

# Llais

*promoting the right to an ordinary life*

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yet continue to howl**

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Learning Disability Wales  
Anabledd Dysgu Cymru

## **Dr Wolf Wolfensberger (1934 – 2011)**



**Let  
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**Learning Disability Wales**

# Llais

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"Our aim is that Llais is a rich source of debate, which sometimes may be controversial, but always informative. It is our intention to help our readership make up their own minds on a subject, by reflecting the latest thinking from a broad range of sources. The views expressed in Llais are therefore not necessarily supported by Learning Disability Wales. If you disagree with a certain view or article, why not write us a letter or even better, write your own article, which we will be happy to publish in Llais. Thus ensuring further balanced coverage of a particular subject.

We also welcome new articles on a given subject. To discuss writing for Llais please contact us."

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## Let Wolf rest in peace, yet continue to howl

*Kristjana Kristiansen is a Professor in social sciences at the University of Trondheim, Norway. She has worked alongside Wolf since the early 1970s and has led SRV, Social Role Valorization learning events, including PASS workshops throughout Europe and the USA. Kristjana shares her recollections, and those of colleagues, of Wolf Wolfensberger's life and work.*



Wolf Wolfensberger died on February 27th surrounded by his family in Syracuse (New York State, USA) after a long illness. And thus ended the life of a man who probably did more to change the understandings and situations for disabled and vulnerable people and their whole societies than anyone you could have met. What did he give the world, and what did we learn from him? Or what could we have learned from him, had we been willing to listen? And why might this be especially important in these turbulent times?

Wolf was born in Germany in 1934 and emigrated to the United States in 1950, where he worked in both the USA and Canada, primarily at Syracuse University's

Institute for Human Service Planning, Leadership & Change Agency. His official obituary and life-story is available elsewhere on-line. What you are reading here are my own reflections, as someone who knew and worked alongside Wolf since the early 1970s, and supplemented here by discussions and comments with some of my UK friends (Tony Wainwright, Ruth Marchant, Richard Pemberton, Pete Ritchie) as well as Norwegian Wolf-friends.

Wolf was a man of integrity, discipline, wisdom, wit, and kindness. He provided us with higher-order theoretical and historical ways to understand human oppression, the devastating consequences of societal devaluation, systematic

ways of analyzing the role and complexity of human services, and foresight about the continuing risks for disabled people and vulnerable groups, most of which are increasingly becoming true as he warned us. His human service evaluation tool PASS gave us a rigorous structure for unveiling that what services claim to be doing is often a major mismatch with what is actually provided, and that this often happens unconsciously and masked with well-formulated intentions. Wolf was a scholar with an impeccable tradition for accuracy that is sorely missed these days...and also had the title of USA chess-champion... (perhaps these two statements are not coincidentally intertwined?)

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For those who visited and worked with Wolf in the University town of Syracuse, you could have walked along his side as he humbly fed and clothed homeless people, especially at Unity Kitchen. And certainly the only Professor who wandered the streets at night looking for thrown-away items that could be re-used: the cellar floor of his own house was a major recycling station, where many poor people and students could find a lamp he had repaired or a warm coat his wife Nancy had washed and re-buttoned. In other words, he lived as he taught us to live.

Wolf's thinking and work and teaching style could hit us hard, and many rejected him because he refused to be politically correct in the numerous and recurrent waves of political correctness and false hopes of 'break-throughs': he was a 'human service craze-detector', warning and reminding us that simple solutions will be appealing yet rarely successful.

He changed life-directions for many who knew him and/or studied and appreciated his work. Some left paid human services and tried to live more coherently and in alignment with disadvantaged people in their own communities. Many tried to teach his ideas, through an over-regulated (many would claim) way, but that's because Wolf knew things would be simplified, underestimated, un-disciplined, and be used partly albeit unconsciously to serve one's own needs rather than that of others. And we can still find this going on.

Some went into very high level positions, based on his ideas, and often with success at changing policies at high levels and in coherent ways...only a few giving credit to his work as they themselves progressed. The All-Wales Strategies in Mental Handicap (1983) and later Mental Illness (1989) published by the Welsh Office deservedly received much international attention when disseminated, providing guiding principles for dismantling institutions and the development of community-based local service provision, using words such as social integration, respect for

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he was a 'human service craze-detector', warning and reminding us that simple solutions will be appealing yet rarely successful.

