



to be inspired is great,
to inspire is incredible

Disability and Abuse: Shifting from Peripheral Vision to Central Focus

By Thomas F. Coleman

There has been a flurry of activity on my part over the past two months in connection with issues involving disability and abuse. I have been wondering what this was all about. Today I decided to put the pieces of the puzzle in place to make sense of this.

I follow my inner self – my spirit – when I embark on a new research project or decide to write something. I follow the guidance I am given from source energy and then take actions accordingly.

All of my recent research and writing on disability and abuse has been propelled by source energy. My spirit has told me to make a shift so that disability and abuse moves from my peripheral vision to a central point of focus. I have followed this directive.

Inklings about this started to bubble up in November. I began to have thoughts that my advocacy for conservatorship reform needed to expand. For the past several years, it has mostly been about access to justice in the legal proceedings, with most of the focus on proceedings prior to the conservatorship order being entered. Proposed conservatees were the primary beneficiaries of my efforts. There was a little work done for actual conservatees, such as Mickey Parisio or David Rector or Greg Demer, but my class-based advocacy was mostly geared to ensuring due process and justice in the proceedings prior to a person being ordered into a conservatorship.

Then about two months ago, I started getting vibes that I should expand the focus and broaden it to include people who have been adjudicated as conservatees. I started to feel that the first area of attention for this class of individuals would be the issue of abuse. Risk reduction, identification, and appropriate response to actual or suspected abuse. This feeling started out small and then the inner voice grew louder and louder until I would pay attention. I also started mentally to really connect the dots about ACES and a lifetime of medical, mental, and emotional effects in adulthood from childhood trauma.

I was not sure where to dive in, but I knew that once I made this shift from peripheral vision to central focus, I had to gain ownership of the issues. I could no longer rely on what others have been telling me. I had to do a deeper dive into the statistics and literature on disability and abuse. I also had to find out what resources were available in terms of therapy options – not only for victims of abuse but for conservatees who have mental health problems stemming from other sources.

Since I had already done a moderate statistical dive when I read the book “Maltreatment of People with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities” in 2017, I decided to revisit the area of prevalence and

rates of abuse. Hence the intense study of data which then lead me to write the commentary “[Disability and Abuse: Evidence-Based Data Should Drive the Narrative.](#)”

Once that was done, my spirit prompted me to find out what books and articles have been written about therapy for people with developmental disabilities. This resulted in: “Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities: A Bibliography on Trauma and Therapy.” I was excited to discover that so much has been written on these topics in the past 15 years, with much of it published in the last three or four years. I started to think about how valuable the 112 authors and co-authors of the [60 books](#), and the 110 authors and co-authors of the [49 articles](#) could be to the work of both of projects of Spectrum Institute.

Then I started to wonder how many mental health professionals were providing counseling and therapy to people with developmental disabilities. Beyond how many, I wondered what types of therapy they provide and what training they have received. My spirit then moved me to start my research in California. Hence the outreach to Barb Imle. With her direction, I was able to identify more than 460 vendors approved by regional centers in California to provide counseling and therapy to children and adults with developmental disabilities. This includes 203 psychologists and 54 psychiatrists. What a gold mine of information for future use this [directory](#) of mental health providers is.

Thinking about these conservatees and how their mental health needs are being neglected by judges and conservators, I was moved to write an [op-ed](#) for the Daily Journal about the legal right to therapy. I got up one morning and the commentary just poured out. It was published in this legal newspaper the next day.

Having shifted the issue of therapy from the health care realm to the civil rights arena, I then was prompted to write a [Civil Rights Manifesto](#) on mental health care for people with developmental disabilities. I have already started to solicit endorsements from various organizations.

All of this has been [emanating](#) from my mind -- propelled by my spirit -- and finding its way onto paper over the past two months. Little by little. Piece by piece.

So here we are. I have written all of these documents. I have also generated many ideas about what can be done with this information to help people with developmental disabilities who have been abused or who are confined in conservatorships.

The best explanation I can give to all of this is that my angels made me do it. And I am thrilled that they did. ◇ ◇ ◇

Thomas F. Coleman is the legal director of Spectrum Institute. (tomcoleman@spectruminstitute.org)