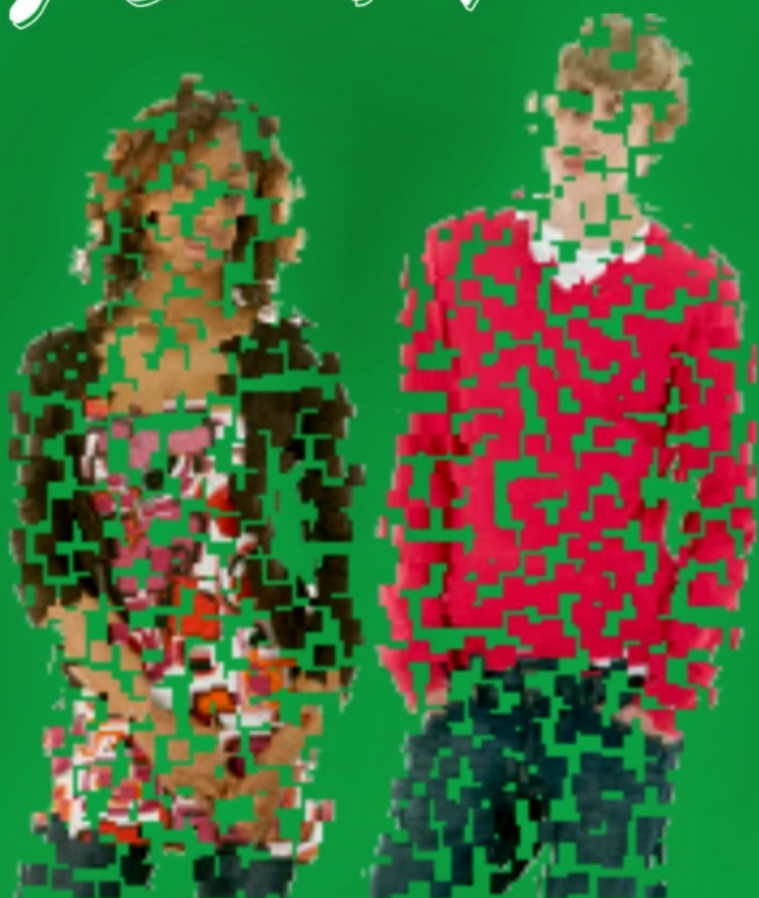


# Moments with Youth



Mark Krueger

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**Mark Krueger**

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# Foreword

**Gerry Fewster**

Mark Krueger was the most prolific writer in Child and Youth Care. For me, and many others, he was also the most profound. His stories – he called them “sketches” – are multi-layered narratives that beckon us into the underworld of practice and leave us to find our own way back. His insights – he called them “musings” – pose endless questions and leave us to create our own answers. It wasn’t his style to tell others, whether adults or kids, what to think, what to feel, or what to do. Rather, he challenged us to match his own insatiable curiosity, and, if we had something to say, he would listen, not as a judge, but as a learner. What a writer, what a teacher, what a youth worker!

Mark was never at ease with certainty. He mistrusted the experts and gurus who claimed to have the truth. His heroes were those who took the risk to break free from the bondage of worn out prescriptions to delve into the underlying chaos of their own experience – whether they happened to be James Joyce, Albert Camus, or the kid who just told him to “fuck off and die.” This wasn’t an intellectual stance concocted for academic or professional purposes; it was an authentic reflection of how he chose to lead his own life: “... *the major challenge in child and youth care is to understand, not change or prove, as we are so often led to believe today ... When (this profession) can understand, it will understand itself.*”

Mark was equally ill at ease with purpose. His curiosity was driven by a need to make sense of his world rather than by personal ambition or ‘measurable’ outcomes. Impressive as they were, his academic, professional, and literary achievements were never taken as fodder for the ego, but as opportunities for defining his place in a world he needed to understand. He was a man constantly in motion, moving with the flow to sense the underlying pulse or rhythm that connected him to the whole. He was a runner:

*"I run everyday because I enjoy moving. Frequently, after the initial pain subsides and the endorphins kick in, I get runners high. Time is lost and everything is in synch. I can go for several blocks and not remember the distance in between. You might also say it is my flow or optimal experience, and as such is a metaphor for how hard work leads to fulfillment in life."*

Mark preferred metaphor to concept, not only in his writing but as a way of illuminating his own experience. He preferred images to abstractions because they were alive. And he preferred themes to details because they were expansive, always in motion. These were the flexible parameters that allowed him to remain open, free from the shackles of consensual knowledge and beliefs. This doesn't mean he spent his time wandering aimlessly in a solipsistic haze. He was a researcher and his methods were as disciplined and rigorous as any to be found in the traditional scientific realm. He was a pioneer and, like all diligent explorers, he created anchor points that defined his location on the planet, such as the old Pavilion in his beloved Milwaukee, and his lakeside cabin in the woods. He kept a log book, rich and detailed pageants of the past, to monitor his course through the flow of time. And he used his work as an affirmation of his identity, a secure place in an irrational and precarious world.

For much of his life, Mark's primary laboratory was the ubiquitous discipline of Child and Youth Care. Here he was free to pursue his own course without being compromised by professional labels and repetitive practices. Much as he was devoted to the development of Child and Youth Care, he refused to be influenced by its changing fads and fashions. His need to understand his world depended more upon retaining his innocence than accumulating the packaged wisdom of the experts or complying with the demands of the controllers. So, did he have a problem with authority? Yes, he did.

As a fledgling youth worker, Mark came to believe he would never understand the kids unless he was equally committed to understanding himself: *"This desire to understand makes me human. I want to know other, the world around me and myself ... and therefore I am."* The essence of his work was to find the elusive balance between his desire to help kids take charge of their lives and his need to create a space in which his own life could be

experienced and expressed. To make this happen he would have to be fully present and available in the moment. There could be no pre-determined outcomes, only a process, a mutual encounter of learning and understanding.

It was a challenge that called him into action as much as reflection. On the topic of motion, he wrote:

*"As a youth and youth worker I was constantly in motion. I was moving, doing something. Motion was always there at the edge of my consciousness. It was something I did, heard and/or flowed between us that I could not quite understand, yet vital to knowing my experience and the experiences of others. The titles of my novels were "In Motion" and "Floating" because these emphasize the meaning and importance of motion in work with youth. Put simply, we are more often in motion than not.*

*Sometimes I think of motion as the existential hum or rumble beneath the surface that we often feel and hear, a life force perhaps. Motion is also, as Aristotle said, the mode in which the future and the present are one, or perhaps a state in which we can be totally in the moment. And then motion is just plain movement, or getting from here to there, or nowhere, the moment without which it is impossible to be alive."*

As a teacher, Mark was never one to spout theory. He resisted any external belief system that might deny, deflect, or distort the truth of his own experience. The knowledge he valued could only be accumulated through direct engagement with others and the world waiting to be known. For this he had no road map and would politely detach himself from anybody who offered one. Freedom comes to those who have the courage to step into the unknown, and understanding comes to those who can remain grounded within themselves to make sense of whatever they discover. He urged his students to go out into the chaos, examine their own thoughts and feelings, create their own meanings ... and report back. He didn't lecture; he discussed. He always acknowledged honesty and challenged conclusions, whether he agreed with them or not. It wasn't about education – it was about learning. In other words, he worked

with his students the same way he worked with himself and the kids in the residential centre.

As a writer, Mark's most trusted source of material was his personal journal. Unlike most academics, he wrote for himself, not as a strategy to influence, impress, or educate others. This was the medium he used to create meaning from what he was seeing, thinking, and feeling. Readers looking for clarity and resolution may find this disturbing. Images and metaphors may illuminate but they don't explain or resolve anything. And that's exactly how he wanted it to be. His intention was to 'see, show, and tell' rather than define, analyze, and conclude. He wanted to understand rather than explain and, for him, the expressive arts of literature, music, and painting, offered a deeper and more revealing representation of human life than the data collected in the name of science. He didn't write textbooks. To fully grasp the essence of his work, readers must begin by suspending disbelief as if watching a play or reading a novel. In his narratives, he is always the central character, the main protagonist, moving through time and place and coming to reflective stillness. The challenge is not to objectify, classify, or follow him, but to join him as a companion who is also seeking to understand. Readers who come to see him as a separate person are left to reflect on their own stories and create their own meanings. He would have asked no more from a fellow traveller.

Mark was passionate about Child and Youth Care. For him, it was a means to enhance the lives of young people, particularly those who struggled to find expression and meaning in the backwaters and war zones of North American cities. His desire to see and understand what "is" was in constant dialogue with his growing sense of injustice. On this topic he didn't hesitate to let his values and beliefs be known:

*"Every city, town, and country has its oppressive places run by the control, and sometimes religious, 'freaks' who think of space and place mostly as a chance to restrict and shape personalities for a future as cold, closed, and limited as the place in which they find themselves. These controlling places try to make consumers, religious crusaders, and employees out of children instead of fulfilled and happy youth who have a chance to become their dreams. The workers and leaders live above, not 'among' the children and families. The signs on*

*their doors and walls have messages that 'come down' from some mysterious higher authority. Presidents, preachers, gods and captains from a place unfamiliar to anything democratic, spiritual, or humane."*

This doesn't mean he aligned himself with the simplistic conclusion that residential programs should be abolished or used only as a last resort. On the contrary, he believed we should create spaces and places in which child and youth care workers could become directly involved in the day-to-day lives of the kids in their care "... 'homes' –cabins, cottages, hang outs, playgrounds, and woodland and mountain temples of hope ... programs that invite, inspire, value, and respect the creative and intellectual capacity of each young person to find his or her way with the guidance of a fulfilled adult." He considered Child and Youth Care a movement as much as a profession:

*"My dream is for a contemporary civilian conservation corps of young people who would build these places with adults – 'habitats of humanity' across the land, not just the wood frame habitats, but the parks, streams, lakes, playgrounds, schools and streets where everyone walked and played with their heads up. And we could easily pay for it with the money we have spent blowing up the other places."*

When it came to methods of practice, Mark wasn't about to be influenced by those who argued that diagnosis and treatment were the key to becoming a real profession. He had no interest in tagging kids with concocted disorders, setting arbitrary goals, standardizing prescriptive interventions, and measuring meaningless outcomes. Such strategies belonged to the control freaks and had no place in the profession he had in mind. For him, the problems are not inherent in the kids themselves but in the poverty of their relational histories and the repressive nature of the social order. The primary task of the youth care worker is to understand the experience of each young person and support him or her in developing a sense of Self capable of throwing off the shackles. And the task of the profession as a whole is to share this understanding with anyone prepared to listen.

Mark's quest for understanding inevitably took him beyond the pragmatics of day-to-day child and youth care practice and into the realm of philosophy: "*There is something about philosophers that I can hear, but don't quite understand.*" Yet even in this daunting arena he didn't simply devote himself to whatever the masters had to say; he carefully selected those who seemed to understand *him*. Having come to see himself as an active, feeling, and thinking being, a product of his past, and the creator of his future, he was naturally drawn to the diverse philosophy of existentialism. He singled out the French novelist Albert Camus whose personal struggle to free himself from the repression of his past seemed very much like his own. It would be a mistake to assume that he identified with Camus, Becket, Satre, or Dostoyevsky. They were simply the carriers of the light that served to illuminate the darkness that constantly beckoned from the periphery of his awareness and understanding.

