

Commentary

A Tribute to John O'Brien (1946–2025):

Weaving Lives of Possibility

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John O'Brien influenced not only the way we think about supporting people with disabilities, but also how we think about the people who know, love, and accompany them. Everyone engaged in this field of work today—knowingly or unknowingly, directly or indirectly—has been touched by his ideas and presence.

This tribute is the work of a small circle of people who have shared long and intertwined journeys with John. Dave Hasbury, Lynda Kahn, Beth Mount, Jack Pearpoint, and Patti Scott have been close collaborators and dear friends of John over many decades. Oliver Koenig had the opportunity to collaborate with John between 2011 and 2015 in two European projects, and in this tribute serves as the weaver, braiding together the shared reflections that surfaced over a series of meetings and exchanges.



Figure 1: John O'Brien at the Toronto Inclusion Summer Institute (photo by Dave Hasbury, 2014).

As a founding father of person-centered planning approaches, John O'Brien was often the unseen sage behind many visionary innovations. His influence can be traced through practices and movements that changed the lives of people with disabilities and their families across the world. Person-centered planning refers to a set of approaches—a community of practices—designed to assist individuals—most often people with intellectual and developmental disabilities—to plan their lives and supports in ways that reflect their own choices, aspirations, and relationships (O'Brien & O'Brien, 1999). John's lifelong work centered on reimagining how societies support people with intellectual and developmental disabilities—shifting from systems that manage lives to relationships that honor personhood and possibility. While he always emphasized the primacy of people over institutions and rules, he built an extraordinary web of connections over his six-decade career.

Born in Potsdam, New York, in 1946, John studied philosophy at Le Moyne College and social work at Syracuse University, while also educating himself through a lifetime of voracious reading. He was a Fellow of the Centre for

Welfare Reform (UK) and affiliated with the Center on Human Policy, Law and Disability at Syracuse University (US), InControl Partnerships (UK), and the Marsha Forest Centre (Canada). He taught at Emory University School of Medicine and lectured at universities around the world, including McGill, York, and Keio University in Tokyo—where, as his obituary recounts, the demand for his lecture was so great that the event had to be moved to a sumo arena.

John co-developed influential approaches such as the Five Valued Experiences and Accomplishments framework (O'Brien & Lyle, 1988), MAPS (originally the McGill Action Planning System) (Forest et al., 1996), and PATH (Planning Alternative Tomorrows with Hope) (Pearpoint et al., 1993)—conversational processes that continue to shape inclusive practices worldwide. His writings, translated into twenty languages, include more than a dozen books and hundreds of articles, many co-authored with his beloved wife, Connie Lyle O'Brien, and collaborators across the globe.

This tribute holds a double intention. It speaks to those who knew (of) John, inviting reflection on memories and learning with and through him. It also introduces John to those who may not know who he was or how he shaped the field of inclusion and person-centered work.

We see this written piece as part of a broader set of interconnected efforts to curate, preserve, and make accessible John's living legacy. Alongside this article, we have created a companion video that includes pictures and oral recordings of John.¹ To truly sense John—his way of listening, questioning, and holding space—one must both hear and see him in action.

We offer this written tribute as an invitation to continue learning with John—whose work, questions, and spirit remain alive and needed wherever people gather to imagine fuller lives, stronger communities, and a more humane world.

Weaving the Remembering

How can one remember John—this humble giant? Any written account will necessarily be incomplete. He touched so many lives, and no set of words could ever contain that. His philosophy was never confined to words on a page. He enacted it in a way of being with others—a philosophy of personhood lived in circles, conversations, and communities.

This is why we have chosen to use the metaphors of braids and weaving to write this tribute. Weaving is rarely the work of one person. Most often, it is a collective process, a gathering of strands. Here, the braids we use are stories,

¹ The companion video “Lessons At The Edges: Selected Reflections of John O'Brien” can be accessed here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FWJMh3hemGs>

images, and personal memories woven together to carry something of his presence and legacy.

John planted himself in solidarity with people marginalized by intellectual and developmental disability. He dedicated his life to the belief that the greatest teachers of a community are those most often excluded from it. From them, he drew lessons about what it takes to support lives of distinction, and he invited the rest of us to learn in the same way.

