



John McKnight

## Self-Help vs Professional Help

A Keynote Address by John McKnight, Chief Investigator  
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**INTRODUCTION:** In 1978, the Epilepsy In the Urban Environment Project began a series of studies on epilepsy (1) to determine the critical factors needed to improve health in local residents with epilepsy; (2) to analyze the effectiveness of medical care as a remedy; and (3) to develop new ways of attacking the problems created by epilepsy which are beyond the reach of the medical establishment. The following is a report of the project's chief investigator, John McKnight to the participants of the 1983 Epilepsy Self-Help Conference.

After looking at the self-help movement and self-help groups for the past 5 years, we think we can now distinguish what it is that makes them so unique and important.

They are different from larger, formal organizations. They are as different as an airplane is from a train. Both an airplane and a train can get you from Chicago to Denver, but they do it in very different ways. There are advantages and disadvantages to both.

Institutions, large formal ways of dealing with problems have advantages and they have disadvantages. And small, personal self-help, face-to-face, informal groups, likewise have advantages and disadvantages. NOW, we've tried to say, "What are the peculiar advantages of these self-help groups. Let me tell you what we think they are:

**FIRST OF ALL:** Self-helpers (you all know this) understand that **helping helps the helper**; that one of the best ways to help oneself is to help somebody else. One of the problems with most professional care, in formal systems, is that they don't allow you to help and in that, they are less health giving than they should be.

**THE SECOND THING** is that self-help groups have had an incredible, unintended side-effect (and boy do I see it here tonight)...**they develop leadership**. Most of our institutions and systems don't develop leadership because they are mostly organized very formally in a hierarchy and there is one leader. Self-help groups make everybody a leader. If you believe in democracy and citizenship, then you believe it's good to have a nation of leadership potential, if you want to be a great nation.

I've watched you here today and you know, you don't just sit around. If there's somebody up front and something changes or goes wrong, you know what? You ALL take over. You chip in and you make a wonderful group together. So that's the second thing and you can see it here. You're all leaders and there is just this intimate connection between self-help and leadership.

**THE THIRD THING** coming along very clearly is that self-help groups are able to **give quick responses** to problems while most of our institutions are very slow. Institutions are bureaucracies so they have committees or they have hierarchies. But self-help groups are able to MOVE. Many of our institutions are so big and cumbersome now that they move very slowly and that's one of their big problems.

Self-help groups are creations, all over America, of people ready to deal with a problem NOW. I was at a meeting of an

epilepsy self-help group one time. A phone call came, somebody answered the phone and said, "Greg's been arrested." He was a member of the group and immediately Greg had a rescue committee. You see the rescue committee was to go out and see what had happened to Greg. That's the kind of thing that we need as a part of our capacity in America. A quick response system to human problems.

**THE FOURTH THING** about self-help groups, that we think is very significant, is that they are **able to deal with individuals, INDIVIDUALLY...**while our big systems are good about dealing with everybody in the same way.

I remember I used to go into a Holiday Inn and on the dresser was a sign that said, "Holiday Inn, no surprises." It didn't matter whether you were in Fairbanks, Alaska, Cairo, Illinois, or Tahiti, you knew the room was going to look the same. Right? No surprises. They gave you the same thing everywhere. For a lot of purposes, that's just fine. But for people with problems that's just WRONG.

People with problems need individual, personal kinds of response. And self-help groups are the places that can do that kind of work in a way that our institutions can't.

**FIFTH:** self-help groups are the inventive part of America. They are a new solution to an old problem, while at the same time we think they represent **a new way of creating new solutions**.

Incidentally, have you noticed how many of our large corporations are going over to Japan to figure out "why" the Japanese are doing so well industrially? Do you know what they come back and say? "Why those Japanese, they may have corporations but we look into their corporations and find they're a bunch of little groups of people working together who care."

Now what we've got are these big hierarchies, right? With organization charts and lines of authority, with people individualized. So that is one of the most important things we think about this scale of group effort.

The inventions that I heard about this week here are incredible. I doubt that Northwestern University could, in a year, invent as much as you have invented. So self-help groups are places for invention...I hope you keep with it.

One of the things I keep hearing is that somebody would say there is a right way for self-helpers to act. When you hear that, you say: "Professor McKnight says, 'That's not true, there is NO right way,' cause there isn't."