It would also be a mistake to conclude that Mark's fascination with philosophy was a conscious, or unconscious, attempt to abandon his laboratory in Child and Youth Care. Given the prevalence of rationalist thinking in this profession it's far more likely to have been the other way around. Whatever he wrote, and whatever he said, he always invited responses from anyone who cared to step forward. In his early work, when he was primarily concerned with the role of the front-line worker, he was constantly engaged in dialogue and discussion with the party faithful. But the more he explored the labyrinth of his own curiosity, the less responsive his audiences became. Many of his 'followers' (how he despised that word) fell by the wayside arguing that he was no longer concerned with the real issues of working with kids, and had wandered off into the esoteric and impersonal forest of literature and philosophy. Nothing could be further from the truth. Anyone with an open mind and artless curiosity will clearly see that his later work offers the most personal, insightful, and far-reaching picture of what working with kids is really about. Along the way, they will be treated to some of the finest writing to be found anywhere in the literature of Child and Youth Care, or in any other human service profession for that matter. The writer had found his 'voice' and the alarming simplicity of this complex man is there for anyone prepared to listen.

In the years before his death, Mark Krueger had to come to terms with a debilitating and disfiguring condition. To regard himself as a victim would have been an unthinkable violation of all he had come to know and believe. Caught up in the monolithic and impersonal world of the medical system, the precarious nature of the human condition was painfully apparent – power, authority, status, control, pretension, and arrogance, overriding the simple qualities of caring, compassion, and connection – the ‘skimmed milk’ of human kindness. True to form, he steered his own course through the fortress, demanding that his medical specialists communicate with each other and begin to work as a team. And he kept on running, not as an attempt to avoid the obvious, but as a way of staying present in the otherwise intolerable moment. Rather than seek out others for sympathy or support he preferred to nestle down in his favourite coffee shop with his laptop and a book, no longer engaging others, but always watching them, still seeking to understand.

This volume contains sketches and muses published by CYC Online between February, 2002 and October, 2011. They are part of a rich legacy left by a brilliant and unique contributor to the literature of this profession. If you’re not familiar with his work there is so much more to be had. When Child and Youth care comes to understand Mark Krueger, it will have taken a major step in understanding itself.

## **A Personal Note**

In this introduction I’ve used many words (2943 to be precise) to create a rough ‘sketch’ of my buddy Mark Krueger. But they’re only words, carved from the many moments and events we shared over the years. For the sake of integrity, mine and his, I need to say from the outset that these words are not about Mark at all – they are about my experience of him as one of the most significant and beloved figures in my life.

To underscore the point, Mark would never have approved of the word ‘beloved.’ Perhaps I would say he was discarding the most essential ingredient of being human. Perhaps he would say it was a diversion, a catchall used to avoid facing the ‘truth’ of what ‘is.’ What I *can* say is that, in our constant exchange of emails, I began to sign off with “Love, Fewster” while he continued to use such terms as “Peace Brother” on his end. To provoke him I decided to

increase the size of the “L” word with each successive message. He made no comment as the format of my emails became increasingly ludicrous. When it was obvious that I’d reached the limit of my computer fonts he finally capitulated with a message ending with “L, Marko.” Phew!

In the months before his death, his responses to my messages became increasingly nebulous and sporadic. Checking in with members of his family I discovered he was distancing himself from relationships in general. Selfishly, I continued to hope that I would be the exception. A few days before he died, his caring brother-in-law reminded him of my persistent efforts to maintain contact. He simply smiled and said, “Ya, Fewster is probably going nuts.” I comforted myself with the belief that he set about dying as he set about living, making his own decisions and taking full responsibility for the outcomes. Perhaps he has finally uncovered the simple beyond the complex.

p.s. – I can only guess what Mark might say about this Introduction. In all likelihood, he would begin with, “Too many words Fewster ... too many words.” Well to him I would borrow a line from the movie *The Full Monty* and say, “I love you ... you bugger.” To which he would probably reply, “Peace Bro.”



## Time and Motion

*Like youth work (our term for child and youth care work), this column can be thought of as a continuous journey.*

*I will begin to share some of the thoughts that have emerged from our study and from reading other stories by youth workers. The premise for our study, as well as this column, is that stories inform us and challenge us to think differently about youth work.*

Time in youth work, for instance, is usually thought of as being linear. Workers and youth move forward in time. The clock governs the length of what they do. They plan activities on the hour or by the minute. Sometimes it is as if time rules what they do. What can we do with this hour? Or this day, and how can what we do fit with the allotted time. A youth gets a time out. Another youth gets a special time, each time fixed according to the clock.

But in youth workers' stories about their moments with youth, time is not always linear. An event often occurs in the context of past, present, and future, and not always in that order. Sometimes moments, like moments in great novels, spiral forward and back through stories. A youth feels connected to a worker and recalls it later with fondness. Or a youth struggles with a worker then later understands what the worker was trying to say.

Workers and youth are often lost in time, immersed in their activity. Time stands still or moves with them rather than forces them forward. They are with each other, their togetherness and involvement in that task at hand governing their activity as opposed to the clock.

Motion and time are often interconnected. Workers and youth move together through time. In this context, motion is, as Aristotle said, the mode in which the future and present are one. Workers and youth act with purpose in time and subsequently what they are

doing and where they are headed is in harmony. Their goal is to be in the moment or to do something purposeful for themselves or others, and subsequently time is embodied in what they do.

Their movements together connect them. They are as Henry Maier said, “rhythmically in synch.” While running or playing or struggling their movements are in harmony. Sometimes an existential hum also moves just beneath the surface. An inaudible sound that drives the characters forward, creating something at the edge of their reach that calls to them. It is as if they are riding this underlying current of sound toward a nonexistent sense of resolution only to discover that it is the journey upstream that matters.

These notions of time and motion, like many other phenomena in stories, challenge us to think differently about youth work. They encourage us to pay attention to time and motion in ways that we might not have otherwise. In the next Moments *With Youth* column, stories by youth workers about silence, another key phenomenon in the stories of youth workers, will be presented.

For more information about time and motion see:

Maier, H. (1992). Rhythmicity: A powerful force for experiencing unity and personal connections. *Journal of Child and Youth Care Work*, 8, 7-13.

Magnuson, D., Baizerman, M., and Stringer, A. (2001). A moral praxis of child and youth care work. *Journal of Child and Youth Care Work*, 15-16, 302-306.

## Place

Youth work occurs in places. Physical places. Public and private places, places where youth can be alone or together *with* others, shared and separate spaces. Places that shape, violent, friendly, dull, exciting places – houses, parks and street corners. Places of boredom. Places where something might happen. Places where there is a sense of anticipation.

Workers and youth are in these places with one another, enmeshed in the space within, around, and between them, creating safe places, human places grounded in their presence. They try to understand places, their meanings changing as they change. They dance in and out of place, making it different with their presence. They long for place, the place of a youth's youth, their youth. They are in place with a sense of anticipation, vocation. They move in place and time, become lost in place, absorbed in what they are doing.

In James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* place gives the story meaning (linguistic self-consciousness) and is part of the lead character. Similarly in youth workers' stories, place shapes, houses, frees, liberates, controls, holds, contains them as they interact. A place is built, altered, shaped, left, entered, remembered, as an important part of the mood, tempo, tone and texture of who they are and what they do.

\*\*\*

Thus, in *Moments With Youth*, place is an important theme just as are the themes of time, motion, and silence in our previous stories (see previous columns in *CYC-Online*).

For more about *place* read:

Baizerman, M. (1990–present). Musings with Mike. Regular column in *Child and Youth Care Forum*.

Childress, H. (2000). *Landscapes of Betrayal; Landscapes of Joy*. Albany New York: State University of New York Press.

Maier, H. (1987). The Space We Create Controls Us. In *Developmental Group Care of Children and Youth*. New York: Haworth Press.

October 2002

## Basket Hold

*In previous months, I shared stories from youth workers who are participating with me in a phenomenological inquiry we call 'Moments With Youth'. This is one of my own. I wrote it for our study as an example of one moment early in my career when I was trying to decide what to do with my life. In this context, it was one of many moments that helped me realize I was where I was supposed to be.*

Daniel gets up from his chair in the lobby of the residential treatment center and approaches, his T- shirt tattered and his face wind-burned from several days on the streets. He's 14.

"I'm Mark, I'll be your child and youth care worker," I hold out my hand. I'm 23.

He continues walking. I walk alongside and motion for him to enter the office.

"Hi Daniel, I'm Nicole, your therapist," she holds out her hand.

No response.

"Before Mark takes you upstairs I wanted to tell you a little about our program," Nicole says.

"I don't give a fuck about the program!" He grabs a paperweight from Nicole's desk and throws it through her window.

I reach for him. He takes a swing at me. I duck and grab him around the waist. He pounds on my back. I quickstep behind him remembering my supervisor, Ernie's, instructions: "Grab both arms by the wrist and cross them in front of him, then put your knee behind his knee and dip like a basketball player taking the leap out of a re-bouncer in front of him, and collapse together to the floor. If he's small enough (Daniel just barely is) sit him in front of you with your legs hooked over his so he can't kick, his body cradled in your arms and your head tight to his so he can't butt you. Then prepare for a long wait. It helps to have something to support your back."

"Nicole, would you move that couch over here." My voice shakes. She gets on one end of the couch and pushes until it's between my back and the wall. The struggle is on. He twists like a dog trying to avoid a bath, shouts, "Your mother sucks cock! Your ol' lady sleeps with horses, cops, pigs!" The veins in his neck cord and his body strains like a stretched bow. My arms begin to ache. The sweat thickens. His hand breaks free. He turns and spits, then butts me in the nose. "Damn!" Fireflies flash in my eyes. Blood begins to run down on my chin.

"Are you, okay?" Nicole asks.

"Yes, I think so. Would you please grab his legs?"

She straddles his legs and holds them firm to the ground while I re-tighten my grip, wishing I could pull his arms up around his neck and choke him. He rests, then jerks like a fish out of water, rests and jerks again until gradually, like an engine slowing to idle, the tension subsides and we sit quietly, soaked in sweat, limbs intertwined, breaths as if coming from the same set of lungs. I look at the scars on his arms, several, almost perfectly round, circles. Sue told me his father put his cigarettes out on him.

"I'm going to let go of your left arm then your right one." We do this step by step until Daniel is standing across from me and Nicole is to our side.

I look out the window. It's raining. As large maple leaves slide down the glass, Nicole brings me a wet paper towel to wipe my nose and face. Daniel shows no remorse.

"I'll take him upstairs," I say to Nicole.

Together we climb the stairs. "Sticky suckers," Suzanne the woman I live with calls the odd mixture of urine and disinfectant that marks the place.

At the top of the stairs, I part the fire doors. The other boys are in school.

"Your room is down the hall," I say. He walks to my side, runs his shoulder along the wall. The treatment center was remodelled last year: earth tones replaced with pastels, large hospital rooms turned into smaller, dormitory rooms, each one housing two boys.

A grocery bag with his things is on the bed. He digs through it. "Bastards," he says. Ernie searches all the new boys things for

drugs and weapons. He takes out a T-shirt and pair of jeans, starts to change, then looks at me. "What are you queer or something?"

I give him a moment to change and unpack, wait outside the door with my back to the wall, once again questioning why I'm here. When I enter again he's sitting at the desk with a photo.

"Who's that?"

"None of your fuckin' business."

I don't respond.

"My sister."

"She's nice looking." Nicole told me she had been abused also.

"Why do you work here?"

"I'm not sure."

"So you can get your jollies, probably."

I change the subject. "Want a coke?"

He nods and we walk to the day room.

I keep an eye on him as I buy cokes from the vending machine then sit across from one another at a small table. He sips his coke, looks down, then up.

"Your shoe's untied." He stares at me.

I stare back.

