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Book reviews

Coming of Age: The Story of Our Century by Those Who've Lived It

Studs Terkel, New York (NY): The New Press, 1995, 468. pp hard bound \$25.00

Preface

Studs Terkel is America's unofficial 'listener' who periodically puts his finger on the pulse of what's going on and tells us the results through the stories of those whom he interviews. Even since I first read *Working* and then viewed a production by the American Playhouse Theater on Public Television, I knew there was a mentor whose life's work had much to teach those of us who support people with disabilities. Who is the Studs Terkel for the people we support? Is it Bob Perske in his eloquently written *Deadly Innocence* in which he chronicles the events leading up to the death by lethal injection of Peter Arridy in Colorado in 1939. Or is it John O'Brien and Connie Lyle O'Brien in *Remembering the Soul of Our Work* when they edited and organized the stories from staff members of Options Inc., in Madison, WI. Or, is it Jonathan Kozol, a recent keynote speaker at the annual conference of The Association for Persons with Severe Handicaps, and his most recent book *Amazing Grace: The Lives of Children and the Conscience of a Nation*. Perhaps, in the accumulation of stories told by people and related by authors who use their editorial skills to highlight and punctuate the fullness of the message, the real measure of our success can be found. It is important to read of the successes and setbacks experienced by as many individuals as we can take the time to hear. We may continue to hear the calling of our own

service and support in the tone and substance of their words.

Studs Terkel is himself eighty-three, during the year of publishing his most recent book, which contains his summaries of interviews with people over seventy years of age. There are seventy interviews grouped together in six parts. Each interview is about four to five pages and allows for moments to read quick excerpts without losing the richness of each person's unique story. There are several quotes worth remembering, said by both publicly visible and ordinary people, who have been asked to reflect on the important events of their day as well as their own feelings of contentment with what they have been able to accomplish. I found this book to be exactly what I expected: insightful, concise, instructional, and inspirational.

The general highlights of this book:

- A theme throughout the seventy stories is one of satisfaction with what had been accomplished personally, but contrasted with a frustration about the legacy that was being handed down to younger generations.
- There is a rich diversity in the backgrounds of the individuals selected for this book. Many local community organizers and people who had made a positive impact in their local neighborhoods were able to tell what influenced them to take risks against the conditions they were experiencing.
- A sense of community was most often felt when there were times of hardship. Everyone was experiencing tough times and neighbors

tended to help each other out, i.e. during the depression, labor strikes, natural disasters.

- Terkel fills in some details when stories are related providing some historical benchmarks against which to better understand the context in which events unfold in each person's life.

Specific areas of excellence:

- *'I am of the opinion that my life belongs to the whole community and as long as I live, it is my privilege to do for it what I can. I want to be thoroughly used up when I die, for the harder I work, the more I live. I rejoice in life for its own sake. Life is no brief candle for me. It is sort of a splendid torch which I have got hold of for a moment and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to future generations.'* (p. 13) Terkel opens his book with a quote by George Bernard Shaw. It is an apt introduction to the collective voices contained in the subsequent pages. How will we heed the messages contained in these words before we pass our torch to those who come after us?
- *'My look at tomorrow? I'm a perennial pessimist-optimist, a walking contradiction'* — related by Timuel Black (p. 54). This passage highlights the image of paradox that surrounds the supports we provide to people with disabilities.
- *In the process of becoming a bureaucracy, you lose all the energy you had on the picket line* — related by Ernest Goodman (p. 84). This person addresses the complacency many people fall into once they approach their later years of professional employment. It is ironic that many of the people who were at the vanguard of change 15–20 years ago are in positions to maintain the status quo of today.
- *La esperanza muere al ultimo. Hope dies last* — related by Jessie de la Cruz (p. 123). This was one of my favourite quotes in the book. It is the statement of never giving up in pursuit of one's dream no matter how many obstacles seem to get in the way.
- *People say to me, 'Nobody knows who you are anymore.' I really don't care. One of the reasons*

I'm still full of beans is because I'm passionate about my beliefs. I'm happier in the pursuit of these goals than people who are pursuing their own belly buttons, their own success, without having a cause. They're chasing their tails — related by Uta Hagen (p. 163). Our leaders in the field of disability supports need to maintain the humbleness of Uta Hagen.

- *Sometimes as you get older, the flame goes down, but some person comes along and says something to my taste and he's tryin' to do right and is bein' abused and my flame burns bright again and I'm on my way* — related by Joe Begley (p. 234). We all need people who, when they cross our path, renew our energies to keep going in the direction of our pursuits.
- *There's a book I've come across about the Mondragos Cooperative in Spain: 'We Make the Road as We Travel'. You see, I don't think there is any blueprint. It's a constant. You're never going to get there, you're always on the way . . . the hope is to continue to put one foot before the other and without knowing where that's leading you to . . . the important thing is that you go* — related by Wally Nelson (p. 247). A great motto. Action toward a goal is better than inaction. There is truth and simplicity in this statement.

