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Humans are storytelling creatures: Child and Youth Care Workers perhaps even more than most.

We use stories to share our experiences, help others learn, and simply to communicate.

Stories permeate our work with young people and their families. There are, for example, the story of their lives as we enter into it; the story of our lives as we came to be a part of their story; the stories we use to help them understand, grow and develop; the stories we share with each other as workers to help others learn from our experience; the stories young people tell themselves as a way for them to understand their experiences and so many more. Stories are everywhere.

This issue is about stories and story telling. It is about our experiences with young people, families, colleagues and community.

This is the story of this issue.

When we decided to produce an issue about stories, we at first focused on the idea of ‘teaching tales’ – short stories such as those which might be told in a training to make, or emphasize, a particular learning point. As we talked further, we discussed how stories are everywhere in our field and so we broadened our thinking to the idea of ‘stories of our
experience in working with young people and families’ and sent out a call for papers through individual and general contacts. In our call for papers, we asked for:

“stories of experience from which we all might learn. One might, for example, tell a story about how simply ‘hanging out’ with a young person made a difference or how ‘participating in a daily life event’ helped build a relationship of trust or, perhaps even how an intervention fell off the tracks or how an interaction helped us to understand ourselves better”.

We thought we knew what to expect. Boy, were we surprised when the stories started rolling in. The stories went far beyond what we had initially expected to receive. We all read each of the stories as we needed to agree on each of them for inclusion. Well, we laughed, we cried, we sat in profound awe and respect. We reveled in the creativity of our field. We admired the way authors put forward their ideas, accepted feedback and were anxious to tell their stories. It was as wonderful an experience as one could have as an editor.

And the result is this issue. We hope you enjoy it as much as we enjoyed compiling it.

Here you will find stories of some workers intimate experiences with young people, stories of workers own experience of growth, stories of wonder, of curiosity and awe.

Some of these stories might be what we call classic teaching tales, stories told to convey some learning about practice. However, all the stories offer something for us to learn whether about working with young people or, for example, about our own growth and development as practitioners. So, as you read these stories of experience, we would ask you to reflect on the following:

- What is the learning point in the story?
- How might your practice be impacted if you accept the learning point?
- What other areas of practice are you stimulated to think about as you reflect on the learning points from these stories?
- What have you learned about yourself from each of these stories?
There is learning here, offered to us by those who have shared their stories of experience. We are grateful to all the authors and their insightful contributions.

We hope you enjoy and that as you reflect on the stories shared here, that you too consider your own stories of experience.

Sincerely,
Thom, Jaspreet and Aurorra

Fiction, Frictions, and Truth

Wolfgang Vachon

As someone who came into child and youth care (CYC) through theatre, story has been central to my work, before CYC and since. As a CYC instructor, I/we share stories in the classes I teach. As a theatre maker I draw on stories to create engaging performances, as a CYC practitioner (CYCP) I listen to stories from the young people I work with, and as a researcher I invite stories from those I speak with.

I am currently working on my PhD. A study with CYCPs who have lived in residential placement- group homes, foster homes, and semi-independent living. For this project I’ve met, spoken, and created audio dramas with CYCPs from care (CYCPfC) who live across Canada. I find the inquiry fascinating, fun, informative, and important. Some of the people I’ve met don’t want anyone to know that they lived in placement (indeed, several would not even “officially” speak with me as part of the project). Others claim this history as a central element of their identity. When CYCPfC talk with me, they frequently share their
experiences in the form of stories. They transform the facts of their lives into compelling, revealing narratives. I listen (and re-listen) to the stories they tell me, stories they tell themselves, and the stories they don’t tell.

A personal narrative is a distinct form of communication: It is meaning making through the shaping of experience; a way of understanding one’s own or others’ actions; of organizing events, objects, feelings, or thoughts in relation to each other; of connecting and seeing the consequences of actions, events feelings or thought over time (in the past present and/or future) (Chase, 2018, p. 549).

Thinking narratively allows us insight into how, what, and why we communicate. Why and when do we tell the stories we tell? What does that reveal about us? What do we learn about the other person through how they receive our stories? These are the sorts of questions asked, and answered, through narrative inquiry, a process which uses stories (be they auditory, visual, or silent) as a form of research towards understanding self, others, and institutions. It starts by listening to, and for, what the individual is communicating through the narratives they share (and don’t). The above quote from Chase also seems to me like a pretty decent way to think about our own work as CYCPs.

Every CYC instructor that I’ve ever asked tells me they use “stories from the field.” Encapsulated wisdom born of practice, shared with students, packaged in a structure that is unique to people. To the best of our knowledge, no other creature on earth tells stories. It has been suggested (Harari, 2014) that the ability to tell stories is what moved us towards becoming the dominant species on the planet. According to Yuval Noah Harari (2014) about 70,000 years ago homo sapiens had a “cognitive revolution” which allowed us to use language in new ways. Moving beyond basic communication (which is accomplished by many species from ants, to monkeys, to whales, and far beyond) humans developed the capacity to form language. Language allowed us to do many things, not least of which was to tell stories. It might even be that the ability to tell stories, and specifically create and tell fiction, is responsible for our “successes” on this planet.
The cognitive capacity to fictionalize, according to Harari, allowed us to move into larger communities, to develop myths, religions, rules, laws, to gossip; thus, allowing us to understand what are and what are not acceptable practices in our communities. Storytelling permits us to keep tabs on each other, to regulate larger and larger groups of people, to learn through means other than direct experience, to benefit from others’ experiences.

This is what I am doing each time I tell a story in class. I am sharing successes and failures. Communicating what is acceptable and what is not. Inviting reflection, debate, more stories, more experience. I am teaching through my experience to people who have not yet had the experience, and asking them to teach me, and the rest of the class, from the experiences they have had. In an introductory relational practices course I teach, I start each semester by beginning, but not completing, stories based on my experience. It is a compelling and engaging way to start the year, and students remember the stories right to the end of the semester. I complete these tales as the year progresses, tying them into different topics of the course (usually saving one story for the very last day, which students will frequently ask me to finish).

*Me:* remember that story about the young person who showed up needing to leave their family and find a place to stay, but wouldn’t say why?

*Students:* Yes.

*Me:* Let’s talk about relationship building and how a child welfare call works.

*Me:* Remember that story about the guy who showed up intoxicated to the group I was facilitating?

*Students:* Yes

*Me:* Let’s talk about relational dynamics and different therapeutic approaches to treating addiction.

*Me:* Remember that story...

*Students:* Yes.

*Me:* Let’s talk ...
People remember stories, because we have evolved with stories, and they have become a central element of who we are as a species. Holstein and Gubrium (2012) write, "stories are discursive ways of doing or accomplishing something. The narrator or storyteller actively shapes or constructs narrative reality to achieve particular descriptive, rhetorical ends—be they personal myths or extraordinary events..." (p.7). Stories are how we make meaning; it is how we shape and construct our realities. In many respects not only do we make stories – stories make us. We create ourselves and the world we live in through our stories: our cultures, identities, professions, ethics and values are all constructed through the stories we tell (Harari, 2014).

One of the things I struggle with regarding the sharing of stories as a CYC practitioner, educator, and researcher is: are they mine to share? The stories I tell as an educator, for example, are about me, but they usually involve other people. Of course, I don’t reveal details of who the people are, but I also don’t always know who is listening. The stories I chose to share, I share because they teach something or provoke conversation. This frequently means they have unique features, features which might reveal who the people in the story are, if people know some of the elements or some of the people. This became evident to me one day at the beginning of a semester. As students entered the first class one approached me and asked if I used to work in a particular place. I had. In a warm, friendly, and unsolicited manner, they started to give me an update on some of the young people who used to access that service. It quickly became apparent that one of the stories I had planned to tell that day in class—linked into several lessons throughout the semester — would involve people that this student knew. Following an initial moment of panic and last second re-organizing of the entire semester’s lesson plans in my head, it was a lovely teaching moment for me, and the class. After asking permission from the student, I revealed the dilemma I was faced with and said that because of confidentially reasons I would not be sharing some things that I had planned on sharing that day. This opened up an informative conversation about relational practice in action. Fortunately, I had many other stories I could draw on that afternoon; unfortunately, I had no idea if any of the other students might know any of the other people.
This is not a unique situation. I’ve taught students who I’ve had prior professional relationships with, I’ve had students know guest presenters I’ve brought in, I’ve had students identify people in the stories I’ve told. All of these situations sit uncomfortably for me. It is one of the reasons I am drawn to fiction. Fiction allows for the pedagogical value of the story without the risk of disclosing information about someone. In the PhD work I’m doing, we take the stories and experiences people share and turn them into audio dramas, into fiction (see TuningIntoCYC.org to be launched in summer 2021). While everyone involved in the project signed a consent form allowing their information to be used, the CYC community in Canada is relatively small. Identities may be unintentionally disclosed, information shared that people may not want known at a later date. What we agree to at one point in our life, might be different than what we want known at a later point. As such, the audio dramas don’t reveal the specific details of a particular person. Instead, we weave stories together, add new context, create composite characters based on multiple people, shift, alter, manipulate, obfuscate, all with the intention to ethically share the material (the findings, the “data”) while minimizing the risk.

Variations of this are done all the time in CYC, social work, nursing, counselling and numerous other classes. Educators strive to tell stories while minimizing the risks. For ethical reasons I change names, omit information, am intentionally vague about details that might divulge specifics. And while doing all this, from a place that I believe is correct, I wonder where the line is. When does the story slip from truth into, “based on real events”, when does it slide into fiction, when might it become a lie? And does it matter? I remember, years ago, speaking with a college about these sorts of dilemmas. Their solution was to make up stories. They told me they fabricated stories all the time to tell in class. Situations that never happened to them or those they worked with (that they were aware of), but they would tell these stories as though they were real and came from the direct experiences of themselves and the young people they supported. From their perspective the pedagogical value was the same. The students think the story is real, they will treat the story as real, and the class conversation will happen as though the story is real. But there is no risk to having an unintentional disclosure. No risk of revealing inappropriate information. No risk of breaking confidentiality. Of hurting those they
worked with. For this colleague, to tell a fictional story was more ethical than telling stories that are about actual people, if you do not have their permission to tell those stories. This colleague had no lack of stories, they had worked for decades and had a vast repertoire of incredible experience. Indeed, it was this very experience that led them to make this decision.

I have not asked every young person I ever worked with if I could share moments from our lives together in order to teach others. I am confident some would give permission for some stories, others not. I have also heard stories about myself told by others without my permission. Sometimes these are uncomfortable to hear, sometimes I have learned from them, and sometimes they have been harmful. In my formal inquiry processes and theatre work, I always seek permission, and don’t use that which is forbidden. When telling stories, I strive to maintain a balance between pedagogy, ethics, and relationality. And because of this, I wonder what “stories from the field” I should tell, if any. When is it okay, when is it voyeuristic, when is it exploitative, when is it wrong? I work in fiction because of the possibilities it creates and the ethics it allows. I work in CYC for similar reasons. While telling stories might be part of what makes us human, being humane requires us to think of our part in the story we want to tell.

References


Stories of Experience

Jack Phelan

I often smile at how easy it is for CYC’s to overestimate the ability of our youth to understand language that we think is obvious, because it is logical to an adult. I am humbled when I occasionally realize that my “obvious” meaning was totally missed by the young person because I was both not being very empathic and being very self-centered in my communication.

Two quick examples –

I was standing at an outdoor pool, greeting the youngsters from our agency, when Jose, a 10 year old walked up. He had recently returned to us and as he passed by I greeted him, “It’s good to see you’re back, Jose”. He stopped, looked puzzled, and tried to see what was on his back.

Bill, a 14 year old, was being coached to respond appropriately at his upcoming review meeting, by being urged to use “I-messages”. After the meeting, Bill was asked how he was doing, he responded, “My eyes are killing me.”

Caring for Connor

Michelle Perchard

I met Connor when he was 14 years old and placed in an Individualized Living Arrangement I was supervising. Connor was the only young person in this arrangement
with a core staff team. This was placement 19 for him. Connor was 18 months old when he and his four brothers were removed from an environment that was reported to be one of extreme neglect and exposure to domestic violence. Reports describe Connor and his siblings being removed from a filthy, locked room, deprived of food and nurturance. Both his mother and father struggled with addictions and the domestic violence inflicted on Connor’s mother by his father was described as brutally violent.

Many children who are removed from their families and in child protection systems often have many placement disruptions interrupting continuity of relationships. Each disruption, including separation from parents, can negatively impact healthy development increasing the inability or unwillingness to form new relationships. Trauma, grief and loss are most often attached to these multiple moves (Fahlberg, 1994). Connor’s early experiences of terror and chaos deprived him of an adult to keep him safe and secure. Due to his adverse experiences up to 18 months old, many moves and maltreatment in several foster homes, it is likely Connor’s childhood was one of chronic fear and unmet needs.

When Connor was first placed in our program, for a period of almost two months he refused to step inside the door. He didn’t enter the house to shower, to get a change of clothes or to have a meal. During this time Connor was couch surfing and staying at various friend’s homes in the city, most of them youth living independently who likely had experiences of trauma and hurt in common with one another. Except for a visual check-in once every 24 hours, we didn’t see Connor. The only reason he agreed to meet for a visual and to answer some phone calls was because he wanted to avoid a missing person’s report being filed with police. He certainly did not want the police knocking on doors looking for him. Forming relationships with wounded young people is not an easy task, forming a relationship with a wounded young person we saw for five minutes in 24 hours proved to be even harder. There needed to be creativity and intentionality in finding ways to show this boy he was cared for and worthy of this caring. At that time our moments with him were brief and few and we had to be purposeful in every single moment of interaction no matter how brief.
Connor didn’t trust us and considering the hurt and loss that had been his lived experience for most of his life, who could blame him? As it became very clear that Connor had little desire to join us, we realized we had to amp up our acts of caring while approaching our interactions carefully so we would not scare him away. We began taking him meals when we would see him. While there was a risk that bringing him things would take away any reason for him to come to the home, the risk of solidifying his feelings of being unworthy of caring, if we did not find a way to connect, was greater. When we first started doing this we often added a little extra; we would bake him cookies, we would add a toothbrush and some toothpaste or new socks and underwear. At first, he would come to our car window, take his care package and leave. After a while he would stay at the window for a brief interaction. We were all surprised when he began to sit in our vehicles to talk for a few minutes. These moments gradually lead to him eating in our vehicles while we would go for a drive, providing us with moments we would maximize towards building a relationship. While Connor had yet to come to the home, the time spent with him started to increase. Often this time was spent driving around talking about rap music, then we would part ways and the team would research the rappers he was talking about to engage in conversation for the next interaction. One evening while going through a drive-thru with Conner, I spotted a robot claw hand-grabbing stick toy in the back of my car that belonged to one of my children. I looked at Connor and asked if I should pay with the robot hand and take the order out of the window with it. To my surprise Connor said, “Yes, do it!” followed by mischievous laughter. What followed was him putting my purse on this robot hand while we were both in a shared moment of laughter as I was completing this drive-thru exchange making a complete fool of myself. We were both laughing so hard I had to park in the parking lot for a while before driving.

Another evening Connor was eating in my car at around midnight. As always, I told him that if he needed anything and if he would like breakfast brought to him in the morning to call and I would bring it. Just before 6:00 am Connor called and asked if I could bring him breakfast. It would have been easy to dismiss this request or tell him he needed to wait as it was too early, but this was the beginning of many tests Connor would put us through to see if we would follow through with our words and we needed to pass
them. I often thought of Connor calling and asking for food like a baby who cries to be held or fed, except this was a hurt teenager crying out for caring.

After a couple of months Connor eventually came to the home (mostly to sleep). While he still chose to spend most of his waking hours away from the program, he was not couch surfing any more. While in the house, Connor consistently made efforts to push us away. Likely this was to prevent the eventual hurt that he most often experienced when he let others close. While this testing decreased in duration and intensity it remained something that was consistent throughout his three years in the program. Often staff were spit on, yelled at and called obscenities. Often this behaviour would peak after periods of seemingly connected times, times in which he would open up and talk about his hurts, letting his guard down. Connor needed to have experiences of people who were committed to him enough to not give up when things got tough. The pattern of people leaving him when things became difficult needed to be broken to help him learn that he would not always be abandoned by those who were supposed to care.

In the first year of working with Connor there was a phase when he would tear the doors off rooms in the home. It is plausible this behaviour could be linked to his early childhood experience of being confined in a room with his siblings. When Connor would remove these doors he would prop them up against the walls in such a way that he would block staff from entering spaces in the home where he was. Connor had many metaphorical walls built up around him and now he was putting up physical barriers to keep us away. Interestingly, in the evenings when he would create these barricades he would take his mattress from his room to the living room which was closer to the office and this is where he would sleep. The makeshift wall remained but he was closer in proximity to us. It seemed as if Connor didn’t want us to be close to him but he also didn’t want to be far from us which resembled characteristics of disorganized attachment. It is possible that on some level he feared we would cause him harm but understood at some level that he may have needed us, thus causing him internal confusion. Children with disorganized attachment try to escape the source of fear at the same time the attachment system triggers an approach response.
When people with disorganized attachment begin to form a coherent narrative of their lives, they can be helped to understand how their past experiences are affecting their lives (Firestone, n.d.). Connor recognized that he struggled emotionally and was quick to react. He had a desire to change and develop an understanding as to why he had the intense reactions that he did. In the last year of his time in the program and after a lot of hanging in, it seemed we had earned some of Connor’s trust. He became open to speaking about his early childhood traumas and how they were impacting him presently. Connor would seek out information on attachment and early trauma. He would ask for information to be printed and he would take it to his brother who had recently moved back in the city. Not only was Connor seeking insight for himself, but he was also looking for this insight to share with his brothers who had similar experiences. While Connor’s reactionary behaviours didn’t disappear, they did decrease significantly the more he learned.

According to preplacement reports, Connor had struggled through most of his school years. His teachers described him as an intelligent child, but a child who struggled to pay attention and was resistant to following the rules of the classroom. As we slowly got to know Connor, he spoke often of wanting to get his education, and while there were several times that this was set up for him he never seemed able to follow through for any length of time, despite the supports and encouragement that were given. The last time Connor attended school a boy accidently bumped into him in a crowded hallway. Connor reacted almost reflexively and punched the boy, breaking his jaw. This experience not only resulted in him being expelled from school but also in receiving his first criminal charge. It is likely that Connor’s experiences of trauma had resulted in him having a highly sensitized alarm response and because of this he reacted quickly to things without thought. Perry (2005) states that a child who has a persistently activated stress response, extreme hypervigilance and anxiety will struggle with academic, therapeutic and socio emotional learning opportunities. It is reasonable to say that school likely was a quite a stressful place for Connor. School environments are often places with a great deal of sensory input that can be overwhelming. Also, school may have been triggering for him as he had to start over in new schools so often in his childhood. Knowledge of Connor’s
background combined with an understanding of attachment and neurodevelopmental theories may have assisted educators in Connor’s previous school settings in ensuring suitable accommodations were made for him to best support his learning.

Connor would often be triggered into explosive rage that often happened unexpectedly and seemingly out of nowhere, particularly in the mornings. Staff entering the home at shift change and even the faintest sound of footsteps often resulted in Connor yelling, growling, shouting profanities, throwing objects and putting his fists through walls. It appeared Connor had extraordinarily little control of these responses. Staff who experienced these intense reactions to noise in the mornings often described them as feral in nature. It is reasonable to consider that Connor’s strong reaction to noise in the morning was possibly being triggered by memories of experiences that he could not cognitively explain or understand. For practitioners to engage in therapeutic practice it is essential they understand the young people we work with often have had repeated experiences of threat and fear. They may be hypersensitive and easily distressed by daily events that would not be distressing or even noticed by others who have not had these adverse experiences. These children may quickly react in ways that may have prevented harm from happening to them in the past. Behaviours, such as yelling and aggression may have been survival strategies that at one time deflected real or perceived danger (Baker & White-McMahon, 2021).

It is through healthy attachments that a child begins to develop an internal working model of how they see and view the world. Connor’s lived experience in his 14 years of life was one of tremendous unpredictability and loss. While most of his 19 living arrangements were separate from his siblings, at approximately four years of age Connor and his younger brother were placed together in a foster home for potential adoption. Within less than a year of living in this placement the foster family made the decision that they could not provide the degree of care that Connor needed and stated that his behaviours went beyond their capabilities. They proceeded in adopting his younger brother and Connor was moved. At 12 years of age Connor’s mother was in a healthy marriage, it appeared her addictions were under control and she had another child whom she was caring for. Connor’s brothers who were previously in the protection system had
also returned to living with her. She had made an application to the court for Connor to return as well and this request was in the process of being granted. Shortly before the order was finalized, on the day before his 13th birthday, his mother told Connor she was leaving the province with his siblings. She rescinded her application for reunification stating that Connor needed treatment for his behaviours before he could live with her. These experiences along with his many other disrupted placements likely would have reinforced for him an internal working model of being unworthy and unwanted. Tomlinson (2000) states that intervention with youth who have insecure attachments needs to begin with practitioners being aware of the child’s internal working model and providing experiences to the child that does not confirm their theories of the world and other people. Connor needed lived experiences of adults who cared about him, who nurtured his many talents and strengths and who would hang in through those times he would act in ways that would push others away.

Connor made the decision to leave care a few months before his 18th birthday despite our pleas for him to stay. The irony is not lost on me that this might have been one of the few, if any, times efforts were made to convince him to stay in any place he was living. We did not want him to go and would miss the talented, insightful, funny, intelligent individual we discovered underneath layers of protective armour. I pointed this irony out to Connor one evening before he left and he responded somewhat emphatically, “But now it’s my choice.”

References


Saakhi

Jaspreet Bal

Saakhi is the Punjabi word for story. Saakhiyan are integral to Sikh identity. Sikhs are a people who have lost a lot. We have been under attack for more years than we have been in power. We have maintained our identity through stories. While some of our stories have been written down, we have used the art of interpolation to integrate the unknown into the known. We have created art, poetry, ballads and books by taking what we know of Sikh history and inserting emotion, empathy and color. The end result being a connection to who we are and an affirmation of how we know who we are.

I grew up hearing Sikh saakhiyan from my Babaji, my paternal grandfather. When I was little, my grandfather was my ally in the truest sense of the word. In a house with adults and children, he was on the children’s team. He saved us from getting in trouble numerous times and would willingly hide us in the folds of his duvet so my mom and grandma wouldn’t find us. Most nights, after we went upstairs, completely unplugged from devices we did not yet know existed, we would sit on his bed, watch him pick the lint from his belly button and settle in for a story.
His stories were everything. They were funny, they were sad, and on more than one occasion they would drone on and on. He would tell us stories from Sikh history, from his days in the Indian army, and of his days in the small village where he grew up. We would meet his stories with laughter, questions, and, sometimes, boredom. His storytelling knew no bounds; he would talk to his friends in the park, the children he taught at our local Sikh Gurdwara, and even the flowers in his garden. He knew the power of a good story in shaping a mind.

As we all got older, we drifted away from our night time routine. We outgrew his bed and made friends our own age. We spoke mostly English and found comfort in different stories, mostly those on TV and in movies.

While I hadn’t been paying attention, my Babaji had deeply ingrained in my mind the power of a good story. They became integral to the way I shared with friends, the way I wrote, and the way I would eventually teach Child and Youth Care (CYC). In my modest journey teaching CYC I have remarked how hard it is to capture the attention of learners. Being an instructor requires not only subject matter expertise, but also the powerful skills of storytelling, the timing of a comedian and the powerful projection of a singer. I have watched in fascination as my students have shown the same range of laughter, questions and, yes, boredom, that I once showed to Babaji.

As Babaji’s life came full circle, I took care of him. We re-allied as one team in a multigenerational household. I once again found myself retiring to his bedside as night fell, only this time it was a hospital bed in the living room and I slept on the floor beside him. He struggled to remember those stories that had once come so easily to him. He would start, falter, and then stop. His face would contort in frustration and anger over the simplest words failing him. More than once, his eyes welled up with tears as he choked on his own words.

Remarkably, he never forgot the oldest stories. As the newer ones faded from his mind, he could still easily recount hours of Sikh history or lazy days spent in the village with his mother. His life was testament to the power of stories. They shaped our Sikh identity in times when state forces were seeking to destroy it; the Indian state even went as far as burning down the Sikh reference library in an act of genocide. When I think
about how I know what I know, and how I know who I am, it is because of the oral traditions that we kept alive. A simple saakhi from my grandfather at the end of the day held the memory of a people, a spirit of resistance, and the formation of identity. I carry this forward as a teacher, both the medium and the message, as I remember and build on who I am.

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**On Call Tales**

*Hans Skott-Myhre*

The stories that follow rely on my memory. Other people who were there may remember them differently, and that is the beauty of telling tales. The example of unconditional care was a story I heard Karl Dennis tell. I have not found it in the literature. So, apologies to Karl if I have misremembered it.

The call came at about 2 a.m., waking me from a light sleep. I never slept well when I was on call for the emergency shelter where I was the clinical director. The expectation of something going off the rails sat at the back of my mind keeping some part of me awake, even when I was sleeping. Of course, an emergency shelter, like an emergency room, is a place where going off the rails was a daily occurrence. The struggle to sustain some level of genuine care in the face of the chaos that was the daily lives of the young people and their families who sought out our services was a delicate balance at best and could become an escalating shipwreck when emotions and actions began to tatter and fray. While this occasionally happened during the day, it was at night
when our staffing was lowest that our attempts at what Karl Dennis (of the Kaleidoscope wrap around program in Chicago) has called unconditional care, was truly tested.