*We can't place ourselves in  
someone else's shoes, but we  
can try*

Recently members of our youth work research group have been discussing empathy, a theme in our stories. We have more or less come to the conclusion that we can't, as is often said in youth work, "put ourselves in someone else's shoes." If each worker and youth has a unique story, then it is impossible. We all see the world through a different lens, experience life differently based on our prior cultural and familial experiences, and subsequently make different meaning of what we experience.

For example, if a youth worker has been in a gang, used drugs, experienced a loss, or been abused, it doesn't mean that the worker has had the same experience as a youth who is in a gang, uses drugs, experiences loss or has been abused. Likewise a worker who has had success at something is not having the same success. And a worker who experiences sadness, joy, fear, or excitement is not experiencing the same sadness, joy, fear, or excitement as a youth.

Furthermore, we find that when a worker says to a youth that the worker knows what something is like because the worker has been there, it can more or less take away the youth's experience, or close the door for letting the youth describe how he or she is feeling. Most adolescents, for example, don't like to hear from their parents or youth worker, "I know what it's like. When I was your age I did the same thing," especially when it is said in a way that minimizes the youth's experience.

The goal instead is to try to understand. Workers with empathy are curious about the youth's experience. They want to know what an experience is like for the youth. These workers also try to understand their own feelings and stories and then use this understanding to open themselves to youths' stories, feelings, etc. This makes them available as Gerry Fewster says to mirror back

their experience of a youth. An empathetic worker, for example, shows the excitement, sadness, etc that a youth evokes in the worker as the youth describes his or her experience. And this conveys to the youth that the worker understands, or at least is trying to understand.

It is, of course, all a matter of degree and context—the matter of how close we can come to having another person's experience. Certainly some of our feelings experiences, etc, are similar to youths' experiences and feelings, but it is never exactly the same. We all have our own unique stories and feelings. Perhaps then a better definition of empathy is that we try to put ourselves in the youth's shoes. By knowing and valuing our own experiences, it makes us value and curious about youth's experiences. The empathetic worker shows by his or her actions and/or says, "Tell me what it's like for you, I really want to know. I'm curious about you and who you are. This is how I'm feeling, how are you feeling."



July 2003

## *On Juxtaposition*

In this column for the past months, seven youth workers and I have been sharing short stories (sketches) about our experiences working with youth. These stories are part of a study (qualitative inquiry) that we are conducting. Our goal in the study is to deepen our understanding of our experiences with youth. As we write our stories, we have also been developing our method of inquiry, Self in Action. We improve our method of research, in other words, as we learn about our experiences.

The study has also reinforced our belief that our stories are interconnected with our stories about our work with youth. A couple months ago, Quinn Wilder, a member of our study group, provided an example of how some of us have been juxtaposing experiences from one moment in time with experiences from another point in time because together these experiences seem to shed light on one another. A moment from our own youth, for example, informs a moment from youth work.

In my own work, this is a process I have been using and trying to understand for several years. For our readers, who are interested in qualitative inquiry, I thought it might be helpful to share a brief description of this process that I am working on for the preface of a manuscript that is almost complete.

### **Pavilion: A Portrait of a Youth Worker**

*"The same or almost the same points were always being approached afresh from different directions and new sketches made. Very many of these were badly drawn or uncharacteristic, marked by all the defects of a weak draftsman. And when they were rejected a number of tolerable ones were left, which now had to be rearranged and cut down, so that if you looked at them you could get a picture of a landscape. Thus the book is really only an album (Wittgenstein, 1951, in preface to *Philosophical Investigations*, pages unnumbered)."*

For several years I tried to draw a tolerable set of sketches about my life and work with troubled youth that I could put in an album. Like my reading of Wittgenstein and other philosophers and poets, there was something about these sketches that I could hear, but did not quite understand – an existential hum perhaps. My sense was that if I could get these sketches to ring true, I would as my friend, colleague, and mentor, Jerome Beker once said, “Hear it deep and look to the questions that do so much to determine the soul of our work.”

Using techniques I learned from literature and qualitative inquiry, I drew and redrew each sketch several times trying to make it look, feel and sound right. Sometimes I broke a sketch down to a line or two. Then I rested and started again, looking for what belonged and didn’t belong.

As I worked, I interpreted the sketches in relationship to what I had learned from literature, art, philosophy, music, psychology and my work with troubled youth. This helped me decide what to leave in and out. But I did not make the interpretations part of the sketches. Like a good story, I wanted a sketch and/or series of sketches to stand for themselves – images that alone or in combination rang true.

I borrowed a note card that short story writer Raymond Carver kept above his desk with the following quote from the poet Ezra Pound, “Fundamental accuracy of statement is the sole morality of writing.” I also read novelists, short story writers and playwrights, such as Margueritte Duras, Anton Chekhov, Albert Camus, Ernest Hemingway, and Samuel Beckett, who had the ability to create clear, precise images with a few simple words.

In search of my own voice, I read my work to my writing teacher. Hearing the words in anticipation of her response helped me listen. Then, when my lessons were over, I read alone, trying to escape the imaginary audience and please myself.

Once I had drawn several sketches as best as I could, I began to combine and juxtapose them, looking for ways they fit together. A sketch from my childhood, for example, would seem to work with a sketch from a later period of time, or vice versa. Gradually I found myself breaking the sketches into fragments and interspersing them with other fragments because this seemed more consistent

with my repeated reflections on the experiences. Rarely did I see a sketch as a whole. Parts of it in combination with parts of other sketches came at me as I was doing one thing or another.

At times it was as if I was looking through a kaleidoscope. As I twisted and turned the fragments in my mind, patterns or themes appeared and became the topics of new drawings. One of the new drawings became a play because that seemed to be the best way to frame the dialog. A few fragments were turned into poems. Many sketches and fragments were dropped. These were either still “badly drawn” after several tries, or simply didn’t fit.

Eventually a central narrative emerged from the few that were left. This was drawn in regular type while the fragments that wove around it were drawn in italics. Seven sketches, each comprised of two or more fragments, and an epilogue remained. All of the fragments were dated. And, finally, since many of my reflections occurred during my daily run, I framed the entire work in a run, which also seemed to provide the correct tempo. What resulted was a self-portrait, a work in progress named after a place I often return to, Pavilion.

August 2003

## On Vac

*We're on vacation. Our research group of youth workers is spending the summer camping, swimming, exploring etc. Last month I spoke about how we juxtapose our sketches to understand the interrelatedness of our experiences in and out of youth work. Here's a sketch I've been working on.*

/ cross country ski. The sunlight off the snow is blinding. Afterwards, I rest on the couch in my cabin near a warm fire.

*We – six youth (Isaac, Pat, Mary, Daniel, Carla and Brunsey) and me – are in the woods, cross-country skiing through the southern Kettle Moraine in Wisconsin. It's their first time. A moment ago, we struggled to get their gear on. This section of the course is flat. I demonstrate how to use the poles and how to glide, moving my feet back and forth. It's a beautiful winter day.*

*"Boring," Brunsey says.*

My stomach growls for something to eat. I put on my leather jacket and back between the tall white pines. At the stop sign, I turn up the heat. Two bulls are running in a ditch next to the road. They escaped again from my neighbor's farm. I pull alongside, roll down the window, and listen to the sound of their hoofs hitting the snow. A few years ago, when I was skiing in the woods, a young man on a horse rode across my path. His long coat flowed behind with the horse's tail. It was a majestic sight. Ever since then, the sound has stayed with me.

*A group of young men with sleek outfits and equipment want to pass. "Stay in the tracks to the right," I say. Stumbling, they jump from one track to the other. The young men pass.*

After the bulls disappear in a stand of blue spruce, I continue to the Moose Inn, which is down the road. Joe, the owner, added carpeting and female bartenders, but it is still a country bar by most appearances.

*A few minutes later, we come upon a woman with her two little daughters.*

*"Fuck!" Pat says as he catches a tip and falls.*

*"Watch your language," I say and give him a hand.*

*We pass the woman and her daughters. Pat the strongest of the group, powers ahead. Daniel and Carla ski side by side trying to get more glide out of their skis. I fall behind a little and try to give Mary, Brunsey, and Isaac a hand.*

*"I hate this shit," Isaac says, dusting off his butt.*

*"Wishbone your skis, dig in your edges and keep your poles behind you," I say as we approach the first major hill. It's a comedy of errors. For several minutes a stream of cuss words flow from them as one after another they slip and fall backwards down the hill. At one point with Brunsey and Pat fall on top of me, we start laughing.*

The waitress seats me at a table beneath a beer sign where there is enough light to read. She's wearing a sleeveless Hawaiian jump suit.

"Aren't you cold?"

"No, I move around a lot ... the usual?"

I nod and call the farmer about the bulls, but no one answers. While I read and wait, an older couple at the bar tell a story about a cat that got caught in a chunk of snow behind the wheel of their pick-up and was still alive when they got home. No one questions this. The Moose Burger is reliable like the story I read by Turgenev, Brezin Lea.

*"Here, watch me," I say and demonstrate.*

*"I can do that," Daniel says and follows me up the hill.*

*Their arms ache as they dig their poles in behind them and try to keep themselves from slipping, but they all make it, then scream and holler as they speed down the other side.*

*Pat and Daniel are side by side now.*

*"I'll race you to the next hill," Daniel says.*

I pay my bill and leave. On the way home my mind drifts out across a white cornfield towards the moon.

*Pat races ahead, muscling and grunting through the snow. Daniel*

*uses technique to catch up and pass, but Pat lunges at the finish line.*

Suddenly, around a bend, as if two boulders dropped from the sky, the bulls reappear in the middle of the road. The car swerves to the left, then back across the road and comes to rest in a ditch with the red oil light flashing in the dash. For a moment I think I see the man on the horse. He's wearing a Hessian hat. He points a spear at me and disappears while the bulls lumber into the woods on the other side of the road.

*"Who won," Pat says looking back with his face covered with snow.*

*"A tie," I say.*

Fortunately it only takes a moment to dig out. I keep my eyes riveted to the road the rest of the way home. The smoke coming from the chimney is a welcome sight. I stop to piss in the outhouse. It's cold, but I get it done, then stand on the hill over the lake a moment, listening to the wind make a sweet crying sound as it moves over the ice.

"...in the darkness we saw a figure coming toward us ... But we were mistaken, it was not he." From Dostoyevsky's *White Nights*, the third night.

*The sun begins to sink low in the sky. We make it around the course safely, then start a fire for the hot chocolate. Sitting on the logs shoulder-to-shoulder, we drink with our cold hands wrapped around the warm mugs.*

I warm myself by the fire and climb into the loft where my computer sits on a wire spool next to my futon and work into the night on a section of a sketch I've been writing over and over again: Daniel and I sit on the beach with our chins on our knees, "Do you think I'll be fucked up like my ol' man?"

I hesitate, say, "No."

I want to capture a moment of hesitation, but can't quite get it right. In early morning, a bat, fooled out of hibernation by the heat, buzzes overhead, then crawls back into a small crack in the ceiling and dies, all its energy spent with nothing to eat. A purple hue forms on the horizon. I put on my old military overcoat and take a

walk on the frozen surface of the lake. In the faint light of day, I can hear my feet hit the ground like a distant heartbeat.

