Valued by Love: Social Roles in Wendell Berry's Short Stories

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Introduction

This essay is an experiment. I have been an informal (at least) teacher of normalization and—to a lesser extent—Social Role Valorization (SRV) for quite a few years. For even more years I've been a serious reader of modern fiction—novels and short stories. I'm the kind of reader that Canadian novelist Robertson Davies described as a member of the "clerisy."

> *Who are the clerisy? They are people who like to read books … The clerisy are those who read for pleasure, but not for idleness; who read for pastime but not to kill time; who love books, but do not live by books. (Davies, 1990)*

From time to time over the years I've thought about the connections between the realms of SRV-teaching and serious fiction-reading. Those connections are not direct. It's likely that most fiction writers have never heard of the idea: Social Role Valorization. Many might blanch at the term itself. It has Latinate roots—not favored among writers; it lacks immediacy and vividness; it requires secondary explication that would be tiresome in a story. So, I'm pretty confident that clarification of SRV themes is not central to the purpose of most fiction writers.

I think exploring such connections is worthwhile, though, because fiction—the deliberate construction of story—makes vivid the ways that people interact with each other in the world. Fiction almost always focuses on "characters" and relationships among them, and readers or hearers of stories have always been fascinated by the ways that people get along—or don't. Recently I've been reading novels or stories by such modern writers as Alice Munro, Richard Ford, Marilynne Robinson, and Gabriel Garcia Marquez. They all communicate through story about how people are—and sometimes how they might be—with each other. Writers intend to try to satisfy their readers, although, of course, not every reader is contented with every writer every time. Readers who share a conviction about SRV may, through fiction, play with the roles-in-action the writer portrays. In their imaginations, readers may participate in the give-and-take among characters whose social roles differ in imputed value. Those value differences show up at given moments in a story and across the duration of time that a story represents.

In this essay I want to explore the appearance of "social roles" in the short stories of Wendell Berry. For those unacquainted with him, Wendell Berry is a Kentucky farmer who is also a poet, essayist, and deviser of both short stories and novels. The action in all of his stories occurs in the fictional community around Port William, a very small town on the Kentucky River near its confluence with the Ohio. It's about half-way between Cincinnati and Louisville. I acknowledge right here that Wendell

Berry is my favorite writer of fiction and that I like his stories even more than I do his novels.

Berry's constant theme is community—its costs, disciplines, and rewards. Here, from the story "The Wild Birds," is Burley Coulter, a favorite recurring character, speaking his and likely the author's creed about community, as he—Burley—persuades his lawyer about a change in Burley's will. It's a change that the lawyer/friend/cousin is surprised and uncertain about.

> *I'm saying that the ones who have been here have been the way they were, and the ones of us who are here now are the way they are, and to know that is the only chance we've got, dead and living, to be here together. I ain't saying we don't have to know what we ought to have been and ought to be, but we oughn't to let that stand between us. That ain't the way we are. 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. What has been here, not what ought to have been, is what I have to claim.*

In community, people find themselves filling up actual or possible vacancies in others' lives. Sometimes the vacancies are material. One citizen furnishes food to others for a reasonable return. Some citizens have extra living space they can sell or rent to others. Some community members have learned to do some particular things very well, and they apply those skills in ways other community members can use. And so forth across the entire membership. In the Port William community people live and are joined with each other as they are.

Wendell Berry helps us appreciate community-at-work. We don't have to get tied up in complicated terminology. Instead of studying how people live together, we're led to see, hear, and feel the working and living going on. Instead of an analysis of roles and role-behavior, which runs a risk of oversimplifying the messiness of life-together, in Wendell Berry's stories we find memories of how specific people have acted with each other. Life in community appears to us as life is. Community reveals itself in both its joys and horrors. Let's look at five of the stories of the "membership" to see how members of the Port William community brush against one another—how they either fill or sometimes create vacancies in each others' lives. Observe, though, how community struggles to retain its own. Notice how roles that might ordinarily be devalued in another world's eyes are shaped or re-interpreted by means of the ties of blood and affection that bind Port William members together.