Listening was at the heart of this faithfulness. John enacted deep listening as a way of life. He trusted that generative listening—listening that opens mind, heart, and will—was the surest path to insight. He recognized how quickly judgment, cynicism, and fear can close us off. He practiced, and taught others to practice, listening through them. His listening was rooted in a quiet faith—that there is a deeper coherence in life, a self-actualizing tendency, a larger carrying force into which we are all knit. This trust in emergence shaped his way of teaching. John was a master of non-directive counsel. People around the world came to him for advice, but he never pretended to hold the answer. A colleague in Rhode Island once asked Lynda, “Is he ever going to tell us what to do?” Her answer was, “No, no he is not.”. Instead, he would sit with us and the questions, knowing that the questions we hold are fateful. The quality of the question, the quality of our wrestling to find answers, and the nature of our commitment and investment in finding our way forward together, with everyone’s voices, are what matter.

Among John’s most extraordinary gifts was his ability to hold a vision of connectedness. He saw that nothing—no person, no object, no label—exists in isolation, but that everything comes into being through relationship with everything else. He did not leave this understanding suspended in theory. He carried it into the everyday, giving it form through practice—by noticing ruptures and openings in patterned life, sensing the hidden choreographies beneath ordinary routines, and locating those moments where agency might quietly take hold. His work was, in essence, the art of making life’s patterns visible. He offered ways of seeing, questioning, and acting that allowed meaning to take shape in relationships.

Stories form one part of the braids that we weave in this tribute. Human life and memory are storied: we come to understand ourselves and one another through the stories we craft, remember, and share. Remembering, as we practice it here, is itself a form of weaving. Images are the second component of the braids that we weave. As carriers of essence, images are waymarkers that help people orient and recall deeper truths together; they carry relationships within them. Writing from Anishinaabe tradition, Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013), in *Braiding Sweetgrass*, describes how images and metaphors function as pedagogies: The braid itself is a teaching—a practice of weaving wisdom and responsibility across generations. Much of John’s work drew on archetypal patterns—images that touch and speak to speak to the mythological aspects of our collective journey. Stories were the means by which they were shared. Sometimes, the images we

speak of here appeared directly in the tools he co-created; at other times, they moved beneath the surface, shaping the way he invited and guided our attention. Each served as a doorway into the generative principles he lived by. Some of these braids will be rewoven here.

Braid One: A Crack Opening the Heart

David Hasbury

In a recent interview, John reflected: “I’m an amateur, as far as the field of developmental disabilities goes. I was schooled as a philosopher (...) I found myself working with people with disabilities by accident of circumstance” (Hasbury, 2024, 5:20). In navigating the world he found himself in, John embodied and enacted philosophy as a lived practice in search of wholeness—for individuals and for our social body.

His “accident of circumstance” was a locked ward in a large institution in Georgia in the late 1960s. That experience cracked his world open.

*It's when we face for a moment
the worst our kind can do, and shudder to know
the taint in our own selves, that awe
cracks the mind's shell and enters the heart:
not to a flower, not to a dolphin,
to no innocent form
but to this creature vainly sure
it and no other is god-like, God
(out of compassion for our ugly
failure to evolve) entrusts,
as guest, as brother,
the Word.*

— Denise Levertov (2013), *On the Mystery of the Incarnation*



Figure 2: Power in the Dark (Beth Mount, 2016).

The *crack*, as he often recalled through the lines of Denise Levertov’s poem (2013), marked the place where awe entered—where the heart first broke open to the realization of what exclusion and segregation do to human beings.

Historical realities of othering, devaluation, and segregation are so deeply ingrained that people’s experience remains invisible in the consciousness of the wider population. The horrors of life in institutions were publicly exposed in the 1970s, yet for John and his wife and partner, Connie Lyle O’Brien, what took root here was a sense of wonder. He often said that what sustained his curiosity and commitment was “witnessing what happens when people even have a minimum of human connectedness, and the minimum of environmental conditions that allow a person to act like a human being... in an odd way, it’s how easy it is” (Hasbury, 2024, 19:52).