*... Like drizzle on embers,  
Footsteps within me  
Toward places that turn to air...*

*From Octavio Paz's Draft of Shadows*

November 2003

## The Alley

*In our study (the one conducted by the youth workers who present their stories in this column), we often explore moments from our own youth to determine how our experiences bias and enrich our understanding of youth work. Recently, I was exploring a moment from my own youth. It reminded me of how boredom and waiting play major roles.*

*Milwaukee's Northwest Side, between Burleigh and Auer on 45<sup>th</sup> street, 1954.*

**(1954)**

I kick the ball above the garage roof. On the way down, it hits the edge of the rain gutter, falls to the ground and hisses, punctured on a rusty piece of metal. I go inside. We live downstairs. No one is home.

I won the ball at Summer Fun Club for most pushups, 28. It's about the size of a basketball, only the rubber is thinner and the seams go out, like my ribs. I put tape on the puncture and pump it up. It still leaks. The gas station is at the end of the block. I walk down the alley, dodging horse apples from the garbage wagons. Despite the shit, I prefer this way. It's shorter.

I close my eyes and count my steps, trying to make it to the end of the alley without looking. I almost do. Tires are stacked in back of the station. Sometimes when we play kick the can I hide here. I walk through the overhead doors. Red, the owner is working under a Plymouth. He sees my shoes, slides out. His face is covered with grease.

"What can I do for you Matt?" he asks.

I show him the ball.

"Flat, uh."

"Yup."



"Easy enough to fix."

"I thought so."

The bell rings. Red goes out to pump gas. I sit in the old shoe-shine chair in the office and look out the window. Emil Horn's Drug Store is across the street, just beyond that is Freedman's grocery store where we have a tab.

"This will just take a second," Red says after he puts the money in the cash register. With the little silver valve in his mouth like a toothpick, he scrapes the spot around the leak with a file, spreads the glue evenly, puts a patch on top, and smooths out the edges. Then he pumps it up. "There, that ought to do it," he pats the ball and tosses it me.

"Thanks Red. How much?"

"No charge."

"I owe you," I say, like my dad says sometimes.

"Sure."

Wally's restaurant is on the other side of the alley, just past the barbershop. I sit at the lunch counter.

Pumpkin seeds," I put three cents on the counter.

"You sure like your salt." Wally scoops up the pennies and gives me the seeds. "How's your mother?"

"Fine."

"You be good to her."

"I will."

"Here." He gives me a penny red licorice for free.

"Thanks." I eat it right away.

On the way home I chew pumpkin seed shells around the edges while I bounce the ball with the other hand. They last longer that way. It's getting late in the afternoon. The house is still empty. I gulp down a glass of water, and comb my duck's tail. Then I stretch out on my bed and try to be perfectly still.

The cracks in the ceiling are the Amazon River. My cat Rocky jumps up. I pet him. He purrs, rolls on his back so I can scratch his stomach. It's dead silent, like nothing. The front door opens. Rocky jumps off the bed, meows. My mother feeds him regularly. I do it

when I feel like it.

"Hi Matt." She's exhausted. In two weeks school starts again. She's the principal's secretary. They're getting ready. I like the way she looks. She's wearing a skirt and short-sleeved blouse.

"What's for dinner?" I ask.

"I thought I'd make sweetbreads, boiled potatoes, and beans."

"Can we have fried potatoes?"

"Yes, I guess so," she sighs. "Why don't you go and wait for your father."

She wants me out of her hair. I ride my bike to the bus stop, three blocks away on Sherman Boulevard. My father rides the bus from the life insurance company downtown. A bus stops. The door opens with a hiss like the hiss from the punctured ball. He's not on this one. Another passes without stopping. Last week, I waited until it was dark – one hiss after another with no sign of him.

I can see him on the next one before it stops. He's standing, ready to get off, newspaper tucked under his arm. He looks cool with his dark hair slicked back and his dark blue suit, white shirt and dark blue white poke-dot tie.

"Hi son," he says, his voice drowned out by the motor.

I walk by his side with my bike.

"How was your day?" he asks.

I tell him about the ball.

"That Red is something else, isn't he?"

"Yes, how was your day?"

"Oh, let's just say uneventful."

Our house is fourth from this end of the alley, the end opposite the gas station.

"Hi Bill," my mothers says, turning from the stove.

"Hi Marie." He takes off his coat and sits in his chair in the living room with the newspaper. My brother comes home from football practice. He's in high school; I start junior high this fall.

"Let's eat," my brother says.

"In a few minutes," my mother says.

My brother washes up. "So, what are we having," my father walks in the kitchen.

"Sweetbreads."

"Harry called today, he's coming in for the convention," my father says about my uncle who lives in New York. He used to work at the home office with my father before he got a branch office in the Big Apple. He wears wild ties and Lady Godiva suspenders and, and tells corny jokes. While my mother tells about her day at the school, I go into the attic and swing on the gymnastic rings my brother and I made and hung from the rafters, back and forth over old clothes and phonograph records.

At dinner, my brother tells about his job cutting grass and practising football. I don't say much. I never do unless I want to get a reaction like the time I told my mother I was glad when my grandmother died.

"I'm going up to see Ralph," my father says after dinner and goes upstairs where the Barrys live. Mr. Barry wears a suit too. He travels, for another company. Mrs. Barry works in an office like my mom for the government, but not a school, highways, I think. They don't have kids.

I put on my khaki pants with the big side pockets and powder blue jersey and walk down the alley to the park, which is only a couple blocks away, and field balls during batting practice before the softball game. They let us do it. All the kids in the neighborhood participate. We chase down the balls they hit. The one who gets the most points for the summer wins – 5 points for a fly ball with no glove, 3 with a glove, 2 for a once bouncer (glove or no glove) and 1 for a grounder. There's no prize or anything, just winning, whatever that's worth.

I get seven balls, 19 points – total for the season, 742. Arbiture, who lives on the other side of the block, has 800 something. Russo, my main friend, shows up. We walk around looking for girls. He has a brush haircut. Maybe I'll get one. Kathy and Mary, who we see almost every time we come, approach. Last week, Russo got bare tit from Mary, in the bushes, behind the pavilion. He's ahead of me on that. When Mary and Russo go off, to the bushes, again, I'm left with Kathy.

"See you, I've got to go home" I say, and leave.

It's dark, Wally's is closed, but Red's is still open. Kent is working. He has a tattoo from the navy and wants to go to Michigan State to study forestry on the G.I. Bill. I wave; he waves back as I enter the alley. It's private here at night, away from traffic, and people. I walk slowly trying not to get shit on my shoes.

I swing on the gate; it creaks. My mom's watching T.V. I hate it when she knows I'm coming. My dad and Mr. Barry are upstairs, drinking cocktails and reciting from the Jabberwocky.

*'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves  
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:  
All mimsy were the borogroves,  
And the mome raths outgrabe...*

Mr Barry says and my father goes:

*Beware the Jabberwock, my son!  
The jaws that bite, the claws that catch!  
Beware the Jubjub bird, and shun  
The fruminous Bandersnatch!"*

I throw my clothes down the shoot and go to bed. The moon is out. My fort, a refrigerator box with a rug on the floor is under the window. It's not a real fort like the one I make when we go up north in summer. Sometimes it rains.

I can't see the Amazon River. I can see the ball though. It's on the window ledge, seams sticking out like my ribs. Wonder if Russo got bare tit? I'll get some pretty soon. Maybe Kathy will give it to me, even though I don't like her. School starts in a few days. The moon dips behind the garage. It's pitch dark. I stay perfectly still. There's nothing.

January 2004

## *On the spot*

I'm sitting in a circle in a large room with fourteen students in my class, four youth, and a youth worker, a member of our research group who invited our class to the shelter for youth where he works. A few minutes ago, he took us on a tour. Then we walked here, to the administration building, to discuss what we saw and learned.

One of the youth is telling us about the shelter, his history in foster care and his goals in life. It seems like a speech he has given many times. I'm a little uneasy about how much he's sharing, but the youth worker is letting him go. At one point the youth talks about how he's learned to play the system, and I wonder if he isn't playing us. His fast talk and nervous, cocky body language tell me something is still very unsettled in him.

Then he says something like, "My foster mother wants me to pay for a pair of pants. I ain't payin' for no pair of pants. She gets money for that every month. Why should I pay?" He looks across the room at me. "Professor, I want to know what you think? Is that right? Should she make me pay?"

I begin to contemplate what to say. I learned long ago not to let myself be set up as an expert, but I still feel uneasy about being in this position.

But before I can answer, the youth is distracted by a comment from someone else and shifts to another part of the room. As the conversation continues, I wonder what I would have said, maybe something like, "I'm not sure, I think I'd have to know more, but in general I think it is good to start paying something for your own things as you get older."

On my way to my car afterwards, I think about how, even after years of study and practice, I am still uneasy and uncertain in these situations, and how understanding these moments is an important part of the work and my life. A gift.

February 2004

## Positioning

When I reflect on my early moments as a child and youth care worker in a residential center for emotionally disturbed boys, I remember many of the mistakes I made. I said or did something that with hindsight I can see was wrong, or at the very least, not the best alternative. Fortunately, like most new workers, I think my intent was always good, and I was eager to learn from my experiences.

A strength that I had, and I'm not sure where it came from, was my ability to keep track of the boys in my group. I got nervous or worried if one of the boys was out of sight without my knowing where he was. I also seemed to sense when I should be closer to or farther away from one boy or another.

At times, I had without knowing it what Fritz Redl and David Wineman (1952, p. 164) called "proximity control." If two boys, for example, were in a situation that could escalate into a fight, then it was important for me to be physically closer to them. In another situation it was important to give the boys a little space. And as we walked to dinner, it was important to be closest to those who needed my presence the most, and to give those who could use a little distance just enough so that I could still see them. I usually tried to be somewhere in the center of our configuration where I could determine the best distance between each boy and myself.

Some of the more experienced workers had developed this ability into an art form. When I watched them I was amazed at they way moved and positioned themselves. They seemed to sense as well as know where to be as they improvised to the tempos of daily living. Watching them was like watching accomplished dancers who knew how to play off one another.

Other workers didn't get it. They were in the wrong place at the wrong time. A worker might be in a youth's face when he or she should have been two or three steps away, or on the other side of the room or out of sight when she or he should have been much closer to a youth or group of youths.

Now, as I read many of my own stories and the stories of youth workers, many of which were presented previously in this column, I often think about position. I ask myself, where are they/we in relationship to the youth? How does our position influence an interaction? Are we in the right, wrong place?

When I teach child and youth care work, I give examples of positioning and demonstrate in class exercises. Our discussions invariably turn to how position is connected with boundaries and human connection. Body language is also often part of the discussion. Being in the right place alone doesn't work if our bodies and facial expressions don't give off an impression that supports the purpose of our position.

As with many techniques in child and youth care, it's difficult to determine how much about positioning can be taught and how much is learned through experience. My sense is that workers who are most likely to be effective bring a fair amount of awareness with them. Like I did as a new worker, they seem to know and sense that their position is important in managing behavior, forming connections, and establishing boundaries. In my classes I can usually determine pretty quickly who gets it and who doesn't. If I were trying to make a decision about hiring a child and youth care candidate, I would observe how well he or she positioned him or herself during a trial period with a group of youth and include my observations as part of my decision.

#### **Reference**

Redl, R. & Wineman, D. (1952) *Controls from Within: Techniques for the Treatment of the Aggressive Child*. New York: Free Press.

## *"Let's walk to your room together"*

Last month I shared my thoughts about the importance of position in our work. Where we place ourselves in relationship to children and youth can have a major impact on the success or failure of an interaction. If we are too close or too far away, for example, it can have influence on our ability to set a boundary or invite a youth to participate. Since then I remembered something from a Henry Maier workshop I attended several years ago.

For those who have not discovered the work of Henry Maier, he is the author of several excellent articles and books about child and youth care. He also has a monthly column in this magazine.