The idea of unconditional care has been deeply evocative for me ever since I heard Karl Dennis tell the story of being wakened in the middle of the night to be told that his offices had been burned to the ground by one of the residents in his program. Pulling on his clothes in the dark, he rushed down to find his offices a pile of smoking rubble. As he stood there, in shock and disbelief, the young man who was responsible for the fire showed up, smirking at him. Dennis had a choice: he could vent his anger and disappointment at this person who had received care from both Dennis and his staff. He could do this by either delivering a scolding with great amplitude or simmering intensity, or he could do it by coldly turning away and showing no response. Either way the young man would know how to read the code and would be confirmed in his belief that no adult could care for him – not really.

Dennis sensed in that moment that all his preaching to the staff and to other workers in trainings and writings about unconditional care came down to this moment. What would he do? He walked into the rubble of his offices and began to pick through the disaster to see if there was anything salvageable. As he did, he turned to the young man and said, “What are you doing standing there, we have a lot of work to do.” The young man’s jaw dropped and then awkwardly he joined Dennis in sorting through the rubble. Of course, after a while, the police arrived and the young man was arrested and charged. But when he was released, he sought Dennis out and asked him to be his mentor. Over the years, they became close friends, and that young man became a trusted member of Dennis’ staff at the program.

In a way, it is only during profound crisis that unconditional care can be discovered and tested. And for those on call along with the staff working those long overnight shifts, the opportunities for crisis at 2 a.m. are ever present. And so, when that call came at 2 a.m. that night, like Karl Dennis, I knew it couldn’t be good news. The overnight staff seldom called me to tell me how well things were going. As I went to pick up the phone, my mind ran through a whole series of possible scenarios. Since I had been on call on
and off for over nearly twenty years or so at various agencies, there were many memories rattling around in my brain.

But that night, I was reminded of a call I got from a brand-new overnight staff person crying on the other end of the line. I asked what had happened, fearing what we all fear from those middle of the night phone calls: suicide, violence, death, or disease. After she caught her breath, she told me that one of the residents had totaled her car. “All right”, I said (trying to keep the incredulity out of my voice), “What happened? How did he manage to be driving your car? He isn’t even old enough to drive, is he?”

I was making a real effort to offer a comforting voice at the other end of the phone to a staff member really shaken by the events of the evening, but I was also feeling a rising sense of anxiety verging on panic that something had gone terribly wrong. “Is he alright?”, I asked. “Yes, he doesn’t have a scratch on him”, she replied, “But my car ... my brand new car ... it’s totaled. He flipped it.” I was relieved that the young man was alright. At the same time, I was developing a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach that this was going to be a story that I really didn’t want to hear.

“So, how did he come to steal your car?”, I asked. “Oh, he didn’t steal it”, she said, “I gave it to him.” At this, both my heart and my jaw dropped. Using all the restraint I could muster, I asked her why she gave him the car. It turned out that he had told her that he needed to practice driving, so that he would be prepared when it was time for him to get his license. He had explained, that although he was only fourteen, he wanted to be really well prepared by the time he could get his learners permit next year. He had promised that he would only drive it on the facility grounds, which was well off the main road and where there would be no traffic or police around. She told me that he had made a mature and rational case and she had wanted to reward his thoughtful and calm presentation. So, she had given him the keys with strict instructions to stay on the circular drive in front of the facility.

And he had done that. Only he had decided that it would be fun to see how fast he could go around that dirt circle track, kicking up dust and fishtailing on the corners. So, to her horror, he went faster and faster until he lost control and the car flipped several times into the field at the side of the facility. She ran to the car as he was climbing out, quite
shook up, but otherwise alright. He had gone to bed and she had called me. At this point in the conversation, she seemed calmer and there didn’t seem to be any immediate threat to anyone. I asked her if she wanted to call the police and she said she didn’t, but she did ask me. “What are you going to do about my car? I think you guys owe me a new car.” Struck speechless, I said I would come in before she left, and we could talk about it in the morning.

As I remembered this story as I got dressed that night, I was thinking about how training can never cover everything that can happen when you are working with young people. At some level, it comes down to instinct. For some of us that instinct comes easily and for others it is hard won. Knowing when to bend a rule or give a young person a break, when to call the police and when you don’t have to, how to tell a resident or a kid on the street you care about them without it being threatening or weird, understanding that sometimes the best thing to do is nothing at all. These are gut choices that can’t really be taught. They have be lived into you, either through your own traumatic childhood, or as you make your way through the work.

The call I received that early morning at 2 a.m., was from a new overnight staff member (we will call her Sue) who was clearly scared. It seemed that the father of one of the girls seeking shelter had shown up an hour or so ago and demanded to see his daughter. He was pretty angry and had no interest in doing anything other than taking her home. His daughter was considerably less interested in acceding to his wishes and refused to come downstairs to talk to him. When Sue attempted to explain that his daughter had the right to seek shelter and could not be forced to go home, the father escalated, threatening to hurt Sue and “tear this place up.” He was a big man and certainly looked capable of wreaking a fair degree of havoc well before the police could arrive. Fortunately, the father demanded to speak to her boss. Sue wisely took this as an opportunity to get some breathing room and told him she would call me. This deflected the immediate crisis, but he was still pretty upset. Sue went back upstairs where she was safe behind locked doors and left the father in the lobby.

The question that Sue faced in that moment, was should she have called the police? For some of us, that is a simple answer. If someone becomes threatening, you call the
police and let them handle it. For those who think this way, it is a simple cause and effect scenario. The problem is that if you do that with a parent, you can lose all possibility of building a relationship with them that could lead to a resolution of the issues their child is facing. This is particularly true in crisis work, where things are fresh and new possibilities are all around. So, it is a judgement call. Sue had assessed that no one was in immediate danger (except maybe the lobby furniture) and that there might be some possibility of deescalating Dad. She didn’t feel as though she had the skills to do that, and wisely sought consultation as to what to do next.

And so, I was in the car headed to the shelter in the middle of night to try and talk down a large, angry father. As I entered the lobby, I could feel the tension in the air crackling like an electrical current. The father was an imposing guy with a plaid quilted jacket and grease-stained jeans. He wore a tractor cap and was standing in the middle of the room clenching and unclenching his fists. I took a deep breath and walked as softly, but confidently as I could into the room and immediately sat down. There were two things I wanted to do in that moment. First, I did not want to give him the impression that another large male was threatening him in any way. Secondly, I wanted to signal non-confrontation by sitting. When you are seated you pose much less of a physical threat.

I introduced myself as the supervisor and said that I heard he wanted to talk to me. He started off by loudly proclaiming that he was going wreck the lobby if he didn’t get to see his daughter immediately. I responded that it was certainly within his abilities to do that and I couldn’t really stop him. So, if that was what he was going to do, he had probably better get to it.

He did a double take when I said this in a tired almost bored tone of voice. I clearly had his attention, because he didn’t expect that I would tacitly agree he could destroy the lobby. After a long minute of tense silence, I continued by saying that if he did that, I would have to call the police, they would come and arrest him and, in the end, he wouldn’t get to see his daughter—perhaps for a good long while.

I continued, “But, more importantly you look like a very committed father who really cares about his daughter. We don’t get a lot of fathers like that here and I would love to get to know you better. Of course, that can’t happen if you destroy the lobby. So, we have
a choice to make. We can either head back into one of the rooms in the back and have a
classification about where to go from here, or you can wreck the lobby and get arrested.
I’ll tell you what, I’m gonna go back to the kitchen to get us both a coffee and you decide
what you’d like to do.”

At that, I walked out the room and went to the kitchen to get coffee. And yes, I was
shaking just a little and holding my breath. When there no ensuing crashing from the
other room, I returned and offered him a coffee. He looked at me very strangely and said,
that he thought it might be okay to have a talk. And so, we did. His daughter stayed at the
shelter for a few more days while we did some individual and family work with both her
father, her mother, and herself. I really came to like her father and by the time they went
home, I think they had a better than average chance of working things out for the better.

The thing about stories is that they can only point to what they offer us in the way of
teaching and learning. It is what I like about them. They open up possibilities of new
understandings. I have put in some of what I think of when I tell these stories here, but it
is only a small part of what I could learn or share if we were to talk about them together.
In that sense, I hope you can tell these stories to each other and see what new ways of
thinking about them you might find that I couldn’t even imagine. Or perhaps, our paths
will cross one day, and you can ask me what I thought or tell me what came up for you.
This is the living tradition of our field and it is really one of my favorite parts.
Shifting Towards Change – Recognizing You Are More Than Enough

Kelly Cassano

Changing our thoughts and beliefs can be a difficult road, a journey of complex and conflicting emotions. I have been working in the field of Child and Youth Care (CYC) for over twenty years and in working alongside young people who are wrestling with the feelings of wanting to make change but fall prey to their own internal pressures of being “the best”. This is nothing shy of a challenge. What does it mean to be “the best”? Well, as described by a 15-year-old I worked with (we will call her Ann), it meant achieving grades of 95% or higher, being popular, funny, athletic, creative and being able to manage all aspects of life with no stress. This was Ann’s goal in life. This is what Ann wanted me to support her with. Should I have told Ann that I had not achieved this balance in my own life, nor did I believe I ever would? Exploring how attainable her goal was, did not help; she was determined that being the best was achievable. Making a shift in thinking, was where her journey began.

I met Ann through my work with Ripple Effect Children’s Services (Ripple). Ripple values the uniqueness and autonomy of each young person, thus recognizing the need for a blended and integrated approach in the work we do (Ripple, 2021). Applying bottom-up and top-down techniques, Ripple’s model integrates several principles and philosophies including, relational CYC practice, mindfulness, Internal Family Systems (IFS) and Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), through a Poly-Vagal and strength-based lens (Ripple, 2021). Ann was an extremely insightful individual, and she gravitated to the language of parts from IFS. IFS works under the premise that all individuals are born with
the Self or Self-Energy, and through our experiences and relationships parts develop, it is when these parts learn to work as a harmonious resource that balance can be achieved (Krause, 2013). Ann had a very active part, whom she called the “Producer” part. This part of Ann was behind her goal of being the best and it focused on school success above anything else. Now, don’t get me wrong, being an educator myself, I believe school is important, however, there is (and should be) more to life than just school. This “Producer” part of Ann motivated her and provided her with all the drive she needed to excel at school. The challenge was that Ann also had this other little part, who hardly had any voice or a name. This part needed a break from the internal pressures and wanted to have fun with friends and do things for pure pleasure and enjoyment; sadly, this did not align with the goal of being the best and the “Producer” repeatedly took charge doing its job of pushing Ann to be successful. Several sessions had passed, and I began to struggle with the same feelings Ann was experiencing, this feeling of being stuck. Stuck on what to do, where to go next, and how to promote change and a shift in thinking. I needed to find a way to connect and align with the “Producer”.

Ann and her “Producer” part had a love of learning and the science behind the brain – Neuroscience – and this was the ticket to change. Dan Siegel (2018) in one of his videos, explores the adolescent brain and how it goes through a phase or pruning itself, losing the pieces it no longer needs to make room for new specialized learning and interests. Sharing this video with Ann enabled her to see how you lose what you do not use and by making time for relationships and your interests, you can activate many parts of your brain, promoting optimal growth, connectedness and happiness. She quickly exclaimed to me “Kelly, I have wasted so much time not using all of my brain!”. This was the a-ha moment, not only for Ann, but for her “Producer” part. Value could now be seen in activities other than just school and tirelessly striving to be the best and achieve these exceptionally high grades. Witnessing this growth and shift in thinking was exciting to see, however, it was just the beginning. Ann still values school and high grades (as does her producer part) but we have begun to open up the possibility of more space for that little part who did not have a name or much of voice. Together, Ann and I now explore ways to make time for
relationships, other interests and fun! This is what is going to help Ann achieve her goal of the being “the best” she can be and learning that she is more than enough.

Working through change and helping young people to achieve their goals takes time, patience, and an integrated approach. As Child and Youth Care practitioners, we guide, support and teach through loving and caring practices. To do this, I believe, we need to continually learn ourselves in order to adapt and apply integrated approaches and strategies to the unique needs of our young people. The approach I shared here may or may not help you with a young person you are working with, but this is not the point of this story – the point of this story is that we may not see change right away but we keep trying and exploring different techniques and angles to reach our young people and support them in the change they want to see. And just as we teach our young people, we too, need to believe in our own abilities and realize that we are more than enough.

References


A Tale from the Field

Deb Cockerton

I was working in an elementary school (K-6), that had smaller classes and was comprised of a close-knit community where everyone knew everyone else – rather like a gene pool where everybody was getting their oar caught in someone else’s boat. As is common in many schools, particularly elementary ones, there was a bully. He was a husky boy, quite a few inches taller than his peers, and he always seemed to be the leader of the pack. All the other kids would look at him when people were being chosen for teams, whether in the gym or on the playground. He seemed to be “in charge” and the others would follow suit with what he said. He had his favourites to pick on as well and, with just a look, encouraged others to join in his taunts or physical interactions. He was keen enough to spot a teacher and would ease out of the situation with a “Who me?” when questioned. No one dared to finger him as the instigator or perpetrator of bullying; better to be on this side of the fence with him than to risk being the target of his nefarious attention.

I was the one tasked with helping his three targets cope with and understand the bullying. We worked on their confidence in reporting when it occurred, dismissing the verbal taunts as his opinion and not facts and of course focussed on the stigma of being a victim and losing their friends. As we know, when someone is a target of bullying, anyone hanging around that kid becomes the victim as well – bullying by proxy. Of course, I tried to get the parents’ permission to work with their son, but the response was “There’s nothing wrong with my kid, nobody can prove anything.” The dad showed up one day and threatened the principal with a broom handle as his method of intimidation when the son was tasked with picking some garbage up at recess for calling names on the way out to recess and making a girl cry.
Since I couldn’t get access to him one-to-one, I did some class presentations on respect, kindness and fair play. One activity, however, was the catalyst for his change. I had asked the class to write down three things that their close friends would say about them, describing what type of person they were. Everyone was then told to imagine that for the last two weeks everything they did or said had been recorded, even their interactions with their siblings and parents. This included audio that caught every negative thing they said about anyone else, the eye rolls, the gossip, and the laughing at other people. The class was then told that their friends would be watching this video and would be asked to choose three words to describe their friend based on how they treated other people. If their original three words matched up with the list their friends would create after viewing the video, they could stand up beside their desks.

As I was explaining the first part of the activity (what three words would your close friends use to describe you), I noticed that the boy who exhibited bullying behaviours had left the room. The teacher had noticed as well and stepped out into the hall to find out what was going on with him. She returned and informed me he was out in the hall waiting to speak with me. I slowly walked up to him and noticed right away that his eyes were tearful. I asked what was wrong and he responded by saying something that still impacts me today. He said, “I can’t do that activity, Ms. C, because I don’t have any friends.” He went on to say, while fighting back tears, that he was never invited to birthday parties, sleepovers or to hang out with peers after a community hockey game. He said with his eyes looking towards the floor, “You know those kids you help because I bully them, well, I think you need to see me too.” I put my arm on his shoulder and thanked him for reaching out to me. I did tell him I tried to get his parent’s permission before but was turned down. We put our heads together and he proposed that he talk to his parents about his lack of friends and ask if he could get help from me in gaining some friendship skills. It worked! The parents gave permission and I started seeing him on a regular basis. We worked on identifying his assets – he was a great soccer goalie, he had a super sense of humour and, (this one came from him), because he was so tall, he was great at getting things off high shelves! We did work on friendship skills; how to recognize and compliment others, instead of putting them down, how to step back and let others choose
the teams they wanted to be on, how to do kind deeds for others and more…. you get the idea.

A few weeks into our sessions he told me he had something to share and disclosed physical abuse from his dad towards himself and his mom. I knew at that point that he was counting on me to keep him safe, and he knew I would be calling the Children’s Aid Society, as we had previously discussed that when we spoke about confidentiality. The next week when I arrived at the school I was called into the principal’s office for a meeting. Due to my mandated reporting of the abuse, the parental consent to access this boy was being withdrawn. I saw him in the hall later in the day and he called me to the side of the hall. He said, “It’s ok Ms. C, you taught me a lot and I’ll keep working on it.” I was so proud of him being able to voice that commitment.

Four months later, during the grade six class graduation ceremony he was awarded the “The Most Improved” award. As he walked up on stage, he found me in the crowd and gave me a wink. The seed I planted with him grew that year.

We don’t always get to see how our influence changes the life of a child, and I was so very humbled to see that growth that I cried tears of joy.

Why Every Moment Matters

Caroline Moore

While youth moving on from our child caring homes is a regular occurrence, there is one move in particular that will always stay with me. In one program I supervised we had a young man who came to live with us at the age of thirteen years. The plan was always for this young man to move back with his family. However, this
did not work out and he was taken into permanent care of the government within two years. Throughout his time with us he was involved in school, cadets, school soccer teams and a community baseball team. At fifteen years old he was awarded an outstanding youth achievement award for his accomplishments in both school and the community.

When it became clear that home was no longer an option, the plan was to transition him to a foster home. Several foster homes became available; however, he turned each one down for a variety of reasons. It became clear that this young man would need a foster home that was willing to put in the commitment level, as well as allow him to remain connected in this new community he called home. For this young man, moving out of this new community would once again uproot him from all of his areas of belonging that he had formed. After one failed attempt by his social worker at a forced move to a foster home, we began to advocate for him to be allowed a long slow transition to the next option that became available. This went outside the norm a little, as with the lack of available beds in the province we’re often having to move youth on as soon as possible in order to be able to offer a spot to the next youth in need. With some collaboration everyone recognized this needed to be different.

Finally, after three and a half years with us, a new foster home in his new ‘home’ community became available. This home seemed to be the perfect fit in that it was very close to his school, and one of his friends was also living there. Instinct would have been to move this along asap in order to offer the bed to someone else who was waiting for a place. However, the focus on individuality prevailed and we were able to work with his social worker to allow this youth to take his time to “make sure it’s a good fit” (his words). This meant over the next six weeks he would go for supper, spend a night, eventually spending four nights a week there. Turns out it was a good fit and a transition date was set.

This transition was bittersweet for youth care workers. After over three years of being with us, this young man had made an impact on over 25 youth care workers and three supervisors. Youth care workers immediately went to task to make something he could take with him to hold us close, and not sever the belonging he felt there. Youth care
workers reached out to every person who worked with this young man over his time with us, including reaching out to two past program supervisors. Each of them almost instantly wrote a few lines on cards to him to wish him well on his journey, all filled with messages of praise and gratitude for having known him during his time with us. These were all compiled in a photo album along with the many pictures taken of him over the years.

This young man had not been back to our program in the ten days before his move and therefore he avoided many goodbyes with many youth care workers (clever). The night before his move he returned to spend one last night with us. Before going to bed that night, he sat with youth care workers and wrote notes to every person who worked with him during his time there – some of whom had moved on to other employment. In each of these letters he expressed gratitude and a sense of love toward them. One letter started with “I love you”. In each of them he drew on a special connection he had with each worker, be it a rivalry in sports teams, a game they played together, or any special moment they had shared. He remembered them all. To the extra special youth care workers, he made sure to tell them to contact our program to find out how to contact him if they want to go out for coffee...including at the end that they need to know they would be paying! Before going to bed that night, he said goodbye to the youth care workers, hugging one while crying, refusing to let go. The youth care worker didn’t let go until he did, recognizing there was no rush – and also waiting for his own eyes to dry. After he went to bed, youth care workers quickly went to task making him a huge tray of his favorite cinnamon buns to take to his new home the next day.

On the day of the big move, he picked his ‘favorite’ two youth care workers to go out for supper with and they made their way to his favorite restaurant. One of the youth care workers quickly found a wait staff and explained they were celebrating a special occasion and asked if they can bring over the big moose hat – a favorite for anyone celebrating in this restaurant! This was brought over and they got a picture of all three of them which was included in his photo album. After they ate he spent time letting them know how much he appreciated them. He said he wished all youth could see that youth care workers are there to help them. He also wanted to make sure that youth care workers know that the kids don’t mean it when they call the youth care workers names.
Before going out the door that evening, he needed to do one more thing. He had youth care workers measure him on the height chart inside the office where each youth measures their growth while there. He needed to compare where he started and where he finished ... needless to say, he grew in every aspect of the word. Throughout his struggles over the past years and feelings of rejection from his family, his level of resilience remained outstanding. This young man accepted the support of numerous youth care workers and continued to make choices that were always going to move him forward in life. He is a remarkable young man, and we are privileged to know him. He taught us a lot.

‘Artificial Reality’

Lalita Bains

I have worked in the UK as a therapeutic foster parent for four years and a counsellor for seven years within two organisations. The first was a whole school approach, working collaboratively with school staff and parents keeping the child at the core of our work. The children I worked with received support through therapeutic activities and play. My second counselling job involved working with survivors of sexual violence and abuse.

As I reflected on my work with children, youth and families in both my counselling roles, I recognized I had become familiar working with negative thoughts alongside working with anxiety evoking issues.

What I was hearing many times was ‘what if’ scenarios and clients trying to find the answers to these situations. Through exploration, and the process of the client realising the future, there are many ‘what ifs’. I considered this future that was being created, the
one we work with in counselling, and the number of times I saw this pattern in practice. I began to carefully consider what I was being presented with and what we were working with in therapy. I named this working with ‘artificial reality’.

Artificial in the sense that the client working with scenarios, experiences and situations created solely within themselves. There was a constant looking forward – creating a future, a dream of how things ‘should be’. I was essentially working with a part of someone’s world that did not actually exist.

I treated this artificial reality as an experience, scenario and situation that had been dreamt up, built up, and shattered; I dealt with them ‘as if’ they were real.

I was working authentically with this artificial reality, acknowledging that this was real for the client. When working with clients, reflection and client awareness were key for their change and helping them make sense of what they were struggling with.

For some of them, it was a sense of loss, for others, control, for some uncertainty and a whole load of everything. As they bought themselves into the present some realised, they had not lost anything; they never had it in the first place.

I share this reflection of my work with processes and how I made meaning in these situations. As I came into the counselling world, I also connected with creative writing. So, I share with you what I penned out when exploring my reflections and work within counselling so far.

So, it is lost, that wasn’t even there,
I called it my own, I was fond, I loved what I had, it was close to my heart, everything so dear,
Though it never existed – at the time this wasn’t so clear,
I was filled with happiness how the future is bright, how my children would play and how we looked as a couple, never a fight,
Reality kicks in, the garden is empty, we argue all day never lost for a topic, there’s plenty,
My son he didn’t happen, I’m not seen as a woman, I didn’t give you what was needed, I’m left feeling inhuman,
Where did it all go wrong, my life, where’s it gone, we were a family, together and strong,
Dealing alone, this won’t change, the situation, the affair, when I needed you in my future you just weren’t there.

I cry and I hate; the whole situation begins to irritate, this wasn’t how I pictured my fate, Left with fear, anxiety builds, the unknown creates questions with no answers, ‘what if’ it never happens how it was meant,

This life that I didn’t have, my conception, illusions, my future all bright – all that I dreamt, It never happened, you lost nothing, I got a headache from my own thinking – I created a future that wasn’t to be, then I lost it all now all I do is worry,

Then it’s gone and I’m left to pick up the pieces, broken and hurt to rebuild my life that never existed,

I look near and far for a solution, I look to myself and say ‘it was an artificial situation’.

Family, οικογένεια, Famiglia, Familia, Teaghlach, Pamilya, Famille, Kahwá:tsire

Saira Batasar-Johnie

What is family? How does one identify family? When you are born, some people have parents, some have siblings, grandparents, extended family, a village who loves them, and some may not have that. I remember growing up watching shows such as Family Matters and Full House. Now, as an adult, I wonder what it must feel like for those children and youth who don’t have those conventional homes. Imagine
a world where we get to choose our parents; what would life look like? Who would we be? Would we still be where we are right now, or would we be different?

In all my jobs, I have had the opportunity to work in some form with connections to families. One of my most memorable moments working in the field was from working in a residential setting and experiencing my first family night. I watched how the entire staff team planned and coordinated the menu, invited family and friends of the young people, and followed up with past residents who used to live there because they were family of this home. Child and Youth Workers are often overlooked for how human they are and how much support they provide to young people. I observed a group of women cooking in the kitchen making all the favorites of the young people who lived there. The house began to fill with smells of food that made the air practically edible. I saw staff support young people who were experiencing anxiety and melting downs in tears because people were either coming or not coming. I helped decorate and clean the space. People began to arrive. I watched as parents embraced the child that they hadn’t seen in a few months, how siblings cried when they saw each other, how some parents criticized their child’s appearance which brought a young person to tears. As I sat with one young person, they shared that their immediate family doesn’t come to these things, they are ashamed about the person they are. They said, “it is what it is”, this 16-year-old had life more figured out than I did. They invited extended family members and friends to come instead. They waited, and I sat with them until someone came for them to get up and get excited for that hug. After an hour, her friend came from school with her mom. I thought it was really sweet that her friend brought her mom. It made me wonder about families: who defines what is and isn’t family? When your blood relatives, who are supposed to be supportive kind and caring, are nowhere to be found. When it comes to moments of connection and creating memories, and strangers are the ones who tend to come and show their support. This experience helped me understand the idea of chosen family.