"A Jonquil for Mary Penn"

Wendell Berry gently imagines the response of a loving and caring community to a member who is sick in the story "A Jonquil for Mary Penn." The story begins simply. "Mary Penn was sick, though she said nothing about it when she heard Elton get up and light the lamp and renew the fires." It is 1940. Mary Penn is eighteen years old. Her choice of Elton Penn as a husband a year-and-a-half before has disappointed her locally prominent family, who expected her "… to be married to a solid professional man, a doctor perhaps, or (and this her mother particularly favored) perhaps a minister." Her family now treats her "as if she had never lived." She and Elton have rented a run-down farm and are trying to bring life back to it.

But today, Mary Penn has the flu or something like it. This is the first time since their marriage that Mary has been sick. She feels "floaty." She is achy, feels overpoweringly tired. But Elton doesn't seem to notice. Mary has both indoor and outdoor chores. There are meals to be fixed and oil lamps to be cleaned and polished. She needs to sweep and dust the house. And there are barn chores—feeding animals, gathering eggs. And, it's a windy, cold early March day.

Wolf Wolfensberger says that one of the early authorities to describe and emphasize the power of social roles was Talcott Parsons, who wrote particularly about the "sick" role. A person who plays the sick role may dispense with "ordinary performance expectations" and may receive "treatment and caring from others." At the same time, someone playing the sick role has obligations, including "wanting to get well, and seeking and accepting treatment to this end" (Wolfensberger, 1998).

Mary Penn struggles with her wish to set aside "ordinary performance expectations." She senses no permission from Elton to do so. It's hard to be sick when you know there's so much to be done. It's hard to seek and accept treatment when there's a life to be led.

Finally, though, Mary Penn gives in. She sits, idle, by the stove that heats the house.

> *The wind ranted and sucked at the house's corners. She could hear its billows and shocks, as if somebody off in the distance were shaking a great rug. She felt, not a draft, but the whole atmosphere of the room moving coldly against her. She went into the other room, but the fire there also needed building up. She could not bring herself to do it. She was shaking, she ached, she could think only of lying down. Standing near the stove, she undressed, put on her nightgown again, and got into the bed.*

She sleeps. When she wakes the room is warm, a teakettle sputters, her lamps are polished, and her good neighbor Josie Tom Braymer sits by her bedside and works on embroidery, stitching a jonquil. Elton did notice her illness, did think about how to help, and did stop to tell the neighbors. When Mary awakes, she feels "wonderful." The role has "worked." More … she's received a neighbor's help and love. She's had rest. She's on her way to healing.

"Pray Without Ceasing"

Whatever else "community" means for Wendell Berry, its definition does include forgiveness. Sometimes-surprising healing—over a deed many might think impossible to forgive—reveals itself in "Pray Without Ceasing."

One morning in the summer of 1965 Andy Catlett is greeted by a neighbor, who presents Andy with an old newspaper clipping—the account of the death-by-gunshot, in the summer of 1912, of Andy's great-grandfather, Ben Feltner. As the story unfolds we learn about relationships among Ben Feltner, his son Mat, and Ben's killer—his cousin Thad Coulter. Thad had re-mortgaged his paid-for farm so that he could help set up his own son as a merchant in the county seat. But the business failed, and Thad's son ran out on his debt.

> *And so Thad's fate was passed from the reckless care of his son to the small mercy of the law. Without more help than he could confidently expect, he was going to lose his farm. Even with help, he was going to have to pay for it again, and he was close to sixty years old.*

Thad is portrayed as a "close man"—intensely private, quiet, but sensitive about how he's seen by others. When he gets drunk and, in such a state, appears at the home of his wise and sober friend Ben Feltner to ask for help, Ben judges that the request should better be considered later, when other allies can be gathered and when Thad can think more clearly. Thad, however, interprets Ben's judgment as dismissal. He sees outright rejection in it. He leaves, angry, and goes home for his pistol.

Thad turns from "close man" to killer when he returns. Still drunk and enraged, he shoots Ben Feltner as Ben speaks with neighbors in the town street. The rest of the story traces the roles the characters play after the explosion of public mur-

der that could blow a community apart. Violence connects to disorder. First someone must be an order-preserver—one who can begin peace-making. Just after the shooting, Ben Feltner's son Mat rushes from the blacksmith shop to the crowd now gathered in the street.