In the workshop he was demonstrating the difference between two approaches to get a youth to his bedroom. In the first role play, the worker (Henry played the role of the worker) stood behind the youth, who was sitting in a chair with his arms folded across his chest and a grumpy look on his face. "Get to your room," the worker said and pointed in the direction of the youth's room.

In the second example, the worker (Henry again) was in front of the youth crouched slightly to make eye contact. The worker put his hand on the youth's shoulder and gently pulled it away, saying something like, "Let's walk to your room together. I'm interested in hearing about how your day went."

For me this latter example beautifully defines, as Henry demonstrated, child and youth care as a process of human interaction in which workers seize the moment to form attachments while simultaneously promoting the development of youth. I use it regularly in my classes. Someday, I'd like to structure a whole course around that moment when the worker gently slides his or her hand away and says, "Let's walk to your room together." The position of the worker, the sense of presence he or she conveys, the sensitivity to touch, the pace at which they eventually move, the congruence



between the worker's position and the message being conveyed, and the importance of the event as a transition could all be discussed at great length. More and more I am convinced that this is the place we should be starting and ending – the minutiae and milieu in which the bulk of our work occurs.

Now to another related matter: For regular readers of this column, it is obvious that we have not presented the stories of the youth workers in our research study for a few months. This is because we are taking a break and considering a shift in our study. We would like to include other workers to bring in some fresh stories and ideas. One thought was to invite workers from around the world to submit their stories via the internet. We would send them instructions on how to use the method of reflective practice we use to write and interpret the moments, and hold internet discussions. Their stories would then become part of our study, and also appear here in this column. The first step is to see if anyone is interested. What do you think? Is it a good idea? Would you join in?

April 2004

## *community youth work*

I am with ten students in my child and youth care class. It's a weeknight in early fall, about 10:30 pm. We are walking with Carlos, a youth worker, through a neighborhood on Milwaukee's South Side. Earlier Carlos told us about the youth center where he works and took us on a tour of the building. Now he's taking us on a tour of the neighborhood, and showing us how important it is to reach out to and be part of the community.

It's a poor, rough neighborhood with gangs and families trying to make it a safe place. Carlos walks ahead with "machismo." Two policemen in a squad car pull to the curb.

"Hey, Carlos, come here," says the cop on the passenger side.

Carlos walks over and speaks with them a few minutes. Carlos told us he is a bridge between the gangs and the police. Both accept him.

When he was in my class a couple years ago, Carlos told his classmates and me that sometimes he knows about a crime a gang member committed, but he doesn't tell the police because the gang would drive him out of the neighborhood, or at the very least hurt him or a member of his family. The police accept this because they believe it is more valuable to have him in the neighborhood trying to get kids out of gangs. We use this example in our discussions of ethics in youth work.

The squad pulls away. We cross the street and turn into a side street. Carlos says hello to a woman who is standing in her front yard looking at the stars.

"Hello Carlos," she says with a smile.

"What you looking at?"

"Northern lights, but I don't think we'll be able to see them, not in the city with all these street lights."

Carlos looks and says, "No, probably not."

We continue our walk. A car with four teens in it, "gang

bangers," stops in an alleyway that crosses the street. Carlos walks to the car, exchanges hand greetings, puts one arm on top of the car, leans in and says, "What are you dudes doing on the streets. You should be home doing homework."

They give him a little heat. "I'm serious," he says and taps on top of the car.

They drive off. We continue our walk. In front of a bungalow, Carlos turns, says, "Let's go in here." He climbs the porch steps and rings the doorbell. An older woman answers. Carlos speaks to her and she invites us in.

We stand in a circle in her dining room, surrounded by boxes of plastic garbage bags. Carlos explains that she is a community leader, a person everyone trust and respects. She offers us a can of pop (a soft drink). A few of the students accept.

"The police donate the pop and these plastic bags," she says, pointing to boxes of large trash bags.

"What's it for?" one of the students says.

"The children," she says. "I want them to feel they can come here any time and get a can of pop and a plastic bag to pick up trash in the neighborhood. That's how we build community. The police stop here too, and help out."

"How long have you lived here?" a student asks.

"All my life."

"Why didn't you leave?" another student asks.

"Because it's my home."

She invites us to come back on the weekend to clean up with her. Carlos walks us back to our cars. I thank him.

On the way home I think about my father, who grew up not too far away from the community center. It was mostly a German and Polish neighborhood then. He used to pick up coal that fell from the railroad cars to heat their small house and his brother and he had to fight back to back to keep the Polish kids from stealing the collections from his paper route. After dinner he turned on the streetlights with a long pole.

I wonder what he would have thought about the neighborhood today? It is much more diverse with Hispanic, African American,

Southeast Asian, German and Polish families. I think he would have been disappointed that it was still rough and poor, but he would have liked the diversity. I do. Several years ago, I marched with many other people to help make it this way.

I drive by the house where my father was raised, a small bungalow like the one we were in before. He told me a story once about how when he was a boy he wanted to go to camp but they couldn't afford it. Then one day he was digging with his toes in the back yard and he found a coin purse with a several dollar bills, just enough to go to camp. His mother made him put an ad in the newspaper to see if anyone would claim it (that was good community work) and when no one did, he got to go to camp. Later after my mother had died and he was living alone in another part of town someone broke into the house. They took the TV set, some silverware, and the coin purse. He felt totally violated. But he continued volunteering his time for causes he thought would make the community stronger. As I drive away, I think about him turning on the streetlights, lights like the ones that blocked the woman's view of the sky.

September 2004

## *Leaving things unresolved*

*I am back from summer vacation and ready to start a new series of reflections on moments with youth. In the past, as some of you are aware, this column was devoted to sketches and stories from youth workers who were conducting with me a study of their moments with youth. This study has now ended, and will shortly appear in a book titled 'Themes and Stories in Youth Work Practice'.*

During the summer, I thought about why we focus so much on resolving things in child and youth care. In much of the child and youth care writing and work, it seems as if we are trying to reach a goal or outcome or show how things work rather than being in the lived experience with children and youth. We want to resolve a conflict or finish a project when in reality much of the work is about not resolving or finishing. And ignoring or not learning from this part of the work keeps us from knowing it and being enmeshed in the moment as much as our drive toward resolution or outcome does.

I know in the experiences I write about things are often undone. For example, in one of the moments I have written about and tried to understand several times I am engaged in a game of one-on-one basketball with a youth who gets upset because I always win so I let up and he gets equally upset with me for not trying. It's a no-win situation in a sense. I want to be real and genuine by playing to my ability but I also want him to have an opportunity to succeed, only not at the expense of being less than genuine.

In another situation, which I wrote about in this column last spring, I was put on the spot in front of my class by a youth and I did not know how to respond in time before the conversation shifted, and afterwards I was left second guessing what I would have said. This was a good learning experience because it taught me that even after all this time and study in the field I can get

tongue tied or am not sure of the correct response, if there ever is a “correct” as opposed to real response.

In hindsight, it is easy to see that these unresolved moments were mostly about me, the need to reach a goal, win, prove, or control the situation. Hopefully with time I have been more able to accept a situation for what it is, to go with the unresolved flow when it is appropriate, and to not let my need to figure things out get in the way of youths’ need to figure things out for themselves. Sometimes I have learned it is simply best just to leave things unresolved because not everything in life is resolvable. Knowing when to do this, of course, is the key. This is what makes the dance so interesting and so hard to do, because, equally, there *are definitely times when situations need resolving*.

My sense about these unfinished and unresolved moments is that they are central to understanding the work and to forming connections. By better knowing the unresolved we are better able to resolve. And if we are sincere and genuine with youth in our quest to discover what to do and still don’t know how or what to do, the youth sense it on some level and feel safe with and trust us because we are on a journey to know self the same way we are asking them to know self.

One thing I am sure of is that these moments are part of the montage of our individual and collective experiences of the work, and therefore, for that reason alone, they are worth trying to understand, even if we don’t.

October 2004

## Edward Hopper and the Existential Hum

This column follows the same line of thought as my last column in which I wrote about the importance of understanding unresolved moments in child and youth care even if we don't. There are many moments in child and youth care that we won't ever fully understand, but want to.

I remember, for instance, a moment with a youth just after I had to physically restrain him. We were sitting and talking quietly. He had just asked me why I was there and I was tongue-tied, flooded by self-doubt and uncertainty. Then he said my shoe was untied and I was sure he was trying to get me to look down so he could make a break for it. I smiled and looked at him. He stared back.

Afterwards, I thought a lot about what might have been going on in that moment. I wanted to trust him, but knew I couldn't. I also wanted to trust my feelings, but I was not sure how I felt. My mind was still on his question about why I was there at the same time that I was trying to watch him.

There is something in moments like these that calls to me. I like to think of it as an existential hum. I can hear something on a deeper level, but I'm not sure what it is and this makes me want to try harder. For example, in the above situation I really wanted to know why I was there. And trying to figure it out seemed as important as knowing why.

Literature and art help me describe and understand the feeling states in these moments. In a good poem, short story, or play, for example, I can see and hear these moments, and it makes me want to reach the same point in our own work by understanding the processes the writers used, the way playwright Sam Shepard does when he creates a scene in which you sense there is something at the edge of the character's consciousness that compels you to share the journey.

In hindsight, the feeling that I had in the moment above was sort of like the feeling one gets from looking at an Edward Hopper painting in which tension is created by what poet Mark Strand called the two imperatives in Hopper's work – the urge to continue and the urge to stay. The fact I couldn't capture the feeling made me want to both remain and get away, and I like to think that maybe this made me human and genuine so I could connect with the youth.

In my opinion, we need more of this curiosity and truth seeking in our research and work. There is too much certainty, and subsequently lack of "realness" in our conversations and writing that leaves the listener or reader asking, "how can you be so sure?" And the kids pick up on it because they see us painting a picture that doesn't exist. On the other hand if we focused on describing what is in all its wonder, glory, struggle, uncertainty and confusion, we would probably be in even better shape as a field to connect, the way we are compelled to look and look again at a Hopper painting.



November 2004

## Anatomy of a Scene

In child and youth care, a scene calls to us. We want to know it better, to understand what it means. We look at it like we look at a good painting trying to plumb its depths.

A few weeks ago I drove by the place where the residential treatment center I had worked at used to be. It had been torn down, but the hill on which it stood was still there. The boys and I did many things on that hill. We raked leaves, sat and sledded and rolled down it.

As I drove on, I remembered a time we had just come from the playground down the street and were walking up the hill. Below the hill on the other side were the railroad tracks where the boys tried to run away. None of them seemed to want to run away now though. We had had a good time at the playground and were hungry. Food was on our minds and the smell of the fall leaves was in the air. Small stones made our feet slip slightly as we walked up the asphalt driveway. We were moving together yet separately. The sun was low in the sky.

Later for some reason, I'm not sure why, I continued to draw this scene in my mind. In addition to what I described above, I knew other things about it. For example, it occurred in the 1960's when I was a young man looking for an identity. The troubled boys were also searching for their identity. We were hoping for hamburgers. It felt good at that particular time to be together. Things were going relatively smoothly. For a moment, I felt on top of my game as a child and youth care worker.

But I wanted to know more so I turned again to a book I wrote about last month that was written by poet Mark Strand about his interpretation of Edward Hopper paintings. For those who don't know Edward Hopper, he was a US artist who painted scenes from the 1940's and 1950's, the most famous of which is a scene in a diner called *Nighthawks*. Strand said that Hopper paintings reminded him of how he experienced Canada as a boy from the

back seat of his parents' cars. They were moving but the scenes he saw were still. He gazed at them but they did not return his gaze. As in looking at a Hopper painting, two forces compelled him, the urge to leave and the urge to stay.

