

## Tribute to George Watters – 10/24/2018

This is a tribute to George Watters by Jeff Truthan. I will explain later why I am not here today in person, much though I would like to be.

I had the honor of contributing to a book published last year called “A History of Private Sector Rehabilitation”. I was invited to write a chapter, but I agreed to do so only if I could write another chapter about George Watters, my mentor and friend. The book editor was quick to agree, so I arranged to interview George. With my (late) wife Jinnie, we met at a restaurant on the South Hill. He agreed to be audio recorded ... so we have a nearly 2-hour audio that captures George in the early Spring of 2017. From that, we distilled our interview into an 8-page chapter for the book. I chose to title the chapter “Of Optics, Tilting at Windmills, and SSA Reform”. Hopefully, some reprints of that chapter are available for those who would like to know more details about George’s work in the disability sector.

What George really wanted, was to see a conceptual change from Dis-ability to simply Ability. He wanted to diss the dis- in disability so that focus would be on the residual abilities of people – what they can still do, despite the presence of some condition or situation that influenced a person’s daily life.

From an early age of 7-8 years, his own severely visually impaired father worked intensely with George to come to create solutions that solved a complex but essential problem .... Driving to work despite tunnel vision! George learned to thrive in such complex details. His early work years and education brought him into contact with others who faced seemingly daunting physical and mental challenges ... yet collectively, working with others, could create changes that had lasting effect, whether due to architectural barriers or attitudinal barriers.

George did not balk at taking on seemingly impossible tasks. He saw the potential, the attitude, and the fortitude of people with disabilities and did everything he could to enable opportunities with them. He was part of the early movement towards independent living opportunities for people with severe physical disabilities. He advocated for the removal of architectural and attitudinal barriers. He linked elbows with a variety of political figures in his quest to cause institutional change at the Social Security Administration (SSA). He testified multiple times before Congress to encourage such changes.

In one of those testimonies in the late 1970’s, he saw the potential for recent changes at the US Department of Labor to enable computerized automation of a bulky dictionary of occupations that had only been used in book format until then. This book – the Dictionary of Occupational Titles – was a foundational piece in working through the process of disability claims for SSA. Similar testimony by Dr. Dennis Pollack of Spokane led to an introduction of the two by Tom Foley, a renowned local congressman who introduced the two. George relocated to Spokane from California to co-found a company later known as Ability Information Systems – AIS. With help from local Spokane investors and business leaders, George was able to engineer several early, computer-based solutions that helped to process disability claims and also helped to identify return to work solutions for people with disabilities.

The expert computer system George engineered in 1984 was field tested by Social Security in multiple states. It perfectly emulated the crazy complex vocational decision-making process used by SSA, and documented itself better than typical claims examiners would do. The decision flow charts followed by SSA, if printed out and laid side by side would encircle this room!

Sadly, despite a successful 3-year trial of this incredible solution, SSA decided not to license it, a choice that triggered an ownership change at AIS. Yet undaunted, George flipped the optics on his quest to

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build useful tools for SSA, obtaining several grants to build predictive systems rather than claims determination. His work led him to cooperative relationships with several Spokane area rehabilitation companies. Ultimately, based on just a small amount of easily obtained claims data, he derived a formula that predicted, with 95% accuracy, the outcome of a claims application. This enabled an opportunity to intervene early with a person who was reluctantly applying for disability but would rather return to work if they could. His early intervention studies in the late 1980's and early 1990's showed success rates that put 1 in 12 people back to work instead of SSA's 1 in 200 rate. George at his finest ... always trying to find ways to help people achieve their dreams.

I had the occasion to meet George early in 1985, after I had become one of the early (1983) customers of his online solution for rehabilitation. I had first learned about AIS from a sales rep with tunnel vision in 1983. I saw that that this solution worked to help me identify what I could not get to in the printed books of the day and it got answers for me in minutes instead of hours. I began to do training workshops to promote the technology in the state of Ohio in 1984. Now recall that this was 12 years before "the Internet", so it was quite an achievement. People were terrified of computers taking their jobs, rather than helping them work better.

Then met George in 1985 at the Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago. We "hit it off", as we both shared our vision for how computers could help in this challenging niche industry. He hired me in mid-year 1985, and I had the great honor and privilege to work with him and others to support and train customers, solve issues, and create new solutions.

People talk about a person being "right-brain dominant" or "left-brain dominant". To me, George was neither ... he was what I call "Stratospheric-dominant" – way out there in his thinking. I often felt like I was hanging on to his dangling shoe laces, trying to keep up with the genius, free-floating, free-thinking brain with which he was so gifted. I often felt like the anchor, trying to translate his very cool ideas into actionable elements. What a privilege I had to have known him and learned how to not be afraid to step outside the normal boxes in which we so neatly keep ourselves too often.

After I stopped recording our interview last year, I asked George why he had hired me way back in 1985. His answer was: "I thought you were someone who could carry on in my place." It is destiny that the very day that we pause to remember George is the day that I co-present two advanced training sessions to Vocational Experts at a national conference in North Carolina on how to better do their work.

Once again, George was right ... the need for this important work continues .... And I will always carry on with the fire he lit in me to think outside the confines of the boxes we feel more comfortable in. Look for new solutions to continuing old, existing problems. Help people with disabilities, don't harm them by just "getting on benefits" with no way out/beyond that sentence to a life on the edge of poverty.

Thank you, George, for lighting the fire in me so long ago. It is a great honor to carry on in your heritage of innovation and creative solutions. May God welcome you for your caring heart, your many friendships, your humor, your insights, your inspiration, your perseverance. May you find your peaceful eternal rest.