> *… then he saw what was left of the man who had been his father lying against the wagon wheel … When Mat stood up again from his father's side, he was a man new-created by rage. All that he had been and thought and done gave way to his one desire to kill the man who had killed his father.*

Mat becomes a would-be avenger. His uncle, Jack Beechum, emerging from the general store, recognizes the transformation in Mat. Uncle Jack acts to stop more violence—to restore and preserve order.

> *He ran to the door. When he was outside, he saw first the crowd and then Mat running toward him out of it. Without breaking his stride, he caught Mat and held him ... He may have been moved by an impulse simply to stop things until he could think.*

Jack's order-preservation—the creation of breathing space—works. Mat, given time to collect himself, begins another transformation: from avenger to head-of-family, a role that's suddenly been thrust on him through violence.

Thad Coulter, the killer, is sobered by his violent act. He quickly feels remorse but cannot, of course, retract what he has done. He becomes an abject fugitive.

> *The walking and the water drying on his face cleared his mind, and now he knew himself as he had been and as he was and knew that he was changed beyond unchanging into something he did not love.*

Thad surrenders himself to the county sheriff and is placed in the county jail—from fugitive to prisoner—where he hangs himself on the second night of his confinement.

Meanwhile, on the evening after Ben Feltner's murder, a crowd gathers in the Port William street and, seeking authorization, moves to the Feltner front yard. They want approval from Mat to go to the county seat—to the jail—and to visit immediate retribution on Thad Coulter.

> *For what seemed to Jack a long time, Mat did not speak or move … Jack's right hand ached to reach out to Mat. It seemed to him again that he felt the earth shaking under his feet, as Mat felt it. But though it shook and though they felt it, Mat now stood resolved and calm upon it … The voice, when it came, was steady:*
>
> *"No, gentlemen. I appreciate it. We all do. But I ask you not to do that."*
>
> *And Jack, who had not sat down since morning, stepped back and sat down.*

So, Mat completes the conversion from avenger to forgiver and peacemaker—a conversion that's necessary if community is to be preserved, and an example of what might be termed Berry's recurrent theme of valorization-by-love. And, Mat's grandson, Andy, 53 years later recognizes the value obtained by Mat's act:

> *I am blood kin to both sides of that moment when Ben Feltner turned to face Thad Coulter in the road and Thad pulled the trigger. The two families, sundered in the ruin of a friendship, were united again first in new friendship and then in marriage. My grandfather made a peace here that has joined many who would otherwise have been divided. I am the child of his forgiveness.*

Peace and comity are companions, and it's the forgiver—or the binder-up—who makes such

companionship possible.

"Thicker Than Liquor"

Newly married attorney Wheeler Catlett receives a mid-day long distance call that splits him from thought about his bride and his new life and thrusts him into the demands imposed by love, family, and community. Wheeler's Uncle Peach (full name: Leonidas Wheeler) is at the bottom end of a "spell" of hard drinking. The hotel in Louisville calls Wheeler, whose near future must then feature rescuing Uncle Peach and bringing him home. It is 1930. The phone call pushes Wheeler from roles as young husband and beginning professional into the role of family caregiver.

Uncle Peach is a trial to his family—the "black sheep." Wheeler has long argued with his mother, Dorie:

> *"To hell with him! Why don't you let him get on by himself the best way he can? What's he done for you?"*
>
> *Dorie answered the first question, ignoring the second: "Because blood is thicker than water."*
>
> *And Wheeler said, mocking her, "Blood is thicker than liquor."*
>
> *"Yes," she said. "Thicker than liquor too."*

So Wheeler drives to the station, takes the interurban car to Louisville, and locates Uncle Peach in a cheap hotel near the stockyards. Wheeler faces the job of getting his uncle back home. The job—being Peach's rescuer—immediately exposes Wheeler to its hazards. After a struggle to get Uncle Peach dressed, out of the hotel, to the station, and onto the train, Peach gets sick in the crowded train.

