

**Paper presented at the Launch of the
Right Relationship Tools,
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I have been asked to speak about Right Relationship and person centred approaches, and I am delighted to have this opportunity, thank you. I'll start with some comments about relationships in general. First though, I'd like to reflect on an experience with clouds!

On a flight recently, I looked out the window and saw masses of beautiful clouds. There were huge fluffy balls and silky filaments. I could see white, and silver and pewter. There were hills and valleys, and it was an arresting sight.

And then the plane took us through the clouds and the trip got rocky. There was shuddering and juddering, and I was waiting for the moment of the sudden drop when my tummy would be where my eyebrows once were.

It made me think about relationships in general. From a distance and when we're not in them, the clouds looks so beautiful and enticing. But there is not smooth sailing once we're in the midst of them. Relationships are a bit like this.

People in general are more likely to be fulfilled when in at least one meaningful relationship. In fact, research into happiness shows that people are more likely to be happy and fulfilled not when they have material possessions or a flash holiday, but rather when we have people in our lives who like and love us. You might relate to the following experience: when I was finally acknowledged by the local fruiterer, when I was warmly welcomed by the local hairdresser, when my neighbours say hello to me, that's when I feel a sense of belonging, with roots to my community. It is through the people I relate to that lets me know that I am not a stranger in my own land. When my family shares in my joys and deepest fears and accepts me despite many shortcomings, that's when I know I am loved. When friends seek out my company, that's when I feel like I have worth. So the point here is that by and large, relationships bring many things to our lives.

However this is a two-sided coin. Relationships are hard. Who has ever been in a relationship that is all smooth sailing? Probably no-one. As much as we like, love, trust, or respect someone, relationships are not easy, especially over a period of time when the dints in our personalities become more obvious. So on the one hand, relationships are the glue that holds our lives together. On the other hand, relationships are hard work. This becomes apparent when we take time to survey what it takes to make all of our private relationships work.

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This brings me to the paid relationships that we are in, through our work in services. It is crucial to have a set of principles to guide us in our relationship work, and these can underpin a set of indicators for Right Relationship, such as what the Northern Collaboration Project, through the Consumer Reference Group, wisely developed.

Right Relationship is one of the elements of person centred approaches, and a person centred approach is one vehicle for service quality. The type of quality that we're interested in is quality that is from the perspective of the people. The broad question for quality is something like this: at the end of the day or year, are the people we support better off for having a service involved in their lives? This is different from the sort of quality that compliance audits typically measure, as they typically focus on policies, procedures and paperwork.

In brief, person centred approaches came out of a vexation with two things. One of vexations was with the medical model where the power rests with the professional who does the assessment, decides what is broken about the person and puts in place the things to fix the person, based on their expert opinion. Related to this was a further vexation: people felt like they lost their humanness and individuality when they entered human services. They felt like they were all treated the same, and had to fit into the menu of service options.

We can look to generic human services for clues about some of the key features of person centred approaches. Think about how a good hairdresser works, or a personal trainer. They ask us, 'What do you want?', and then seek to deliver it. We're not asked anything like 'Do you want a bowl cut or a bowl cut?', because what is offered to us is something that is individualised. They don't take power away from us in the first place, however they will share their expert opinion, because that is after all why we go to them. By and large though, they don't impose the outcome. The power is shared. We hope to leave in better shape than when we arrived, in other words, our wellbeing is in some way improved.

What we can take from this and apply to the human services that we're involved in is that person centred approaches mean

- that the responses are personalised and individualised
- that the objective of any assistance is so that the person can stay in their ordinary lifestyle and have it enriched
- that such approaches are characterised by a partnership between server and served that has an equal power sharing relationship whereby there is a 'doing with' rather than a doing to and doing for.

Michael Kendrick has referred to this form of relationship as Right Relationship, drawing from Buddhist teachings. The Buddhists teach that the intent of Right Relationship is to do no harm to any living being.

I googled 'Right Relationship' and the sites that were listed were slightly surprising. They were offering to help me find THE right relationship! What we're talking about is HAVING Right Relationship in whatever relationship we're in, from our partners to our neighbours to our friends to the fruiterer, and so on. Today of course, we are most interested in the extent to which Right Relationship is present between those who provide a service and those who receive a service.

To come back to the cloud analogy, Right Relationship is a bit like a cloud. When you see Right Relationship, you know what it is. You can see it, feel it, touch it. But it's hard to grasp hold of, so I'll try and explain it in a range of ways.

Being polite is no guarantee of Right Relationship,
yet Right Relationship includes being polite.

Behaving with respect is also not necessarily an indicator of Right Relationship,
yet being respectful is crucial for Right Relationship.

Being kind is also not necessarily the same as Right Relationship,
yet kindness is a central attitude in Right Relationship.

After all, it *is* possible to dominate an older person, control what happens in their life and intrude into people's private domain while being polite, having a kind heart and also, on the surface, being respectful.