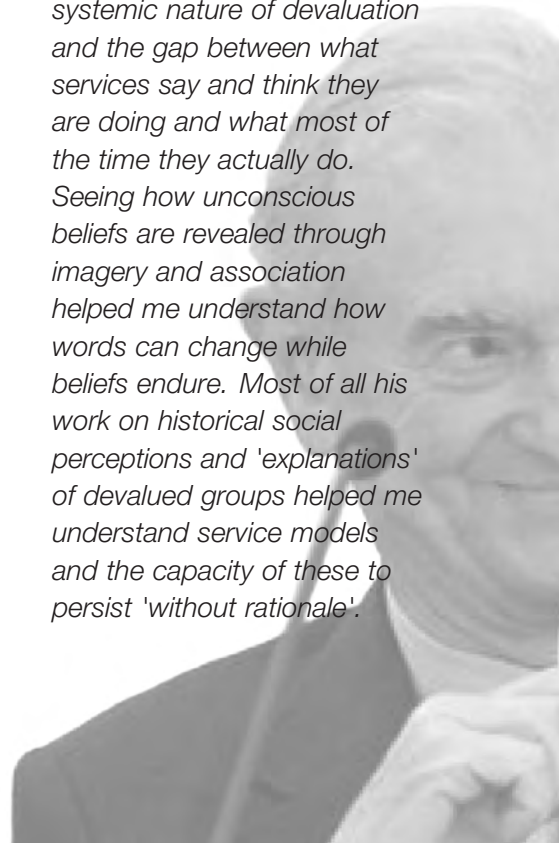
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individuals, and multi-disciplinary cooperation in planning and development of alternatives. These Welsh strategies were almost almost totally based on Wolfensberger's work from PASS (1969, 1973), yet you will not find his name or work mentioned. The same is true for UK-based social advocacy efforts, especially citizen advocacy, for the man who originated the ideas (1973). Why did this happen? Why did people abandon or ignore his name and writings? Anyone can use a set of ideas to accept or reject a standpoint, an ideology, or a theory, or an individual person.

Wolf himself had been labeled everything from a communist left-winger to a conservative religious fanatic. He said at an international conference in Canada in 1984: "Maybe I could have helped more people trying to liberate and support disadvantaged people if I had died after writing PASS III...before I declare myself personal anarchist Christian". Although he was consistently explicit in which of his teaching events and writings were secular or Christian, he lost many would-be learners who then boxed him in a singular place and rejected everything outside. This is a classical example of what Wolf taught us about how 'genetic fallacy' works (an important lesson for many).

Some concrete comments about what some of us have learned through the years:

- *Wolf gave me key insights which became an integral part of my world view and which have stayed with me over the decades - particularly about systemic nature of devaluation and the gap between what services say and think they are doing and what most of the time they actually do. Seeing how unconscious beliefs are revealed through imagery and association helped me understand how words can change while beliefs endure. Most of all his work on historical social perceptions and 'explanations' of devalued groups helped me understand service models and the capacity of these to persist 'without rationale'.*



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- a major and lasting contribution to the understanding of the destructive social processes that all too often can lock onto people who are different and how these processes shape the physical and social narratives of individuals and their services. His description of 'common wounds' is an eloquent and compelling account of how difference can all too often be translated into multi-layered depersonalization, marginalisation and worse. He opened my eyes to abusive practice masquerading as care. It helped me to understand the centrality of values, the complexity of change and persistence of un-human services. His work has also been a source of wisdom and hope.
- I believe there are problems with PASSing, - it can easily end up being used to blame service-workers, without showing how and why service dysfunction occurs. PASS 4 should have been written instead.
- Among the many zillions of things I learned from Wolf: especially listen to what people who depend on services say, about what helps or not.
- The imagery lessons will remain with me forever, and the way history repeats itself in new clothes and new jargon without substantial change in content.
- Comity and polity will dissolve, he taught us, and I was one of many who had to learn more about these two concepts, - now as usual he was predictably correct, and the

*signs of the times are all around us.*

- *Of all the people claiming to try to understand and represent a service-recipient perspective, no one has given us a more accurate account, experientially and theoretically. The model-coherence work we did in Norway continues to have a profound effect here.*
- *When I first collided with SRV I had never considered that the harm created by human services was anything other*

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*He opened my eyes to abusive practice masquerading as care. It helped me to understand the centrality of values, the complexity of change and persistence of un-human services.*

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*than random. It was revelatory to find a framework for understanding how this happens, again and again: across settings, across groups of people, across cultures and across time. The ideas within SRV helped me think differently, and the detail and the thoroughness of the PASS framework helped me work differently. For both, I will always be grateful to Wolf.*

## **Concluding thoughts:**

Wolf's work will be durable, and hopefully continually revisited and rediscovered.

In these days of global recession

and financial cuts in both services and personal supports for vulnerable people and groups, this revisiting of Wolf's work is long-overdue and pressing.

May you, dear Wolf, rest in peace yet continue to be our 'howling' Wolf, reminding all of us to strive onwards in thinking and living in coherent ways. Thank you, Wolf.

In 1991 Wolfensberger's book Normalization was ranked as # 1 in the list of 25 classic works in the field, and in 2006 Exceptional Parent magazine named "the Work of Dr. Wolf Wolfensberger on the Principles of Normalization and Social Role Valorization" as one of the '7 Wonders of the World of Disabilities'. For many years PASS (published by NIMR, Toronto) sold more copies than the Bible in Canada.

Some lesser-known things worth reading:

Kendrick, M. (1994). Some reasons why Social Role Valorization is important. SRV/VRS: The International Social Role Valorization Journal/La revue internationale de la Valorisation des roles sociaux, 1(1), 14-18.

Wolfensberger, W. (1995) "Social Role Valorization Is Too Conservative. No, it is too Radical", Disability & Society, 10(3): 365 - 367. ...

Wolfensberger, W. (1995). An "if this, then that" formulation of decisions related to Social Role Valorization as a better way of interpreting it to people. Mental Retardation, 33(3), 163-169.

Wolfensberger, W. (2002). Needed or at least wanted: sanity in the language wars. Mental Retardation, 40(1): 75-80.

Wolfensberger, W. (2005). The new genocide of handicapped & afflicted people (3rd ed.). Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Training Institute for Human Service Planning, Leadership & Change Agency.