John and Connie pursued what it would take for people to leave the life of confinement in institutions and find a place to call home, as valued members of society. Together, they discovered and articulated our need for a shift toward a vision of wholeness rooted in person-centered practices that shine a light on the gift of humanity expressed in each person.

The wisdom and experiences John and Connie shared are expressed in a simple but profound truth that John often voiced: “People are not problems to be

solved. They are a mystery, to inspire wonder. If we catch a glimpse of a person, that is an awesome mystery” (Hasbury, 2024, 38:03).

Recognizing this personhood of people with developmental disabilities remains a radical act. John included the experience of people he came to know in his search for our collective wholeness, influenced by a philosophy of “personalism,” guided by questions: “What is the gift of personhood? What conditions allow a person to thrive? How can our gifts contribute to the common good?” (Hasbury, 2024, 28:56)

The image of the crack holds both grief and possibility. It is also an invitation to others—to stay with what is broken in our systems and in ourselves, to look at it without turning aside, and to recognize that transformation begins exactly there. The crack is where a lifelong journey in pursuit of wholeness began. For John, this meant a journey always traveled in the company of others, as expressed in this poem he recited often:

*If you don't know the kind of person I am
and I don't know the kind of person you are
a pattern that others made may prevail in the world
and following the wrong god home we may miss our star.*

(...)

*For it is important that awake people be awake,
or a breaking line may discourage them back to sleep;
the signals we give—yes or no, or maybe—
should be clear: the darkness around us is deep.*

— From William Stafford (1998), *A Ritual to Read to Each Other*

Braid Two: The Spiral—"What More is Possible?" or the Power of Being Held in the Imaginative Space of Possibility

Beth Mount



Figure 3: A World that works for Everyone (Beth Mount, 2000).

*You who portend to know great truths,
Wearing your scholarly gowns of knowledge,
Speak to me in my own language,
For to do otherwise
Is to discriminate against the vast majority of
So-called "uneducated" people.
I wish to know too,
And for your knowledge, I will bring
The colors of my life,
And a basket of fresh fruit to share,
And we will see
If there are even greater truths!*
—Jane Evershed (1990), *Universal Language*

The *spiral* became a quintessential image and metaphor for John’s way of being and working—circling outward, touching the edge, returning, expanding again. It symbolizes a living form that holds and embodies layers of humanity and emergence in the on-going journey of imagining “what more is possible” (O’Brien & Mount, 2015).

John practiced with faith that possibilities will emerge if we take seriously the practice of listening to and learning with each other. The spiral represents this willingness to stay engaged in the ongoing journey of co-creation—being open, able, and willing to value the deep wisdom of every person. Within these generative spaces, we learned to listen with the eyes of the heart, to experience other ways of knowing, to touch the energy of something new that each and every one of us might bring into the world.

Fifty years ago, we didn’t have the language of emergence. We had our lived experience. John and his partners could design and hold a conversation so that we could all hear into it and become part of something greater. People began to see themselves in a different light. That is where initiative for real change—for activation—came from: from being part of that bigger whole.

The spiral is an archetypal space we are willing to enter with one another, with a sense of expectation, not knowing what will come. John could listen to words spoken and unspoken, offer a summary, and everyone would gasp, amazed at what we had heard. He had the gift of listening and synthesizing, yet the gifts returned were reflections of the wisdom of those gathered in the space. We felt and knew something was happening—and we were changed by it.

There was a unique element in how John worked with others: a dance between ideas, images, and stories. Many remember conversations with John that began as sketches on napkins. If the drawing held resonance with others, John would turn it into a more refined version—adding words, ideas, and patterns—making it *electronically beautiful* and easy to share. That one-page image might be used for years, going through countless revisions, until it evolved into an article or a book. The symbol would take on a life of its own, woven with living examples and stories, connecting the personal and organizational alike.

John called this the “aesthetic side of practical imagination.” He once wrote:

The aesthetic side of humanness ... expresses and celebrates imagination, which is the capacity to think of things as if they could be otherwise (Greene, 2001). It is this sort of practical imagination that people trapped in the box of segregation and socially sanctioned deprivation of opportunity need almost as much as they need fresh air. Bringing disciplined imagination into people’s lives is the privilege of those practitioners of person-centered planning who decide to heed the call of people’s faces and honor their concerns as worthy of attention (O’Brien, 2002, p. 412).