Right Relationship is about:

- what's in our heads and hearts, and it is about how we are in a relationship with an older person and their family. It's about what we're thinking about when we are entering a relationship. You might recall the quote from the movie 'Avatar': 'I see you'. This is more than a simple greeting; it is an acknowledgement with a sense of standing in the shoes of the other, bringing deeper understanding of the other. This is in stark contrast to entering a relationship where the primary purpose is to fill out a form.
- our beliefs about older people and their worth in life. Depending on how we perceive older people, that will shape how we engage in a relationship with them. Some workers in another state were asked to describe the qualities of some older people who they find hard to be with. They reported that (some) older people are demanding, manipulative, sexually perverted, complaining, violent, and lazy. I have no doubt that these workers are broadly good hearted and kind people, yet still have a view of older people that makes it hard for them to stay in Right Relationship. A common story was of a person who asked the worker to do something a few minutes before the worker was due to leave the person's room or home. This request was generally met by the worker with signs of frustration, like gritted teeth and rolling eyes, even if metaphorically. These workers then spent time in an exercise designed to assist them to understand the past experiences of these older people. These experiences included a shrinking world, the loss of many roles, a body that was becoming less reliable, separation from loved ones, loss of their own home, and a hunger for intimacy. The workers clearly then moved into a space of compassion, of identifying more strongly with the older people. So the next time an older person asks them to do something a few minutes before they leave their home, the worker might respond with curiosity, such as wondering why it is that the person does this, and what type of need might it point to. The lesson here is that when we can stand in the shoes of older people, we are less likely to harm them.

Right Relationship invites compassion and insight. Compassion is a quality of the heart. It is being able to see the world through the eyes of the other. Insight is a quality of the mind. It allows us to bring good thinking to a situation. We need both qualities.

- how we think about our role. A focus on cleaning or filling in time with older people is unlikely to reflect Right Relationship. In contrast, helping someone

maintain their roles at home and keeping people connected to their community is more likely to reflect Right Relationship.

So you can see that Right Relationship is as much about what happens in our hearts and minds, as well as what we do. It is also about what priority we give the relationship.

Work by Dunst showed service recipients are more likely to feel assisted when it is not only their practical needs that are met, but that the service is delivered in a way that values the relationship between server and served. His point was that while practical helping is important, it needs to be done through relational helping. Without relational helping, older people feel like that they are widgets on a factory line: clean the body and the house, and then the worker is on to the next person.

Right Relationship can happen at the micro and at the macro. At the micro, Right Relationship can happen in the shower: how the face washer is offered to the person, how the older person's skin is touched by the worker, the conversations that are held during this intimate task. At a more macro level, Right Relationship can be reflected in how the 'support plan' is developed, what control the older person has over the plan and how the key decisions are decided: are the needs of the older person central to deciding what tasks the workers will do and what time they will come, or are the needs of the staff who will only work certain hours and only do certain things central to the plan?

Right Relationship is also about what happens in the space between the parties. We can understand this term 'space' if we think about how the space between lovers might be described: the spark between them. Or the space between people in a floundering relationship: a gulf. So in our context, we're interested in what grows and what is possible in the space between worker and service recipient.

I can illustrate this by drawing on the experience of my own grandmother and family when a service entered our lives. One of the things that grew in the space between us was trust. This was not because the Coordinator expected trust on the basis of her professional status or paid role. Trust grew because she made promises and kept them. She made commitments and kept them. We had the feeling that the Coordinator was on our side. We knew that she had a lot of power; the key was that she used that power in very positive and enabling ways. She helped our family be the best that we could be through giving us information, support and encouragement. It was what she said and how she was, as much as what she did. Things happened that would not have been possible without the Right Relationship that this Coordinator formed with Nan and our family. For example, my uncle, a confirmed bachelor and in his 70s at the time of this story, who had been looked after by Nan all his life became chief cook, kitchen hand and clothes washer. Nan continued to be central to family celebrations. The workers also helped Nan to be the best that she could be, including in the days before she died peacefully in her own home.

Of course, there are challenges for all of us when we try to work in Right Relationship, so I'd like to mention a couple.

A task for both Coordinators and support workers is to work in ways that allow your personal qualities to be called forth. In particular, I refer to the qualities of being genuine and not relying on a professional façade, having humility and letting go of the certainty of being right, and sharing power which requires a renouncing of the pursuit of control. This signals a shift from working in a relationship that consists of 'I, the Professional' and 'You, the Consumer' to a space that is 'We, the ethical partnership that allows us to move forward on hopes and issues'.

A further responsibility for Coordinators is to create an organisational culture that allows Right Relationship to thrive. This requires such things as helping workers to understand their role, keeping bureaucracy to a minimum and providing good supervisory support to workers so that they can provide practical helping through relational helping.

I would like to congratulate the Northern Collaborative Group, and in particular the Consumer Reference Group, for their work on the principles and the indicators of Right Relationship. I would also like to make particular mention that older people were invited to take on leadership roles and stepped forward into these roles in order to develop these resources. This is a particularly good first step towards Right Relationship. Well done and I wish you well. Thank you.

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