The young people who lived at the residence had all gone through so much in their young ages, things that no one should ever have to experience. We call them resilient, but they are resilient not by choice. They are who they are because they were put in situations that they should not have experienced as children. Chosen family are people who show
up when your blood relatives do not, they are present in moments of times of need and vulnerability. They are also present in times of celebration and happiness. These young people taught me that their Child and Youth Workers became their family members, their agency, and their support team. The residence that I worked at was not just a group home; it was a family, it was a home, it was the space where many young people passed through in a moment of their life to figure out what the next chapter was for them. When you have genuine, supportive and caring Child and Youth Workers who exist in this environment, young people don’t feel like they are in a system of residential care, it turns into an environment where the workers become motherly figures, sisters, aunties, and grandmothers because that is what care looks like, and that is what chosen family is.

Note: The world family is in different languages as those were the languages of the young people who lived there at the time.

He is Not a Devil

John Digney

Once upon a time in an enchanted kingdom was born to a kindly couple a baby who they came to call John. He was a difficult child, asking too many questions and getting into all sorts of trouble as he grew up. Thankfully, and with the luck of the Irish (and the love of his parents) he managed to reach adulthood – although most who encounter him still think he is a big child.
After completing his psychology degree he went out into the world to make his own way and find his independence. He wandered almost aimlessly in the wilderness for many months before finding work. He did not realise it but he had come to take up a very privileged position. Indeed, many years were to pass before the man-child (now called Digz by those who he encountered) was to have the epiphany that caused him to realise the importance of what he had chosen to do. He was unaware of the special powers that had been bestowed upon him nor of the potential impact he was to have on so many young lives.

Young Digz had found sanctuary and employment in what was known all those years ago as a ‘Special School’, which at that time in Ireland meant a detention centre for juveniles. He accepted his role as a Residential Social Worker (in modern terms, a child & youth care worker) without fully understanding what he had signed up for.

The programme had been newly established and was staffed mainly by young and newly graduated workers. Some from teaching, some from psychology, some from nursing and some from other professions. The two things these folks had in common were their young ages and their lack of experience or knowledge of working in such an environment with this cohort of young males ... many of whom were only a few years younger than the staff.

The behaviour that the young residents exhibited could best be described as evil, or at the very least aggressive, dangerous, and threatening. The system for working with these young people was the Levels System. The young workers were told this system was ‘sacrosanct’, and it had special healing powers. In fact, as it turned out, it was just a ridiculously poor behaviour modification programme. One that was clunky, poorly defined and implemented in a subjectively arbitrary manner. The workers were not to realise this for some years, as they, as novice staff, were compelled to implement this nasty and at times abusive system.

As Digz was to discover later in life, people can become brain-washed into believing things that are not true. They can even come to a place where they are not able see what is right under their noses, often because of the environments and cultures that they are exposed to.
In the often-toxic environment of his workplace, Digz, like all his colleagues came to define their young wards through their behaviour. Such is what occurs in toxic B.Mod environments. The feeling and the thinking of the young people was secondary to their real selves.

One memorable day, about 4 years after he took up his post, Digz meet a very young boy named David. Most of the other young boys were around 16 years old and had been sent to the Special School by a Judge at the criminal courts. Davis had come in the same way but he was only 10 years old. Shortly before David arrived at the School, his reputation had arrived – in the form of a 32-page fax, outlining his history, offences and expected behaviour.

David was not to let his reputation down. Within hours of his arrival he had assaulted 4 staff and been placed in ‘time-out’. And so, this behaviour continued, often egged on by the older lads. He tried to abscond, refused to go to school, stole property from other kids, smashed furniture and televisions and assaulted staff.

And in the Special School, the sacrosanct levels system decreed that if a resident assaulted anyone, they were places on Level Zero. All privileged were taken away (no gym, tuck-shop, and early bed from 3 nights) and they spent 23 hours of the day away from the other residents, with only 1 hour in the company of one other boy and staff engaged in activities such as Mario Carts.

David became a legend, having accrued early bedtimes for the next 43 nights (and counting). He acted out, we ‘marked him down’ and this in turn caused him to act out and lash out. All we saw was a demon-child, sent from Valhalla to ensure we were never able to relax. He was a devil, a delinquent, a terror and a danger.

Digz was now approaching his 26th year, having had four years studying at university in the subject of human behaviour and then four years in practice, learning his trade. He believed he know it all, he was an expert and a force to be reckoned with. He had become somewhat hardened and, in many ways, detached from his young charges. He blindly wielded the Sword of Star-Charts and hid behind the Shield of Levels. Behaviours needed to be modified and he was the man to get it done.
One evening, after an especially difficult shift in the bullpen, a riot began. It came from nowhere and within minutes Digz was standing amidst a pile of broken property and a rampaging group of 10 young people. Alarms sounded and ‘back-up’ was called. Many staff were assaulted, but after about 90 minutes all the young people has been taken safely to their rooms.

The immediate debriefing was heated and there was only one ringleader. David. He had the power to cause such organised destruction and harm. He was indeed evil.

After such events staff took the time to ‘problem-solve’ with the young people and seek some answers and restoration. Digz was chosen to deal with the Devil-Child. He was to be the one who would try to reason with the unreasonable. Digz wasn’t happy with this quest and made it known to his colleagues, ‘Why the hell are we wasting our time? He is a demon and always will be’. Digz was still dispatched to challenge David.

As he approached the room, Digz was startled by the lack of sound, ‘why isn’t this beast banging at his door and shouting abuse?’ He approached silently and peered into the room through a small viewing panel. What he witnessed was to rock his world and change his way in this world forever.

David was on the floor of his room, in each of his hands he has small model motorcars and he was rolling them along the carpet. He was making a ‘vvroom’ sound and focusing intently on his game. He caught Digz eye and on the lower half of his face peeped out a little smile.

Digz could only turn and run for what he had witnessed was a sight that his mind could scarcely take, as the realisation hit home. ‘DAVID IS NOT A DEVIL, HE’S A LITTLE CHILD’. Digz left the Special School two minutes later and swore he would not return.

What had become of the young man, born to kindly parents two decades earlier? How had he come to be blinded? How would he have believed in such a system?

Of course, this is the real world, and Digz (that would be me) returned to work 2 days later for his next shift (you must pay the mortgage after all!) But things were not to be the same.

I began to question everything. Why were we so reliant on useless Levels systems, why had we demonised these kids, how did we think it was working when David was able
to accrue over 40 Level Zero bedtimes? What are we not spending our time getting to know these kids and what makes them tick? What do they think and how do they feel?

To be effective in our roles as child and youth care workers we need to ask questions, we need to challenge things that do not feel right, we need to invest in the relational and we must never stop seeing these kids for what they really are .... KIDS!

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Families and Natural Supports: Where are They?

Michelle Briegel

Back in my early days of child and youth care I worked in a long-term group home in Alberta, Canada. We had six beds available to children’s services located in what was considered an average neighbourhood. At the time, a long-term group home would often have young people living there for a number of years, often until they transitioned into adulthood and moved to a supported independent living situation. It was not unheard of for residents to stay three or four years in a setting such as this. Long-term group homes were designed for youth who were not able to live at home; those who did not fit well in foster care, and many were permanent wards of Children’s Services.

Family involvement was limited. If there was family involvement it was the occasional visit home on a weekend, or the family might come home to the annual holiday celebration held in December. Family visits would often break down and we would pick up the young person up after only one day with their family. Sometimes it would not even last that long. Phone calls with family members were only allowed during certain scheduled
times, usually after dinner and when chores were completed. This rule was sometimes broken because families would call outside of the scheduled time claiming that was the only chance they had to call.

We had such rigidity around family that we had rules about when young people were allowed to talk to their family; and that we allowed home visits with family, as if the child belonged to us and we would allow them to only visit their family (T. Garfat, personal communication, April 29, 2021).

Young people did not have cell phones or access to the internet, neither had become mainstream yet, so they were very dependent on access to family through landlines monitored by the group home staff. At the time, we had strict rules about how and when the phone line was used by youth in the program. We didn’t want them to have free access to phones, as we believed it was sure to cause behavioural problems if they became upset during the phone call. We went through a number of phones because the phone would be slammed, thrown across the room, and even used as a weapon on occasion. Phones were risky in the hands of an upset and dysregulating young person. Thinking back on it now, I do not know what we were thinking. We would put young people in the position of having emotionally charged conversations with their family members in front of their peers and then wonder why they could not keep control of their emotional reactions.

At the time, I was fresh out of school and ready to change the lives of the “at risk youth” that I was charged with caring for. I wasn’t sure that I was fully prepared to help young people fix their lives, become independent, and break away from their “dysfunctional” families, but I knew there were people that I was working alongside who had been doing this work for a long time, so why question anything? I just went along with what I was told to do and did not ask questions (at least in the early years of my career). There were rules and processes in place for a reason, and families were not in the lives of youth in the program for a reason. It was not my place as the Youth Worker to question or inquire about different options. What the Case Worker or Social Worker (Children’s Services delegated guardian) said they wanted to happen is what was done, end of discussion.

I eventually became a key worker, the Youth Worker in charge of one young person in the group home. In my case (which I recognize might not have been the same for all key
workers in other programs), I was responsible for all the reporting, assessments, and attending case conference meetings involving this particular youth. This meant that I was able to help guide the treatment plan of my key kid, or so I thought. I soon found out that Youth Workers did not have much respect at the conference table when it came to decision making and case planning.

Family members were not often present at the regular case conferences regarding their child. Case conferences usually consisted of the group home manager, supervisor, or director; the key worker; the Case Manager from Children’s Services; the youth (sometimes); and on few occasions the family. Apparently, it was deemed unimportant to invite the family. Sadly, at the time, I was just fine with that; because clearly, they must be the problem – right? We (the professionals) are the best people to support youth in care, right? We will always be there for them, won’t we?

Fast forward a decade or two and I am managing multiple programs at a large agency and we (Children’s Services and Children’s Services Agencies) are learning about the importance of including family in the treatment plans of young people. We are exploring wrap around type services that include having the young person’s family of choice at case conferences, supporting the youth who is always in attendance at a case conference. We are learning about family finding (n.d.), a concept created by Kevin Campbell that involves the professionals in the lives of young people actively looking for people from the young person’s past who can be supportive in the life of the young person. We are looking for people outside of ourselves to be the support that will carry on as we (the professionals) pull out of the young person’s life. We are involving people who, in the past, we would have declared unfit or problematic to the table at decision making time. We (the children’s service sector) have decided that young people most often go back to where they came from, back to their family, or back to the where and what they know – including the streets. Therefore, in light of that, we certainly should include the people that are important to a young person in their treatment planning…shouldn’t we? The answer is yes. Yes, we should, but are we?

An old African proverb, believed to embody the spirit of several African cultures, says “It takes a village to raise a child” meaning that the entire community should engage with
children so that they can grow in a safe and healthy environment. Yet, despite knowing this is likely true, society in general (western society especially) seems to fail at following through. We isolate within nuclear families, and when the nuclear family encounters difficulty within the family system and trouble arises, children’s services will often get involved, for good or bad depending on the situation. Regardless, if children’s services involvement is good or bad it is traumatic for children, youth, and families. Imagine being a child who is taken from your home and family and sent to a place where you do not know anyone, you don’t know the rules, you don’t know if you will see your family again, and you don’t know if you will be safe. If you are a parent or have a young person in your family that you can call to mind, think about the fear that child would have if it were them who was taken away.

We tend to forget about the fear when we believe we are helping children, youth, and families by intervening to keep children and youth safe. Who is there to help bridge the transition for the child, who can they rely on to be there? I know that many practitioners in child and youth care think they will be that person. We want to be that person for young people, but we are not. We are paid professionals in their lives, we will not be there long term, we cannot love and care for them in the same way that someone who will be part of their life forever can. I am not saying that we will not love and care for the children and youth we serve, but not in the same way that family can. Therefore, it is our responsibility to find the people who will be there for children and youth to support, love, care, and help to keep them safe throughout their life.

So, what is it that is getting in the way of this happening for every young person, each time? I believe it boils down to lack of resources and overloading of case management. I do not think that anyone who works with children, youth, and families would be against finding family, or individuals who can be natural supports to a young person; it is just finding the time and the resources to do it.

What if we had a dedicated person to do family finding at each program? A person who could work with the children’s services case manager, and the young person – if they are able – to seek out natural supports? I wonder what kind of difference that could make in the life of a young person who has been taken into care, or a young person who
is struggling and at risk of needing children services intervention. The Family Finding Model, developed by Kevin A. Campbell (n.d.), is an evidence-based model used to identify relatives and other important adult connections for children in care. The model responds to those involved in the child welfare system with the same urgency as the Red Cross during crisis, using the philosophy of Article 26 of the Geneva Convention – “The Right to Know”. Family Finding projects have demonstrated that Family Finding works to significantly increase the number of relatives and other important adult connections for children in care and leads to an average of five to eight offers of help from these adults (Campbell., n.d.).

I remember many years ago working with a young person in the long-term group home where I worked. This youth had been taken into care under a temporary guardianship order, meaning she could be in care for up to two years (or more if extensions were granted), while the system decided what would happen for her. Her Mom was living in a very unclean home, where hoarding was occurring, and Dad did not have custody. So, the youth and her brother were taken into care and placed in different group homes. At that time, the immediate family may have been consulted about taking in the children but there was no support offered to make it manageable. There was a grandmother involved but she was unable to care for two teenagers without assistance. The system failed the children in that they failed to dive deep into the past of the family and look for people who could be involved with the children. Instead, the children remained in long term group homes with multiple extensions on their temporary guardianship order, while their Mom was given orders repeatedly to get the house in livable condition to get her children back. What we know now, is so much more support was needed for this family.

Years later, an aunt and uncle who lived in Ontario, found out about the children being in care. They did not know they had been taken into care because nobody had looked for other relatives. Once they found out, they wanted to know if they could move to Alberta and take the children into their care? They were fully prepared to do whatever they needed to do to help the children. Unfortunately, by that point, the children had become enmeshed in the child welfare system and did not want to go live with people they now viewed as strangers. I wonder if this would have worked out differently had the
aunt and uncle been connected to the children earlier on, perhaps in what we now know as a kinship placement.

Resources will probably always be a barrier to child and family services being done well, but we can continue to advocate for better options. People need more time and space in their caseloads and programs to be able to do their jobs well and provide the best possible outcomes for children, youth, and families. By asking local children’s service authorities and organizations about models such as Family Finding (nd) we encourage the system to continue to keep looking for natural supports for children and youth in care. Everyone needs someone in their lives who will be there for them as a supportive resource and young people in care need this even more as their lives are quickly turned upside down. I hope we can commit to doing more than just talking about it.

Reference


How a Neon Green Scooter got my Foot in the Door

Noor Almaoui

Jerry D. was thirteen turning fourteen when I met him. He had recently overdosed on a combination of Xanax, cannabis and alcohol. The therapist before me expressed high frustration and disappointment about working with Jerry because he often dodged her and rarely (if ever) met with her for scheduled appointments. When she transferred
Jerry’s care to me, she sarcastically wished me good luck with trying to get his buy-in. I thought to myself, “Wow. What a life to have lived at just thirteen. This will be a challenge, now let’s see what I can do with this little man”. The family facilitator on the case had a better relationship with the mother and asked me if I wanted to speak to her to learn about Jerry before meeting him. The mother had come to the office to deliver some documents to the facilitator for help with an attorney, since Jerry was being taken to court for threatening a teacher’s safety on school premises. I met mom and she told me that Jerry “sees through people”. She suggested that I “Keep it real with him” and tipped me that he enjoys skateboarding. “Perfect!” I thought, “I know exactly how to reel him in and make that ‘connection’”.

So, the first time I went to meet him, since I don’t skateboard, I took my neon green scooter to ride while he skateboards. He took one look at me, smirked at the sight of my neon scooter and agreed to ride around the block. His smile was an in for me! I let him guide us around his neighborhood, since I was unfamiliar with it. As we circled the block, he shared with me some of the sad and frightening memories he had of his experiences in his neighborhood with gang affiliated peers. Memories of walking into apartments with unconscious bodies on the floor, sneaking into an abandoned apartment swarmed with law enforcement to find blood smeared on walls and a corpse on the ground, or being held at gun point in a local park. After hearing all of what he shared, I was deeply saddened by how much life this young person had lived in just thirteen years. And I wondered where in the world would I begin?!

After that first visit with him, Jerry canceled various scheduled appointments with me. It was very frustrating to have so many appointments canceled but I felt as though I couldn’t give up on him! His probation officer later told him that aside from the mandate to “stay clean and out of trouble”, individual and family therapy were also obligatory for him to pass his probationary period. So, Jerry showed up to sessions and often shared his abstract magical thoughts about his powers to plant thoughts into others’ heads. He left me with a heavy head swirling in confusion trying to figure out what was this kid’s truth and what was not. It was so perplexing to hear all of how he thought but it was intriguing, and I wanted to know more.
In individual therapy sessions, we didn’t get very far. However, in the year and four months that I worked with him, the fruit of my labor came after three family therapy sessions. In one of our family sessions, I used “therapy Jenga” questions to build rapport with him, his mom and his dad. “Therapy Jenga” is regular Jenga except with a list of therapeutic questions that participants take turns asking and answering. The game can be played however participants choose, but the goal is to get to know each other over a friendly game of Jenga. After a few exchanges of questions, mom decided to ask every participant “What is your most embarrassing memory?”. We each shared a memory and mom shared that hers was one of when the dad beat her up in public with all three children present and then undressed her from the waist down and left her on the street for bystanders to stare at. Jerry looked straight at his dad and dad looked at me. My heart sank and, in my mind, I could visibly see my jaw drop to the table. I was in shock by not just the magnitude of dad’s behavior, but also by mom’s courage to continue to co-exist with a person who treated her the way dad had that day and I couldn’t imagine the impact it must have had on the three boys. Dad said “I thought we talked about not bringing up the past. That was then”. Jerry spoke up and said, “You never apologized to her”. Jerry’s dad laughed and replied “Let’s not talk about then”. So, I interjected and explained how taking accountability for our own actions and how they may harmfully influence others is a piece of healing. Dad apologized and Jerry shot mom a quick half-smile. Mom thanked the dad for the apology and asked me where to go from here.

The first thing I could think was “What an opportune time to set up house rules”. So, mom summoned Jerry’s two older brothers and together we chalked up house rules onto large post-its to hang in the communal area of their living space so that everyone could be reminded of the rules. The rules were about respecting one another, never putting one another down, and lending a helping hand when others are in need.

What I took away from this experience and want to share is a) be creative in engaging kids in amusing and interactive activities (traditional “talk therapy” doesn’t always work), b) pull in the whole support system because when we’re not in the youth’s life anymore, they’re going to need natural supports to turn to, c) practice patience and don’t give up
on our youth and their families, and last but never least d) regularly practice curiosity and unconditional positive support when working with our youth and their families.

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**Stepping into the In-Between**

*Thom Garfat*

I step into the room where I know Sharon is hiding herself away from the situation which had just occurred. She had been with us for a while now and we had spent many moments together as a part of her experience here. It would be inaccurate, however, to say that we had a ‘good’ relationship. So far, our relationship had been one of distance, uncertainty, and insecurity. She lived in the world as an angry fifteen-year-old, abused by men in her family and leery therefore, of contact with other men.

“Sharon?” I inquire as I step into the room. The inquiry is a question asking, essentially, if she is willing (able) to engage. It is not a demand for engagement which a phrase such as ‘we need to talk’ might convey. It offers her, I hope, a feeling of control in the moment. I know that if we were to truly engage, she must also make a commitment.

“What do you want?” she demands, throwing up, by my interpretation, a wall of defensiveness.

“I am wondering, how are you doing? I know you just had an argument with the other staff.” The emphasis is on her, on how she is doing in the moment, not on what she might have done. I want to connect with who, and how, she is. It addresses self, not behaviour. Because the truth is I do not, at this moment, care about her behaviour.

And at the same time, I am wondering ‘how am I?’ and what am I doing to create this experience of me, of her, of us? How am I contributing to the in-between, that space we
co-create and call ‘the relationship’? From the moment of first contact, at the beginning and each and every time after that, everything we do contributes to the joint construction of our experiencing in relationship.

“Ya. So whada you want!” It was a statement more than a question, but I chose to think otherwise. I see the mistake in my approach. By going beyond the ‘wondering how you are doing’ to ‘I know you just had an argument’ I shifted the focus to what she did rather than how she is doing. I regret my mistake. This is, I think, probably an approach with which she is familiar; leading, in her experience, to blaming, demanding, accusation. I wonder why I went there and how it is affecting the in-between beyond my immediate noticing that it has created more distance in our relationship. I am disappointed with myself. ‘Rookie mistake’, I think.

“So, I wanted to know, how are you?” I know I have to connect with her for anything meaningful to happen here. We have to move away from the behaviour and into her experiencing of her self in this moment. If we do not engage self-to-self nothing meaningful will happen.

She looks at me like I was a plate of the wrong food served at the wrong time. “Why are you always asking me that?” There is an opening here, I think, a possibility to move closer in connection, to develop the in-between between us. I notice how I am interpreting her statement and non-verbal actions and mark it for my own reference.

“Because I am always wondering how you are doing whenever we meet,” I respond as clearly as I can. “And I think that if I am going to be helpful at all, we need to be connected while we talk. So, I think that by asking how you are, we might connect a little closer than if I start right away to ask about your actions, which is really of less concern for me right now than how you are doing.”

I want her to know that I want caring and connection to be the foundation of our relationship and that I am interested in beginning with a focus on the present, the immediate, the now of our interaction. I also want to let her know how I interpret my behaviour, what it means to me in this moment of encounter so as to challenge any other meaning she might be attributing to it. But I feel her pull back a little, the distance in our relatedness expanding rather than shrinking. I feel less connected than I did just a
minute ago and I remember her experiences with the men in her family. I am thinking that perhaps it is because of the meaning she makes of the word ‘closer’ which may imply something different than what I intended. In response, I move myself physically a little further away from her, striving for balance, and I make sure I am not blocking her exit should she decide she needs to leave this encounter. I sense her relax; there is a little less tension in the in-between. I feel the tension leave me, without having realized it was present. But I want us to move closer. What’s that about, I wonder?

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“When I was your age, I used to get into trouble a lot,” I say, hoping that a little disclosure, a sense of my vulnerability in this relationship, may invite her to a place she experiences as more equally balanced in terms of vulnerability. Our work involves stepping into the unknown, risking self in the service of other. “It wasn’t because I was wanting to,” I continue. “I think it was because I was always thinking about other stuff at the time.”

I am not really caring if she will understand what I just said but I am hoping that she will experience my openness, fragility, for this is an area I do not talk about a lot and so in raising it here, I feel exposed. Young people often pick up on what we are feeling even though we might not express it or even try to hide it. Just ask any Child and Youth Care Worker who has tried to pretend she is having a good day when she is not. I am also hoping that if she experiences my dropped boundaries of protectiveness; hoping she will sense that I am willing to risk in this relationship. And maybe that will encourage her to move towards a balance herself.

“I just want to go home,” she blurts out.

My heart breaks a little and I tumble willingly into the in-between through the passageway she has opened with her pain. I cannot hear this and stand distant. This is the cry of a lost, disconnected child, wanting comfort. I have no choice, if I believe in Relational Child and Youth Care practice, but to allow my self, with all my fear and hesitation, to step clearly into the in-between, unadorned. For it is only then, in the in-
between, un-hampered by all my preconceptions, intentions and mandates that I might encounter the real person who is here. I must let go of the self I protect in my everyday encounters and expose myself to the experience of other to truly connect in relationship. It is only, when I let go of my ‘intention to be helpful’ that we can perhaps, together, create a healthy and helpful experience of the in-between. Perhaps only in letting go of my drive to engage therapeutically can we connect meaningfully.

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All my previous Child and Youth Care training falls to the side as I open myself to encounter this child, this person, in all her pain and uniqueness. I know, in that moment I must, despite my fear of the unknown, give myself to this moment of real ‘self to self’ encounter. And then, hopefully, we might ‘make it together’ and find our way back to wherever we are going.

In Need of a Kidney

Jennifer Kettle

I have worked in the field of Child and Youth Care for many years, and I am constantly amazed by the insight of the youth, and how they help us see things from their perspective. The youth teach me every day, and often their wisdom helps me learn in ways that inform my practice and helps change how I see the world. Over the years I have heard debates about “Do you tell the youth you love them?” I will not weigh in on the debate but I have learned that in residential programs the answer is very complex, tied to
boundaries, differing staff, differing young people and even agency policies. It is not an easy question but, a few years ago, I had an experience with a youth that helped me understand it better.

I was working in a residential program for teens. “Steve” was fourteen and had been living with us for over two years. He had a background that was typical of many of our youth including experiences of trauma and neglect, some developmental delays, multiple diagnosis including ADHD and FASD. When he came to us at twelve, he had been in approximately ten placements that had broken down for various reasons. From the beginning, he struggled with our program, particularly the rules and structure. He was a young man who wanted to do it his way, but his way often failed to consider how that affected him even in the immediate future. I once watched him barricade a staff in her car, because he did not want her to leave, even knowing that security were already on the way. He could not recognize he would not only get in “trouble” but that it would affect his relationship with that staff.

After a rocky first year, things started to shift and we had many days where we all, including Steve, were happy with how things were going. There were days that he still struggled, and he became what we agreed to call “stuck”, refusing to do anything. I happened to walk into the house on one of those days. At this point Steve had been living with us for more than two years and we all certainly thought we knew everything he might throw our way.