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I could relate immediately to Strand's comments. There was something about this scene that called to me but I also wanted to move on. We were walking, but the scene seemed like a still-life drawing. I looked at it but it did not look back at me. Our lives were moving forward, but we were captured at a moment in time. Our presence, the rhythm of our gait, the birds flying overhead, the time of day, and the calls I can still hear from the boys inside the building on their own search just before dinner, were all part of the scene.

I continue examining the scene. I try to imagine how I might have seen it from the backseat of my parents' car, my sense being that if I can see it through the eyes of my childhood, uninhibited by my professional questions and thoughts, it will be an even more valuable part of my evolving montage of child and youth care.

## Love: the who or what and Thanksgiving

While reading a recent discussion about love in child and youth care on CYC-Net and in the *CYC-Online* journal, I had several feelings. First, I didn't think I loved the kids I used to work with. I liked and was fond of many of them, but love seemed like too strong a term. I didn't love them the way I loved my mother or Suzanne and Jason, my partner and son. I loved things about the kids and some of the things they did, but I wouldn't call it love the way I save the word love for a few people with whom I have had deep, caring, sometimes passionate, unconditional, relationships. This kind of love seemed misplaced and even dangerous in the work, whereas liking, being fond of and caring about the kids seemed much more as we used to say, appropriate.

Further when I heard people saying they loved the kids or the kids loved them this made me leery because I felt their notion of love was quite different than mine. It was as if love was something that could be spewed out for everyone. It also seemed to me that their use of the word love was more an expression of what they wanted others to think about them rather than a deeper feeling about real love, or love as I had experienced it.

Recently I saw a documentary about the philosopher Jacques Derrida, the leader of the deconstructionist movement. At one point the interviewer asked what he thought about love. After trying to avoid the question, he asked the interviewer if she meant love as related to the "who or what?" I'm not sure if I got it right, but I interpreted the "who" meaning the singular sense of loving and being loved for who we are and the "what" being the sense of being loved and loving people for what they do, look like, etc. It seems to me that most of us want to experience self love in the singular sense but are often torn by wanting to experience love for what we do or how we appear to others. We say we want to be accepted for who we are but act to please others or to create an image that is more

about the “what” than us.

Love, of course, is really only our experience of another person or our experience of what we feel from another person about ourselves. Each person in a loving relationship experiences love differently. It's not their feeling we experience, but our experience of how they and we make us feel.

So how does this apply? I often say I loved the work. Or I loved to be with the kids. And I really did. I loved the smell, the pace, the struggle and the sense of being enmeshed with them in our daily activities. Even though “like” is probably the better word, it's easier for me to say I loved the work or to be with the kids, because it was part of me and I do indeed want to love myself for who I am and what I do. Maybe it is also because I want to be known for loving the work, I'm not sure, but it seems if I can't love me and what I do, who will?

Thus whereas I don't think I ever said I loved the kids, or one kid in particular, it might have been appropriate for me to say I loved my experience of being with certain kids and the part of me they evoked. I did indeed feel closer to some kids. I could even as Urie Bronfenbrenner said, “be crazy” about some of them. But my experience of them was not the same experience of love I had with Suzanne and Jason, which was a much more deeply-rooted experience of love. With the kids, I hoped that deeper love would come from their experience of being with others with whom they would enter more permanent relationships – parents, lovers, siblings, etc.

In general I think I tried to show them how to be a loving person and be loved, and the best way to do that was to love myself and to show how being loved in the singular sense made me as a person. My experience of my mother for instance is that she loved me this way and it made me more able to experience love as a child and adult, and I hoped it would come through in my interactions with the children. I also tried to accept them unconditionally and to let them know that I was there for them.

I am, however; still uncertain about my experience of love as I am about many things, and in a sense I think this is part of what makes me human and capable of loving and being loved. I am not sure, for example, about the “who and what” in relationship to others and myself. Do I do things in my relationships because I want to

experience love for what I do or because I just simply love to do it? Do I act to be loved for these actions or do I act as an expression of who I am? Similarly, do I love my experience of others for who they are or what they do? Probably both. I love Suzanne for who she is, but I like many things about her such as how she looks and has chosen to live her life. I feel the same for my son, Jason. So it is probably both, but more and more as life goes along, the “what” part of love seems less meaningful than the “who” part. Suzanne and Jason seem better at this than me. When I am with Suzanne for example, I experience mostly love for who I am. She sees what I do, I think, as external. She admires me for doing it as I admire her for her artwork, but in my experience of her that love is more about my self. In my private moments I retreat into my child, the innocent part of me that I love and want to be loved for, and feel a sense of certainty that this is really the love I want, not for the just the good things, but the rascal and dreamer I was as a child and now am as an adult.

And in the end it is probably the experience of being loved for and loving the “who” that makes us competent child and youth care workers. Love is shown in who we are, and this rubs off on the kids who are searching to be loved and to love. If we love and have been loved, they witness our experience of love in us and this makes them more capable of loving and being loved with others. It seems more risky I think if we act from the what, the wanting to be loved for what we do, with love being one of those things we do. This creates that unreal, insincere world of trying to show ourselves by saying we love the kids.

Make sense? Probably not, I'm confused about love. On Thanksgiving Day, I pondered this question in the morning before I went for a turkey dinner with Suzanne's family. For those who don't know, Thanksgiving is a holiday in the U.S. that honors the arrival of the Pilgrims. Probably a complete distortion of what really happened, it is based on the myth that the Pilgrims had a meal with the native inhabitants to celebrate and be thankful for the freedom and food they had found in the new land. A turkey is the centerpiece of the meal. People go to great lengths to stuff and cook their turkeys.

It's my favorite holiday because it is a one-day event where families come together to eat and then it's over. There isn't all the hoopla and materialism that has become part of other holidays like

Christmas. This year Suzanne was not with me. She was on her way home from Dublin where she had shown her paintings at an art show. Neither was my son who was on his way home to Raleigh to be with his wife. I would pick Suzanne up later from the airport and bring a plate of food sent along by her relatives. Before I left I wondered do I love these people? I usually feel pretty good being with them during the meal, but afterwards sometimes afterwards I have a sort of sad, empty feeling. That's all a part of the experience of love in families I tried to reassure myself.

Then I remembered a thanksgiving experience with two boys from the residential treatment center. In those days the child and youth care staff took the boys who didn't have a place to go on holidays home with them. We were aware of the risks but we felt it was important for them to have a place to go and we worked hard not to feed their fantasies that they might come to live with us. The boys, Ricky and Pat were both 12. The dinner was at Suzanne's parents. Suzanne and I had been living together for a couple years and I knew her parents fairly well. Her father was a prison guard but unlike some of the other guards he was very compassionate and understanding. Her mother was from Australia, and after meeting her father during WWII moved to this strange land as a teenager to marry him. He was often at work or at the bar, or hunting with his buddies, so she did most of the rearing of their six kids.

They lived about sixty miles from Milwaukee in Waupun, where the prison was located. As we drove there on that Thanksgiving I thought about all the families members that would have to make the long ride from Milwaukee to visit with their loved ones behind the bars at the prison. The trip went smoothly. The boys were unusually well behaved, perhaps because of their anxiety about what they would experience. Ricky was a quiet, introspective boy. He reminded me of a young engineer or scientist who constantly working some new formula in his head. But he also had a very violent temper that could be unleashed at the slightest provocation. I liked him for some reason, maybe because he seemed to have so much fight in him to survive. Pat was just the opposite. He was as we used to say "hyper." He never shut up and was always looking for some way to provoke other boys. Whereas Ricky held in his anger until it boiled over, Pat let it out constantly to seek attention. I had a hard time liking him but I was working at it.

We stopped in the Horicon Marsh to look at the Canadian Geese. Each year thousands of geese stopped in the marsh to feed and rest on the way south. A flock sat in an open field. Suzanne ran towards them and we followed. Suddenly hundreds of geese rose and flew overhead. The boys were enthralled by their newfound power, and the almost deafening sound of the geese honking and their wings flapping against the wind.

Suzanne's parents welcomed the boys. The house was warm from the oven and the smell of turkey. We sat in the living room and watched football with her father. Suzanne went upstairs and looked at some of the old photos and paintings in her room. The boys started to tease each other. "Cut it out!" Ricky shouted when Pat put his elbow in his ribs. I sat between them. They calmed down. Her father smiled at me, aware of what I was doing. By instinct he knew the importance of proximity.

"Dinner is ready," Suzanne's mother said. Her four brothers ran to the table. As was the custom, her father said grace, stuttering slightly. The boys and brothers started to giggle. Sitting between the boys I pinched their knees slightly. Pat took a swipe at my hand. I held his hand firmly. Suzanne recited a beautiful poem she had written. There was more giggling from her brothers, but not the boys. "Knock it off!" she said, having learned how to defend herself with her brothers years earlier. They started to pass the food: first dressing then mashed potatoes. Her father served slices of turkey from the platter. We put our plates forward. Pat tried to get his plate in ahead of Ricky.

"I'm first!" Ricky said and pushed Pat's plate.

"There's plenty for everyone," Suzanne's mother said and for a moment the boys settled again. Having plenty for everyone was not something they had experienced at home.

I buttered a roll. Pat began to load his plate with mashed potatoes.

"Look at that," Ricky said. "He can't take that many potatoes."

Pat flicked a spoonful at Ricky, who jumped up and pushed the back of Pat's chair. Pat turned and took a swipe at Ricky, who lost it, flailing his arms and shouting obscenities. I grabbed a hold of Ricky and took him in the living room where he took a swipe at me and began to push the furniture.

While Suzanne's father held Pat, I restrained Ricky on the carpeting. He spit, screamed and shouted more obscenities. I got angrier than I might have otherwise have done because my authority was being challenged in front of her parents and I was still in that stage where I was trying to prove myself. Eventually he settled down and we all went back to the table. The boys sulked through the rest of the meal, but there was no further incident. We talked about sports and past thanksgivings, how their aunt Jessie's hearing aid made a screeching sound during the meal. Her father stopped one of her brothers in the middle of a dirty joke. "Not in front of our guests," he said. The boys ate big slices of pumpkin pie with loads of whipped cream on top.

Afterwards I took Ricky and Pat in the basement to play pool with two of her brothers while Suzanne, who was used to how the boys behaved because I had taken some of them to our apartment where she taught them how to draw, took the dog for a walk and her father and two of the brothers finished watching the football game. The boys were well behaved during the pool game, probably because they wanted to be cool in front of the two brothers who were four and five years older than them. The day ended without further incident. All in all her family was very understanding. With all those children growing up together they were used to chaos, and having lost the oldest son in a car accident they also had this sense of the feeling of loss, which the two boys had experienced over and over again as they were bounced from one placement to another. "Come again," her father said.

"Well now they have a better idea of what I do," I told myself as we drove home. I also thought about what Pat and Ricky's previous Thanksgivings must have been like: parents drunk, arguing, never enough food to go around, siblings and relatives ridiculing and making fun of them, a different set of foster parents each of the last three years, and sometimes no thanksgiving at all.

It turned dark and started to snow. The boys began to go at it in the back seat. I pulled to the side of the road and said we were not moving until they settled. Knowing that this was mostly nervous energy and anxiety that came with the ending of activities they couldn't trust themselves to enjoy, I did this three times without losing my temper before we got back to the residential treatment center. Suzanne waited in the car while I went inside and made sure



they were settled before leaving. They didn't thank me, but I could tell they liked the dinner. I was a relatively new worker. As I drove home I thought about how I might have handled things differently, but overall I felt it had been a good day.