The spiral quest of holding the question “What More is Possible?” is just one example of how John and the global inclusion network strengthened practical

imagination in the lives of people. The weaving of archetypal images and symbols, language, and practices grew as countless people imagined better and discovered their own capacity to create spaces for the new to enter.

This personal and collective *presencing* necessary to invoke such powerful healing possibilities called for equally deep dives into the destructive forces of devaluation and dehumanization that define the lives of so many. John could hold the weight of desperation and despair carried by those who face crushing constraints and realities. The generative listening that gave rise to new landscapes of inventive social forms was forged within the interplay of pain and possibility.

John created and strengthened an imaginative presence of alternative modes and practices. The quality of relationships, the dignity afforded to each person, the anguish of constraint, and the awe of unexpected invention—all of this was part of being held *in the imaginative space of possibility*.

The spiral, in this way, was always a pedagogy of faith and relational emergence—what Otto Scharmer and Eva Pomeroy have called “fourth-person knowing,” defined as “neither my knowing nor yours, neither solely outside nor inside me but rather something beginning to articulate from a different source that operates beyond these distinctions” (Scharmer & Pomeroy, 2024, p. 27). John moved in that field long before it had a name.

Braid Three: At the Edge of Possibility

Jack Pearpoint

Edges invite experiments. The Toronto Summer Institute became such a place: a circle big enough to try, fail, and try again.

John O'Brien remains a remarkable thought leader and creator of approaches to support people with intellectual disabilities—and all of us. The Toronto Summer Institute (TSI) was one of many unheralded O'Brien co-creations. Like almost all of John's ventures, it was born out of listening to the pain and anguish of families who wanted real and better lives for their children.

Now many laws internationally have changed to afford children with disabilities the right to education. In those early years, many of us were struggling to find ways to welcome children with disabilities into regular classrooms. Facing opposition from governments, rejection by medical establishments, universities, and publishers, John listened. Then he quietly helped rally a loose team of like-minded thinkers including Marsha Forest, Judith Snow, myself, and others.

He became one of the founders of an “institute.” The concept was simple: create a space where families and organizations could learn from one another and from thought leaders like John, Marsha, and Judith. There was no master plan—it just seemed like a good idea, and the only way to test it was to *just do it*.

That was John's way. It was his lifelong quest to discover and adapt new and pioneering ways to share ideas and move people into action. The key was his core belief that all persons deserve a full life—especially those labeled with intellectual disabilities.

That first two-week experiment in 1984 ignited a fire that led to 34 years of Institutes—first at McGill University in Montreal, later in Toronto at the Primrose Hotel and Ryerson University (now Toronto Metropolitan University). Thousands came from across the world—the Americas, Europe, Asia, and Africa—forming a global circle of people who shared a passion for inclusion and a willingness to explore the edges of learning together. And it left many impacts in the world.

Fascinated and frustrated by the power of mainstream culture to reject and discard certain people, John set a personal objective: to change the culture. He understood that it would be a long, painful journey because the attitudes of rejection are deeply ingrained. He knew that if transformation was to emerge, it must begin from the wisdom of those who had been excluded. This required that we listen to them—and learn and relearn how to listen underneath and between words to see their hearts and feel their souls.

We held a simple vision: if children grew up, played, and learned together, the scars of exclusion could begin to heal in the next generation. There was resistance everywhere, but the collaborators were determined to try.

Among them were John's friend and fellow philosopher Judith Snow and her "Joshua Committee," the circle of friends who accompanied her as she broke out of institutional life and onto the leading edge of thought and practice (Pearpoint & Snow, 1998); and Marsha Forest, working at the forefront of inclusive education (Forest, 1987). The Circle of Friends model they developed built networks of relationships around individuals to foster belonging and participation (Pearpoint et al., 1992). The idea had enormous promise. We recruited a few school classes and began. Marsha and Judith were on the front line while John observed, analyzed, and stirred his creativity cauldron.