As soon as I walked into the program, I could sense that something was up. The two staff were upstairs in the office and they were frustrated. They recounted a challenging morning starting with Steve refusing to attend school, attend his counselling appointment or even talk to them. He had escalated to yelling, arguing and banging furniture. The staff were frustrated, not able to make any sense of his mood or behavior, which seemed to come without any trigger. I am sure to them it seemed like a step backward. By the time I arrived, Steve had retreated to his room with firm direction to leave him alone in very colorful but clear terms. I decided to try to talk with him, hoping a fresh face might help give us a new place to start.
I knocked on his door but did not get a response. I asked if I could come in and got a “sure if you #*%*ing want to”. I decided to see that as an invite. Steve was sitting on the bed, looking down, playing with some random toy and was very different from the angry youth the staff had seen less than an hour before. He looked like a lost little boy, not an enraged young man. We chatted randomly about nothing for a few minutes before I was brave enough to ask what was going on. I suddenly saw the anger the staff had described.

I got a verbal blast that included how all the staff were idiots (my word; his words were more detailed and colourful), how he hated us all and how we should all just leave him alone. He pointed out this was our job; we were paid to be here, and we should be better at it. His frustration was evident, but he still gave me no clue what had triggered it. I attempted to be empathic, pointing out I knew living in a group home was difficult, looking at his strengths, etc. At one point, I tried to use our relationship and stated, “You know they are not trying to get you to do all this to be mean, they want you to do well, they care about you”.

Abruptly Stave changed tactics. He didn’t argue but didn’t agree, he just said “Can I ask you a question?” The switch puzzled me but seeing an opportunity I quickly said, “Go ahead, ask away”. I had anticipated a question on how we could get back on track, or where we go from here, but Steve had different ideas, he asked, “I was wondering if I needed a kidney, would you donate it to me?”

I was floored, this was out of left field and I paused trying to figure out the answer. I knew he needed to hear a yes, but I struggled with where the question came from and the boundaries that I felt were necessary. In essence, I knew he was looking for connection, but I was cautious around making some wild promise that I could not follow up on. All of this ran though my mind in seconds, but I found an answer, I chose to use science. “Well of course I would give you a kidney if you needed it, but there are medical considerations such as am I a match, is that the only option” …I babbled on. This was not what Steve was looking for, but it felt safe for me.

He stopped me midway through the science lecture, interrupting me with, “I understand all that, and I believe you would give me a kidney”. I felt a momentary swell of...
pride as I felt that I connected to Steve, and that my answer had met his needs, but he continued. “I have another question for you. If I needed a kidney and your kid needed a kidney, who would you give one to?”

Now I was stuck, how should I reply? I struggled as I recognized what he was asking but certainly did not want to say “Well, to my own child” for fear of how that would make him feel. However, I have always felt it is important for the youth to see us, as honest and in my heart, I knew what honesty would dictate I should say. I struggled with how to answer it; it was probably only seconds, but it seemed like an eternity.

I started to stumble through a response, struggling to come up with words ... but fortunately, he let me off the hook and he stopped me. He looked at me and said, “it’s okay, I understand, you would give a kidney to your child, you should do that, she is your child.” I did not know what to say and paused, and then he looked at me and said, “That’s what I am looking for, I want someone who is going to give me a kidney”.

I honestly cannot remember where the conversation went after that, but that one moment stayed with me. In that one statement, he conveyed that the basic thing he wanted was a family that loved him unconditionally, something we could not give him. For many years, long after he left our program, he shared his journey and his challenges in his search for that family. Sadly, I do not think he ever was able to find it.

I always remember that moment and try to consider it when the youth are struggling. They deserve families that love them, but they have not all been fortunate enough to get them. Do I love the youth? In many ways, I do, but at the end of the day, I will always be “staff” and while I do many things, one of my goals is to help them figure out how to find those who “will donate a kidney”.

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June 2020, the world erupted when a video of a man’s death was put on display for all to see. Some people were witnessing this for the first time and for others, it was another day in their life. Whatever end of the spectrum we landed on it was a moment that gave space for reflection. As a child and youth care worker, I wrote in a forum where workers can share ideas and reflections. I wrote about a call to action. An opportunity if you will for child and youth care CYC workers to make space for the clients to discuss the impact of what they had witnessed. A space to discuss their pain and suffering, misinformation, and uncertainties. The call to action was met with at best silence, at worse, indifference. Comments like “It’s not our job to get politically involved” or “Don’t bring your personal beliefs to this forum” and “It’s not my problem”. To say I was dumfounded is to put it mildly. I have been a Special Care Counsellor for the last 22 years and have never been so disheartened as I was at the response to the call to action. You see, there are minorities and people of colour in ALL the clientele groups we serve. Whether working with youth, the elderly, or people with physical and/or intellectual disabilities, minorities are present in all these categories. Often in our positions of power we, as educators not only stay silent about their some of their experiences, but we silence them because “WE” are uncomfortable, because “WE” do not know how to navigate difficult conversations.

As a result of my experience with the Special Care Counselling page, I spoke to my colleagues about the importance of making space to discuss difficult and uncomfortable topics in the context and in service of the work that we do everyday with our clients. The following is an account of the various conversations I had on the topic. You will hear the voices of a team leader, a psychology student who is also a special care counsellor, a
stage student, a youth worker at the beginning of her career and myself, a clinical
director. Together we make up part of an extraordinary group of individuals who seek out
difficult and uncomfortable conversations in service of providing our clients with a non-
judgmental environment in which to unpack the many realities of the society they are
living in.

The first person I spoke to was Katie. Katie has been a Special Care Counsellor for six
years and is about to graduate from her BA in Psychology. Her interest in the human brain
and the impact that stress has on its development and functioning was really at the
forefront of her views on this topic. This is what Katie had to say:

When working with vulnerable populations, such as at-risk youth, many in
the field avoid difficult, taboo, and uncomfortable subjects and
conversations. Severens et al. (2012), researched the neuro function of
individuals who were attempting to inhibit verbalizing a word that society
considers taboo. The researchers discovered that the neuro activation
differs when the individual is inhibiting a socially unaccepted word versus
inhibiting a neutral word. The researchers suggest the differences are due
to the external factors and norms that have been instilled into the
participants, noting an extrinsic inhibition. While this study revolves
around taboo words, imagine the implications this may have on youth that
feel they must inhibit questions or discussions about uncomfortable, and
taboo subjects.

When difficult subjects are not talked about, a social norm is created that
these topics are taboo, which in turn inhibits youth from seeking help, and
disclosing and seeking information. This may, in the future, hinder their
ability and confidence to ask important questions about their sexual
health, their preferences, their gender, their discrimination, and
oppression that they experience. This creates yet another barrier to both
information and opportunities for the youth.
It is well documented that trauma alters neurobiological functioning (Cross et al., 2017).

The results of talk-therapy have also been extensively researched showing that talking about experiences and traumas alters the neurobiological functioning of the brain, enhancing positive behavior and cognitive processing (Rossouw, 2013). Knowing the benefits of talk therapy, youth need a space to be open and discuss their experiences as well as their questions about life and society.

Why are some CYC workers not stepping up to the plate to talk to the youth about the trauma they have seen or experienced? Why are difficult, taboo, and uncomfortable subjects not being readily broached? If talking about trauma has been shown to alter neurobiology in positive ways, why is it taboo to talk about taboo topics?

CYC workers can help youth change their behaviour and thinking patterns. CYC workers have the responsibility to help children and adolescents make prosocial adjustments. Why then, are difficult and uncomfortable subjects sometimes being ignored? The trauma becomes perpetuated if youth feel they cannot and should not be asking questions or discussing the uncomfortable issues.

The brain is altered by experiences through neuroplasticity. When CYC workers are not role models and do not give space for discussing uncomfortable topics, this also alters the brain. It shows youth they should not be talking about these subjects because society views them as off-putting, or too taboo.

Talking about sex should not be taboo, vaginas should not be taboo and discussion oppression and discrimination should not be taboo. Society
has put a label on these topics. It is CYC workers who choose to feed into that label or decide to educate.

Environments matter; especially when involving the neural development of youth (De Bellis, 2005). Workers know all too well that certain environments can be detrimental to a youth’s development, notably neglect at home; so why are workers neglecting the youth’s development in a different way? In most CYC settings, workers set the mood and the environment for the teens – why are their development, education and experiences still being neglected?

Katie’s words left me with a lot of food for thought. Knowing the impact and the physiological changes that occur in the brain when we give space for these difficult conversations, my next conversation was with Alexander. Alex has been the team leader at AMCAL for the last three years. He has been a dedicated member of the team and earned his position through hard work and being willing to learn from his mistakes. Alex and I often have conversations that aren’t for the faint of heart and our relationship is stronger for it. This was Alex’s take on having difficult conversations as a frontline staff member:

In my personal life I have made it a habit to talk about uncomfortable subjects, as a white male in the social services field it is important that I am able to have conversations about uncomfortable topics. I represent a subsection of our society that can be seen at the root of many social issues throughout history and the current times. I feel a responsibility to the populations that have been affected, to listen to them and their experiences. While in school, I was taught a specific point of view and would see other viewpoints as incorrect or insignificant. I questioned all opinions and stances on any topic from that point on.
This pandemic gave space for us to reflect on the many injustices that have gone on for too long. It has forced us to confront issues within our justice systems, in our health care and in how we interact with each other. With all the social media that we were scarfing down many of us were inspired to spark change in ourselves and others while many have used it as an excuse to maintain the status quo. As I work with my clients, I need to remember that their life experiences can be quite different from mine. I need to be conscious as a childcare worker to not feed into the cycle of self-importance and white privilege. If I let the comfort of not confronting the privileges, which can be uncomfortable for some, I would show my clients that what they live through is not important to me. By being open to discuss how my privilege affects others I model for my clients the ability to do the same.

When I choose to speak about a topic, I remind myself that if I keep a calm and comfortable demeanor, I will allow the person or people in the conversation to also feel more at ease to speak. I find that when we become hesitant to speak about topics, we miss the opportunity to gather information that can better our understanding. By choosing not to speak we also assume that people know where we are coming from. When we choose to not educate ourselves in many topics, we inadvertently perpetuate the cycle of ignorance.

We all must remember that everything we do teaches those around us.

As a cis gendered White male, Alex recognizes how easy it would be for him to ignore these difficult conversations. He also knows that as a Child Care worker and more so as a Team Leader, he has to ensure that all teens under his care feel that they have a voice and that their voice matters.

As part of my role as the Clinical Supervisor here at AMCAL, I have the pleasure of weekly meetings with our stage students (interns). Alexandra is a student who has ben
with us for 2 semesters. Her program specializes in Youth Care. Alexandra happened to overhear a conversation I was having with Alex and Katie about my disappointment with the SCC forum. She approached me later that day to ask if she too could be a part of whatever response we were going to give. In our next supervision, we discussed how she saw the situation. These were her thoughts:

Working in a new environment, although exciting, brings about multiple challenges. Along with the challenges, however, comes the opportunity for personal, professional, and education growth. Being new to the industry, fear was very much prevalent during my shifts as a childcare worker. I feared making a bad decision, not being good enough for the job or the client(s) or intervening inappropriately. Further, I feared asking questions that would lead to a difficult conversation which I did not know how to handle appropriately or would provoke a personal trigger.

I often found that fear prevented me from asking certain questions, conducting interventions, or making certain observations with clients. In these situations, I feared that I would not be able to handle the conversation that followed the question I asked or the comment I made. I worried about how making the wrong intervention would make me look inexpert before the eyes of clients. In my experience however, not discussing certain topics or ignoring interventions almost always has negative ramifications. The questions I did not ask, and the comments or interventions I did not make, let the clients know that there were taboo subjects. Similarly, the perceived taboo subject made it more difficult to establish the worker-client relationship essential for constructive intervention, and subsequently, concrete change. The issues clients face do not simply go away if they are not discussed or addressed. Instead, they grow until they have the potential of getting out of hand. Fear also greatly impacted how I viewed myself as a childcare worker. Every time I
avoided a certain topic or intervention, I lost confidence in myself and my decision-making capacity. This loss of confidence then affected my work performance and productivity. The fear of not being fit for the job further impacted the way I dealt with complex situations in my role.

Over time, I learned how to better deal with fear and work through blockages as I realized that the only way to grow professionally was to take risks and learn from my mistakes. It was made clear that I would always be faced with a certain level of fear when making decisions, no matter how much experience I had. However, this realization did not come easily; I used multiple tools to change my thinking. I found that self-reflection was extremely helpful in processing my shifts. More specifically, I used notetaking to process and objectively identify what went well, and what did not go as well. Further, I found that asking for support from colleagues was also an excellent way of working through the fear I was experiencing. Using a support system can involve asking for feedback, engaging in shift debriefs, or simply asking for advice. Most important, self-awareness is crucial in not making decisions based on fear. By being aware of yourself, you can foresee your areas of development and improve your responses to diverse situations, whether it be a difficult conversation, an unplanned intervention, or a triggering subject.

We can all relate to Alexandra’s concerns. Our career in this field started at some point and we can all remember how it felt to be unsure about our skills. I went to Samantha, our newest team member to get yet another point of view from a recent inductee into the field. She is a graduate of the Special Care Counselling program and joined our team in January. Sam has made herself an integral part of the team. She processed this topic from the perspective of someone who understood all too well how if felt to be seen as “other”. She focused on the reasons why taking those risks are worthwhile. Here’s what she had to say:
As a Special Care Counsellor and an individual who has gone through the process of being the odd one out, I am very aware that there are a lot of things that are not spoken about openly concerning the topic of belonging. The questions that often came up were: “How come I was called the odd one out? How come they can accept me at the lunch table but, make silly faces and comments when my food is different? How come I get put aside when I bring my ideas to the table yet, I am a part of the group project?” These are questions I asked myself as a youth, but never had the answer to. As an adult, I can now look back and comprehend why these questions were uncomfortable to explain.

When explaining belonging to individuals, it is not only about being accepted but also about being heard and seen for the differences that we bring to the table. As an educator, we work with a variety of clients yearning to belong to a group. Whether it is at school, at home, with extended family, or within their culture and with friends. I have often noticed teens who explain “I haven’t quite fit in yet”. They tend to see themselves as the group of misfits that are unseen and who struggle with identity, due to not being a part of a specific group.

Our job as workers is to try and create that safe space for teens to develop and to thrive in our program so that the tools they acquire can be transferable to the outside world. Our duty is to service the youth in our society. I believe that we should talk about the realities of the world to those who are seeing the injustice as they grow up. To answer the questions of why they are being put aside or questioned.

We should have the conversations about all the uncomfortable topics that label and put individuals in a certain category. If our teens are aware of all society’s constraints, they can start to question them and help pave the
way to the future kids, teens, and adults who feel this way. Perhaps this will be the start of unified people.

As a team, we felt that this subject needed to be put out in the open. As educators, we must start the discussion ourselves, have the expectation of one another to address these issues head on. We recognize the difficulties that come from speaking the unspoken. I am blessed to work with individuals who engage in rich dialogue. I am eternally grateful for their perspectives, their openness and their positive attitude towards encouraging and supporting change. Some of our teens don’t get to pick and choose whether or not they are comfortable discussing these topics as the decision was made the day they were born. Change never happens without a little discomfort. Be uncomfortable.

References


Nicki and Me

Howard Bath

Nicki was twelve and had been in our children’s centre for around nine months. She had a pronounced limp, was feisty and energetic and seemed to enjoy provoking and annoying the care workers. It was often difficult to engage with her as she rebuffed attempts to talk and reacted dismissively to our efforts to involve her in activities such as board games.

As a young youth worker, I was assigned to do the school run, picking up the young people from three schools in the district. I had just picked up Jack and he hopped into the prized ‘shotgun’ seat in the van next to the driver.

We drove on to the next stop to pick up Nicky. She was waiting in her usual spot a little away from the other children and moved towards the van when she saw it pull up. Getting a little closer she suddenly stopped and seemed to be upset about something. We waited for a few minutes as she ignored my attempts to get her to hurry up, but eventually she opened the side sliding door and pulled herself in, immediately moving to the corner of the last row.

We set off towards the next school a few miles away. Jack was chatting about an event at school that day and I became aware that Nicki had been unusually quiet.

A few moments later I heard a muffled sound from the back and was startled when a car moved alongside the van and blew its horn, followed by another that did the same thing. Looking in the rearview mirror I saw Nicki leaning out the window yelling at the other drivers. Immediately I turned around in irritation and said “Stop that Nicki, it’s really dangerous”.

We drove on for a few more minutes with Nicki quiet and sullen.
Another car blew its horn and the driver held up his fist at me. I hadn’t heard Nicki calling out but when I checked the rearview mirror, I saw that her arm was out of the window and she was making obscene gestures towards the other drivers.

Now I was really annoyed. I turned around and yelled “Don’t be so stupid Nicki, what do you think you are doing?”

There was another long silence and I thought that my last retort must have solved the problem.

I glanced again in the rearview mirror and tears were streaming down the face of the normally feisty and oppositional Nicki. She was a picture of misery.

I remember my confusion at what had happened. One moment I was geared up for an extended confrontation with Nicki, complete with her normal expletives and insults, and the next I found myself with an obviously distressed and emotionally bruised young person and, what’s more, I sensed that it was my response that was to blame.

It took me a long time to untangle what happened that day and today, more than forty-five years later, it still sometimes comes to mind when I think about my early adventures in child and youth care.

So, was this Nicki being her usual oppositional self as I thought at the time (and probably wrote in the daily log), or are there other perspectives that can help us to make sense of her behaviours? What follows are a few of the helpful perspectives that I have learned over the years – they each provide insights and tools I wish I had as a young youth worker.

Firstly, I have learned a lot more about communication skills over the years, especially as I have had to teach them to others. Active Listening is surely the foundational skill for everyone one in human services and especially in services that support children and young people.

I didn’t pause to listen to Nicki that day because I was focused on my school pick-up task – I didn’t take time to consider that Nicki may have had a bad day; I didn’t reflect on the fact that all the young people wanted to sit in the ‘shotgun’ seat and that Nicki may have been upset about that; and I didn’t think that she may have wanted to be part of the conversation that I was having with Jack.
Perhaps her problematic behaviour was one of those disguised ‘bids’ for attention or connection\(^1\) that are so common with kids who don’t have effective communication skills or don’t believe that adults will listen or care. When she started to ‘misbehave’ it just confirmed for me that I was dealing with a kid with ‘behaviour problems’.

Putting feelings into words is even more of a struggle for children who have experienced developmental adversity. Bessel van der Kolk tells us that such children often have a limited emotional vocabulary when compared to their peers\(^2\) and that, “a critical element in the treatment of traumatized children is to help them find words for emotional states”\(^3\).

Perhaps Nicki would have struggled to ‘put her feelings into words’ if I’d asked her what was troubling her, but surely I could have tried to help her find words, or to have simply acknowledged that she was having a tough day. Perhaps that would have avoided a situation in which we both felt wounded and misunderstood.

James Anglin provides us with another helpful perspective. He tells us that when care workers are under pressure, they often fail to notice that some problematic behaviours are driven by emotional distress – he calls these ‘pain-based behaviours’. When young people in emotional distress act out their emotional pain, they often elicit ‘pain-based responses’ from their carers such as threats or coercive statements. In fact, Anglin suggests that the ‘central challenge’ in working with traumatized children is avoiding the use of secondary pain responses when responding to their ‘primary pain’\(^4\).

It’s clear in hindsight, that Nicki was in some sort of emotional pain and that her behaviours were a reflection of this pain. My responses, based on the impact of those behaviours on me, was to use ‘put-down’ coercive words, fueling her emotional pain. My goal was to stop the behaviour not to wound her, but I fell into the trap that Anglin


described. The ongoing challenge for us all is to develop behaviour management responses that do not involve the use of physical or emotional pain, especially when we are dealing with behaviours that are dangerous, frightening, or provocative.

The third insight is related to that emotional pain and involves an all-too-common emotion that troubles our young people, especially those that have been exposed to abuse and neglect. Shame is a deep sense of believing that we are deficient in some way, that we are unworthy, inadequate, and do not belong. Dan Hughes tells us that many young people who have experienced maltreatment and rejection are ‘enveloped’ in this shame5.

If we are not exposed to ‘put down’, shaming words at home, we will surely learn about them in the playground. They are used because they are effective in inflicting emotional pain and often make the speaker feel temporarily more powerful, to feel that they belong, and the other person does not. Shame words speak to those fundamental needs we all have, to belong and to feel good about ourselves.

In my frustration that day I angrily told Nicki that she was ‘stupid’, and in doing so I ‘weaponized’ shame. Perhaps that was it; perhaps that is why my angry retort did not attract the usual abusive response from Nicki but cut her to the core.

I still don’t know what was at the root of Nicki’s behaviours that day because I didn’t take the time to listen, either during the event or afterwards. What I do have now is a clearer idea about how I should have responded and an appreciation for the tools and perspectives that help us understand and respond in ways that help rather than harm.

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Virtual Drop-In Coffee and Tea Sessions with a dash of Child and Youth Care

Melanie Zuzarte

This past academic year I have reflected upon our practice as Child and Youth Care Practitioners (CYCPs). I have thought deeply about the kindness and generosity that we weave into our conversations with our child and youth care post-secondary students. I have considered how our actions often speak louder than words when working with our students. With all of that deep thinking aside, I’ve wondered what Henry Maier would say during these times. Maier’s (1980) “Play in the University Classroom” scholarship found me one morning in my search for wisdom. It was so profound that it inspired how I curated a Bachelor of Child and Youth Care Interventions 1 course at Humber College for Winter 2021. I hope the following contribution to the literature will infuse some inspiration into your practice.

I leaned into the generosity of Maier’s scholarship as I slowly acquainted myself with my child and youth care (CYC) post-secondary students. I quickly learned that this pandemic is hardly doing our students any favours. Finding moments to weave in kindness within the pedagogy for students to experience would be a feat. Maier speaks about how learning is easily digested when students are relaxed and ready to take a risk (Maier, 1980). I reflected on reframing ‘class time’ as a Virtual Coffee and Tea session for my students as a starting point towards comfort and inclusion. Every Sunday morning, I would send out a kind email invitation to my students to join me for a Virtual Coffee and Tea Drop-In session in the week ahead. My goal was to curate a virtual life space that was welcoming and warm for all. During the semester, we would be engaging in discussions
and role plays that infused strength-based, relationship-focused and positive psychology approaches into the learning process. My hope was to co-curate a space where we could dive into these topics with a sense of safety. I pondered how I could begin to engage my students to feel comfortable enough to practice intervention techniques, that they had never encountered before, with their classmates and myself while weaving in themes of kindness and generosity.

I would arrive to class ten minutes early prior to the start of the Virtual Coffee and Tea Drop-In session. I created an inviting space to allow those early risers and I to connect with one another. We shared laughs, they told me how they were coping with their studies. Some even introduced me to their pets before their classmates arrived. I was starting to demonstrate to my students that I was an approachable instructor that was willing to offer my time from a lens of kindness.

The framing of Virtual Coffee and Tea sessions provided a nice way for my students to take a break and think about why they were in class while the pandemic banged on their door. I took note of Maier’s nod towards relaxation and involvement and thought about how I could further connect kindness and generosity as an intervention strategy with my students.

When class began, I greeted my students with the reading of a simple reflection as they settled in and sipped their hot drinks. Peterson (1988) suggests watching for reflective moments with youth that are naturally occurring therapeutic opportunities. I wondered what my students’ reactions would be as I read the passages over Blackboard. The virtual life space of an online classroom could be a great place to hide if you are a shy student or feel anxious that you may be judged if you contributed. Were they tuning out? Humouring me? Did they think I was weird? Maier’s (1980) scholarship suggests creating a milieu where everyone feels welcome. After reading a passage I would check in with my students and enquire how they were holding up during the pandemic. During the first weeks I was met with silence, but, as the weeks progressed, students began to share their thoughts and feelings with one another through their mics and in the chat. I noted that the comments to one another were kind, supportive and even generous.
After reading passages for two weeks, I heard another whisper from Henry Maier’s journal article where he suggested that joint rhythmicity infuses a sense of togetherness while also strengthening communication (Maier, 1980). I decided to take a risk and found a clip of Beyonce surprising students at a Harlem School (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XoX9qXBPOBs) to illustrate the intervention technique of rhythmicity. As I linked the video into Blackboard’s chat, I encouraged my students to dance along in private in their pyjamas in their homes. I left my camera on and demonstrated my best dance moves, albeit sat in my office chair. I was hopeful my students would engage in that moment of playfulness and togetherness. I watched the chat flood with hearts, smiles and giggles. I was slowly providing my students opportunities to connect with an intervention strategy and to taste a sense of togetherness, albeit virtually.

By the third week of class, I invited my students to volunteer to lead their own reflection activity. It would be for fun. No grade would be assigned. I would reward them with praise after their shared contribution and an email shout out at the end of class. I was hoping that my students would take a risk and make the most of a scary relational and collaborative experience. I encouraged them to take their time and think about what would make for a meaningful reflection activity. I suggested a poem, a video clip, a guided meditation or even a song. They had free rein to use the four minutes as they wished. There were a few volunteers who were willing to share. A few students spoke to me about feeling that ‘they weren’t good enough’ or perhaps ‘they didn’t know what to do’. I reminded them to gently lean into the new experience and see what they could discover about themselves as emerging clinicians. I noted that the quieter students were keen to use the chat to share their thoughts; in turn they were supported by the more vocal students. The reflection activity was beginning to demonstrate to students that they were in a safe place to share and support one another.