> *Wheeler looked for a way out, perhaps to the vestibule at the end of the car, but with the aisle full of people escape appeared to be impossible, and anyhow it was too late, for suddenly Uncle Peach leaned forward and, with awful retches and groans, vomited between his spread knees. Wheeler caught hold of him and held him. All around them people were giving them looks and drawing their feet away … Wheeler's pleadings with him to be quiet might as well have been addressed to a panic-stricken horse. As soon as he would be almost recovered and quiet, suddenly he would lean forward again. "Uuuuuup! Oh, my God!" And when the spasm passed he would roll his head against the seatback. "Ohhhh, me!"*
>
> *It was an awful intimacy carried on in public. To Wheeler, it was endurable only because it was inescapable.*

Caring for Peach introduces yet more complications. When they arrive at the local station, Peach—still sick—insists on getting his horse and buggy from the livery stable, leaving Wheeler's car at the station. Near nightfall, when they reach Uncle Peach's farm—not that close to Wheeler's place—they find nearly no food, and both Peach and Wheeler need to eat. Eventually, Wheeler gets Uncle Peach to sleep.

> *Once, after they had passed through yet another nightmare, Uncle Peach, who had momentarily waked, said slowly into the darkness, "Wheeler boy, this is a hell of a way for a young man just married to have to pass the night."*
>
> *"I thought of that," Wheeler said. "But it's all right." And he patted Uncle Peach, who went back to sleep and for a while was quiet.*
>
> *Later, Wheeler himself went to sleep, his hand remaining on Uncle Peach's shoulder where it had come to rest.*
>
> *And that is where daylight found him, far from home.*

Community and family—those connections, often of blood, are, Wendell Berry says, thicker than liquor. And sometimes those connections create roles

terribly inconvenient but also terribly necessary.

"Watch With Me"

This story could be read with profit by those who seek thoughtful responses to events like the shootings at Virginia Tech or Columbine High School. Into all the hubbub that follows such events Wendell Berry inserts this story about a community that stretches itself to keep a wayward member in its embrace. Local citizens—farmers and their families—suddenly are called to fill unaccustomed roles so they can, they hope, prevent violence and keep their community together.

The year is 1916. The wayward community member in "Watch With Me" is Thacker Hample, more customarily known to his neighbors as "Nightlife," for reasons the story elaborates. It's a name Thacker Hample takes on gladly. Of Nightlife the narrator says:

> *Thacker Hample belonged to a large family locally noted for the fact that from one generation to another not a one of them had worked out quite right. Their commonest flaw was poor vision … But Nightlife was incomplete, too, in some other way. There were times when spells came upon him, when he would be sad and angry and confused and maybe dangerous, and nobody could help him. And sometimes he would have to be sent away to the asylum where, Uncle Othy Dagget said, they would file him down and reset his teeth.*
>
> *His mind … had a leak in it somewhere, some little hole through which now and again would pour the whole darkness of the darkest night—so that instead of walking in the country he knew and among his kinfolks and neighbors, he would be afoot in a limitless and undivided universe, completely dark, inhabited only by himself. From there he would want to call out for rescue, and that was when nobody could tell what he was going to do next, and perhaps he could not tell either.*

With reference to Nightlife one of his neighbors observes, "He don't fit the hole that was bored for him." "Watch With Me" tells what happens when Nightlife has a "spell," picks up a loaded shotgun from a neighbor, and walks off into the woods.

Nightlife's chief pursuer is Ptolemy (Tol) Proudfoot, a lifelong farmer, exuberant socializer, and devoted husband to Miss Minnie Proudfoot (neè Quinch). It is Tol's shotgun that Nightlife appropriates, from Tol's farmyard. Tol reacts by following Nightlife into the woods. He asks another neighbor to let Miss Minnie know what's going on and to recruit other neighbors to help. Then he says, "I expect I'll just ease along with him for a ways." Tol fears that Nightlife may either shoot someone else or shoot himself. Neither would be acceptable. The gun is known to be a powerful one.

The other neighbors join Tol as he follows Nightlife, keeping a safe distance because of the gun. The "a ways" that they follow stretches into hours and miles.

> *It was not going to make sense, not yet, and maybe not for a long time, if ever. And for a while, maybe a longish while, there would not be food or rest or comfort either … He (Tol) said to himself, "I reckon it would be better not to have got involved." But he knew even so that, helpless or not, hopeless or not, he would go along with Nightlife until whatever happened that would allow him to cease to go along had happened … He thought, "I reckon I am involved."*

The procession continues throughout the long afternoon and into the evening. Nightlife, whose role newspapers of our time would be sure to describe as "loner," leads his followers through woods, past small farms, and down to the Kentucky River. The followers don't, though, think of Nightlife as a "loner." That's a word for reporters and police departments. To the followers Nightlife

is their neighbor. He's one of their own, though an odd one. He's still a **member**—an important point of the story.