In hindsight, I love and am thankful for this experience. It is part of who I am.

## The Morality of Writing

When I was a young fiction writer, minimalist writers such as Hemingway, Camus, Duras, and Chekhov influenced me like many others. They had such an amazing ability to say in a few simple words something that drew me in and rang true with my experience. It was as if I moved effortlessly through their stories knowing that something profound was being said about very complex issues. Somehow they had found a way to focus on what was essential and in so doing painted a picture that felt very real and made the reader curious about the characters and what would happen to them. They were not trying to prove, only to show.

Raymond Carver also became a favorite of mine because he could write with a sense of truth that came from his experience. He showed life as it occurred for the downtrodden in our society and made the characters accessible to similar parts of myself, even though I didn't consider myself downtrodden. In one of his books, *Fires*, he wrote about his influences as a writer and the note cards that he kept pinned next to his desk. One of these cards had the following quote from poet Ezra Pound: "Fundamental accuracy of statement is the sole morality of writing."

Creative writers like this I think can help us express our experiences of child and youth care. Finding the simplicity that evolves from complexity, portraying the work and kids in a way that rings true with our experience, and speaking with accuracy it seems are at the center of our ability to effectively express ourselves in a way that informs the literature. For me, for example, there is something very powerful about a statement like, "He got up from his chair and joined the group," if it comes in the context of understanding this is a child or youth who did not participate much and if you can get a sense of the tone and texture of the moment such as this:

The other boys were engaged in an art project, their fingers and hands full of paint. Unlike on other trips to the art room they were not teasing the boy in the chair. They were involved in their finger paintings. The art room was in the basement, but it was a cheery

place with brightly painting walls. Sunlight shined through the street level window. I was working on my own finger painting next to one of the boys and had just invited the boy in the chair to join me.

"What's that?" he asked, looking at my sheet of paper with several wisps of black and red like a Franz Klein expressionist painting.

"I don't know. I'm just trying to let my fingers do the talking."

"But what are they talking about?"

"How I feel?"

"How's that?"

"Well, I'm not exactly sure, part happy, part sad I guess. But I'm glad you joined us. Here, you try it." I stepped aside.

"On your paper?" he asked.

"Sure. Let's see what you can add."

He took some blue paint on his fingers and made a swirling line across my work.

"I like that," I said. "How do you feel?"

"Happy and sad" I guess. He smiled.

"I can see that."

"Can I do my own?" He smiled, eager now to get to his own work.

"Of course." I got him a sheet of paper and some paints and we made some room on the table for him to work.

"Can I make a mark on your painting?" One of the other boys asked.

I invited him over to help me with my composition.

"Come and see what I'm doing," another boy said to me.

There is no attempt in this narrative to prove or explain. It is just a simple description of what is, and for me it shows something complex. I can see, hear, feel, and sense myself in that moment. I can also sense the boys around me. If you read it like I do, then there is plenty to see and learn from. We were together. I invited them into my experience, and was curious about theirs. We were involved in what we were doing. I was doing what I asked them to do, giving it a

try and being open to letting them see me as I expressed me on paper. I was also curious about what they were saying in their paintings.

Too often these days we are presented with catchy slogans and acronyms that show little relationship to any thinking that has been done about the complexities of the issues, descriptions of the work and kids that don't ring true with our experience, and contrived statements designed to please funders and politicians. Often these jargon-laden narratives say more about what the writers want us to hear as opposed to inviting us into the world of child and youth care as it occurred in their experience. And we are left with a feeling of uneasiness that comes from writers who in their haste to prove something don't tell it like it is.

We would be an even better profession I think if we insisted more on literature that portrayed the work like it is. Stories, articles and books that showed rather than told, like the stories, articles, and books that are being written by many contributors to this online magazine and the books and teaching in child and youth care. These are the moral writers, and we can tell almost immediately because they draw us into their world and the world of the child by their insistence on speaking the truth of their experience. They show rather than tell us the simplicity that comes from a quest to understand the complexities, and their ability to express themselves in a way that rings true with their experience. And subsequently we feel welcome.

February 2005

## Beach Scene

A moment haunts you. You're not sure exactly why, but you sense there is a purpose. It calls out and says look at me again. For me, this is one of those moments.

On a camping trip along the shore of Lake Michigan with six boys from the residential treatment center:

*It's near midnight. We're sleeping in the tent. I'm half awake. Daniel, one of the boys, gets up, pulls on his swim shorts, and leaves the tent. I put on my swim shorts and follow out of sight. It's a warm August evening. Once he reaches the bluffs above Lake Michigan, he stands a moment and looks across the water. The moon is out. I duck behind a tall clump of grass and watch as he races up and down the dunes until he collapses at the waters edge.*

*Caught up in the mood, I race down the dune hollering at the top of my lungs. Daniel stands and faces me. At the last moment I veer off and dive face first into the water. We play and splash each other and sit on the beach with our chins on our knees and the moon running across the water to our feet.*

*"Do you think I'll be fucked up like my ol' man?" Daniel asks, his voice shivering.*

*I hesitate and with my voice also shivering, say, "No," I reply.*

I'm not sure why this moment keeps reappearing, or why I draw it over and over again. There is something more to learn from it but I'm not sure what. Daniel and I had been through hell together. More than once he had run away. He had tried to hit or bite me several times. He had spit at me and said some things I would not repeat. Yet we had endured and our relationship had grown stronger. I trusted him and myself in this moment. I let him go that night whereas in the past I would have made an effort to stop him. I was curious about where he was going. I watched in admiration of how

he unleashed his raw energy. It was almost as if he had created a stage to temporarily exorcise the demons that haunted him. An act of great beauty and sadness, the lead actor collapsed at the water's edge.

I wanted to be part of the drama, to place myself in it with the same intensity, to scream at the top of my lungs. I did it. We played and splashed together revealing something more in both of us, a desire to express, to be what we did together. He was there and I was there in the moment.

Then as we sat together in one of those unforgettable moments with the moon running across the water to our feet, he shared for the first time his fear that he would end up like the father that had so terribly abused his sister and he. And I hesitated before I said no.

Why did I hesitate? Did I know on some level that I did not need to make things better yet tried anyway? Did the mood of the moment make it impossible to resist even though I knew deep down that it might not be? Was I assuring myself once again that I would not end up like my father, a company man? Was I anxious and uncertain, like him, not just shivering from the cold?

I have long since learned that I cannot fix things in child and youth care, or life. That the best I can often do is to be there and listen. I also know that it is my experience of a moment, not someone else's, and that I bring my own story and feelings to the moment, which, if am aware of how they influence me, should make me curious about and open me to the experiences of others.

Yet there is still something from this moment that haunts me, something more to be learned. Even though my response was not the response I would give today, it was a moment of human connection, I'm sure of that, but I'm not sure exactly why. The conditions were perfect. It was just he and I alone on the beach, vulnerable, open to discovering something about our selves. He must have known like I did that there were no guarantees about the future and that my hesitation reflected my true feelings. He probably wanted the assurance anyway. But I'm not sure if that's the whole story, and wanting to know makes it child and youth care.

## *The Seventh Moment*

Child and youth care is in the Seventh Moment. The Seventh Moment is a term used in qualitative inquiry to describe the trend to open the doors to new ways of studying and looking at human behavior, attitudes, and conditions. The Seventh Moment is a period of “ferment and explosion” (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000, pp. 2-12), that is “defined by breaks from the past, a focus on previously silent voices, and a concern with moral discourse, with critical conversations about democracy race, gender, class, nation, freedom, and community (Lincoln and Denzin, 2000, p. 1048).”

In the Seventh Moment, practitioners and researchers are using a variety of qualitative research methods to understand and improve practice. They intermingle literary, poetic, journalistic, fictional, cinematic, documentary, factual and ethnographic writing and representation. No one form is privileged over the other (Denzin, 2001, p. 7).

All of these methods of inquiry are concerned to some degree with the “what is” and the ways it can be shown. The researcher, who is often a practitioner as well, looks into an experience, and shows the experience in a way that is consistent with the way that it is experienced, heard, and/or visualized. The goal isn’t to prove, but to understand by writing about, drawing, performing, etc. and interpreting an experience. Like the child and youth care worker, the researcher tries to be in the moment, open and available to hear, see, and mirror back his or her experience of a child and/or what is going on around them.

Self is always present in the Seventh Moment. Researchers’ biases enrich, and inform the narrative, and sometimes become the center of the inquiry. They are present in the moment curious about a phenomenon, feeling, child, youth, adult, etc. And knowing how their presence changes and influences the context of what they see and experience is a key part of understanding a phenomenon.

In child and youth care we have seen an increase in performance

texts, stories, narratives, and other contextual examples of reflective practice because they fit nicely with the way many of us experience, observe, and think about the work. The way we make meaning of our developmental interactions is often best understood and portrayed in a short story, essay, film, portraiture, painting or other forms of expression that contextualize the experiences, and gives voice to those who might otherwise have been excluded. And these voices — the voices of workers, parents, youth, etc. — are being heard louder and louder. More than ever before we can see and hear child and youth care as it is experienced in the lived experience of workers, children, youth, family members and others. We are, as Jerome Beker, founding editor of *Child and Youth Care Forum* said, trying to “hear it deep and look to the questions that do so much to determine the soul of the work.”

I have come to the Seventh Moment with excitement because for many years I was in it without really knowing that I was. Long ago I discovered that narrative (mainly novels, short stories and vignettes) were the best forms for my voice. In a story or vignette (sketch) I could show and speak about child and youth care the way I experienced and saw it, and by doing this I could deepen my understanding of my experiences. Then as I began studying and reading about qualitative inquiry, I learned that others felt the same way about their work and had developed methods of critical, interpretive qualitative research that fit with how they saw the world.

The workers who presented their stories in this column for three years were in the Seventh Moment. Like me, they didn't know it, but they were. The method of research we developed, and our stories, were consistent with the interpersonal, inter-subjective, contextual ways other seventh moment researchers are looking at phenomena today.

These stories and our method of study have just been published in a book: *Themes and Stories in Youth Work Practice: In the Rhythms of Youth*, by Haworth Press. We invite you to take a look, and if you haven't already, join us and many other child and youth care workers in the Seventh Moment.

If you are looking for some immediate examples of Seventh Moment stories, simply go on *Tales from the Field* in this issue of *CYC-Online*. If you read the ‘tales’ last month you saw a youth under a desk, a worker getting out of the way, and a rainy camping trip



turned into a memorable experience. This is the “stuff” that defines our work and how we do it in the Seventh Moment.

**References**

Denzin, N. (2001). *Interpretive Interactionism*. Thousand Oaks California: Sage Publications.

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April 2005

# The Team Meeting: A Short Three-Act Play

*In this column for the next three months I will present a three-act play (one act per month) that is based on conversations among youth workers that I have participated in and/or overheard. You are invited to join the dialog.*

## Characters

**Shantell:** A child and youth care worker (26 years old)

**Carlos:** A child and youth care worker (30)

**Angie:** A child and youth care worker (20)

**Bill:** The overnight worker (24)

**Camille:** The clinical social worker (40)

**Tony:** The child and youth care supervisor (35)

**A Child:** Eleven years old

Children from the treatment center.

## Act One

*Setting:* The boardroom at a residential treatment center in a large city. All of the characters are seated around the table. A rhomboid of light is shining through a window like in the opening scene of Beckett's *Endgame*. No walls or doors. The background is dark except for the light from the window shining on the characters and the table with books on a shelf on the side of the room opposite from the window through which children's voices can be heard playing outside. A small overhead lamp shines on the books, a collection of classics in child and youth care work.