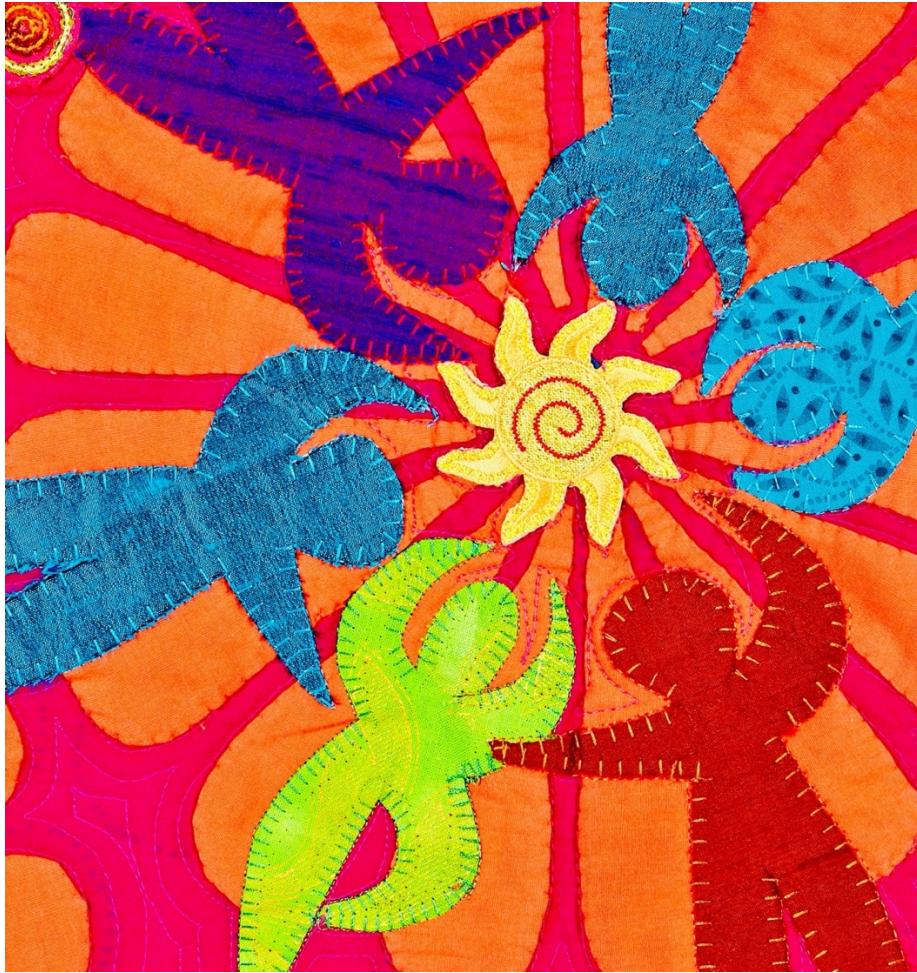


Figure 4: Garden of Soul 1 (Beth Mount, 2011).

MAPS grew out of that collaboration—a process grounded in storytelling to help individuals and families envision positive futures. When the focus on history in MAPS revealed its limits, John proposed a radical shift: begin with the “North Star,” a shared vision of the desired future. From this inversion emerged PATH, guiding people and organizations to identify and move toward their best possible outcomes. Circles of Friends, MAPS, and PATH have since traveled globally, assisting countless individuals, families, and communities in creating inclusive and hopeful futures.

The Institutes became the testing grounds where these ideas evolved through many iterations. As they unfolded, John was always there—sitting quietly to observe and listen into the latest experiment, while already inventing the next. He consumed books, articles, and conversations voraciously, always searching for what could be adapted, tested, and learned from. The Summer Institute was never a fixed form. It was a constantly evolving experiment on the edges of learning—and John was the patient gardener of that growth.

That is what John did all his life. He listened with a gentle, focused intensity that few could comprehend—and then he taught us to listen in fifty different ways. Listening became a kind of contagion—a “virus” that continues to take

root, generating the ideas and energy to change a life, a family, an organization, a culture.