Areas in which this publication can be enhanced:

- Interested people will benefit greatly by reading several of Terkel's early books including *Working*, *American Dreams: Lost and Found*, *The Great Divide: Second Thoughts on the American Dream*, and *Division Street: America*.
- As I was reading this book I was also reading Jonathan Kozol's *Amazing Grace: The Lives of Children and The Conscience of a Nation* and also Bob Perske's *Deadly Innocence*. I discovered that each book enriched the connections I was making as I focused on each one during different times of the week. Books like Terkel's that are composed of brief, succinct chapters (4–6 pages) can be enhanced with parallel reading by another author who describes events from a slightly different perspective.

- These stories lend themselves to audio tape in which the listener can hear the quotes come alive. I don't know if this book is currently on tape in this fashion.

Common threads throughout this publication:

- There is a genuine desire, by the people being interviewed, to share both their successes and setbacks and to make some sense out of their lives.
- When people, who are in their seventies and beyond, talk about having a sense of community they refer most often to times in their lives when hardships had to be overcome, i.e. the Depression, World War II, poverty. Challenges bring people together to form a network of support.
- There is a sadness expressed by many of the people interviewed throughout this book that young people today lack an adequate historical perspective to events going on around them.

Recommendations of its utility to rehabilitation professionals:

- Studs Terkel is a story teller par excellence. What would the accounts of a lifetime be for many of the older citizens with disabilities whose lives we have supported? What would they tell us about the satisfaction they feel in their lives? If many of the people we support do not communicate in ways to express this perspective, what do their daily routines suggest about the quality of their lives?
- Perhaps the fields of sociology, anthropology, human ecology, and social psychology hold some advice for how we capture a person's life story to share with others. Do older citizens with even quite severe disabilities have a story that unfolds into lessons for people just now entering their profession in rehabilitation?
- As we listen to how people discuss the important parts of their lives in a book like *Coming*

of Age, we may gain a better understanding about what brings quality to a person's life. Once again, going outside our current field of expertise can yield some unexpected, positive benefits.

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The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Community Centers, Beauty Parlors, General Stores, Bars, Hangouts, and How They Get You Through the Day

Ray Oldenburg, New York, NY: Paragon House, 1991, 338 pp., soft cover \$14.95

Preface

Ray Oldenburg is a sociologist with information of a timely nature of those of us who help connect people with disabilities to places, events, associations, and people in their local communities. The title is taken from a quote by Pete Hamill, 'But aside from friends, there must also be a Place. I suppose that this is the Great Good Place that every man carries in his heart ...' This book had been recommended in the writing of John O'Brien and John McKnight in the context of building communities where the capacities of all are welcome including citizens with disabilities. Oldenburg's insights about the role of 'place' assists our understanding of how to better develop supports for the individuals whose lives we impact.

Oldenburg takes the reader on a journey through pubs, coffee houses, bistros, taverns, and other community settings he refers to as 'third' places. The first and second places in our lives are occupied by home and work, respectively. Third places are those settings where we socialize with friends and where conversation is the major focus. These places are dwindling in numbers over the years, but there is hope that urban planners

and architects of the future will acknowledge the impact of the loss these places have on citizens within diverse communities. When we concentrate on helping individuals develop lasting relationships with their neighbors and fellow town citizens, we need to investigate the role that 'place' has for providing settings that facilitate the active participation of all citizens who enter its doors.

The general highlights of this book

- The book is divided into three sections. Part 1 is an introduction to the characteristics of third places. The second part traces the general origins and describes six examples of third places including German-American Lager Beer Gardens, Main Street, The English Pub, The French Cafe, The American Tavern, and Classic Coffee houses. Part 3 contains a discussion of the future direction of third places and the fate of informal public life.
- There are eight characteristics all third places possess. Third places are
 - on neutral ground away from our residences and places of privacy
 - levelers, in that occupation and social status are left at the door
 - settings in which conversation is the main activity
 - easily accessible and accommodating
 - environments in which there are regulars
 - inconspicuous and keep a low profile
 - areas in which the mood is playful
 - a home away from home where you are welcomed
- The decline of third places is largely attributed to our over reliance on the automobile and the structural space in which we choose to design our communities.
- One chapter is devoted to the personal benefits of frequenting third places including its ability to bring novelty to our lives, the development of new perspectives to our everyday challenges, refresh us with its spiritual tonic, and provide friends by the set instead of one at a time.
- There is a fascination in how Oldenburg describes the unique ways in which different cultures throughout the world bring diversity to their version of third places.