> *For Tol and the others, following him had ceased to seem unusual. In the heat and the difficulty of their constant effort to keep just within sight of their strange neighbor, who had become at once their fear, their quarry, and their leader, they had ceased even to wonder what end they were moving toward. This wild pursuit that at first had seemed an interruption of their work had become their work. Now they could hardly imagine what they would be doing if they were home.*

Shedding more regular roles, Tol and his neighbors have become nearly-silent watchers. They are Nightlife's guardians as he moves toward a future that's uncertain and likely dangerous. Night arrives. The following continues. Because the pursuers are experienced hunters and because it's summer, they have no hesitation about going on in the dark, except that they have a harder time knowing where Nightlife has gone. They fear losing him. But just as much they fear being surprised by the gun. At last, late in the night, tired, hungry, and confused, they stop to rest and build a fire. They fall asleep.

> *They are awakened at dawn … what had wakened them was Nightlife standing over them, one foot in the ashes. He was holding the gun, but not threatening them with it. It dangled from his hand as unregarded as if it has been the bail of an empty bucket.*
>
> *"Couldn't you stay awake?"*
>
> *They were frightened, astonished, tickled at their own and one another's fright and astonishment, and most of all ashamed …*

After Nightlife moves on again into the woods, Tol observes, "If he hadn't found us, I don't reckon we ever would have found him." This Gethsemane-like incident, matched with the story's title, more than hints at Nightlife as an expression of the hidden Christ. See Matthew 25: "…insofar as you did this to one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to me." This is an almost-shocking contrast to the typically-ascribed role as "menace" or "loner."

The story rushes to its end. By morning Nightlife has circled back to Tol's farm, where the pursuit began. The wives and mothers of the processors (including Nightlife's mother), knowing what has been happening and aware that everyone will be tired and hungry, gather in Tol and Miss Minnie's kitchen to prepare food. When Nightlife and his pursuers arrive, a sudden thunderstorm drives them all into Tol's workshop. There Nightlife, still under the "spell" that began the day before, leads the men in a hymn and delivers a sermon based on the New Testament parable about the shepherd who left his flock to seek the one sheep that has gone astray. Nightlife emphasizes the point-of-view of the sheep that was lost. As the sermon ends Nightlife's "fit" or "spell" falls away, and the long pursuit ends. The narrator of the story observes:

> *… Miss Minnie, I think, understood it better than everybody. She had taught at least four of those young men at the Go-forth school: Nightlife, Burley Coulter, and the two Hardys. And she and Tol had been neighbors to them all. She knew pretty exactly by what precarious interplay of effort and grace the neighborhood had lived.*

Perhaps it is grace that sustains the Port William community so that it can tolerate and even glory in even its more peculiar members, turning loners into sharers at a common table.

"Fidelity"

I HAVE SUMMARIZED THE PLOTS of the previous four stories so that I could try to spotlight the characters who live out those plots. I won't offer a plot summary of "Fidelity," though. In part, that's because the story is long—almost a short novel—and because it includes several important back-stories. Mostly I don't want to provide a summary because I want to entice anyone who reads this essay to read "Fidelity." My advice is, if you choose to read only one Wendell Berry story, that story should be "Fidelity." I have imagined stories as foci for long conversations—like those at retreats. "Fidelity" is the story about which I'd most like to join others in such conversation.

Readers—and those who, like me, are re-readers—of Wendell Berry's stories probably fall in love with Burley Coulter. He is arguably the author's favorite character. Burley's niece-by-marriage considers him as she faces the likelihood of the end of his life:

> *Burley was a man freely in love with freedom and with pleasures, who watched the world with an amused, alert eye to see what it would do next, and if the world did not seem inclined to get on very soon to anything of interest, he gave it his help…*
>
> *… she knew, too, how little he had halted in grief and regret, how readily and cheerfully he had gone on, however burdened, to whatever had come next. And, because he was never completely of her world, she had the measure of his generosity to her and the others. Though gifted for disappearance, he had never entirely disappeared but had been with them to the end.*

Through nearly all of the stories and novels Wendell Berry offers Burley Coulter as a life-force. He's the leader of work-song in the tobacco fields, the hunter who stays out for days with his dogs in the woods, the faithful carer for his mother in her last years, and the leader of local celebrations—sometimes inebriated ones. "Fidelity" tells of his illness, death, and at least two funerals, one of which is also a sort of trial.

