

An Essay on Independent Facilitation
Through the Metaphor of the Seasons
By Roz Vincent-Haven

It was when I first read the essay, “There Is a Season” in Let Your Life Speak by Parker J. Palmer that I recognized what a powerful metaphor the spiral seasons of life are for all of us. As I reflect on the practice of independent facilitation, this metaphor comes immediately to my mind. Once one embarks on the process of independent facilitation there is a natural movement through time, as one season turns into the next. No previous experience is lost but leads to the next, on and on in a spiral fashion, to create a life rich in choice, voice and full citizenship. The following essay is my attempt to incorporate the elegant words and thoughts of Parker Palmer with my own understanding of independent facilitation. It is my desire to create a metaphor for this practice that can be understood in a familiar context and lends itself to the language and spiral nature of life.

We all use metaphor to bring meaning to our lives. The master metaphor in our current era, one that was birthed by the industrial revolution some 300 years ago, is the linear manufacturing metaphor. This is the arrogant conviction that we manufacture everything. The world is viewed as merely “raw material” with no inherent value on its own. It is only when design and labour are imposed upon it, does it attain value. Culture insists, against all evidence, that we can make what we want, when we want it. Just look at our language, we make time, make friends, make meaning, make money, make a living, make love. No longer is a baby “grown” in a mother’s womb but is now “made.”

In this linear metaphor, people who are labeled as developmentally disabled are seen as “flawed raw material,” that must be “fixed.” Plans, programs, measurable outcomes, evaluations, etc. are all based on the prevalence of the manufacturing metaphor. The Medical Model of service delivery widely in use today is the attempt to manage that which cannot be mended. This linear process is commonly recognized and accredited across the developmental sector. A plan is developed, either with the person’s participation or on their behalf, a program is determined, and a placement is made. Three steps to the product. Outcomes are measured, financial accountability attained, the person is “taken care of” and the quality control of the active manufacturing metaphor continues on.

On the other hand, the process of independent facilitation offers another, much deeper and more ancient metaphor. It is the wise metaphor of the seasons. As facilitators walk along side of developmentally disabled people and their families, they bring the perspective that our lives are like the eternal spiral of the seasons. Each season turning into the next, taking with it all the lessons learned and experiences lived on the way. This does not deny the struggle or the joy, the loss or the gain, the darkness or the light, but encourages us to embrace it all – and to find in all of it opportunities for growth.

Because independent facilitation accepts the notion that our lives are dependent on an inexorable spiral of seasons, on a play of powers that we can conspire with but never control, we run headlong into a culture which insists that we can make whatever kind of life we want,

whenever we want it. Deeper still, we run headlong into our own egos, which want desperately to believe that we are always in charge.

Independent facilitation employs ways of thinking and doing and being that are rooted in respect for the living ecology of life. Unlike “raw material” on which we make all the demands, this ecology makes demands on us even as it sustains our lives. We are here not only to transform the people we assist but also to be transformed by them.

Transformation is difficult, so it is good to know that there is comfort as well as challenge in the metaphor of life as a spiral of seasons. Illumined by that image, we see that we are not alone in the universe. We are participants in a vast communion of being, and if we open ourselves to its guidance, we can learn anew how to live in this great and gracious community of truth. We can, and we must – if we want our people to be valued, our sciences to be humane, our institutions to be sustaining, our healings to be deep, our lives to be true.

The Spring Season of Independent Facilitation:

Spring is a splendorous season but first there is a hard truth about it. Before spring becomes beautiful it is nothing but mud and muck. But in the muddy mess, the conditions for rebirth are being created. During this time, it is the humus – the decayed vegetable matter - that feeds the plant roots.¹ Similarly, it is a time when the humiliating and frustrating experiences of life in the current frozen developmental system that may create the fertile soil in which, with the help of independent facilitation, something new can grow for a person living with a developmental disability.

In the early spring of independent facilitation growth begins slowly and tentatively. People and their families may never have had the opportunity to dream about their future. It takes time to assist them in developing the capacity and confidence to imagine that life might be different, better, richer. But the tenacity of the smallest and most tender shoots of a beginning trust are developing. Through consistency, the facilitator assists these small beginnings to emerge as a harbinger of hope for the person they are assisting. For some who have been disillusioned and disappointed by the traditional service system it may be hard to credit the small harbingers of larger life to come, hard to hope until an outcome is secure. During this early spring of facilitation, the independent facilitator looks very carefully for the green stems of possibility: for the intuitive hunch that may turn into a larger insight for the person they are assisting. It takes time to thaw a frozen self-confidence and enable one to see that the world is hospitable.

However long it may take, early spring of independent facilitation moves into spring in all its fullness. It is a time for dreaming big dreams and making the plans to realize them. It is a time of flamboyance and activity. Now is when time is spent in a riot of developing relationships, exploring contributions and deliberately enabling growth and capacity in the person and their family.

¹ Plamer, Parker J; “There is a Season” in Let Your Life Speak (San Francisco, John Wiley & Sons 2000), pg. 103

Late spring in the natural world is potlatch time, a great give-away of blooming beyond all necessity and reason – done, it would appear, for no reason other than the sheer joy of it.² And so it is with the person receiving independent facilitation. This is the time where the person assisted is empowered to risk and reach for personal possibilities with the joy and certain knowledge that s/he is the director of his/her life. This is the season where, perhaps for the first time ever, the person receiving independent facilitation has the power and joy to share their unique gifts with community.