The edge, for John, was always where the real work took place—where what is known meets what is not yet formed. To stand at the edge is to enter a kind of emptiness, what Japanese aesthetics call “ma”—the pause, the gap, the fertile space in-between. John trusted that emergence comes from such spaces, if we can wait and listen.

Braid Four: The Circle and the Star—Co-creation and Friendship

Lynda Kahn

Our most powerful relationships are transformational. John raised the bar for my own expectations of myself. He intentionally opened spaces for me to step into and up to. He offered belief in my capacity and contribution, even when my head was saying, “I cannot do that. I am not good enough.” Or best of all, he pushed me to *let go* when my inner voice was saying, “If I can’t do it perfectly, I won’t try.”

I can hear him asking me, at a PATH and MAPS workshop in New Mexico in 2004 that John and Jack were guiding: “What do you think you are doing there?” “Taking notes on what you’re doing,” I said, happy just to watch. “Stand up now and lead the debrief of this conversation.” That is the way.

In planning together with John and Connie—whether in Toronto, or in a hotel room in Australia—John would ask, “What are you energized about that you are learning, or that you have experienced recently?” We would collaboratively work and co-design the offering to bring in those ideas. John could easily have designed any experience or workshop on his own. That was not his way.

That capacity to deeply listen and see a person and invite their gifts and contributions as he appreciated them—even if you did not see or feel them yet yourself—was part of the soul of his work and way of being in the world. He embodied co-creation, pushing the edges together.

I reflected about my experiences of John on one occasion with Connie Lyle O’Brien. She noticed my wonder and appreciation and simply said, “He is a teacher.”

Yes. Yes, he still is.

John held threads of people in his wide web of relationships. You always knew he was thinking about you—what you cared about, what you might enjoy. The emails and messages shared came from sources you might not otherwise have found. John read widely and deeply. His “shares” came in the form of newspaper articles, magazines, books, poetry, recipes, music, films, and

television series. A deeply curious person, John would learn more, ask more about something that interested you that he had not yet explored.

John was once seen in a “jimmy wig,” a yellow top hat with blond curls, but I could never get him into glitter. He did, however, immerse himself in *The Gilmore Girls* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, willingly engaging in conversations about character development and layers of meaning.

The circle of friendship also extended into his consulting and teaching. He was a transformative ally for more than two decades in Rhode Island, where he and Connie introduced the Five Valued Experiences as a way to continually ask, “What is worth working for?” (O'Brien, 1989).

The framework has its roots in the late 1970s and early 1980s, when the deinstitutionalization movement was gaining strength in North America and the United Kingdom. Drawing inspiration from the principles of normalization and social role valorization (Nirje, 1969; Wolfensberger, 1983), John and Connie sought a more accessible, human way to talk about what people with intellectual and developmental disabilities said truly mattered in their lives.

The Valued Experiences—Belonging, Contributing, Being Respected, Sharing Ordinary Places, and Choosing—emerged from countless conversations. John and Connie listened to people around the world, in People First meetings, in family circles, with direct support workers and professionals, where they would ask, “What brings quality of life to you?” Listening for patterns, they shaped what would become a global compass for meaningful lives.

Over the decades, the framework has informed person-centered practices, service standards, and policy approaches in countries across the world—from the United States and Canada to the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand—offering a simple yet profound ethical orientation for inclusion work.

John later reflected:

The quest to act in ways that offer more of these five interrelated experiences builds a more competent community. Healthy communities work to notice and overcome us-and-them thinking by exercising social creativity in doing these five community tasks:

- Promoting Interdependence
- Living inclusive stories
- Practicing hospitality
- Seeing and supporting capacities
- Resolving conflicts (O'Brien, 2011, p. 2).

These Five Valued Experiences and Community Tasks became the foundation of Rhode Island's Service Quality Network and later the Facilitator's Forum. Holding this quality framework continues to define my work and the work of people around the world. They remain among the most generative of

John's images: the Star of the Five Accomplishments—a constellation to navigate by.



Figure 5: Garden of Soul 2 (Beth Mount, 2011).

The *circle* and the *star* belong together: the circle creates the conditions, the star provides direction. Together they reflect John's enduring belief that community is both art and discipline—the slow work of listening and the courage to act.

