

HOP 9 – When HOP takes a little tumble...

Sheridan Forster

In the previous edition of PMLD Link (Winter 2023), I wrote about the “ingredients” for making a Hanging Out Café. The event, held in October 2024, with a dozen people with multiple disability felt like a resounding success.

Then I received this feedback: “Feedback my staff gave me was that they felt the session was silly and it made them feel insecure in their abilities as support workers (SW) and uncomfortable.” Strangely, I could not be more grateful and humble for the feedback. Let me share a little context; a couple of minutes during the Hanging Out Café.

A man and I were seated by each other, both in our wheelchairs, within arms reach of a table with papers on it. He was hunched forward, perhaps had been for decades, with his vision marked by his lap and perhaps a few inches ahead of him.

At some point, I don't know why, I handed him the HOP booklet – this meant, I picked up the book, and placed it under his fingers, and waited for him to grasp it. Slowly, gracefully, he lifted his hand and the book, took it to his side, then dropped it over the edge. His face belied no meaning, or maybe there was a tiny eyebrow rise. My mind said “he can grasp and drop, let's see if this can be our moment”. I slowly handed another sheet of paper. Again, the delicate grasp, wave out, and drop (I wish the words caught the beauty). For me, it was a conversation as deep and warm as any with words.

“We gotta go now,” said his support worker, grasping the wheelchair handles.

“Wait a second, we're having a chat”, I interceded, and then continued the conversation without words between the man and I.

In the situation I was absorbed in the moment. Sitting back now, I see the situation differently. Through the support workers eyes I can see that this strange performance would have looked silly, baffling, bordering on a behaviour... I can see how this odd woman “talking back” at him, undermining his authority and oversight of duty of care could have led to insecurity.

I can see that the workplace culture and education of the support worker would have left him disrupted by my behaviour and the behaviour that I was engaging in with his charge.



It is valuable for me to step back. To pause. To understand the situation for those who are differently engaged beside people with profound intellectual and multiple disability.

The challenge now is to work out how to step forward... I must work forward in a way that understands the reality for those who view interaction differently from me. A way that does not view them as empty vessels in need to be filled with my wisdom... perhaps softly owning my story, listening to theirs, and exploring a new one together.

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