The students that were more vocal signed up first. They began to curate their own personal reflective moments that were brimming with positive affirmations and considerations towards self-care. Students wrote me a week before their reflection activity stating their vision. One student said, “I want to focus on recognizing the small
triumphs in life, like getting up on time, taking a shower, brushing your teeth, texting a friend back, etc. I think it's important to recognize that we all are enough and doing an amazing job even if it doesn't seem like it to us. I want to highlight that success shouldn't be measured in how much work we did or the quality of our work but in the fact that we started something and/or had the motivation to try.” Warm reflective moments grounded in kindness and generosity was beginning to bloom in the virtual life space.

As the weeks progressed and the semester became busier, there were some students who presented their classmates with poems as reflection points. “The Two-Headed Calf” by Mary Oliver and “Having a Coke with You” by Frank O'Hara were a few of the poems that were submitted as reflection activities. The students who read the poems provided opportunities for their classmates to share their takeaways. These poems naturally wove in the characteristics of a relational child and youth care approach and the purposeful use of daily life events. When I touched base with my students and asked them if they knew that their poems were connecting to the literature, they were surprised. They were naturally beginning to join creative mediums to intervention approaches from a lens of love, strength and being emotionally present in CYC practice.

As we slowly started to wrap up the semester one of my students wrote a piece which connected to the different roles we embody as educators and scholars. Maier suggests when educators participate in the role of facilitator and then co-learner within a classroom, they are encouraged to be transparent with their students that they are shifting roles. The transparency that educator offers can provide rich learning opportunities for their students and themselves (Maier, 1980). As I listened to my students present their reflective activity, I inhaled what kindness and generosity meant to them, which supported my own scholarly journey as an educator.

“Life itself is not what's difficult. There are hard moments in life for sure. But when those moments seem to be piling up, don't blame life and don't blame yourself. Think that it's the circumstances or situation you're in that is responsible for your troubles. Don't stop there though; try to find ways to overcome the circumstance or situation so that you can be reminded that
life is not difficult. It is beautiful, it's wonderful, colourful, and there are so many special memories and discoveries for us all to make. Have the courage to face hard times so that once they are over, the good things in life can appear once more.”

As we continue to work alongside our wonderfully articulate, kind and generous emerging Child and Youth Care Practitioners, I encourage you to celebrate those co-learning moments. The pandemic may continue to roar outside our doors, but inside our homes and virtual life spaces we continue to nurture our students’ clinical practice with those beautiful ingredients that make our profession unique.

References


My Greenest Day

Libby Shaw

When I first entered the field, there was a word that followed me around. A word that I resented but I could not deny it all at the same time. The word was “green”. I was “green”- meaning, I was a “newbie”. I had not developed the hands-on skills yet. I was lucky enough to be hired on as a Child and Youth Worker by my third and final placement in a children’s mental health facility. The clients were aged 6-12
and although I had been there during the 3 months of my semester, there were a few clients that I purposely avoided. I found the kids with more severe diagnosis intimidating. This was a challenging predicament.

You see, I wanted so badly to be a REAL CYC- and possess the skill and knowledge that came with it! I watched the seasoned staff I worked with, and I craved their experience and skill. The program manager agreed to hire me as a third staff on the floor. This meant that I was the “extra body”. When I protested and tried to advocate for more of a position, I was told “Not yet, you’re still too green.”

So, I worked a few extra body shifts, and wondered when my time would come. I looked at the schedule and saw the premium spots that were designated to the most seasoned and skilled staff. One of these spots was the Tuesday night 2-10 shift. Tuesday was the toughest night because it was chore night, and the staff really needed to be on their game in order to deal with the resistance from the kids, the frustrations that came with chores and provide fast and effective conflict resolutions strategies.

I wondered when my green shine would wear off, and I would be considered “skilled enough” to hold the position of this shift. Would it ever happen?

Ricky Mathews was the highest needs client in the house. He was 12, diagnosed with early onset schizophrenia. He was big for his age, he had wild hair and dark eyes- almost black. He grunted and scurried when staff tried to talk to him. He was prone to unpredictable aggressive outbursts and had needed physical intervention when all other strategies failed to de-escalate him. I was scared of Ricky. I did not know how to talk to him, never mind de-escalate him. I felt green to my very core when I was around Ricky. I continued to avoid him and instead put out the little fires that the other clients set and built strong relationships with them. This tactic seemed to work, and no one picked up on the fact that I was going out of my way to sidestep Ricky. Instead, my team saw me thriving and I was given more and more shifts!

One Tuesday, I got a call that we were short staffed, and could I come in to be the second staff on the floor. My stomach flipped with excitement! This was IT! My chance to shine and to show them that I could really do this job. Part of me really believed that I could but looking back I was riddled with fear and insecurity combined with the most
dangerous thing of all: Something to prove. My ego did not serve me well here, and I was out to show the world that I could control the kids, that I could get through Tuesday shift without any issues. I was so desperate to show my capability ... that it clouded my judgement.

About an hour into my shift the kids were zooming around the house busy doing their chores when I heard yelling and swearing coming from the back of the house. I knew who it was...and I knew that I needed to address this as my shift partner was in the basement with 2 other kids. I went back there and tried to engage Ricky in a conversation. He took one look at me, bolted passed me, down the hallway and out of the house. I followed him, “Ricky! Come back here!” He kept walking. He was in the parking lot now and I was following him, calling after him. The more he walked away, the more fear rose up inside me. I resorted to threatening to take all privileges away if he did not turn around and come back! I gave him a countdown- all the while chasing after him down the road. Suddenly I saw him stop, turn around and start walking back to the house. His fists clenched beside him, and his face was full of anger...but he had done what I asked. I breathed a sigh of relief and I too turned around and started walking towards the house, Ricky was behind me.

At this moment, I was thinking that I had successfully prevented Ricky from running away and mentally patting myself on the back. We were in the parking lot when I head footsteps pounding behind me and heavy breathing. Before I could clue into what was happening, I felt blows to my head and face. I realized that Ricky was attacking me. I had never performed a restraint before. I had never really been hit before. I was trying to protect my face with my arms, and I remember thinking how glad I was that my hair was tied up so that it could not be pulled. I don’t remember if I was yelling for help or if I was silent, but in any case, thankfully my shift partner came running out of the house and pulled Ricky off me. I had never felt so green in my life. Shame stung my face where the blows had been, and lump settled in my throat. The vastness of all that I did not know washed over me, and I felt defeated. I should also mention that this day was my birthday. I tried not to cry.
I went home that night and asked myself- Do I really want to do this job? Can I really do this job? I experienced, for the first but not the last time, the doubt that comes with being a CYC and the weird pull that brings you back to your centre. An almost primal instinct that tells that no matter how much this field beats you up, sometimes literally, there is nothing else you’d rather do. I took a long hard look at my approach that day and recognized my error. I had no business trying to intervene with Ricky because I had no relationship with him at all. I had done everything I could to avoid him over the last 4 months. I had blown it ... and it was time to start fresh.

I walked back into the house in the next day with one goal- I was going to get to know Ricky. Was I scared? Yes! But because the worst had already happened it gave me a weird sense of confidence that had not been there before. I had nothing to lose.

I began by helping him make his lunch for school the next day. I put mustard on his bread for him and helped him find different snacks, all the while chatting and asking questions. I made sure that at the dinner table, I sat beside him- he grunted at first when I tried to talk with him but over time, he formed full sentences. I helped him do his chores, and this became such a routine that he would look for me on Tuesdays so that we could work together. I learned that he really loved the Simpsons and Family guy. He had a great sense of humor and he loved Christmas time. His favourite food was pizza and he loved Goosebumps books. He didn’t like taking his meds in the morning and needed a little extra time to wake up.

I learned that he had hallucinations that would really scare him. I noticed that his eyes were not so frightening anymore and I saw specks of golden brown and green when he smiled. He had a cluster of freckles scattered across the bridge of his nose. His favourite board game was Sorry.

Ricky got upset with me a few other times after that day, but I was so much better prepared to handle it, and he never hurt me like that again. I knew him now; we had a relationship and that was the intervention.

A year later, his CAS worker asked him who he could talk to in the house about his feelings, and Ricky said, “I can talk to Libby”. Within a year we had gone from one of the worst possible interactions, to a place of meaningful relational work. I no longer felt
green, I felt for the first time like a real CYC. The funny thing is, after that incident with Ricky, I stopped worrying about people thinking if I was green or not. I accepted that I was, and that I had a lot to learn. And that was OK. I realized that my team was not offending me by putting me in as an extra body, they were doing it to support me. After that day, I willingly stepped into the “extra body” spot once again and slowly made my way up the ladder to a full-time permanent position, which I held for 4 years before deciding to leave to complete my degree and later my Masters in CYC. The training that I received at this facility has stayed with me.

I tell this story to my CYC students now. I tell them to find that kid that makes them feel a little uneasy and build a relationship with them. Your job is to connect with all children in their life space. If there is a child that intimidates you, chances are you just need to work that much harder at finding a common ground. That is your role as the CYC—it is not the child’s role to make you feel safe. I will never forget Ricky and the impact he had on me and my career. Ever since, I have used this relational approach to connect with clients in a multitude of settings. The most challenging being working as a CYC supply staff for 5 years in the Toronto School Board. Each day, I would meet a new child that I would need to work with, keep safe, and ensure that they receive the best possible CYC magic I can give. I learned how to form a relationship pretty fast, and I knew that the success of everyone’s day depended on my ability to connect.

Another lesson here is that sometimes you’re going to blow it. But when you do, you need to own it, get up and get back at it. I am so happy that I did.
Life Story work

Ian Milligan

It was autumn 1983. I had recently started as a residential worker in a local authority children’s home, quite large, 23 beds, but common for the time. 23, a funny number – it had to do with the salary bands for the ‘officer-in-charge’. There were three units in it; two for eight children and one for seven, named after Scottish rivers. I was in Clyde, a reception unit where children usually went when first admitted while we assessed their needs and thought about which of the other two units – Tweed and Leven, they were best suited for.

I had started work in the home three days after the interview – it was a time before ‘criminal records background checks’ or ‘police checks’ as they came to be known. I was put in Clyde and it was pretty quiet at the time with only two children. One was Caroline*. Caroline was 13 and I was her keyworker, learning the ropes. As I recall it was not long after I started that Caroline and I were sitting together watching football on the TV. Caroline was a Celtic supporter. I can’t remember who they were playing, maybe it was a European game because there was a Polish player somewhere on the pitch.

Caroline suddenly said, “I used to have a name like that”. What! My ears immediately picked up on this. How could Caroline Smith have been called something Polish? It wasn’t in her records. I didn’t react in a big way but I did respond to her comment, “how is that Caroline?” Now I don’t remember the conversation exactly, but she said she used to be called something like Wieznevksy* and she didn’t know why. I didn’t push. I did report it to my shift colleague and thence to the shift leader and the officer-in-charge – a really nice, smart guy called Dave. Nobody had heard about this.

Most of the other staff thought this was an interesting curiosity but left it there. There was a bit of gossipy chat: “that’s interesting … do you think that’s true … I never heard about it … she’s maybe confused … oh well she’s Caroline Smith now, … her mum says
her name is Smith” and with just a hint of xenophobia, “Polish, hmm”. I thought I’d like to find out more. It seemed like Caroline wanted something too – she had told me this information. I checked with her and she said it had been a few years ago when she was younger – she was a bit hazy about her family and her mum was the only person we had heard mentioned in terms of a parent. She seemed quite happy as the word spread about the home – of course many children had had different surnames in their young lives, but this was unusual. I asked her if she’d like me to look into it, talk to her social worker, maybe look in her files. She said she was okay with that. It seemed important to her, so to me. Dave said it was okay for me to follow it up and talk to the social worker.

The social worker didn’t know anything about it – he hadn’t been Caroline’s social worker for very long. In fact, he really didn’t seem that interested, though had said “Oh, that’s interesting”. So, I asked if I could look at her files. He said “Well, I suppose so, I’ll need to ask.” I phoned him back and he said, “Oh yes, I looked for them, there’s quite a lot, do you still want to look at them?” I said yes please. His colleagues showed me to his desk and next to it were some piles of paper. I looked – yes these were hers – three huge untidy piles of records.

The historian in me (that had been my degree) was not too daunted by this. I knew it might take a while but there was plenty to look through. Sure enough Caroline had been in care on or off a few times. I did find an earlier ‘admission to care’ form, and there was her Polish name. Her mother was using it and the father was mentioned. I wrote down what I could make sense of – some dates of when she had been in care, and just where this name came from and when she was called it. I reported this back to her. She seemed pleased to know. She didn’t change her name although would mention it from time to time. We did add a mention of it into the files we kept in the home. Of course, our files were not the social work files which would follow her where she went in future, but we acknowledged that she had been Caroline Wieznevski, and now she was Caroline Smith.

Caroline didn’t stay with us very long, but I learned something from that interaction. About the value of asking questions that others didn’t think were that important, and a willingness to dig into files held by others. I guess I would say that I was being ‘research-minded’ – even though the files were held by a more ‘powerful/higher status’ social work
professional. Caroline had a right to know what was in her files, and as her keyworker I had a right to look on her behalf.

Years later I did a more structured piece of ‘life story work’ with David*. This was something I was required to do as part of my professional training. David was around 13 years old too, and of course I had to get his (and his social workers) permission to do this piece of work, as it was driven by my training. It had to be something which was relevant and helpful to one of the children in my home. David was a quiet youngster, but he had difficult relations with various family members who he would visit occasionally. There was a mum and a dad and an aunt, all of whom he had lived with in the past. He had been placed in care on a few separate occasions, starting out very young. It was difficult to work out who was who and why he had not been able to live with any of the adults in his family. I decided that I should attempt to do a timeline of David’s moves into and out of care, and who he had lived with. This seemed to be something he was interested in and he agreed to sit with me for a few sessions while I constructed the timeline of his life and shared it with him as we went.

There were several memorable things that came out of this for David – and me. One concerned his father. David had always said that he had lived most of his life with his mother, but she had ‘put him into’ care. He had warm memories of his father, and in his telling, his Dad wanted him but hadn’t been allowed to have him. My investigation into his files showed clearly that though David remembered one admission to care, there had been returns home which had not lasted long. The social work records and other pieces of correspondence in his files revealed that he had in fact had three separate admissions into care around the age of 4-5 years old. The last one was from his father’s care. This was a substantial amount of new information for David, and some of it he found difficult. His view of his father changed into a more negative image. In summary, I spent time working on all this with David trying to offer reassurance and encouraging him to think as well of both his Mum and Dad as he could.

Many years later when I had moved into social work education and training, a different boss said to me ‘I like your intellectual curiosity’. No one had ever said that to me before, but I took it as a compliment and was grateful to her for the feedback. I had
known from early school days that asking questions could annoy people, including my teachers! I had sometimes annoyed my fellow students when doing my professional training, especially on one occasion when I put my hand up again – at 4.00pm on a Friday afternoon. Still my boss liked it and I liked her good opinion. I was a guy who asked a lot of questions, and often they were ‘why’ questions. I wanted to know why things were the way they were.

This is a story about being curious and being willing to dig deeper than is usually required. It is a story about ‘Life story work’ with children. Life story work is the name given to a specific and often time-consuming piece of one-to-one work done by social workers. The idea is to create a scrapbook containing short pieces of text and photographs of people and places covering the various moves in a child’s life - to keep a record of the people who were important to them. It was intended to provide a valuable keepsake for the child, to help them remember where they had lived and who they had lived with. Sometimes a child was encouraged to write down their own memories of favourite people, places and things. If the child was not able or confident enough, then the social worker might do the writing for the child. Many social work agencies have taken on life story work and developed it. “Googling” the term produces many hits. From the UK, the NSPCC Learning pages give useful guidance (www.learning.nspcc.org.uk)

With Caroline it was only a little bit of ‘life story work’, helping to create a bit of a timeline or filling in a specific gap. With David the story was perhaps more ambivalent – it did bring him new information and allowed him to have a more accurate view of his past. But it disrupted his memories of very important people in his life.

I think it is valuable for children, but it does need to be done carefully by someone the child has a good relationship with. Whatever form it takes, helping children record some of the things that happened in their complicated histories is valuable – dates, who they lived with, when they moved to where, and maybe even some of the reasons.

What do I think the learning is here? The value of curiosity, of listening carefully to our children’s stories and following-up. It seems to me there is a place for professional curiosity about our children’s lives so that we can understand them better and they can understand themselves better. This requires care and persistence.
Children move, families change, we move children ... we’ve got to do better than this at a system level but let’s also be curious and persistent. Let’s all do life story work.

This is not just about Caroline and David’s stories. This has been my story too. Our life stories are intertwined. It is not wrong to tell and to share them. For the children’s sake and for my sake too.

* The children’s names have been changed to afford them privacy and protect confidences.

Dropping In

Kathleen S.G. Skott-Myhre

Going to work at the drop-in center in the middle of the winter in Minnesota was always a challenge. It wasn’t because of the young people who would drop in off the streets, but because the facilities were so bad. The heat really didn’t do the job of keeping us warm, so when the temperatures got into the low single digits Fahrenheit or below zero, we dressed as though we were working outside. We wore heavy jackets, scarves, and winter boots.

In the early days, the center was, to be frank, a dump. It was an unoccupied storefront that was very small and crowded. It was cold in the winter, but it was also hot in the summer due to poor air-conditioning. We did what we could to offer food with several crockpots to heat the limited canned food we had on hand, as well as providing cocoa and instant coffee. We used a small room to store clothes, sleeping bags, and other assorted items that we could give the young people in need of basic necessities.
There was another small room in the back set up for the nurse who came in once a week to do triage. We had a pest problem with mice and cockroaches. But the center was in a central location easily accessible by bus from all over the city, and it was full of all kinds of young people as soon as it opened until we closed in the evening.

We hated the physical plant, but we loved the work, and we loved the youth that used the center. Our supervisor, Joel, was one of the old school “real” youth workers who tirelessly advocated for both the young people and us as case managers. He had a depth of experience that was rich and complex, and he was always available for consultation day or night. It was a gift to work for someone whose interest was genuinely humane, and I learned so much from him in the time I was there. My colleagues were also cut from the same cloth. While they didn’t have Joel’s experience, they shared his love of the work and dedication to grassroots practice centered directly in the community. For us, that community was right outside the door on the streets, in the squats, the schools, strip clubs, jails, coffee shops, and the other spaces where the young people we served eked out a life every day. That community of at-risk and homeless punks, skinheads, gutter punks, crusties, gangsters, sex workers, runaways, travelers, and those disaffected and alienated from their families and the adult world flowed through our doors to hang out with us, and we went out to them in their world as well. During the time I worked there, I got to know the living spaces carved out of the cityscape of abandoned buildings, alleyways, freeway underpasses, youth-friendly businesses, and other spaces where young people spent their time. It was a unique geography, and I learned a map of the city that most people don’t know exists.

One of my first encounters was with a 16-year-old woman who had been on run from her home for several months. She had traveled out to California and back, living by whatever means necessary. As I worked through the questions on the intake form, trying to learn a bit about her and how we might be helpful, she told me she wanted to get in touch with her mother. She wouldn’t say why except that she wanted to let her know she was OK. I offered to call her mother (who lived in the cities), and she accepted. I called her mother, identified myself, my job, and informed her that I had met with her daughter, and she wanted to let her know she was alright. After revealing the reason for finding out
why I had called, I heard a sharp intake of breath followed by a loud sob. When she had regained her composure, she told me how relieved and happy she was that her daughter was safe. She wanted to come down to the drop-in center right then, but I advised that that might be a bit quick. Instead, we arranged a meeting between mother and daughter to take place in a few days. When they met, it was a tearful reunion, and they seemed to get along quite well. The daughter chose not to return home with her mother, so I worked with her to obtain employment and temporary housing. I continued to meet with them for several months. The daughter never did move back home but built a life with stable housing and employment. I helped to enroll her at an alternative arts high school, where she did very well. She and her mother stayed in touch and, over time, developed a warm and functioning relationship. Sometimes it worked out like that.

Other times it looked as though things were headed in the right direction only to have them go horribly wrong. I was working in the center one day when a woman came in with her teenage granddaughter. She explained that her granddaughter (I'll call her Amy) had been living with her for the past several years as her own daughter felt incapable of taking care of her child. Everything had been going reasonably well, but Amy had begun hanging out with “the wrong crowd.” An aunt in Chicago offered to take Amy in to relieve the grandmother of some stress, but they did not have any way to get her there. Amy was sweet and easy to work with, but I could see the tension between her and her grandmother. Like many young people who have experienced violence and neglect, she showed little or no emotion when describing her life as truly traumatizing before moving in with her grandmother. Amy was very much in favor of moving to her aunt’s because she thought Chicago would offer more opportunities and there would be more time to get to know her family. She would miss her grandmother, but they both agreed the move would be a good idea.

So, as a good case manager, I got her an ID, a bus ticket, some petty cash for expenses, and set the date. I took her to the bus station myself and watched her get on the bus. She smiled and waved to me as the bus pulled away.

A couple of weeks later, her grandmother showed up at the drop-in. She was carrying a picture of her granddaughter. I was pleased to see her and couldn’t wait to hear how
her granddaughter was settling into Chicago. Instead, with tears in her eyes, the grandmother told me that Amy had, again, fallen in with the wrong crowd shortly after arriving and had been stabbed to death in a random act of violence. I was devastated, and I have carried grief and unreasonable regret about buying that bus ticket to this day. If only I hadn’t been so helpful. I realize this was not my fault. But some things we experience in this work don’t go away. They are ghosts that haunt us, and every so often, I can see her smiling and waving as the bus pulls away.

But the work was full of amazingly positive memories as well. A short time after I started working in the center, a local paper did a small piece on the program. As it happened, a board member from a large corporation – literally across the street – saw the article and decided that they should contribute to the work we were doing. In fact, they decided to use all their annual charitable funds to get us a new space. They located a beautiful ample space in the basement of an artist’s Cooperative that was still in the downtown area close to the bus line and asked Joel to help design it. He met with the staff at the center, and we all decided that this was an excellent opportunity for our young people to get involved in owning the space where they spent their time. As we often did when making decisions that directly impacted our youth, we called a community meeting, and the young people elected representatives to be involved in the designing process. The corporation set an initial planning meeting, and we walked across the street with a few staff and the representative young people.

We got quite a few stares from the security people at the front desk and from the businesspeople who rode the elevator up. When we entered the board room, the board members and architects were seated around a long table with seats open for us to join them. The board president came forward and shook Joel’s hand, and motioned towards the chairs. Joel and those of us on staff stood back against the wall and gestured to the young people to take the seats. They did with some hesitancy, and there they sat, punks, skins, gangsters and alt kids in all their regalia. The board was taken aback and not sure how to react, and so they started by talking over the young people’s heads to us at the back. But we redirected each question back to the young people at the table, and they answered cogently, thoughtfully, and with the insight that only insiders can have about
the kind of space they needed. Gradually the board warmed up, and a lively, very productive conversation ensued. Over months, the young people and the “suits” forged a working alliance that designed a great space with everything we could have hoped for as youth workers.

When we moved into the beautiful and architecturally progressive space, it was breathtaking. Over the years we were there, the young people took full ownership. They oriented new young people to the new space, made sure it was well cared for and took pride in it as something they had done. They worked with us to set the rules and procedures.

They had learned a lot from negotiating with the corporate board and had become marvelous ambassadors to the adult world. The youth demonstrated their newfound skills when we met with the artists who lived in the building to get their buy-in for the new space. The artists who lived and worked in the building were nervous about having a youth drop-in center in their basement. It was the usual concerns about noise, traffic, rowdy behavior, criminal activity, and all the other things that tend to be associated with our young people. The Co-op held a meeting and invited us to come to present the program. As we did with the corporate board, we had the youth present to answer questions. By the time they were done, one man stood up and said, “It is time we put our actions where our rhetoric has been. We need to invite these young people into our space with open arms.” He carried the day and relations between the other residents and our young people were excellent, until . . .

There was an art studio next door to us that shared our entryway. One day, a woman was taking lessons there, and when she set up for class, she set her purse next to the open door. Unfortunately, the purse disappeared. Since our side of the entryway led down to our program, it was assumed one of our young people had stolen it. The veteran members of our program were horrified that one of the young people served by the program would disrespect the space in this way. They launched their own investigation and reported back that it was a young woman new to the program who hadn’t even been oriented yet. We called a community meeting and asked the young people what we should do. After a lengthy discussion that included some rather severe disciplinary
suggestions from the youth, the group decided that the young woman should meet with the student from the art studio and return her purse and make restitution for any money or items that were missing. The group contacted the young woman who had stolen the purse, and she agreed to the plan.

The two women met with a staff member in attendance, and the purse was returned. During the exchange, the young woman who had taken the purse explained that she had never been in a program where the adults treated the young people with respect. She was used to being poorly treated by adults and always taken anything she could when she could. She apologized and said she could see things were different here. The older woman responded by saying she wanted to be accountable for the theft as well. She said that she should never have left her purse as an open temptation to young people who had so little. She said that she recognized she had so much more and that she had been thoughtless and insensitive. She said she wanted to be helpful in any way she could to the young woman who had stolen her purse and offered to mentor her if she was interested. As it turned out, the young woman had an interest in art, and they began to take art classes together in the very same place where the theft had occurred.