Braid Five: The Work Taking Root—A new organization beginning

Patti Scott

In January 1997, Neighbours Inc., a newly formed non-profit organization in New Jersey, had just officially supported the first person with a developmental disability to move into their new home. We were a very young organization then. We wanted to work one person at a time, helping people who were moving from institutions into their own homes to choose their support staff, to control the funding available to them, and to lead lives rich in purpose, people, and participation in their new neighborhoods (Scott & Hasbury, 2022).

We were sitting in the library of our new home—mostly on the floor, as we had no furniture yet—a small team of four, joined by two people from the government agency for developmental disabilities (DDD) and the head of our University Center for Excellence (UCED). Together we were trying to achieve something that hadn't yet been done in our state, and we wanted to think it through collaboratively.

John was there with us at that beginning, doing what he does so well: asking questions, listening, graphically recording, summarizing, and helping us plan how to move forward—imagining how to best support the people who would choose us to work for them, and helping us think about how we could push our system forward. We entered that meeting with a vision of what we wanted to see for people in New Jersey. Thanks to John, we came out with a deeper understanding of that vision, along with the next steps on our path forward.

John stayed with us throughout our journey. He visited regularly over the next twenty-eight years. He visited our staff and board, and the people we work for. He led what we called “visits with critical friends,” helping us to explore where we were living into our values and where we needed to do better. These visits offered unflinching honesty—*but* from a friend, with respect. They enabled us to keep planning, to stay grounded in the heart of our work while navigating the complicated, confusing, and often contradictory world of a federally funded, fee-for-service system.

Any success that people we work for may have experienced can be traced directly back to John's support, his insight, his ability to listen, and his gift for helping it all make sense. There are so many pieces to John's legacy. We are just one small agency with our own story. It is deeply personal—but it is also part of something much larger. Our organization is one of many around the world that John supported in this way, with similar results, leading to real differences in people's lives.



Figure 6: We are Seeds Wisdom Flag (Beth Mount, 2018).

John had the ability to see something in each of us he encouraged and supported—especially if we were lucky enough to be considered friends. He would push us, in just the right way, out of our comfort zones. He would encourage us to try new things, to probe new possibilities. These stretches that he invited us into often felt scary at first, but they were never reckless; they were precisely tuned to our capacity and our courage. They required bravery, but they always held opportunities for growth.

I have many examples of those moments. One stands out: In 2018, a group of us were co-hosting an event in New Jersey. The night before the second day, we had stayed up late planning and organizing. I woke early, painstakingly preparing for my part, confident and ready. Then, literally as we were walking out the door, John turned to me and said he'd been rethinking things: that we should forget the plan and instead, Dave and I should facilitate a pop-up open space.

Since John suggested it, I said yes—though I confess to not fully understanding what a pop-up open space was. We pulled it off—just barely—but the experience demanded improvisation, courage, and trust. And it left me changed. John had that gift: to invite you into something that would stretch you, unsettle you, and ultimately enlarge you.

John constantly opened my thinking to new ways of looking at and thinking about the world, our work, and how it all fit together. Quite often this was through ideas that had nothing to do, at least on the surface, with disability—ways of thinking I would never have discovered except through him.

To really support people to have a life, a spirit of innovation is needed—a willingness to try things, to *probe and prototype* in small, safe-to-fail ways; an openness to see what emerges, to amplify what works and let go of what doesn't.

These explorations were just one more way John helped us continue to push the edges of what more is possible, to innovate and to create space for new possibilities. It opened us to emergence and has allowed many of us on the ground to approach our work in a way that leads to authentic person-centered planning, discovery of gifts, practices that have become ingrained in our culture, innovation—and life in all its beauty and messiness. All of which is an ongoing demonstration of the massive impact John has made.

Braid Six: Cross Pollinating and Inspiring Generative New Forms

John's work and the practical wisdom it uncovered have been profoundly influential, shaping the course of life and work for countless people around the world who care about the personhood of people with intellectual disabilities.



Figure 7: A New Way of Being Wisdom Flag (Beth Mount, 2020).