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**AND THE SIXTH THING** that we think we've found that is unusual is that self-help groups have a kind of rhythm. You know how life has a rhythm? You go through a day with a rhythm or a week. Scientists study these rhythms. Institutions have no rhythm...they just keep going on and on and on every day. But self-help groups seem to have a **rhythm that meets the needs of people** in their personal selves. They do that by shifting leadership, by calling on different people at different times to do different things...rather than what our institutions do: call on the same people, all the time to do the same thing.

I once had a wonderful opportunity to ride with an old American Indian man across the prairie. Across the same prairie went an engine on a train track. The engine seemed very powerful until I realized how limited the engine was. It was organized and powerful and structured, but it could only go from Cheyenne to Denver, no place else. The man on the horse could go anyplace, could find a new way, a different way. The Indian didn't move so fast, didn't look so powerful but was a lot more creative and a lot more responsive, flexible and free to choose where he would go. He had a lot more control of his transportation than the railroad engineer did.

The weakness that we think exists in the terms of self-help groups is that so many people, particularly professionals, feel self-help groups are not credible. We have done a lot of work trying to look at how you might do something about that. I was very pleased to see that the last thing at your conference today was the question: how do we maintain credibility? A critical issue, but when it comes down to it, there are a lot of people in every society who now believe that:

**Big is better,  
Managed is more,  
Systems are superior.**

These are the same people, I am afraid, who have given us:

**Schools that can't teach,  
Police that can't make us safe, and  
Car companies that can't make a car we'll buy.**

NOW, there is another voice abroad in America that is the **RENEWING VOICE**. The voice I think we're beginning to hear is **YOUR VOICE**...as we begin to hear it in health, but we can hear it everywhere. That voice is saying:

**Small is also beautiful,  
Informal is effective,  
Sensitivity is often superior.**

And incidently, wherever I see these principles at work I see groups dominated by women. I don't want to make the men feel bad but that's the way it is. If there is a woman's movement, I think that's what it's really about. Most women know these principles of small, informal, sensitive and free. What's bad in our society is if women forego their principles and think they must become like male managers for things to get better. It's male managers that have been giving us:

**Cars we won't buy,  
Schools that can't teach, and  
Police forces that can't protect.**

So think a little about the values, history and experience that you have had as women with families because they are very much the kind of things that inform the self-help movement

and why, when I speak to groups where self-help is the center, I see this: I see women as leaders.

You know it's like this: You know the old question? Describe this glass. Some people will say: "That glass is half-full" and other people will say: "That glass is half-empty". Now I work at a university where we train professionals and I know what professional training is. Professional training is looking at somebody and seeing the empty part, seeing the deficiency, the short-coming, the lack. Self-help groups are exactly the opposite. They are people learning to see the fullness. You see the possibilities?

So with self-help groups we think what we are seeing is people who can see the capacity. We're seeing people who are really citizens and citizens have capacity. We're seeing people who know how to contribute to society. We're seeing people who believe in responsibility to the community and people who have faith that they, working together, can make a better life. Put those together and I'd say that's where the future of America is. It's not in our government, or our medical centers or our corporations. I personally believe they are, by and large, dinosaurs, slow afoot, oversized engines and not Indians.

In 1840, a French Count took a trip across the United States and wrote a famous book called **DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA** but nicknamed the **TOTE BOOK**. Do you know what he picked out as the **MOST** important difference between America and old Europe? He said: "It is when Americans see a problem,



they will get together and form a committee or a group and go out and solve it. In Europe that is not a possibility." Everything in Europe was controlled and structured and defined.

Now WE'VE gotten to where almost everything is controlled and structured and defined in America and we can't afford to lose this special character that the Tote Book talked about and right here tonight is the heart of that America. That's what this is all about, what makes us unique. It's not our football teams, it's not our production systems, it's not our universities. It's our capacity to come together, in small groups, and find **NEW WAYS** to solve old problems.

That's the heart of America, that's the American dream, that's really why when Jo called and asked: "Would you come out to Colorado on an August day, for nothing, and speak to a group of people who are in epilepsy self-help?" I said, "I gotta be there cause that's where the center of America is," and I appreciate it. Thanks for inviting me.

### **Father**

**The father is the head of the house—  
The mother is the heart of the house,  
or visa versa.**