Working in a program that operated with a steadfast commitment to equity and respect was an amazing experience that has profoundly influenced my work ever since. Over time, the drop-in center evolved into a more clinical orientation, and I found it was no longer a good fit for the kind of work I found so compelling. Over the years, I have thought a great deal about my colleagues and the young people I encountered there. The beauty of CYC work is in the way that it transforms you and the drop-in center did precisely that for me, and for that, I will be forever grateful.
Where to Now?

Penny Parry

“Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?” asked Alice.
"That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,” said the Cat.

Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland, 1865

When I finished high school, the big question was: what am I going to do with my life? Go into sales said my dad – who was a salesman. Be a librarian – it’s a good profession for a woman, said my uncle who came from poverty to being a lawyer. Be an executive secretary, said my mother who had insisted I take typing one summer just in case. And me? I wanted to go to art school. I had applied and been accepted. But then, I got a scholarship to the local university. So off I went thinking ‘It’s not going to cost me anything so I may as well give it a try.’ Many years and a Ph.D later, I finally found home in Child and Youth Care. Finally, a path based in values that seemed just right to me, such as, to respect for the power of everyday life experiences – how they mould our habits, shape how we see things and how, using these experiences, I could work alongside others to help make changes they want to make; to believe that the person experiencing a problem knows the problem in a way I never will; to continually learn about and use myself; to think ‘solution’ and never think ‘that’s not possible’. Here is a true story that happened many years ago. I have never forgotten this experience.

“How would you physically restrain me?” asked Angie. This took me by surprise as it seemed to come out of nowhere. We were just sitting watching TV. What’s more, this was the first time I’d met Angie.

“I don’t know” I said. “I don’t think I could”.

Relational Child & Youth Care Practice
“But then how would you do your job? How would you make me feel safe?” she said.

I was getting ready to see if anyone else was around – just in case this was her way of letting me know she was about to lose it. No one around, so …

“Hmm” I replied, “how would I physically restrain you?”

I furrowed my brow – thoughts flashing before me – omg, we’re giving these kids the idea that physical restraint is a necessity for all; omg I’d lose at arm wrestling with this young woman – she’s a good foot taller than me and has the weight to go with that … but here we are, and she looks as if she is sincerely interested in the answer.

“Ok” I said, leaning in a little in a conspiratorial way, “I can’t do it alone … but I could physically restrain you if you think you need it – yes, I could do it but … I’d need your help. So, here’s how I think we could do it: First, I’d grab that chair over there and set it down near you. Then I’d climb up on the chair. I need the chair because not being a cat I can’t spring upwards and you are a bit taller than me. Now your part – cause remember I can’t do this alone and I do want you to feel safe but it won’t work without you. So, you would have to move right in front of me and wait until I could pitch myself at you and hopefully the force of throwing myself would knock you over… at which point I would …

Angie started to get this look like ‘Are you for real?” and then she began to laugh and so did I – we both realized that this was the most ridiculous idea! I would never be the person to do physical restraint as a way of creating safety. No way could I pull this off – even with her help. We both looked back at the TV screen. Then, slowly we found ourselves talking about her … what is was like to be in this new situation ….

Yes, this happened just as I’ve described it. At the time I was working as a staff trainer as well as the on-site psych consultant at a residential treatment centre for teenagers, most of whom held the formal diagnostic moniker, favoured at that time – behavior disorder. I hung out and helped out in the units a lot – day and evening – meal times, down times, sad times, happy times. Why my first day on the job, at 7am I was greeted with ‘Ok, everybody, this is Penny. She’s in charge of helping you guys make breakfast!’ I think “hit the decks running” might apply here. And so it went. The benefits to this approach were obvious: staff training would be relevant because I’d have some understanding of the everyday experiences and contexts of the youth and of the youth.
workers; I love teenagers, so I was happy. Oh, and one very concrete benefit for the staff was that the young people were not left on their own when staff needed a bit of time together for a good shift change, or when one young person was in crisis, there I was ready to “mind the fort”.

Now, if I were Alice chatting today with the Cheshire Cat, I might be tempted to tell him this story of Angie and me. I’d reminisce with him about that first time he and I met, and how, over the years, in so many situations, knowing where I wanted to get to helped me know which steps to take next. And how did I know? Ah, I think that comes from having a set of values that you really feel comfortable with and believe in. The steps kind of just follow. What do you think?

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**Play is the Intervention**

*Robin Hoffman*

As a new clinician, I remember putting a lot of emphasis on trying to strategically prepare for each client session by either trying to preplan a structured intervention or by considering what type of therapeutic modality I might use. I did this so I would feel adequately equipped to assist my client's in their therapeutic journeys. This need to organize and my desire to feel "ready" arose partly from the messages I heard in graduate school about the importance of the clinical intervention and partly because of my own need to plan ahead. For me, the anxiety of not feeling prepared was too much to handle. I believed it was my duty to be as prepared as possible with pre-planned interventions to help my clients grow and heal.
As I grew as a practicing clinician, I realized that my need to prepare was preventing me from being mentally present with my clients. I found I was hyper focused on my role as clinician and less on what each client was bringing to the "playroom." I discovered that children needed to be heard and it was in this discovery where I found my passion for working with children. Children want to be heard and thrive in environments when they feel their voice matters. The interventions I thought I needed to plan ahead of time became less important because the children coming to therapy and engaging in play IS the intervention itself. It became less about the type of play that was happening and more about my response to each child. When you listen to a child and observe their behaviors, you begin to see a story unfold. It is through their play where you begin to hear their voice telling you the story about their world and experiences. By slowing down and being present with children through play, you get the opportunity to hear and see a child letting you in to the place they might try to keep hidden, or to that place they might not fully understand themselves.

This shift in thinking changed how I approached each play therapy session and how I generally conceptualized that essence to play therapy. I have worked with many children and families and some interactions illustrate this shift so nicely. A young girl came into my office – known as the "playroom." Through play, this young girl identified for the first time that she felt important and special. This was hard to hear because of the reflections I now played out in my head, but it also allowed me to see a truly recognizable growth moment for this young girl. In this moment of play, this child voiced feeling special because she felt safe enough to share an inner emotional struggle she was facing. I realized that I was providing a space for children to engage in play interventions of their choice where they could express their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors – ultimately demonstrating their true self.

My thoughts and responses in the playroom shifted. I went from trying to over-plan and lead children in play to allowing them to lead. My role became the listener, where I provided responses to my clients through the use of tracking, reflecting and meta-communication – all based on what the children were demonstrating through their play and storytelling. And through this transformation I realized that children can affect adults in a powerful way. Being able to witness a child growing, healing and becoming a stronger
version of themselves pushed me toward continuing my mission to providing a safe space for children to be whom they want, and to engage in the type of play they feel helps to tell their story. If someone had told me at the beginning of my clinical career that I would experience this transformation from engaging in play with children, I would have said no way. However, it happened, and I now realise how powerful play is and how play is the tool and intervention that allows children to open up and to express thoughts in feelings in ways that other's might not understand. Children can spark growth in others, just as adults work hard at creating opportunities for children to grow.

It is easy to get caught up with our day-to-day expectations and it is sometimes hard to recognize when we need to observe, appreciate and listen to the innocence of children that is heard through their play. My journey has helped me to see children who are creative and playful in their own unique and individual way through their play. When children feel heard, valued and connected with others, they open up and share their inner world.

Children have the capacity to communicate deeper thoughts and feelings through play. Play is a child's job, and through play children grow, develop and discover.

The Baby Blue Baby Grand

Martin Stabrey

1976. I was nine years old. My mother had died months earlier. My father, with the burden of her lengthy illness and the emptiness of his life laid bare, had resorted to the bottle. He had time for little else. He did somehow manage to go into work each day, and as I couldn’t be home alone, there was only one option for my care and schooling. Boarding school. I hated boarding school, its regimen, the bullying, and the
authoritarian, punitive adults. I hated it so much that at the end of the school year I made it clear to my father (as clear as any nine-year-old could) that I was not going back. My father, now almost permanently intoxicated, was in no state to discuss the matter, never mind offer alternatives. And so, for the first four months of 1977 I was left to my own devices, doing nothing except roam the streets each day, looking for a friend to play with, or just anyone to say hello to. I remember being very lonely. And hungry. Always hungry.

One early-evening in May, two social workers appeared at our small apartment to confront my father about why he was breaking the law by not having me enrolled in school. He could offer no good reason and within the week I was taken into the care of the state and enrolled as the “new boy” at St. John’s Hostel, a 64-bed children’s home for boys. It would be my home for the next eight years until I finished my schooling in 1985.

For the first eighteen months at St. John’s, I would spend school terms at the hostel and at home for the vacations. My father was trying to stay sober and had arranged to be home with me during the school holidays. I was happy again. My father was sober, and I was spending the days with all my old friends. Each day would be a new adventure – on our bicycles, playing games, throwing stones onto the tin roofs of houses, or just hanging out.

In June 1979 all that changed. Our mid-year three-week school holiday was a week away and I was eager to be heading home for the holidays. Except, my father was seriously back on the bottle and had been fired from his job as a result. Having reneged on his part of the deal he had with social services that he should remain sober; they were left with no alternative. I would be not going home again until my father had sorted himself out (it transpired that it I never saw my biological father again until I was presented with his ashes in 2008). I would have to spend school holidays at the hostel from now. When I was given the news that I wouldn’t be going home, all I could remember thinking was how I would spend three weeks by myself with everybody else gone home. Memories of boarding school came flooding back to haunt me.

As it turned out, I was one of eight boys who remained at the hostel that holiday. We all moved into the same section together (a huge privilege), we were given pocket money
twice a week instead of once, and there were fewer staff around – to keep an eye on us. We were free to do pretty much as we pleased.

It wasn’t a few days into my holiday when I was asked if I would be interested in helping with a project that would keep me occupied for the three weeks. Urghhh, not really, I thought. I had stuff to do. Soccer this afternoon, the latest Star Wars movie tomorrow … “What is it?” I asked. “A baby blue baby grand piano” BG replied. Huh? I’d seen a piano, but what was a baby blue baby grand? “It’s being delivered this afternoon. It’s been donated to the hostel by one of the cruise ships in the harbour” he said. “What do you want me to do?” I asked, suspiciously. “When do you want me to start, because I’m going to watch Star Wars tomorrow morning with Marky and Craig” I said. “Oh, whenever you want to. I’ll probably start tomorrow. I’m going out later to buy paint stripper, scrapers and sandpaper.” At this point I was hoping he would pick up on my hang-dog reluctance and offer me a way out. No such luck.

And so, two mornings later and Star Wars still fresh in my mind, I reported for duty after breakfast while still trying to fathom why I’d agreed to manual labour when I could be doing something else more enjoyable. I dragged my reluctance into the huge Voorkamer of his house and there, in the far corner of the room was the biggest baby blue colour thing I had ever seen. I remember thinking that it was so big that whatever we wanted to do would take a year, not three weeks. “What do you think?” he asked. “It’s big” I shot back. “No, the colour!” he laughed. “It’s okay. Why do you want to take the paint off?” I asked. “That’s just the top colour of about eight layers that they’ve painted on it over the years. And the reason we’re taking it off is that all that paint actually changes the sound it makes”. He sat down at the piano and started playing. I’d never heard him play the piano. My twelve-year-old ears thought it sounded quite good. “Try to remember how this sounds, because when we’ve finished taking all the paint off, I’ll play it again. Then listen if you can hear a difference.” He sounded like he knew what he was talking about. I was not convinced.

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6 Dutch for “Front Room”. Many of the oldest homesteads in South Africa were built by the Dutch settlers and the biggest room in these homes was called the Voorkamer.
Soon we had both slopped our first brush of paint stripper onto a section of baby blue paint – and me, onto my left hand. Why didn’t he tell me it burned like crazy if you got this stuff on your hand?! Lesson learned. I watched in fascination as the blue paint started bubbling and boiling, the stripper taking effect. “Just wait a bit for it to finish its work and then take that scraper and scrape it off” he said. I waited until the bubbling had stopped and then set about scraping off my first piece of paint. It lifted off very easily. But all I saw was light cream paint, and white, and dark blue. Huh? Where was the wood he kept talking about? “What’s going on? I scraped off the paint stripper and now there’s a whole lot of other stuff underneath.” I half shouted. “Yes, all you’ve done is taken off the baby blue layer. There is still lots of other old layers of paint under that. It’s going to take a lot more elbow grease and perseverance, young man” he said. Great! How long was this going to take, I wondered. I was in a rush. Fifteen minutes had passed and all I’d managed was one layer the size of a small saucer. More sloppy stripper ... wait ... scrape. Repeat. After what seemed like half a day I had managed to expose a section of the original, dark wood. What a sense of achievement I felt. I walked around to the other side where he was working. Hmm, he’d finished only a slightly bigger section. I must be doing okay keeping up with an adult, I thought. Suddenly I couldn’t wait to carry on. “Hang on, don’t put too much of that stuff on at once. Much smaller sections at a time.” he said. Again, I was not convinced.

A week passed and holidays at home and hanging with friends and soccer were distant memories. I had more important things going on. I was hanging out with an adult, chatting with an adult, doing “adult” stuff. Not since my parents, had an adult given me such undivided attention – and placed such trust in me with their “adult work”. I remember feeling so incredibly happy and having such fun. But the very best times of each day were 10.30am and 3.30pm when tea and biscuits were delivered from the kitchen. The tea tray hadn’t even been placed on the table and I was ready to pounce on the best biscuits. It didn’t occur to me that I should wait or share. Six biscuits twice a day, and I would gobble at least four each time. He didn’t seem to mind. So I just carried on.

It was halfway through the holiday when I finally finished the side section of my half of the piano, all the lush dark wood now exposed. Stripping the paint from the top turned
out to be much easier than the sides, and in just another three days all signs of what seemed like eight layers of paint were gone. And even though we hadn’t yet started sanding the piano, we still took a moment to admire our labour. “Pretty impressive, eh? You’ve done well” he said. I felt such a sense of achievement. I was bursting with pride. I wanted to show it off to everyone!

In a flash the holidays were over. We had somehow managed to sandpaper the entire piano. It felt like silk to touch. We didn’t get to varnish it, but that didn’t matter because he said he was going to ask someone “who knew about varnishing pianos” to do that part of the job. A couple of weeks later, with the varnishing done he asked me to come and see what it looked like. Wow. I couldn’t believe my eyes. The wood looked so clean and so shiny. I thought it looked brand new. I felt so proud all over again. “Do you remember what it sounded like before?” he asked. “I think so”, I responded unconvincingly. He sat down and played the same piece he’d played six weeks earlier. I couldn’t hear any difference, but he assured me that there was – and that seemed to make him happy. All I know is that I just couldn’t stop looking at the wood and how good it looked. And that I was allowed to do that! Wow!

As the years passed, whenever I walked into that voorkamer I relived those three weeks as one of the happiest and memorable times of my life. Now, over four decades later, those memories have, if anything, become even more vivid as I am reminded of the importance of those short few weeks and how it contributed to the shaping of my childhood and the adult I would become, the possibilities of what I could achieve, and most critically, the decisive role just a single adult can play in shaping the course of a life.

Thanks BG.

Love,

Your handlanger7.

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7 Afrikaans (one of the official languages of South Africa) for helper or handyman. BG always called me that during these three weeks.
It was a Friday at about 5:30pm. The sun painted the sky a faint orange. The crisp fall air brushed my hand as I waved goodbye to a resident and their grandmother who was taking them home for the weekend. I walked back up the stairs to check on Nic as they were packing their bag for a weekend visit with their dad. They were the last kid at the treatment centre. The rest were already picked up or on the bus home for a visit. As for Nic, they were waiting for their dad to pick them up in his old Jeep Cherokee. He was coming in 30 minutes.

Nic was excited to visit their dad’s house this weekend. Their stepmom just had a baby and, even though they didn’t really get along with either parent, they were super excited to spend time with their new little brother.

“He’s someone who doesn’t know anything about me. Nothing will affect how we spend time together. I’m excited to get to know each other”

Nic was showing me the stuffed animal they bought for their new baby brother. It was an elephant and they named him Jason. They saved up the weekly $5.00 allowance the residence gives them for months. Usually, the residents spend this money on pizza or snacks from the convenience store on their walk home from school. But Nic didn’t want to indulge in their cravings for sweets. They wanted to show their little brother that they would always give him everything they had.

The phone rang. It was Nic’s father. I gave Nic some privacy with their dad on the other line and headed to the staff office. Not even two minutes later, Nic stomped out of their room, threw the phone into the staff office and slammed their door shut.

“It’s just not a good weekend for Nic to come over. I’m sorry – we’ll have to reschedule”.

Nic

Jaclyn Ng Man Chuen
Nic’s closed bedroom door muffled blaring music, bangs on the walls, screams of pain. I slowly opened it, only to find them trashing their room, throwing their clothes everywhere, shoving library books off their desk, slamming their pillow against the wall. My head held open the heavy door as I sat on the floor. Making a point not to stare at or look at them with any sort of judgement or fear, because I wasn’t judging and I wasn’t afraid, I sat in silence and listened.

Clothes were thrown, scattered and crumpled all over their room. Bedding was slammed onto the floor, resting in a pile in the in a corner. CDs and books were tossed to the other side of the room; everything was in disarray. Every action was a statement so loud that it screamed “I JUST WANT TO FEEL LOVED”. I listened to their cries that they wished their dad loved them as much as they loved their dad. Each word was a gut-wrenching blow to my stomach. Eventually, they took a deep breath and plopped down beside me.

I put my hand on Nic’s shoulder and we cried together. Time is a funny thing. I can’t say if we were sitting together for five minutes or fifty minutes. But we sat together, in relationship and in rhythmicity, for as long as Nic needed.

They led the charge as we redecorated their room together. Changing the arrangement of the posters that ornamented their walls. Re-organizing their books and CDs by colour, as they painted their desk. Folding their clothes and putting them neatly in their cozy drawers, where the clothes felt comfortable and as though they belonged. Washing their sheets so they could sleep in warm, clean bedding. Tomorrow would be a new day.

As we redecorated together, Nic was able to verbalize how they were feeling. I listened and lightly challenged their thoughts when I felt like Nic would hear them as a thought, not as a judgement. Were they sure it was anger they were feeling?

“No. It’s sadness. Disappointment. Feeling like, yet again, I don’t matter”.

We did whatever Nic wanted for the rest of the night. We cooked hot dogs and hamburgers on the barbecue and laboured a box of Kraft mac and cheese at the stove. We watched one too many Fast and the Furious movies as we stuffed our faces with ketchup chips and pop. We relaxed in sheet masks with cucumbers on our eyelids as we
listened to The Cure. It didn’t make the situation go away. In fact, it was more like a Hello Kitty Band-Aid that we put on their wound together to take away the temporary pain; the hurt was still there, but at least there was something fun covering it. It wasn’t a solution, but Nic went to sleep at the end of the night feeling warm in their freshly washed sheets. It was enough for now.

Today was Nic’s day. And it was the first time I truly understood what it meant for the being, the doing, and the interpreting to seamlessly interact with one another in a way that is meaningful to relational CYC practice. The hanging in and the hanging out; being emotionally present and doing with, not for or to; examining context and it’s about it (Garfat, Freeman, Gharabaghi & Fulcher, 2018). Everything seamlessly working with another to show Nic that they were wrong; that even if it doesn’t feel that way sometimes, they absolutely matter.

Reference

It all started one spring afternoon in 2001. I was commuting home from an Introductory Psychology class at the University of Toronto. I was a single face in the sea of a thousand scattered across Convocation Hall. I imagined the class was filled primarily with students uncertain about their future, thus deciding to take the Bachelor of Arts and Sciences program to help sort it out.

I realized then that I was different, I knew exactly what I wanted to do, although I didn’t have the language to describe it at the time. I wanted to be a life space intervener. I wanted to work with young people, listen to their stories, walk alongside them on their journeys, and support them to thrive. I wanted to find creative ways to help them learn the skills and strategies needed to live critically in their worlds; worlds presenting them with less than ideal circumstances and often rendering them powerless. I wanted to amplify voices, support self-actualization, help them to recognize and leverage their strengths, be a practitioner sensitive to cultural and human diversity and one who worked from a youth-participatory, strength-based, ecological, and relational approach. Most of all, I wanted to offer the gift of a genuinely caring, youth-determined ally. I wanted to be a Child and Youth Care Practitioner. However, when faced with the decision about what to study after high school, I had yet to learn about this field; a discipline so unique that, when well-executed, appears somewhat magical. A discipline that both novice and experienced practitioners alike have difficulty explaining.

I had experienced my own set of challenges as a teenager; struggles that would later reveal themselves to be some of my greatest tools and have positively influenced my use of Self in practice. Some would conclude that these events were the driving force behind
my desire for the work, my recognized ability to empathize, or my seemingly effortless approach to authentically engage in meaningful relationships with young people; relationships that act as the catalyst for positive change and reciprocal growth. However, my passion for the field started before my teenage years. I have memories of responding to the common question: “What do you want to be when you grow up?” with “I want to help kids.” The adult would usually say “You would make a great teacher or child psychologist” and never did anyone say: “You would make a great Child and Youth Care Practitioner.” And so there I was, in introductory-level courses, with the intent of learning about the broad field of psychology.

I was proud of my acceptance into university, a milestone I struggled to achieve. I was acutely aware of my privilege and cognizant that some predicted I wouldn’t succeed, but as I left class that day, I felt unsettled, under-stimulated, and discontent. This was not uncommon in those days. I was a bit of a lost soul. I was not doing very well in my classes, struggling to find my purpose and nursing my first broken heart.

After speaking to a dear friend about this, she forwarded me the overview for the Child and Youth Worker Program at George Brown College. The words seemed to dance hopefully on the page. The program objectives aligned perfectly with my goals and described precisely what I had envisioned for my professional Self. They depicted learning methods that reflected my strengths and identified the career I envisioned doing for the rest of my life. The program was (and continues to be) rooted in strong foundational values, ethics, and principles such as children’s rights, anti-oppression, holistic care, youth engagement, and restorative practices. But most importantly, it was a discipline rooted in relationships. It made my soul sing. I felt as if my stars were aligning, as if I had met my soulmate. Why was this the first time I was being introduced to a field so in tune with my desires? My narrative immediately shifted: I was going to be a Child and Youth Care Practitioner when I grew up.

And so I began at George Brown College in Fall 2001. I felt like a small child: curious, eager, and ready to explore. I remember the instructor saying “If you’re here for the money, leave now.” and “The burnout rate for this type of work is five years unless you make it a way of being in the world.” I wasn’t bothered by these limitations, instead I
became infatuated. I knew right away I was a lifer and so I committed. My marks skyrocketed, my strengths were recognized, my learning style honoured, and my self-esteem was restored. It felt as though things had finally fallen into place. For the first time in years, I felt I was exactly where I was meant to be. I fell deeper and deeper in love as I learned about the theoretical underpinnings and practice methods, as I learned how to be critical and innovative, about the importance of relational safety, how to navigate systemic barriers, and reflect on how my own values and beliefs would enhance or hinder my interactions. I learned the power of genuine care as well as the importance of mitigating inherent power imbalances. The program ignited a passion that, to this day, remains untamable. Child and Youth Care was (and continues to be) my love language. My way of being in the world. My inner peace.

On my first day of paid employment, I was directed to strap my keys to my belt, a symbol of authority, power, and freedom. The keys were coupled with a sensor to press in case my safety was threatened (oh the irony). Who did I think I was? Was I even qualified to provide effective support to the province’s most vulnerable youth? My orientation consisted of crisis prevention and intervention, first aid training, and a seasoned staff saying “sink or swim, kid.” Full of optimism, I found myself face to face with an angry young soul filled with rage from all the injustices she had faced, completely untrusting of adults and challenging my mere existence in her world. My legs began to shake. I scrambled to remember my learnings, to no avail. I recognize now that I had learned very little about best practices to support adolescent mental health and had only a vague understanding of the roots of violence. Did this language even exist at the time?

I became acutely aware that it was now my professional responsibility to put theory into practice and that relying on my inherent power and control to respond would only make the situation worse. This approach was oppressive by nature and she had already experienced oppression in the worst possible ways. She was expecting that of me. I remembered the power of kindness, genuine curiosity, and authenticity. I said to myself “just be real” and that’s exactly what I did. With consistency, patience and intentionality, we became quite connected. To this day, she crosses my mind. I wonder whether I cross her mind as well. I would like to think I do. I also wonder why my orientation focused more
on presenting as an authority figure versus the importance of building meaningful and authentic relationships with young people. I now know that there is just such a deep incongruence between the two.

I have since moved through the various sectors, carrying the unique stories of each young person into my interactions with others. I have learned about emerging practice modalities such as behaviour management models, with the sole goal of compliance, to trauma-informed approaches, which honour the young person’s lived experiences. I have worked in programs heavily reliant on point systems to influence behaviour and in environments where young people were able to explore choices and have access to genuinely caring relationships that continued to influence them even when the individuals were no longer physically present. I have seen an encouraging smile be the most effective therapeutic intervention, and the potential damage caused by relying solely on evidence-based interventions, and vice versa.