The great spring giveaway of nature teaches us a steady lesson known by wise independent facilitators: if we want to save the lives of those we assist, we cannot cling to what has been but must allow them to experiment and spend their lives with abandon. When we are obsessed with bottom lines and productivity, with efficiency of time and motion, with the rational relation of means and ends, with projecting reasonable goals and making a bee line toward them, it seems unlikely that our work will ever bear full fruit, unlikely that we will ever witness the fullness of spring in the lives of those we walk with.

The Summer Season of Independent Facilitation:

In nature the keynote of summer is abundance. In contrast to the sensationalism of spring, summer is a steady state of plenty, a green and amber muchness that feeds us and nourishes us on more levels than we can know.

Nature does not always produce abundance, of course. But nature normally takes us through a reliable cycle of scarcity and abundance in which times of insufficiency foreshadow an eventual return to the abundant fields.³ It is difficult to trust that the pool of possibilities is bottomless, that one can keep diving in and finding more but that is the work of independent facilitation in the season of summer.

Perhaps the first job did not work out or the roommate so hoped for did not materialize. But if the scarcity assumption is embraced the very scarcities that are feared are created. In the human world, the abundant life does not happen automatically. The independent facilitator operates from the assumption that community is the first resource and through belonging to a community, where the person can give their goods, whether money, or love, or power, or words, to others who need them – and receive them from others when they are in need, abundance is created. Occasional time limited facilitation may be required from time to time to reestablish a personal goal or assist with some aspect in the ongoing life and dreams of the person. However, this is the season where the person, with their family and allies, monitor and support the life the person has chosen. The role of the independent facilitator is to encourage that and check in occasionally.

² Ibid pg. 104

³ Ibid pg. 106

All good facilitators know this summertime truth: abundance is a communal act, the joint creation ecology in which each part functions on behalf of the whole and, in return, is sustained by the whole. Community not only creates abundance – community is abundance. The summer season in independent facilitation may last a year or a decade. It is a time when active assistance is not required or asked for. The facilitator becomes a wise and trusted member of community who can be called upon if needed.

Summer is the season when all of the dreams and plans and actions are repaid with compound interest.⁴ The person is living a meaningful life, naturally supported by relationships that offer care, support, advocacy, monitoring and companionship. For this single season at least, no matter how long it lasts, all anxious machinations might cease and the person can abide in the joy of an ordinary, everyday life.

The Autumn Season of Independent Facilitation.

In life, as in nature, the seasons do change. Autumn is a season of great beauty, but it is also a season of decline: the days grow shorter, the light is suffused, and the summer's abundance decays toward winter's death. But with autumn comes the scattering of seeds that will bring new growth in the spring. Strategic independent facilitation once again gently reemerges in this season of paradox.⁵

Perhaps the person is experiencing a decline in meaning within their present circumstances. Maybe a trusted family member or parent has been diagnosed with a serious illness or there is a death of a meaningful work environment. The person and their natural support team begin again to look to independent facilitation.

It is hard to see the myriad possibilities being planted to bear fruit in the seasons to come, when one finds themselves facing a “road closed” sign. On the surface it seems that life is lessening, but silently and lavishly the seeds of new life are always being sown.⁶ The job that was lost might help the person find work he was needed to do. Another ally emerges to be a major support. It is in this season that the independent facilitator gives wise accompaniment. When a situation feels irredeemable, the facilitator can assist the person and their supporters to discern what they need to know and to remember all that is not lost.

In a culture that prefers the ease of either-or thinking to the complexities of paradox, we have a hard time holding opposites together. We want light without darkness, the glories of spring and summer without the demands of autumn and winter. And yet wise independent facilitation in this autumn season of life supports the truth that daily dying's are necessary to new life.

⁴ Ibid pg. 109

⁵ Ibid pg. 98

⁶ Ibid pg. 100

The Winter Season of Independent Facilitation.

The little deaths of autumn are mild compared to the desperate demands of winter. And yet the rigors of winter, like the diminishments of autumn, are accompanied by amazing gifts. This is a time of dormancy and deep rest that are essential to all living things. Despite all appearances, of course, nature is not dead in winter but has gone underground to renew itself and prepare for spring.⁷

The winter season of independent facilitation may be spurred on by crisis or tragedy in the life of a person. A supportive loved one or parent has suddenly died. The person's own health has declined. An abuse or other personal crisis has occurred. Inward winters can take on many forms – failure, betrayal, depression, death. Yet until the fears that we most want to avoid are entered into boldly, they will dominate our lives. It is the role of the independent facilitator to enter into these fears with the person and their supporters, giving a guiding rudder in the midst of the ice and loss.

In winter, one can walk in the woods and see the trees singly and together, and see the ground they are rooted in. The gift of life's winter season is the gift of utter clarity. It is here that independent facilitation can identify the immediate needs for the person being assisted. What might have been previously discounted now comes clearly into view. Much time could be spent in creating a safety net from which the person can once again explore possibilities. Winter clears the landscape, however brutally, and it is here that independent facilitation can help the person see themselves and those around them more clearly, to see the very ground of their being. The skills and network of the facilitator are put into use to create stability from which the person can once again grow. Even in the most dismaying season of all we discover once again that the spiral of the seasons is trustworthy and life-giving.

And the seasons continue in the process of independent facilitation ever spiraling onward toward the new beginning of spring, in the life of the person who is assisted. The new shoots of dreams and goals are built on those that went before. The lessons learned and the experiences lived form the basis for the birthing of new vision and possibilities. Nothing is lost. We turn again and move on.

Author's Note:

I am deeply grateful for the wise words and teaching of Parker J. Palmer, whose work on the natural seasons and inspiration have formed the basis of this essay.

Credit:

Parker J. Palmer, "There Is a Season," in *Let Your Life Speak*, © by John Wiley & Sons; San Francisco, 2000.

⁷ Ibid pg. 101