The story also offers a clear contrast between a disappearing rural community sustained by history and family and the modern serviced world as represented by urban hospital medicine. I had a teacher in seminary, forty years ago, who strongly counseled prospective preachers against what he called "negative-positive" sermons—the kind that threaten hearers heavily but then offer a dollop of grace at the end. "Fidelity" is a successful violation of my teacher's advice. The bias in the comparison between the two worlds could not be more explicit. And that bias is revealed, at least in part, by contrasts between identities imputed to key characters.

82-year old Burley Coulter appears, from the points-of-view of (unnamed) doctors and police officers, as a "patient" at an urban hospital. To his family and friends, first scattered on farms and later gathered in attorney Wheeler Catlett's office, he is a beloved patriarch. Wheeler sums up by reflecting, "He was, I will say, a faithful man." It's entirely clear which role is the "real" one for the teller of the story.

The police see Danny Branch (Burley's finally-acknowledged son) as a likely kidnapper who has, they believe, criminally snatched Burley from the hospital's care. Most other characters regard Danny, who goes to the hospital in the middle of the night to bring Burley home, as his father's rescuer. There's no doubt which opinion is held by the narrator.

Kyle Bode is a detective for the state police. Is he a defender of law-and-order, investigating a crime, as he seems to think? Or, is he an obstacle to a family's expression of love for a sick and dying member and a barrier to their continued life together? The storyteller is certain.

The roles that are assigned to characters in a play or story or everyday life are functions not only of the role-player's identity and actions but also of the interpretations of all those who are part of the role-player's world. Much has to do with

perception. "Fidelity" gives us an example of how drastically perceptions can differ. It also offers a glimpse of how roles can be changed in a positive direction (can we say "valorized"?) by the power of a community and its love.

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All quotations from Wendell Berry's stories come from: Berry, W. (2004). *That distant land (The collected stories)*. Washington, DC: Shoemaker & Hoard.

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EDITOR'S NOTE: The Safeguards Letter (a publication of Ohio Safeguards) is an excellent resource, well worth reading. It contains thoughtful articles, stories, opinion pieces, quotes, book reviews, etc. It is available in print or by email. Contact the Editor, The Safeguards Letter, 3421 Dawn Drive, Hamilton, OH 45011 USA. jackjr158@earthlink.net. http://www.ohiosafeguards.org/

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The SRV Implementation Project & Family Lives are pleased to present a lecture series to be held at the Family Lives' Westborough, Massachusetts (US) office:

Ethical Topics in Medicine. There is a growing climate of acceptance in society for medically-inflicted &/or hastened death. A series of court decisions & changes in public opinion, influenced by leaders in the 'bioethics' field, have brought major changes in the climate in which medicine operates. Redefinitions of the meaning of personhood, futile care, medical treatment, death, & the end of life, have heightened dangers to people with impairments, the old, the sick, & others who are devalued.

Thursday, September 18, 2008 from 1:00 to 3:00 pm. *Wesley J. Smith* is an attorney for the International Task Force on Euthanasia & Assisted Suicide, & a special consultant for the Center for Bioethics & Culture. Smith's *Culture of death: The assault on medical ethics in America*, a warning about the dangers of the modern bioethics movement, was named one of the Ten Outstanding Books of the Year & Best Health Book of the Year for 2001 (Independent Publisher Book Awards).

Tuesday, December 2, 2008 from 1:00 to 3:00 pm. *Cathy Ludlum*, author of *One candle power: Seven principles that enhance the lives of people with disabilities and their communities*, will speak on the topic of demystifying tube feeding. Ludlum is a nationally-known author & disability activist. As a person with a disability & an employer of personal assistants since 1988, Ms. Ludlum brings an extensive background in the recruitment, hiring, & management of support staff.

For more information, please email Marc Tumeinski at info@srvip.org.