

ON BECOMING: DEVELOPING AND ACTING ON A VISION FOR VALUED SOCIAL ROLES

by John Armstrong

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Next SRV workshop - Melbourne: "Towards A Better Life"

- Wed 15th & Thurs 16th April
- Manningham Civic Centre, 699 Doncaster Road, Doncaster
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INTRODUCTION

Did you ever get asked what you wanted to be when you grew up? Do you remember how excited you were as you imagined what being someone important, or clever or brave, or who helped people or worked with amazing machines, could be like?

It is interesting to consider how the question primed us to think about the future; of growing up and becoming something. It primed us about valued social roles, though of course we probably didn't put it in that language, but that is exactly what it was. This was the nudge we needed, along with

in that role. What would I have to become to enable me to do that? Do I have what it takes? What education would I need, and what level of math and physics would I have to achieve? Of course, having other people believe in you was such a big bonus, and such a crushing drawback if they didn't. In fact, their belief could make or break your desire to succeed in that role. Being asked what you wanted to be was probably one of the biggest and immediate expressions of such belief. It forced us to know ourselves better and to truly match, or at least think about, our capabilities to the requirements of the role: this is referred to as a 'person-role match'.

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statements like, "you know, you're pretty good at that. Have you ever thought about becoming...?" It set us thinking and planning and asking more questions, and imagining ourselves looking the part and performing the role.

accurate, only to learn that our imagination had tricked us into seeing a mirage. The role was nothing like we thought. We were nothing like we thought. But we could all learn from the experience and move onto something that better matched what we imagined.

We also thought about what it takes to be

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get asked questions that consider their future? Often not. The nudge is missing as many others often remain uncertain as to what one might expect to see and hope for. Only in recent times have we seen the examples of people, some with significant disabilities, obtaining roles that previously we would never have dreamed of. It has given rise to an increasing

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optimism about the future for people with disabilities. Can we dare to dream? Can we listen and take notice of their dreams? Could my son or daughter, for instance, attend university? And the answer for an increasing number is, 'yes!' Certainly not everyone needs or wants to go to university, but this simply illustrates what can be achieved.

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Without the dream of what we can be and become, we would never harness the impetus and the courage to seek answers to the question. What could stop us? Put simply, narrowness. Narrowness of experience, narrowness of expectations, narrowness of belief and hope. It might be born of a fear that it will fail and a misguided notion that one will be safer if one does nothing. Let's just keep with our narrow (read 'safe') perspective; a kind of survival mode that thinks just one day at a time.

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Sometimes the psychic load such as the worries, fears and anxieties people can carry prevents them from

venturing further. But not knowing who one really is produces a psychic load of sorts as well. In fact, not having a valued role makes people seek any role, and negative roles are quick and easy to acquire. So while we fear moving forward, we could unwittingly

be encouraging someone we love to move backwards into dark areas such as the many negative roles available with their low expectations, poor habits and disciplines, dependency, and reduced competence and confidence, to become something that could

take a lifetime to escape. Please, no, let's not go there. Have you ever noticed how many things in life happen to those who are looking? Some of the research on luck (as reported on Catalyst) bears this out. Lucky people are just people who watch for opportunities, see them and then act on them. It's called serendipity. Unlucky people are simply people who believe that nothing good can happen for them and so

they aren't looking—at all! In one study, they simply dropped \$50 notes on the footpath.

Who found them? You guessed it, the ones who were looking. The “unlucky” people simply walked right over the money! The very same opportunity was there for both groups, but only those looking for an opportunity grabbed it.

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Sometimes opportunity is staring us in the face. We just have to grab it. One thing that helps though is to “hear” the yearning within us. Have you ever known that something was missing in your life? Knowing this can make you a bit depressed, but also watchful and especially prone to seeing opportunities that arise. One author (Coyle 2009) called this a “Trigger”; the thing I had been looking for... that’s it! It produces “Ignition” that fires the person up and in the direction they now need to head. They also experience a strange sense of belonging because they now know where they should be and the (type of) people they will be with.

When people are stuck in awful restrictive environments and constrained physical and social settings, it’s nearly impossible to satisfy this yearning. So much has been written

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about striving and its effect on one’s sense of wellbeing; one’s sense of happiness. But imagine being stuck in a place you can’t escape from, feeling a strong sense of pain, but being unable to change.

Quite often then, it’s a matter of exploration. What will switch this person on? What can excite them and ignite their passion? Who are

they really, and how can we discover that? That’s why parents and other close people who share many of their experiences; camping, travel, hikes, adventures, sailing, music, theatre, skiing, church, other children, books, swimming, house chores etc, already know a

great deal about what the person loves doing - and so do they. Over-protection never permits that exploration and leads to wasted opportunities and a prediction (much like people who don’t think they have any luck) that pursuing something is a waste of time. How ironic, given that not doing anything is indeed a waste of time - and of life. As the ancients said: Where there is no vision, the people perish.

When people are ignited towards something, they tend to channel their energy into that which ignites them. They have little time for other pursuits or distractions. Choices tend to reflect a focus on the goals of the vision, and tend not to be distracted into adverse pursuits that would undermine that vision. We all slip up though, but depending on how much a vision is uppermost in our thoughts, we usually manage to get back on track and continue with even greater vigour. It’s a matter

of valuing what we value and not letting pathetic endeavours take precedence. Have you met people with disability who are very clear about what they value and what they wish to pursue? How do you feel when you see that?

If people don’t have a clear vision for who they want to be, their choices often reflect the confused or aimless state of their being.

Anything is possible. Others, not having perhaps experienced much control and choice in their life, revel in the newfound freedom, much like students leaving high school at ‘schoolies’ week: “I’ll do anything I want because I can.” But the Good things of Life or valued social roles do not emerge from such conduct

in the long run. Only long-term preferences that often express ‘No!’ illustrate the authentic form of freedom that being able to say no can bring. To have the capacity to reject an unnecessary distraction to my goals, even ones that are captivating; now that’s freedom!

Why should valued roles be so important?

Because valued roles shape every aspect of our lives and define who we are. Valued roles facilitate every relationship and open doors to community participation. They determine the settings, activities and appearance of a person; they stimulate growth and learning. Valued roles provide identity and status. They profoundly influence how a person sees themselves and how others see and treat them. They even provide an impetus for the possessions we acquire and the financial support we receive. Our rights are expressed through our roles. Our roles are us.

Yet there is something even bigger for people with disabilities, because (as we discuss in Social Role Valorisation (SRV) workshops) their role is even more powerful in shaping the impression of others, than their impairment!

This is why roles are so integral to shaping the future we all seek; of what we have come to call, as a shorthand, the Good things of Life. No valued roles? Essentially, no good life. We needed a nudge to get us going. The people with disability we know and love need

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that too and quite a bit more. They especially need people who will help shape the high expectations, rich experiences and plentiful investment in a future life through supporting valued social roles that reflect who a person really is.

One can then begin the story of becoming.

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FOR MORE INFORMATION:

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Read: Armstrong J. Thinking About Decision Making. In Thinking about Supported Decision Making, pp. 27-31. (Ed16) Belonging Matters. Melbourne