His was the work of cross-pollination—matching the wisdom from one set of experiences with the circumstances of another, always listening for what might

emerge when stories and practices met. “The first step,” he said before looking for the right words,

is finding the right people. And what I have found is that almost anybody can be the right person. But there are always circumstances where people are moving the edge of what we are doing forward, deeper into a territory that I find valuable. And so, my first step is to find somebody to listen to. And always that's the place where the image, the phrases, and the possibility comes alive, and so lots of what I write is reflection on those generative statements, images that come from the experience of people who are living the struggle for a better life by all the pressures of social devaluation and social exclusion (Hasbury, 2024, 06:32).

Through dialogue with John, countless innovative organizations and efforts were created and designed through collaboration with him.² Through them, opportunities have been created for people and families; agencies have transformed from traditional, institutional models to individualized, person-centered approaches. This tangible aspect of John’s legacy continues to touch lives across the world each and every day.

He never confined his learning to one field. John looked outward, beyond the segregated world of disability, to discover what people were exploring on the front edges of experience in other realms: community development, science, leadership, and systems change. He read widely, studied deeply, and entered into dialogue with authors and thinkers who helped him refine and extend what he was learning with others. His dialogue with Mike Green and Henry Moore on *Asset-Based Community Development* (Green et al., 2006) reached thousands across the globe. His quiet guidance helped thought leaders, organizations, and policymakers explore paths toward inclusion—possibilities often first resisted, then slowly realized through John’s gentle persistence and powerful questioning.

His influence also reached unexpected places. For decades, he was a behind-the-scenes brain trust for Frontier College, contributing to strategic efforts that helped move literacy from the margins to a national priority in Canada. This was

² Among them are: Total Living Concepts in Seattle; Lifeworks in California; Options for Community Living and The Dane County Difference in Wisconsin; Georgia Options in Georgia; Rensselaer ARC in New York; My Home and Western Australia Individualized Services (WAIS) in Australia; Imagine Better in New Zealand; In Control, Citizen Network and National Development Team for Inclusion (NDTI) in the United Kingdom; Inspiring Inclusion in Scotland; AIREA in Spain; The Network of Person-Centred planning (Persönliche Zukunftsplanung) in German speaking countries—and so many more. The list of organizations that exist directly due to John’s support, thinking, and guidance is too long to mention. We apologize for omitting—you know who you are.

another expression of his lifelong focus: to change the culture, one relationship, one experiment, one conversation at a time.

At the heart of all this cross-pollination was humility and collaboration. John nurtured gently, listened deeply, cajoled, questioned, and then synthesized confusion into new, shared clarity. Always, he paved ways for others to take another step forward on this long journey toward fuller lives and justice for all.

His presence remains woven through the work of many—a living pattern of relationships, friendship, and allyship, of images, and practices that continue to evolve and multiply. Through each of these crossings, John's touch endures. In this way, John's work was always about braiding. He braided people and practices, stories and traditions. He braided philosophy and daily life, art and organizing, method and mystery. His was not the work of a single strand, but of weaving many into stronger cords of possibility.

To remember John is not to close his story.
It is to keep weaving the braid he left in our hands.

The way we are, we are members of each other. All of us. Everything.
The difference ain't in who is a member and who is not, but in who
knows it and who don't.

— Wendell Berry (2019), *The wild birds: Six stories of the Port
William membership*

Further Reading

The companion video: "*Lessons At The Edges: Selected Reflections of John O'Brien*" can be accessed here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FWJMH3hcmGs>

The full archive of John O'Brien's books, articles, and talks, as well as recordings of John and Connie, is being curated through Inclusion Press:

<https://inclusion.com/change-makers-resources-for-inclusion/change-makers-make-change/john-obrien-change-makers-books-videos/john-obrien-books-videos/>

A curated collection of personal reflections giving testimony to the lives and organizations touched by his thought, friendship, and example is available at:

<https://www.pathfinders-studio.com/reflections>.

To honor John and his contribution to creating a world where everyone matters, Citizen Network is publishing a series of articles that reveal different dimensions of his work, which can be accessed: <https://citizen-network.org/library/goodbye-and-thank-you.html>

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