Specific areas of excellence

- *The activity that goes on in third places is largely unplanned, unscheduled, unorganized, and unstructured.* (p. 33) When people gather at a favorite spot, conversation becomes the main game centered around a drink or sustenance that a spot has to offer. This has ramifications for the content and structure of social skills training for individuals with disabilities. Oldenburg states later in his book that, one of the only prerequisites to be a regular at a third place is not to be too obnoxious.
- ... *paradox of sociability — one must have protection from those with whom one would enjoy sociable relations* (p. 60). One's privacy can be maintained at home, while obtaining one's fill of social entertaining at a third place. There is no requirement that people be invited to each other's home to enjoy the company of friends at a third place. In fact, Oldenburg contends that social gatherings of friends enhance the intimacy and relations between spouses.
- *Inclusiveness was central to the coveted atmosphere of the lager beer garden.* (p. 95). The word, that Oldenburg says captures the atmosphere of this third place is the German word *Gemütlichkeit* which means warm and friendly.
- ... *a core setting in a neighborhood or community is that place where one is more likely, than anywhere else, to encounter any given resident of the community* (p. 112). Are we conscious of where the core settings or 'focal' points are located in the communities of which we are members?
- *Late in life, Robert Frost consented to an interview by Edward R. Murrow and, when asked to name the worst word in our language, the poet*

and biographer unhesitatingly responded, exclusive! (p. 144).

- Fourastie... distinguished between level of living and style of life. Level of living being a measure of the consumption of all goods and services that can be valued in money... style of life includes climate, neighborhood, urban facilities, leisure preferences, the length of the working day, and the like (p. 162). We may have these terms confused when providing supports for individuals with disabilities when we view success as an enhancement in a level of living as opposed to a style of life.
- Wolf von Eckardt states... We have more to gain by consulting our planners than our psychiatrists. We can achieve more to improve our relationships with others by participating in community planning, rather than group therapy encounters. What ails us — most of us, anyway — is not that we are incapable of living a satisfactory and creative life in harmony with ourselves, but that our habitat does not offer sufficient opportunities. It hems us in. It isolates us. It irritates and disrupts (p. 207). I hear in von Eckardt's advice a plea for our energies to be focused on generic skills to develop more meeting places where people can gather and form friendships rather than helping people to enter into what exists now.
- The overequipped home was mass-produced in underequipped neighborhoods (p. 214). Zoning ordinances are prohibiting the establishment of third places and, when they do exist, are structured to such an extent that people fail to make use of their primary intent.
- Community is a collective reality that does not depend upon the inclusion or exclusion of any given individual (p. 265) It is essential to demonstrate the strengths and talents of all members within a community to help strengthen bonds of mutual appreciation and friendship.
- The lessons to be learned are not taught by those who write articles or books but by the experiences of trying to enjoy life amid a badly designed environment (p. 286) This statement is a tough one for many of us to realize but the truth emerges none the less.

- One Long Island planner observed... the willingness to create and accept diversity will be the measure of whether suburbia remains vital (p. 290). This quote, along with several others in this book, reminds me that researchers in other disciplines (Oldenburg for one) see parts of the solution to our own every day challenges.

Areas in which this publication can be enhanced

- There is an extensive selection of reference notes (pp. 297–313) as well as a lengthy bibliography (pp. 315–323) for the interested reader's advanced investigation.
- I remember watching a PBS special not too long ago, on Diners (physical structures) in America and how they played a significant role as a gathering place in towns, and whose purpose was far more than serving coffee or breakfast.
- Readers may strive to locate third places, or even close approximations, in their local communities and identify ways in which citizens of diversity can become regulars at these places and open new doors of friendships among a community's members.

Common threads throughout this publication

- Third places are on the decline but Oldenburg's last sentence in this book evokes hope. *If there is one message I wish to leave with those who despair of suburbia's lifeless streets, of the plastic places along our 'strips' or the congested and inhospitable mess that is 'downtown,' it is: It doesn't have to be like this!* (p. 296)
- There is an equality among community members who frequent third places. Problems and despairs are left at the door. Conversation among peers takes over and all are invited to participate.
- There is a false sense of contentment among many community members who seek entertainment and recreation within the confines of one's home. Neighborhoods are increasingly becoming mislabelled and perhaps can be best called 'commuter-hoods'. There is a need to

consciously develop space in our communities in which third places can emerge.

Recommendations of its utility to rehabilitation professionals

- Our source of new information and continued learning is likely to be found in the disciplines akin to Special Education and Rehabilitation, i.e. sociology, anthropology, environmental science. In light of the the current emphasis on assisting people with disabilities to enter into new relationships with members of their community, this book is timely and insightful.
- The ability to see similarities among diverse experiences and figure out the generic parts of those experiences is a skill in high demand for

people who support individuals with disabilities. Bringing out the competence and capacities of an individual is the search for equality among citizens. People may even begin to realize that they have much more in common with neighbors and community members than they thought upon initially meeting a person with a disability.

- Search for the 'great good places' in your communities and help the individuals you support become members whose presence and active participation are valued.

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