About half-way into my career, individualized care and youth voice became core pillars of my practice. As I evolved as a practitioner, I shifted my focus from safety and security through enforcement of program rules to actively listening and responding to the unique needs of young people. I committed not to issue consequences when young people were having difficulty but to instead learn about the reasons behind the difficulty. Instead of engaging in punitive approaches I offered support through co-regulation until they were able to access the coping and calming strategies on their own. It was with this shift that the relationships became more meaningful and the interactions more effective. The youth began to trust that I genuinely cared and, in turn, their internal locus of control began to develop, an outcome far more beneficial and long-lasting than an early bedtime or time-out.

I have seen the intense pain associated with traumatic histories and have experienced my own field-related traumas including terrifying riots and physical assaults. I have experienced the burnout that stems from working tirelessly to reduce systemic barriers, safeguarding against toxic staff, and navigating the impacts of institutional oppression. I have tasted the vicarious trauma associated with genuinely caring for and about young people and I have grieved young lives lost to suicide, homicide, and drug
overdose. I have learned the hard way that self-care, boundaries, and continued professional development are the best protective factors. There hasn’t been much opportunity throughout my career to label these events as heartbreaking, as access to supervision has been limited. Nonetheless, they were. I suppose all experiences of love also come with heartache and pain; my love for both the field and those I work alongside has been no exception.

Most importantly, I have celebrated many successes. I have had the pleasure of watching young people overcome adversities and shared in intense moments of laughter. I have observed shifts in worldviews and have learned something new from each individual. I have both offered and been offered a shoulder to cry on by those labeled “empty vessels” or “unempathetic” and have had the privilege of experiencing the power of a meaningful relationship to aid in personal growth and efficacy. I have worked with dynamic practitioners and together, with the young people at the centre, navigated some of the most difficult situations a human can encounter by co-creating brave and caring environments where young people are able to be themselves – caring, talented, wise beyond their years, and resilient young spirits. I hope I have taught some young people a few lessons along the way and I know for certain they have taught me so many more.

The interactions with young people were rejuvenating. They gave me the inspiration and the breath to continue on this journey. In moments of deep reflection, usually during the rising or setting of the sun, I feel guilty for some of the choices I have made in my practice, feeling that young people may have deserved better in certain moments. I think about how differently I would practice, having learned what I know now. However, I have come to realize that it is the hands-on learning, the making of mistakes, and having the time and space to reflect on these experiences that have been the most valuable aspects of my development as a practitioner. Without these, I would still be the practitioner I was when I first started: unable to hold space for reflection on the work, unable to offer insights and suggestions, unable to relinquish control, and unable to have young people at the centre. I have come to realize that the learning never really ends, if we are doing it right. Effective practitioners draw from their experiences and knowledge, but always aim to provide individualized care. Therefore, we can never truly be experts in this field. Each
young person will require something different from us, will challenge us to grow and adapt our approaches to meet their unique needs. After all, Child and Youth Care is an art, not a science.

I currently have the privilege of occupying one of the rare leadership roles available to Child and Youth Care practitioners in Ontario. My love for the field has now extended past the front line to leadership and I spend most of my days building capacity and supporting practitioners as they support young people, families, and communities. I have learned that being a **competent** leader in this field requires one to have an excellent grasp of the foundational core competencies, theoretical underpinnings, practice modalities, evidence-based practices and emerging trends, but that being an **effective** leader in this field requires one to be caring, authentic, relational and responsive; it requires the same approaches utilized with young people. I love my job and the passion remains fierce; however, there are days I yearn for the front-line work.

Our field is striving to professionalize. We are being asked to qualify our work. We continue to challenge ourselves to quantify relational practice in efforts to gain professional recognition and demonstrate outcomes. Despite these ongoing challenges, I continue to remain passionate, committed, and energetic about the field, for I have witnessed, first hand, the power of effective Child and Youth Care practice. It is these experiences that keep the love alive, and in fact, may also keep young people alive. The field is expanding. Opportunities present themselves in research, policy development, consulting, and private practice. I hope that with these evolutions young people will be encouraged to explore Child and Youth Care as a viable and respectable career option, allowing more and more people to find their love language.

With that being said, I will leave you with a few questions to consider and explore during supervision or while the sun is rising and setting. I offer these to you in hopes that they will support your evolution as a practitioner and enhance your practices with young people. I offer them to you, as I wish somebody had offered them to me.

- It is so important to stay in love with the work. If you have ever been in a loving relationship, you know it takes commitment and dedication. Do you feel as
excited about Child and Youth Care as you did when you first entered the field? If not, what can you do to reignite the passion? Young people deserve to have the most passionate people working alongside them.

- Meaningful and authentic relationships are reciprocal in nature. How have you grown as a result of the relationships you develop with young people? If you haven’t, would you consider positioning yourself as the learner more often? It will make a huge difference to the way young people experience your support.
- Has your practice evolved over time? Do you see shifts that have resulted in more meaningful connections? If you are still relying on the rules and regulations of a program to dictate how you support, can you critically assess whether these rules are in the best interest of young people? Can you safely flex a bit to better meet their needs and observe the outcomes?
- How have your life experiences influenced your views of Child and Youth Care, in particular have they influenced your use of Self in practice?
- Having protected time to talk about the challenges and impacts of the work is invaluable. Do you access supervision on a regular basis? If not, consider who may be a safe person to connect with. It will be the best gift you can give yourself and the young people you work alongside.

As for me, I often wonder what will come next. What will my next adventure entail? In the moments when I begin to feel unsettled, unstimulated, and discontent again, I simply daydream about the possibilities and quickly regain my inner peace, knowing that if I continue to make Child and Youth Care the heartbeat of my work, all will be okay. But, as with any healthy relationship, I have promised myself that if I lose the passion or fall out of love, I will do what’s best for everybody involved and simply walk away knowing I gave it my entire heart and soul.
Home

Nancy Brydon

I took a snowshoe today and thought about you, all of you who I have had the pleasure of meeting over the years in my role as a youth care worker. Initially though, I began thinking about me. I choose this day to venture out into nature, to reconnect to the importance of being. Too long my life seemed rushed and unfocused. Too long I had been clouded with worry and anxious about where my path was heading. I felt judgement encroaching from all sides and internally rupturing my soul. There was a need to refocus, to find my path, truth and strength once again. I felt I was battling to rediscover my rhythm. I was struggling to crawl out from the under the burden of stress I had been carrying for too long. As a result, my cadence was condensed and choppy, complimenting the amount of air entering and exiting my lungs. One foot would sink down through the pristine drifts then another unpredictably, would abruptly end on top of solid crust. As I ventured out further on the path, I began to consciously draw attention to my breath, inhaling clarity and purity, exhaling confusion and angst. I was enamoured by the clear, glorious day that was blessed by sunshine, and fresh air. I let go of the nagging repetitive thoughts my mind was succumbing to. I tuned into my senses and opened up my heart. This is when I encountered my longing for home, my safe place. Home, I realized would be where I would rediscover my spirit and uncover my sense of belonging and purpose in life.

It was now that my attention turned to you as I sidestepped away from my ego and allowed loving kindness to take its place. I channelled the immense magnitude of the universe calling on it for guidance and support reigniting my sense of purpose, my spirit. You had just arrived not a week before. Your story was not far from any other that came before you. This time, I found myself to be saddened by your telling of it. The verbal cry you issued was shrouded in anger and jealousy. Your belief that you were not good enough, that you felt alienated by those that you entrusted with your love, pierced my
soul. I transposed my steps into yours, reflecting on your recent and past journey. The trail you find yourself on mimics mine given that you are trudging through an unforgiving terrain. Yet, I am trying to find my way back to my spirit and you are left alone in your quest to discover your own. The steps you take are sinking through the snow, not allowing you any headway. You continue – blind and alone.

I flirted with the juxtaposition of my life and yours. My breath inhales confidence and exhales assuredness. Your breath echoed short and shallow and scared. My heart is held firmly and close by loved ones and leads me home. You travel your journey, seemingly similar, in snow just as deep and crust just as hard but with a broken spirit looking only towards a dark and an unknown destination.

There was one time I got lost in the woods on a day just like this. Oh, the horror! I recall my heart pounding out of my chest, my mind and thoughts racing. My autonomic nervous system went into overdrive I began to perspire, and my body began to shake all over. I predicted a premature death was lurking for sure. I was so very scared and so very alone. Reflecting now, revisiting now, I relate how you must be feeling. I imagine your heart beating loudly, your thoughts running full speed as you get turned around not recognizing the environment that has replaced your identification of home. All that is familiar up until now is threatening to become fleeting memories. You want so badly to grab hold of something, anything before it disappears in the failing light. In the end you find yourself standing still, exhausted, with no assurances of ever finding your way back to what you once knew. Your primitive brain is in overdrive. You can’t flee so you must fight. But who do you fight against? Are you left to do this alone? There is no one here that you can rally your defenses with.

I refocus my attention back to the snowy track and make my way forward one step at a time. It proves to be arduous task. I must draw from the intrinsic strength that was cultivated inside me over the years, brick by brick. Each brick has been forged by way of experience and the helping hands of loved ones. I have travelled my journey gaining insight from the trial and error of my choices. The relationships I formed and the stories you have shared contributed to my deep connection to who I am, where I come from and where I am heading. I am not alone therefore I do not require an army at my disposal. I
am able to draw from within my spirit the strength that is required to carry on. I plead with you to accept my hand as I desperately yearn to reach out to you. Let me be a general in your battle. I will stand alongside you, offering guidance to help break down the walls that hide your growing spirit.

Allow your vulnerability to be your strength, buried as it may be behind that wall of pain. Yet, remember this battle you fight, this peace you seek, takes time. Do not let it burden you. As you become revitalized, I will keep pace beside you. Take rest for now. Lift your head and heart. Look up from the perceived darkness and loneliness. The world is not evil, it is here for you. The world exists for you to take solace in, to offer you comfort. Realize that there is no reason to be afraid. What you seek is inside of you. Your destiny is held in your heart and soul ready to be revealed!

Turn your head and see me reaching for your hand. Do not be afraid. Do not hesitate. Grab it as you wish. I can hold it in absentia of your lost beacon. Together, your compass can be recalibrated, and bricks of strength can be laid. The home you feel in your heart and from my shared spirit is not lost, it is still there. Let it be felt, let it guide you on your journey to find your own truth and strength. I reflect on the teachings of loving kindness, that is evident in the study of Buddhism. As I will live a safe, healthy, happy, easy life, so too shall you. My soul honors yours. There is a place inside you where the universe resides. The light, love, truth, beauty and peace are abundant in both of us. We are connected by these things, we are united.

I am overcome at this point. I realize the need to rest. I have been trudging for a while, an hour or two, I’m not sure. Along with the physical effort, I am emotionally spent. I lift my head and open my heart, repositioning my slouching shoulders. I take a deep breath. Now I see! What majesty! Oh, the wonderment! The clear blue sky, the brilliant warm sun, the vast landscape. I take it all in. You have showed me that no matter how far I have come I can return to the wonderment of the strength in the hidden spirit and a whisper of gratitude washes over me.

I wish to thank you. Today, without you knowing, you have been a source of strength and renewal. I want you to know that despite all the stress and business of daily life that
you have drawn my attention back to what is truly important. You have led my spirit out of the rubble to be lightened again!

My hope is that you will discover the deep strength and worthiness I treasure and appreciate within you. I wish that you will foster and nurture connections that honor your soul by continuing to tell and share your story. In the end may you realize the endurance of spirit that lies within you and let it light your way home.

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The Call

Sue Rodgers

You know how it works … on call shift starts at 4pm. Coffee and energy drink at the ready. Phone charged. Headphones in. Teeth gritted to see what comes my way.

Phone rings at 4.05pm. Crisis with one of our tougher guys. He’s an older teenager and from a remote Indigenous community in Labrador, Canada. He has been providing us with ways to improve our CYC skill sets for a few years at this point. I worked with him in his first week with us after he managed to break down the office door and snort the entire med box after smashing it open. We ended up chilling on the couch watching movies that night. He has struggled with addictions as long as we have known him and has a trauma history that keeps me up at night. I have been lucky enough to work with all his siblings and love these boys. Some of my best shift memories and crisis call stories come from this family.

Note about me. I am one of those CYC’s who believes that Dumbledore in Harry Potter has nailed it. Without the dark, we do not see the light. Those hard shifts are the most
important, those crisis calls are the ones that change the story of a youth worker, and the hard nights make for the very best of days for all of us. I have worked residential care in emergency placement, independent living arrangements with older Indigenous teens, program supervisor for emergency placement in Labrador, and on call supervisor handling only the crisis calls and wild nights. I currently work as the behavior resource teacher for the province of Prince Edward Island, Canada and am blessed to help teachers and administrators create and support trauma informed learning environments.

Back to my crisis call at 405pm. He is escalated, things have gone sideways. The staff is a champ, truly exceptional and has an amazing relationship with this fella, but these escalations need two people. I hop on my pony and head over there. He is downstairs and I sit with staff and ask what the protocol is in case he comes up and isn’t happy to see me. She tells me to pick a window to jump out of and make sure I have a phone to call 911. Not gonna lie, this is the stuff that I live for. I know that nights like this are the ones where our youth let you in to their hearts and show you the things they need to process. The staff I am with is also one of my hero’s. Go time.

Our Indigenous youth come from hard times and a seemingly unstoppable cycle of intergenerational trauma. This dude has a history that breaks my heart. He wants more, but the freight train pushing him down bad routes carries a lot of weight for his young life. He has been in youth detention, adult prison, but also held down jobs and created a business. He samples all aspects of coping and self-soothing strategies, but the pain he carries hasn’t found it’s match yet.

Back to present, we sit on the couch and hear him come up the stairs. He is stomping and huffing and puffing. Any CYC knows how we felt. Adrenaline. Ready for the next steps. Fingers tingle. For me, it’s breathing. I start to get my puff on. Thankfully I look calm.

Skipper clears the stairs, sees me and freezes. He stares at me, then his head drops. His shoulders drop. I know we aren’t going out the windows. He walks in and says, “I appreciate you. You wouldn’t send some random in here for me when I was hurting. You came yourself and I appreciate you for that.” He paces and begins telling me what’s up. He ends up beside me on the couch crying while I hold his hand and stroke his back. The evening ends up with us getting some McDonald’s and watching Youtube. He has a laugh.
at me as I fill shifts and manage a couple of other situations on call. He hits the sack and I lay awake all night trying to figure out how I got so lucky. At one point I stand on the back deck, listening to the wind in the trees and watching the moon. He comes out his downstairs door for a smoke, smiles at me, and says goodnight.

This job is something special. Our role is to build a relationship with someone for whom relationships have always seemingly failed. To do this, we need to just stick it out. Hang on when they are testing you. Sometimes it’s nothing more than just being in the space. Sometimes it takes courage, sometimes it takes patience, sometimes it takes chicken nuggets and a drive. It always takes being steadfast. It always takes commitment. It always takes compassion. It always takes building a relationship and holding space, even if you are tired, scared, unsure, and not caffeinated enough. I know I was lucky that he was able to say he was glad I came, and I know that those words are hard to say. I also know our kids always tell us in their own way, words or not, and that we say it back with our action of being there when the dark blocks out the light.

The next day when I started shift at 4pm, the phone rang from my boy’s house. Again, teeth gritted. I answered the phone. He says, “You left before I woke up! Why would you sneak out without waking me up to say goodbye!?” We chatted for ten minutes as he tried to get me to convince staff to buy him cigarettes, and he wished me luck for my shift, and I promised to wake him up the next time. Welcome back to the light, friend. The dark will come back, but we will help you find that light again.
School-based child and youth care work keeps South African girls in school

Nomvula Phiri and Nontobeko Mlambo

I am a child and youth care worker who works in a school in rural KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa. The area is characterised by extreme poverty which, as we child and youth care workers know, makes life very hard for young people as well as their families. The only hope for a better life for children is through education, and the possibility of economic independence that being able to enter the labour market holds.

I began working with Akhona in May 2019 by simply spending time with her. After she began to trust me and we had built a rapport, we worked on a Youth Developmental Plan (YDP) together. The concerning aspect of Akhona’s behaviour was her poor attendance at school, and the reason she had been pointed out to me. We know from research and experience that when young people start to miss many days of schooling, they are on a trajectory towards dropping out. For Akhona dropping out of school at 16 in Grade 10 would mean a life of hardship and impoverishment would certainly lie ahead of her. Akhona was also performing badly academically and was disruptive in class. In the context of large classes, her teachers could not be expected to manage her behaviour, and it was likely that she would very soon simply give up on school, and school would give up on her.

In the process of developing the YDP, I was able to pick up that Akhona was an intelligent young girl who needed a bit of motivation and steering in the right direction as she had joined a group of older girls in the neighbourhood who were negatively
influencing her. Their hopelessness had been masked by risk-taking behaviour patterns seductively offering immediate gratification but which would take them nowhere in life.

Akhona’s family, I discovered, consisted of eight people in the household. The two adults in the family are sisters (one of whom is Akhona’s mum) who are unemployed and engage in piecemeal jobs when they can find them. Akhona’s grandmother is also unemployed and is not receiving a social grant in the form of a pension as she is not yet 60 years old. All the five children in the family are enrolled in school, and the whole family lives off the meager child support grant that they receive for the children. This amounts to approximately $100 per month as an income for the whole family.

Shortly after we connected, I enrolled Akhona into the Vhutshilo, a sexual reproductive health program. The intention behind this was to build Akhona’s moral reasoning and teach her basic life skills. The aim of the program is to educate young people to make informed and healthy life choices. But, getting her to attend was a real challenge for me as a child and you care worker. Akhona would often miss sessions. There were times when she would commit and agree to come but would not turn up. It was also a challenge to get her to be a part of the after-school homework supervision program.

When discussing the situation with Akhona’s mother, she disclosed that she was at a point where she was fed up with Akhona’s behaviour and was giving up on her. She was disappointed that Akhona had become very rebellious and was being disrespectful towards her and the grandmother. I could understand her feelings but also encouraged her to keep connected with Akhona, and went on to explain the adolescent stage of development, so that her mother could better understand her behaviour and reactions.

To motivate Akhona to regularly attend the Vhutshilo program, I managed to adjust the timing of the sessions to suit her, and alternated the sessions with one-on-one homework support and supervision. This led to her being more motivated to attend regularly and she gradually became more receptive of my help.

It was at this point of having a strong relationship with Akhona that she disclosed that she was pregnant. I provided referral services to the clinic and ensured that she sought the necessary medical care. I monitored Akhona’s appointments and would sometimes
even accompany her to the clinic. To ensure that she missed as little school as possible I built a relationship with the clinic nurse, and through this the nurse prioritised Akhona so that she did not miss an entire day of school while waiting in the clinic queue – as usually happens in this community context.

We held a family conference to discuss the situation, mend the relationships between Akhona and her mother and grandmother, and look at how the family could better support Akhona. But, after all of this, Akhona began to fall sick regularly and miss a lot of school. She then informed me that she would drop out of school and go back the following year after having the baby.

Alarm bells immediately rang in my head. I knew I had to find a way to prevent this from happening. If she missed out on the year, the chances of getting her to go back and repeat the year and complete schooling would be very slim. I came up with the plan of attaching her to a neighbour who was attending the same school and in the same grade. Her classmate would bring her work that was done in class for the day. I negotiated with the teachers to send her the assessments, so that she could complete them at home and send them back to school for marking. This ensured that Akhona was not left behind and stayed on par with the rest of her class. As a result of this intervention, she was able to go back later in the year to write her grade 10 final exams.

I kept up with one-on-one sessions with Akhona to support her and plan for the baby’s arrival and referred her to a young mothers’ support group at the local clinic, so that she received peer support and would be better equipped to take care of her baby. During all of this, I continued to motivate Akhona to return to school after having the baby and put in place a support system that allowed for this by involving her aunt in caring for the baby while she was at school.

By using the support offered by myself as a child and youth care worker, Akhona was able to pass and move into grade 11, even though she had her baby in this time. She now attends school regularly after the birth of her baby boy, and is motivated to complete high school.

Akhona has said that falling pregnant was an eye opener and gave her a much clearer perspective on her life’s direction. It made her aware that she is responsible for herself,
and that it is she who needed to change her behaviour to have a brighter future not only for herself but for her son as well. Akhona has shown lot of dedication to her life in that throughout 2020 she attended all the Vhutshilo sessions and the after-school homework supervision program. She is also no longer friends with the older group of young women who were negatively influencing her and is now friends with her neighbour who is a fellow learner at the same school.

Despite the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic and how it affected teaching and learning she was able to pass grade 11 in 2020. She is currently in grade 12 and is eager to pass so that she can plan her life for herself and her son. My support to her now is in the area of career-pathing and the provision of academic support programs such as the provision of past exam papers and study guides. She is also connected to the WhatsApp group where teachers provide additional assistance to leaners.

Akhona’s relationship with her family has improved dramatically, and she now has the possibility of doing well in life. Careful, consistent, in-the-moment and planned child and youth care interventions kept this girl in school, improved the family relationships and provided a sound foundation for a new young life. I am so grateful that the profession has provided me with the skills to intervene effectively when situations look so very bleak. Can you imagine what a difference child and youth care workers could make to our continent’s future, if we were placed in each and every school to keep our vulnerable and at-risk girls in school?
A Bedtime and a Going Home Story

Barrie Lodge

A knock on the door of my on-campus house, on my seldom Saturday off usually meant bad news, an intrusion and a frustration. Opening the door, there stood a tall, well dressed young man.

“Sorry to bother you Mr Lodge. Do you know who I am?”

I knew I was supposed to know.

“Yes”, says I, to save face, having absolutely no idea who he was. I guessed he was an ‘old boy’ resident at some time.

“Can I come in?” he asks.

“Sure”. At least this sounded like a friendly visit. I had become used to ‘old boys’, past residents in the old dormitory system, coming to complain that since I had been there that one of the horses had died, or that the place was going to the dogs.

This felt friendly.

“I was in the group home in Carter House”, he said. “I have just qualified as a medical doctor”.

A glimmer of recognition and then I realised who he was. The whole case history came flooding back. Satanism in the family, a family of large of stature, and a threatening, bordering on violent father. “This boy WILL study. This boy will get distinctions in the matriculation examinations. You don’t come on vacation. You don’t go out weekends. You stay here and you study.”
And so it was. The boy, now a man, had just qualified as a medical doctor. 
But his father’s insistence was not what he wanted to tell me. What he came to tell me was quite different.

“I’m leaving for the Great Ormond Street Children’s Hospital in London. I’m specializing in Paediatrics. I want to work with children, to heal children.”

Now I was prickled with admiration and interest. Just the name, Great Ormond Street Hospital. I knew it. I’d spent a lot of time in that great hospital in my early childhood. It was the only hospital to diagnose my congenital disorder at age eight.

“Do you remember?” he continued. “There at Carter House at the time of lights out, you sat at the end of my bed. You said, using my name, ‘I must tell you, you are one young person I believe, I know, can and will rise above all the stuff in your family that brought you here. You will rise above being in residential care, what you are experiencing now, and you will make something of your life’”.

“What you said changed my life. That moment turned me around to be what I am today. I want to heal children”.

A bedtime child and youth care moment. A moment of which I have no memory whatsoever.

**The home-going story**

Four years on, from his high-seated heavy-duty truck he spotted me in my small car pulled up at an intersection. His big smile and friendly wave was a surprising signal of a connection, a warmth, I thought never possible.

He was the only young person I experienced who had a real intention, the capacity and the deliberately created physical space in which to do me severe bodily harm. The “I’m going to kill you!” scenario.

“You had better come now. I can’t and won’t take anymore of this. I’m locking myself and my wife away”. Slam down went the telephone. It was the child and youth care worker in a large dormitory house setting.
As I entered the main door, that’s exactly what he did. From peeking out of his flat door ajar “They’re high!” ... slam went the door with sounds of bolt pulled and keys turned in locks.

There were two boys in the lounge – brawny boys both eighteen years of age.

He had left the residential facility voluntarily at eighteen and was now with his family.

“You sent me home! You sent me home. You don’t know what’s going on. I’m going to beat you up” This boy had left the residential facility voluntarily at eighteen and was now living with his family.

At this, the second young person closed the lounge door and positioned himself against it, effectively barring it.

In my head I thought, ‘Oh no! Big mistake to come right into the lounge in the first place. Should have called them out into the open. I have no escape route.’

Up went threatening fists. Moving forward, the threats got more and more serious. “I’m going to kill you”. I started talking, talking, talking, and moving backwards around the room, arms loosely at my sides. The first punch didn’t reach me. All I had ever learnt from Professional Assault Response Training (PART) came intuitively into play.

“I’m going to kill you.”

I don’t know what I said that sparked this, but the door-barring youth stepped to one side and opened the lounge door enough to let me out, then closed it as protection.

I called for back-up. The locked away worker stayed locked in his flat. A child and youth care worker came. “You’re neutral. Please see if you can talk that boy down and then bring them to me in my house. Don’t go into the lounge now. Call them outside.”

Half an hour passed, and we sat in my lounge. Re-admittance was a topic as was the undertakings to have another family conference. A lot of talking. The effects of the drugs were wearing off.

When it all seemed fairly hopeful and calm, I said to the youth, “Come, let me take you home”.

In the car he said, “Why are you giving me a lift home in your car when I wanted to kill you?”

“What you did was not OK. You, you are OK”.

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When all was done he didn’t come back for re-admission. There was some living arrangement made outside of the immediate family.

And now, four years on, that smile and that wave!

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**Storying Security with Parents and Teens: From Vicious Circles to Strengthened Relationships**

*Patti Ranahan, Katherine Pascuzzo and Marlene M. Moretti*

 Ça a toujours été difficile, il a toujours été comme le mouton noir, euh, celui qui était le plus tannant ou celui qui faisait des choses inexpliquées.

*It has always been difficult. He’s always been, like, the black sheep, the one who was the most annoying, or the one who did things for inexplicable reasons.*

“Having hope is difficult,” she said while sitting on the front step. “I feel like a failure.” Her shoulders droop like the face of a daffodil on a gray day and she lets out a deep sigh. “He’s destroying himself and us too.” She begins to weep. “We’ve tried everything, you know,” her husband asserts. “Medication, doctors, social workers, therapy, psychoeducation …” His voice cracks as he speaks. There’s a pause, and then she says, “Madame Aubert told us ‘When you can’t take it anymore, call 911.’ So that’s what we
I have been informed that the police were at the parents’ home the day before for three hours. “But he was angry with me after that and he threw it back at me. ‘You called the police! My mother called the police! What kind of mother do I have?’” Sixteen-year-old Michael was brought to the hospital by the police where he was assessed over the next 18-hours as his mother sat in the waiting room. Subsequently, Michael was placed in a residential youth centre. “I was just stunned.” She shakes her head in disbelief. “It’s like your child doesn’t belong to you anymore.”

Palpable pain envelops us as I search for a way to invite the parents to attend yet another service. I’ve been sitting with them for an hour now working my way toward offering a 10-week manualized program for parents and caregivers of teens aged 13-18 years presenting severe behavior and emotional difficulties, embedded within a large research project. The program, Connect, is an attachment and trauma informed intervention, aimed at supporting parents in finding ways to strengthen their relationship and reconnect with their child. While the evidence surrounding this program abounds, filling shelves and pages of academic journals (Barone et al, 2020; Högström et al., 2016; Moretti & Obsuth, 2009), these academic credentials do not matter to the parents sitting in front of me as they negotiate the alienation from their son. “Can I tell you a little bit about the Connect parent group?” I begin. “We don’t give you prescriptive management strategies. That’s not our approach,” I say encouragingly. “We try to think about your child’s behaviour differently. What are they trying to communicate to us through their behaviour? And how might we open some doors in terms of our response, right?” The parents appear mildly interested, slivers of sunlight squeezing through tiny crevices in their cloud of defeat. “We’re not looking for a miracle. I’m just looking for things to help,” the mother says quietly. “Yeah, whatever we can find to see how we can improve our relationship with our son,” the father adds. A glimmer of hope emerges, or at least, a desire for something different.

This is the story of parents’ experiences of strengthening their relationships with their teens while attending a group intervention. As the foundation of qualitative research is stories and storytelling (Lewis & Hildebrandt, 2019), we compiled quotations from parents and teens to share our story of child and youth care research with families. Parents and
teens shared their thoughts and experiences of their relationship as part of a grounded theory research project we conducted between January 2016 and March 2017 at 2 unique sites in Quebec, Canada. Bridging the research-practice divide, the aim of grounded theory is theory generation to explain patterns of behaviour and provide solutions for professional practice (Backman & Kyngas, 1999). We were interested in exploring the process of enhancing attachment security in parent-teen relationships, and grounded theory offered an approach to explain human behaviour occurring within a social and relational context (Mijala, Paavilainen, & Astedet-Kurki, 2003; Wuest, 2012). Grounded theory methods provide “systematic inductive guidelines for collecting and analyzing data” (Charmaz, 2000, p. 509). Analysis of the data is an iterative process, moving from specific incidents to abstractions, and then back to incidents, while focusing on the meaning ascribed to relational events, including the parents’ or caregivers’ participation in the Connect intervention, and the subsequent actions, emotions and interactions in their parent-teen relationships (Corbin, 2009; Schreiber, 2001). Ethical approvals were obtained by institutional and site review boards prior to participant recruitment. Data were gathered from three groups of participants (N=22). Group 1 included two mothers, one grandmother, and three male youth. These participants were invited to audio-record their reflections on a weekly basis, over a ten-week period, in response to the prompt “Talk about your relationship with your parent/teen”, during the parents’ participation in the Connect intervention. Group 2 and 3 data were comprised of audio-recorded interviews before the parents’ participation in Connect, and within 6 weeks after the program’s conclusion. Group 2 was comprised of four mothers, one father, and four male youth, and Group 3 was comprised of six mothers and one father (youth did not participate in audio-recorded interviews in Group 3). Congruent with a grounded theory approach, data analysis began with line-by-line coding of transcripts from the audio-recordings, followed by focused coding using the track changes feature in Microsoft Word. A codebook was developed using constant comparison method to group and collapse codes into categories (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Category definitions were double-checked for accuracy during the analytical process, and gerunds were used when coding the data to represent the process of enhancing security. While the quotations offered here are a compilation of direct excerpts
from multiple participants’ transcripts, we have placed the quotations in a fictional context and names have been changed to protect confidentiality.

“Tell me about your relationship with your mom” I ask. The youth centre has offered a small office space for me to meet with the youth of one of the parents in the Connect program. He sits on the plastic and metal chair, long legs stretched out in front of him accentuating the stylish running shoes covering his feet. He peers at me quizzically through his bangs, guarded yet curious about having a person ready to listen to his story. “They say that my ideas are not very good, that they make no sense, that, it’s not a good way to think. I feel angry a little and I feel, like, just because I don’t think like them, doesn’t mean that it’s not the right way to think.” He pauses briefly. “We all have different perspectives on the world, and everything,” he asserts diplomatically. I nod and invite him to share more about what happens when he feels angry. “I start raising my voice. My parents, they start raising their voices. I can say things that I don’t mean.” “It sounds like things escalate,” I say, inviting more description. He begins to talk in third person: “Well, there’s a guy who has bad relationships and who creates conflicts with his parents. He doesn’t like having conflicts with his parents, so he avoids them and he walks away. And by walking away, that causes more conflicts with his parents. It happens again, he leaves and he doesn’t solve his problems. By not solving them, that brings even bigger conflicts, so it’s conflicts on top of conflicts, and so he feels stuck in that. He’s caught up in these conflicts.” He shrugs. “Vicious circle?” I ask. “Vicious circle,” he affirms.

The chairs are arranged in a semi-circle facing two chairs and a flip chart off to the side at the front of the room. The two Connect facilitators are organizing last minute preparations. The crock pot full of carrot ginger soup if filling the room with warm, delicious smells on the cold snowy evening. “Should we run through the role play again?” one facilitator asks the other. They agree to walk it through one more time before the parents arrive, but are interrupted midway by the cadet troop walking through the halls of the community school toward the gymnasium. The parents begin to trickle in, hesitantly searching for the chair with the most comfort. The facilitators welcome each parent by name and the offer of food. At 6 o’clock the facilitators gather the parents outlining what to expect in Connect and how the next 10 weeks will unfold. Each 90-minute session
begins with the introduction of an attachment principle followed by reflection exercises and role plays that illustrate the principle. The final session includes an opportunity for the parents to provide feedback on their experience to inform the ongoing development of the program.

“Let’s begin by introducing ourselves. We can go around our circle and if you would like to share your name, your child’s name, and what your hope is for attending Connect.” Each facilitator introduces themselves briefly and then each parent in the circle follows. It is the beginning of a connection between the parents in the room. As each parent shares, the occasional nod from others in the room signifies common ground. “One parent brought up a situation that made me go: ‘Ah! That’s our situation as well.’ It just makes us feel that we are not outsiders. We’re not on the margins... that I’m not alone.” Through weekly Connect sessions, the facilitators guide the parents in discussions and reflective exercises aiming at holding the dialectic position of stepping back and letting grow that serves to help regulate their own emotions. By stepping back and remaining calm in difficult situations, parents are able to soothe their teens. “I waited for the storm to pass. It doesn’t do anything to put the boat in the sea when there’s a big storm. It’s better to stay tethered to the quay.” Parents learn that behaviour is a way for the teen to communicate their attachment needs, such as safety, exploration and social relationships. By not reacting immediately to the behaviour, they can learn what it is their child needs. “I make an extra effort to have a more overall view of the situation, to be less emotional, to be less carried away by the situation, to question Olivier about his needs.” The facilitators suggest to the parents that attachment isn’t only about connection. Attachment is about independence as well. “Of the greatest challenges, it is to let Paul take charge of his life, to let him make mistakes and to let him be able to talk after,” one parent admits.

I am welcomed into the living room at the parent’s home. She is smiling and eagerly tends to me with the offer of coffee and cookies. The living room is cozy with mint green carpet and a glass coffee table. It has been a month since the Connect program finished and I am anxious to hear about how her relationship is going with her son. “So, tell me about your relationship since going through Connect.” I suggest. “Well, we have less conflict than we used to.” “How frequent was it before?” I ask. “Oh my gosh, every day. Yeah, every
day. I would end up yelling and he would end up yelling.” She leans back in the chair. “I learned to be more patient, to listen to him better, to understand him better. I think by my behaviour changing, his behavior changed too.” I probe further. “What does listening and patience look like?” “Just step back, relax, and listen. And he has been coming to me to talk more” she explains. I ask what she has noticed in her son with this new approach she is using. “Now, I am really open-minded. My son is much more receptive and more joyful. To see my child smile, just a smile on his face, and it’s been ages that we haven’t seen even a little smile.” Her own smile widens on her face and her forehead, once creased with stress and despair, appears calmer. She describes inviting her son to participate in a movie night with the rest of the family and his initial sullen response. “Ten minutes later,” she says enthusiastically, “he climbed upstairs and joined us. It was extraordinary.” As I put on my shoes to leave, she asks if other parents will have the opportunity to “take Connect.” I reply that I’m hopeful, knowing that our funding is limited.

“Hey Alexandre. Thanks for meeting with me.” I sit across from the youth at the picnic table in the park near his home. “Hey” he replies. I ask about how his relationship with his mom is going. Alexandre is silent for a moment, then offers a brief evaluative statement. “Yeah, it’s really better” he says, “because there are fewer arguments. We understand how the other feels and that’s it. She speaks a little less about bad stuff. Maybe she has understood a little.” I wanted to know more about his observations, his experiences, and how he is viewing the relationship with his mom since her completion of the Connect program, yet in interviewing Alexandre, I realized I needed to be patient. He offers up his thoughts: “During the time at the group home, there’s only the walls and you have no choice but to confront your reality and to think about why you’re here. I feel remorseful about what I’ve done.” He pauses. “I wanted to improve myself.” I probe further about what he has noticed in Sarah, his mother. “Well, instead of persisting, she says, ‘I’m gonna stop talking about this’ or she’ll say: ‘We’ll talk about this later to take some time to reflect.’” “What is that like for you, Alexandre? For your mom to take a moment?” I ask. “She seems calmer. She seems less stressed for real. She puts herself like in my place and goes, ‘Oh yeah. You’re right, it’s true’ and all that.” I reflect the changes he has observed and ask about his hopes for their relationship. “I would say, like
to try to understand the needs of others and not always think about yourself. I have to think a little more about my mother. Sometimes I understand that she needs certain things.” Inwardly, I smile recognizing the knot that binds Sarah and Alexandre together. As Sarah steps back, her calmness fertilizes the roots of empathy in Alexandre.

Each parent and teen offered up stories of struggle and significant challenges in the period before the parent attended the Connect program. Their stories of insecurity were marked by guilt and lack of confidence, distrust, ineffective help-seeking from multiple service providers, and feelings of hopelessness and being stuck in revolving conflicts. During Connect, enhancing parental emotional regulation is a key function that promotes parents’ reflective capacity (i.e., stepping back) and autonomy acceptance (i.e., letting grow). Parents and caregivers learn skills in empathy and reflection, in the context of connecting with other parents. This allows parents to build confidence and develop emotion regulation strategies. The process of stepping back and letting grow works to shift the story from one of insecurity to enhanced security in the parent-teen relationship. As all change occurs in the context of a relationship, shifts in the parents’ story opens the door to transforming the youth’s story as well.

References


Caring Too Much and Vicarious Trauma: Working with Child Survivors of War

Nadia Umadat

*All identifying features changed for confidentiality

One raining October afternoon in 2016, I sat at my desk, hurrying to finish my lunch. I was a newbie in my role and struggled to keep up with the ensuing paperwork piling up around me. I couldn’t afford the luxuries of eating. The arrival of thousands of government assisted refugees from a protracted civil war had our office inundated with calls for support of all shades. My phone rang with a request from my colleague to meet with a family. They were already in the office with a story my colleague believed I should hear. Putting my lunch away I joined in and found a heterosexual couple seated, looking visibly haggard. As they spoke, they became tearful. By the time they finished there was not a dry-eye in the house. They narrated a shocking tale that was not unlike a movie plot. This was a moment I often reflect on as one of the most impactful of my practice thus far.

The family was comprised of a married couple with 6 children. At the height of combat in the war, chemical weapons were used in an attack of the family’s town. Their home caught on fire with all the occupants inside of it; they were forced to inhale toxic fumes. Their fifth child, baby Remi was about a year old at the time. He had been an active and noisy baby, though he had no pre-natal care and a difficult birth. In the attack, the infant was covered in soot and lost consciousness for a few seconds. As time elapsed, he barely spoke, not achieving his developmental milestones. When their fourth child Romi was
around 3 years old, he was known in the community for being exceptionally bright and outgoing. One afternoon while outside, Romi witnessed his favorite cousin executed by a sniper during a routine game of tag.

Without viable alternatives, the family attempted to flee. Their town had been destroyed. Most of their extended family were lost and presumed dead. Along with several neighbours, they clamoured into an old school bus to cross the border to safety. Early in their journey, gunfire broke erupted and the bus driver was killed. The family finished the journey on foot. After some time, they had another child, born in a refugee camp. The newborn experienced poor nutrition during gestation and for the first few years after birth. Education was almost non-existent for the children and refugees were generally treated poorly.

While the parents conveyed their gratitude at being afforded asylum, they were alarmed by the challenges their children were now experiencing. After re-settlement, each child remained fearful and shy. They did not want to close doors, even to use to the restroom. They demonstrated volatile emotionality. All of the siblings endured insomnia and slept minimally. None displayed interested in interaction with their peers. However, Romi and Remi’s persistent abnormalities were particularly upsetting. Romi was the most vexed. He was aggressive, threw tantrums, made animalistic noises, screamed and broke items. He had assaulted his previous teacher. His new school was distressed as he had left his classroom on several occasions and found his way back home unnoticed. When he did in engage in activities it was to graphically share memories pertaining to his cousin’s brutal passing. He would speak of the events to strangers, recreate the actions through role play and draw pictures of the scene.

Little Remi was only able to articulate a few poorly formed words. He was hyperactive and his parents sensed he lacked an age-appropriate comprehension of danger; they were fearful to leave him unattended for even a minute. He was unresponsive when addressed and had mood swings, often becoming despondent and sitting in voluntary isolation. As he had never received medical attention in the aftermath of the chemical attack, it was not certain as to the cause of his myriad of behaviours. He had also made attempts to run away from school and was constantly sleeping through lessons.
The complexity of their account was heightened by both parents battling their own mental and physical health matters. Each had difficulty processing new information and demonstrated memory loss. Neither spoke a word of English. Numerous complaints came from the children’s school. Lost in the proverbial crowd (of newcomers) they felt largely unsupported in their new community. They needed help desperately but were clueless as how to initiate service provision.

That evening was the first of many, where I left the office fixated on problem solving for Remi and Romi. I was appalled by the level of torment they had encountered and secretly made it my mission to champion their plight. For the next four years I worked tirelessly on their case. I utilized every possible agency resource to expeditiously seek treatment. I found myself repeatedly dumping on my colleagues during our regular staff debriefing, careful to alter details so no one would become wise to my ruse. If my superiors had scrutinised my monthly docket they would have been alarmed by the sheer amount of energy I devoted to the boys. Socially, I would strong-arm my service provider friends at other organizations into aiding with programming. On occasion, I even dreamt about strategies I could implement for the family’s success.

There was not an appointment made that I did not personally facilitate. I organized an interpreter for every session, and there were a wide range of sessions. I lobbied child psychiatrists, developmental paediatricians, special education co-ordinators, play therapists, psycho-educational specialists and early childhood educators. I developed a friendly first-name basis relationship with their social assistance caseworker from my numerous pleas for more funding. When the family received noise complaints from their apartment building because of the children, I went head-to-head with their landlord.

I believe every practitioner has a case that is integral to their work and I surmise this one is mine for several reasons. Not only did I find their story so compelling, but it is perhaps the first instance in my career where I felt I had made impressive tangible improvements for my clients. The ferocity I demonstrated solidified the therapeutic alliance between myself with the family. They trusted me explicitly and began to enlist my assistance in the mundane which I welcomed. I also became immersed in invaluable learning. Naively, I came to realize stability was not a linear progression I had eagerly
anticipated. There were surprises along the road. When it was discovered that Remi has partial hearing loss in addition to a possible acquired brain injury, it was the onset of another round of endless specialists and service navigation. There were a few episodes where the parents flatly refused to attend any more appointments. Not observing any immediate improvement, frustrated, and exhausted they could not keep up with the endless mandatory meetings.

After endless consideration, I am now able to admit I was simultaneously working through my own vicarious traumatization. My rational perception about my abilities, systems and even the world around me had become skewed. I even held a clandestine belief, I might be the only person who could make impactful change, which of course obliterated any chance I had of maintaining healthy boundaries. In my personal life, I had to avoid any and all material pertaining to children facing adversity as it would bring me to tears. Additionally, sharing knowledge of the family’s tragic history and witnessing their ongoing trials in their country of settlement with language, finances, culture and health, I developed an anger. Anger towards humanity for allowing an unspeakable depth of suffering and towards my own government who brought in thousands of refugees but failed to provide sufficient guidance once they arrived. My feelings were reinforced as I continually met other families with similar war backgrounds and complex needs.

My perspective began to pivot after receiving a call from a social worker at a local children’s hospital. After months on a waiting list, the family arrived promptly to the appointment. When probed regarding their trauma history, their reply was “call Nadia, she knows everything.” Initially flattered, my mind went into overdrive. This family was perfectly capable of articulating their narrative. In my efforts to advocate had I inadvertently created an insidious dependency? Instead of building their capacity and agency skills had I allowed an expectation to form that I would run the show as the face of help? Staggeringly, I concluded I had done a grave disservice if all of our work together had diminished their will for self-efficacy.

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After that episode I made a conscious effort to slowly divest myself from the case. Feeling depleted and overworked, I began to lean more heavily on the child and youth workers at the boys’ school for educational needs. I enlisted the help of my colleagues with suitable language skills for parental issues outside of my role. I started to intentionally limit the time I expended on the family per week and gave myself a grace period before replying to calls, where possible. Admittedly, at this point the family was more integrated and the boys connected with a team of experts.

To date, there has been great improvement with the family dynamics. Romi and Remi are both under the care of specialists, attend special education and Remi is able to speak. During the pandemic the family moved to a neighboring town for a larger home. While I could have insisted to stay on as a case manager based on our working background, I referred them on to an organization in their catchment. It was time for a break. I find myself still thinking of our work together; sometimes of the many satisfying wins that give me hope for my career on a bad day. Alternatively, I speculate on numerous interactions I could have altered to maintain better professional wellness. I am grateful for the learning opportunities this case has provided me. I hope you, dear readers, can also glean a useful tidbit from a newbie who was just trying to help.
“The Enchanted Forest”: Where the Refreshing Benefits of Nature Meet the Nurturing Words of a CYC

Kathryn Small

Hello! And welcome to the Enchanted Forest- “The Most Magical Place on Earth!” No, wait... that’s Disney World... Welcome to the Enchanted Forest- “Where Dreams Come True!” Wait, that’s still Disney, isn’t it? Um... Oh, I know! Welcome to the Enchanted Forest- “It’s Amazing in Here!” What?! Canada’s Wonderland? I really thought I had it that time!
Welcome to the enchanted forest. It doesn’t need a slogan, it speaks for itself. Come run the trails or take a leisurely stroll. Listen to the trickling water in the stream; soak in the vitamin D as you feel those warm rays of sunshine caress your face. Wander on your own, or bring the kids, there’s something here for everyone! Oh, and while you’re in here- make sure you keep your eyes peeled!

Hi, my name is Kathryn, and I want to tell you all about a very cool project that’s been going on in our community. Near my home, there are some beautiful trails through the ravine, and right now, with all the COVID restrictions, there’s really not a whole lot of things to do, (especially for people who are trying to keep children, youth and teenagers entertained all day long without drop-in’s or play groups or regular extra-curricular activities), so going for a walk is a great option, and what a way to make it more fun!

The original idea came from an area in Bronte Creek Provincial Park, where my sister had taken my two young nieces one day. They discovered a path called “The Gnome Trail”, which follows the idea of painting rocks and leaving them on the ground for people to see, but this is taking it to a whole new level. The gnome trail was an immediate hit, the girls loved it. Especially the one who is three years old, she was completely taken by the “fairy tale theatre”, the miniature “fairy cottages” and other buildings that were set up along the path. She loved it so much, that she came home and
excitedly told me about it, and my reply was “What a great idea – we should do that here!”

I went out to the dollar store and bought some little wooden houses, animal figures and trees. I brought them home and painted/decorated them and then took them out to the ravine near my house. I knew there would be certain youth and adolescents who would walk through and be tempted to break things, so my dad helped me actually screw or nail most of the things right into the wood.

There was still some damage done, one little house, in particular, was knocked over and broken. We were able to find all the pieces, so I brought them home and glued it back together with a 2x4 inside so it would be stronger, but after putting it back out there, it was broken again. It looks like someone just kicked it off the log it was on. I brought the pieces home again, and as I was trying to think of a way to make it even stronger and less damageable, I started thinking about who was knocking it over.

This made me want to know why, and in turn, how I could discourage it. I decided that rather than steering attention away from things, maybe I could add things that might just draw attention in a bit of a different direction, and at the same time, maybe I could inspire or encourage some of the older youth and teenagers out there.

Think back to child/adolescent development, and Erik Erikson’s 8 stages of psychosocial development ... Stage 5: Identity
vs. Role Confusion is supposed to cover the teenage years, so approximately ages 12-18. I’m going to go out on a limb and say that the person/people responsible for damaging parts of the enchanted forest are most likely within that age group.

Erikson says that these youth are at a point where they need to develop a sense of self and personal identity. They’re beginning to think more about moral, philosophical, ethical, social, and political issues (VeryWellMind, 2020) and form an opinion on where they will stand on these issues. They’re trying to decide on their personal beliefs, ideals and values, which will shape their futures and mold the adults they’re going to become (VeryWellMind, 2020). Those youth who are given encouragement and receive positive reinforcement will get through this stage (VeryWellMind, 2020) relatively unscathed, with a sense of independence, self-control and resilience.
So, how could I give inspiration and encouragement when I wasn’t even sure who these people were? I knew that they walked through this path, so I made some signs with short, positive messages on them, and put them up throughout the ravine. The signs say things like “You are worth it!”, “Inhale the good, Exhale the bad” and “Believe in Yourself!”

My dad, the hardware mastermind, helped me put them up ...

I also made two bigger signs for the start and end of that section of trail. Each one says “Sherwood’s Enchanted Forest This Way” with an arrow pointing in the right direction. Since the signs have been up, we’ve been pretty lucky! I haven’t seen anything that’s been destroyed, except for a few small weather related things that were an easy fix. Other people have also started to catch on to the idea! Someone went through and hung Christmas balls on branches all throughout, and there have been some other decorations that we’ve seen pop up in various places – a couple of snowmen, and some fancy, blue and white icicle candy canes. I love that it’s becoming a project for the entire
I’m sure I don’t need to sell you on the benefits of spending time in nature, whether you’re actively exercising, like running or biking, or taking a leisurely stroll. Maybe you’re a writer, and you get your best inspiration just sitting quietly beside the stream amidst the rocks and trees and animals with a pen and a journal. I believe the term that’s being used right now is ecotherapy. And now, if you pick the right path, at the right time, there may just be some added benefits in the form of some beautiful decorations or some helpful messages that you happen to read at just the right moment.

And remember, all those health benefits from being outdoors also work on children, youth and adolescents! Walk with them and let them point out the things they spot on their way by! Items can become discussion pieces that lead to a deeper discussion. Or if they’re old enough, create a scavenger hunt where they take pictures of the things they’ve found. Better yet, let them add to the decorations! Dollarama is still open, and Michael's does curbside pickups. Choose something already made or get creative and design it yourself! Believe me when I tell you that even if you don’t actually hear anyone saying it out loud- people will thank you for it! And I will too!

For those of you who are worried about the environment, please note that I have been choosing
natural, biodegradable pieces of wood and using a water based, non-toxic paint. At the beginning, yes, I screwed some things into trees, but have since made it a point to only put screws and nails into dead stumps or already fallen logs so that I’m not putting holes into anything living.

I would like to thank whoever started the gnome trail in Bronte Creek which inspired me to start this project and also a big thank you to Julie Jaglowitz who taught my ‘Creative Therapeutic Programming’ class in the 2nd year of the CYC program at Sheridan College. Julie, you are more inspiring than you know.

Thank you to my mom, who has helped me so much with her artistic expertise and helping get things ready, and my dad for helping secure things to stumps and logs all while trying to preserve the artistic details and keep them intact.

An extra special, huge thank you to my two beautiful nieces who inspire me every day with their curiosity and wonder and motivate me to try and make this world a better place.

References


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