**Curtain rises.** We enter the middle of the meeting. They are talking about the eight boys in their cottage.

**Shantell** (*Determined, her dark eyes shining, body straight in the chair, eyes focused first on one then the other as she speaks*): We need more consistency and structure. The kids are getting away with murder. They know how to play us against one another.

**Carlos** (*slouched back in his chair*): That's not realistic.

**Angie** (*curious*): What isn't realistic?

**Carlos**: To be consistent and structured all the time. It's not the way we live our lives and relate to others. The kids know right away. They have to learn what its like in the real world.

**Bill** (*bookish*): And where would that be?

**Carlos**: What do you mean?

**Bill**: The real world ... what real world are you talking about, the one they experience or the one you experience?

**Carlos** (*sarcastically*): Very clever, Mr. Philosopher. I know we all make different meaning of our experiences. What I meant is that in life outside the center people aren't coming around consistently enforcing rules, and handing out consequences and rewards.

**Camille** (*professional*): Yes, there's some truth to that, but these are not ordinary circumstances. These kids have lived very unstructured lives and have seen the extremes of unpredictability from parents who are very permissive one moment and abusive the next. They also have been bounced around from one place to another and need to know there are some places with a structure, routine, and adults they can count on to respond in firm and caring ways.

**Carlos** (*argumentative*): Bull. I grew up in a real unpredictable environment and I turned out okay.

**Shantell** (*angry*): I can't believe you guys are falling for this. He does it all the time just to cover up for the way he breaks the rules we establish together. Besides he didn't have it anywhere as near as tough as the kids we work with.

**Carlos** (*staring at Shantell*): I had it plenty tough. You couldn't have survived a day in the world I grew up in. (*Pause, Shantell turns away. Sensing she won't take the bait, Carlos continues:*) Give me one example of a rule I broke.

**Shantell** (*still not taking the bait*): So you can debate with us some more and see if you can get a rise out of us?

**Carlos** (*grinning*): No. I really want to know.

**Shantell**: Okay, last night you let the kids stay up late again. Bill told me this morning.

**Carlos** (*Looks at Bill*): Is that true?

**Bill** (*slightly embarrassed*): Yes, the kids were still running around after you left and they told me you let them stay up to watch the movie.

**Carlos** (*confronting*): Next time tell me to my face.

**Bill** (*reactive*): I just did.

**Carlos**: First before you tell someone else, especially her. (*Looks at Shantell*)

**Shantell**: So is it true?

**Carlos**: Yes, it's true. We were all sitting and watching the movie and I decided we could make an exception.

**Shantell**: What kind of message does that give.

**Carlos**: That I am a real human being and that I make decisions based on their needs in the current circumstances.

**Angie**: I can see that, but aren't you worried that they will think they can get away with stuff with you?

**Carlos**: Get away with what? Having a nice calm quiet evening together watching a good movie and eating popcorn.

**Shantell**: There's a place for that, but not when we have a rule about bedtime. You know they need time to get ready to go to sleep and you set up Bill by not following the rules.

**Carlos**: Bill can defend himself, can't you Bill?

**Bill**: I'm not sure I have anything to defend. The kids were wild and that's a fact. Whether or not it was because you let them stay up or you didn't settle them down doesn't seem to matter much. You still left me with a mess.

**Carlos**: Why didn't you come to me first?

**Bill**: I was going to but then Shantell raised the issue. I had to tell her this morning because the kids were unusually slow and crabby.

**Carlos**: She would.

**Shantell**: What?

**Carlos:** Raise the issue here before coming to me.

**Tony:** (*Speaking for the first time. Voice firm, authoritative, chair back from the table. Legs crossed at the knees*): What movie did you watch?

**Carlos:** *Brave Heart*

**Tony:** That's pretty violent isn't it?

**Carlos:** Yes, but its also about heroes and freedom and what it means to stand up for what you believe.

**Camille:** Given what these children have been through do you think it advisable to give them the message that violence is a way of becoming a hero and standing up for what you believe.

**Carlos:** Look, it's a violent world out there. They know it and I know it. So why should we skirt around it. *Brave Heart* was violent only in response to violence. Some things are worth fighting for.

**Camille:** So responding to violence with violence is okay if you're on the right side?

**Carlos:** Basically.

**Camille:** So do you think our children have a clear picture of what is right and wrong violence?

**Carlos:** Well, just by the way you use the term violence you make it seem as if any form of aggression is wrong, even self-defense.

**Camille:** And do you think they can sort out self-defense from other forms of violence?

**Carlos:** No, but they are learning.

**Camille:** Is there another way to learn that?

**Tony:** Excuse me but I have to interrupt. This is an important discussion that I don't think we can resolve now and there are many other things to talk about.

**Angie** (*determined to make her point*): Before we move on I just want to respond to Camille. I think there is. What about Gandhi and Martin Luther King?

**Carlos:** Oh give me a break. These kids would be dead in a moment it they tried to be like those guys on the streets. Malcolm X is a better role model in my mind. Maybe Che'.

**Camille:** I think Angie is using Gandhi and King as examples of

how we can resolve conflicts in nonviolent ways. They were just as brave, if not braver than people you mentioned.

**Carlos:** And where did it get them? They were killed just like the others.

**Bill:** (*contemplative*). In my philosophy classes we've been talking about morality, power, and culture and it seems that all social political ideologies are corrupt when it comes to the development of the self. Ultimately one becomes polarized in one form or another by their rigid beliefs and values. It might be better to just think of this for what it is, in and of itself, without bringing in all this other stuff.

**Carlos:** So what are you saying? That we should just leave people be as is and everything will work out?

**Bill** (*somewhat paternalistically*): No Carlos, that we should just look at the situation without trying to apply so much groupthink.

**Camille** (*frustrated*): We are missing the point!

**Tony:** Which is?

**Camille:** That these children all have serious emotional problems and that we have to examine the effects of our activities and relationships with them on a case by case basis. But in general we have to be very sensitive to how they interpret acts of violence, especially most of our youth who have been sexually and physically abused.

**Bill:** That's what I was trying to say.

**Camille:** Yes, but in a philosophical rather than developmental way.

**Bill:** What's wrong with that?

**Camille:** There's nothing wrong with existentialism other than it makes it difficult for us as a group to review our cases in a way that everyone can understand.

**Tony:** Okay, okay, I'm sorry Bill, Carlos, Angie and Camille, but I think we have to move on. This discussion is moving away from our agenda.

**Shantell** (*determined*): Without resolving whether it was okay for Carlos to let the kids stay up late?

**Tony** (*sighs, looks slightly frustrated about how his agenda has been interrupted again*): I guess we should. Based on what I know I can

respect what Carlos says about the need not to be too trapped in rigid rules. I also think I get a sense of what he is saying – what it takes to be a man and to be able defend yourself and what you believe in. I also understand, however, what Camille said about the need for structure and predictability, and Shantell's concern about the message it gives the kids. In this case it is my opinion that it probably was not a good idea. Given what you watched and how you left right at your shift ending, I think you set up Bill for a rough night and that your judgment about the movie was a little weak. If you had had time to process all the violence in that rather long movie, it might have served a better purpose, but this did not seem like the right context.

**Carlos:** Figures.

**Tony:** What?

**Carlos:** You're playing the culture card. Hispanic males are machismo. They see these things differently than you Anglos and you don't like it.

**Tony:** Oh come on! This has nothing to do with being machismo.

**Carlos:** It doesn't? Well, then why are you trying to win?

**Tony:** I'm not trying to win. I'm just trying to resolve this situation (*Tony pauses then looks Carlos directly in the eyes.*) You know what I think?

**Carlos:** What?

**Tony:** That for some reason you are creating this power struggle with the team and you'll keep it going as long as we let you. Maybe you and I can talk afterwards, but for now I want to hear what the others think and move on.

**Shantell:** I agree with Tony.

**Angie** (*the peacemaker*): Maybe we can set aside some time to discuss these issues in more depth. I'd like to learn more. I think several points that were made were valid.

**Camille** (*as if still seething at what Carlos said*): I'd like to be part of that discussion.

**Bill** (*as if obligated*): Me too.

**Tony** (*sitting straight now, looking at his watch*): Okay, I'll set something up. Let's move on.

*Lights dim, move stage left. A girl about eleven is in a sandbox. An overhead light is shining on her. The rest of the stage is dark. All of the participants in the team meeting circle the sandbox.*

**Bill:** What are you building?

**Girl:** The world I used to live in.

**Bill:** That's a big job. Let me help.

**Girl:** Okay.

**Bill:** *(Gets down in the sandbox, pushes sand forward to the child so he can continue):* What's it like here?

**Child:** Scary.

**Carlos:** What's that over there?

**Child:** My new house.

**Bill:** Where is it?

**Child:** Another world.

**Carlos:** Tell me about it.

*The others kneel down and listen. Lights dim.*



May 2005

## *Inside the actor's studio*

Last month I promised that I would present in this column the second act in a three-act play, *Teamwork*. You'll have to forgive me I got waylaid and couldn't get it done. I was thinking about something else: the relationship between movie stars and star child and youth care workers.

A cable TV program that I watch called *Inside The Actor's Studio* triggered these thoughts. Many good actors have appeared on the show. James Lipton, head of the school, The Actor's Studio, where the interviews take place asks the actors questions about their histories and acting. Students are present in the audience. Afterwards they ask their own questions. It struck me that star child and youth care workers might respond to many of the interview questions the same way the actors do.

At the Youth Work Learning Center we are trying to conceptualize and fund a study of star child and youth care workers. We want to learn more about child and youth care from people who do it well. I thought it would be helpful, therefore, to reflect on what I learned from the actor interviews. For example, many actors come from broken families. They experienced divorce or the loss of a loved one early in their lives and this in some way contributed to their desires to be actors. Many are shy. They find it easier to express their feelings when they are playing someone else.

When asked what they think is the most important acting skill, a large number say listening. Good acting requires the ability to hear what the other actors are saying. Everything from the timing to the genuineness of the response depends on the ability to listen.

Several speak about the ability to get out of their heads and into their bodies so they can be enmeshed in their acting. Many are method actors. They were taught to get in touch with their own feelings and experiences so they could show the feeling in their acting. Marlon Brando was the best known of the early method actors. These actors you could say work mostly from the inside out. Other

actors work from the outside. They inhabit the character using a variety of techniques to be that person. They tend to follow the script literally whereas method actors might do a bit more improvising based on what moves them from the inside. Some use whatever works. Most don't want to be put in a category.

You could say they are actors trying not to act. They want to be natural, not performers. If they are acting, they feel they are not real. They all seem to pay attention to details. Choosing the right pair of shoes, for instance, can play a major role in getting them into character. All of them also love what they do.

Anyway, obviously there has to be some connections with Star workers. If we interviewed them in our study the way James Lipton interviewed actors, many of them would probably have histories in which they have experienced some form of loss that has opened them to wanting to understand themselves and the youth they work with. Some would work more from the inside, some the outside, and most work in and out. All would like their work and are sincere about their work. They would have the capacity to get enmeshed in their activity. And they would all know that listening with undivided attention is one of the most powerful things they can do.

I also thought about how much of our work is scripted? How many roles do we play? How much of our self comes through in our acting? It would be nice to think that we are real and genuine all the time, and that our self and our presence always shines through. But to be honest I think it could be said that all of us, the stars, and the rest of us, are in some ways actors playing a part. Our imaginary audiences influence us. We perform instead of *be*; it is only human. The challenge is to know when we are doing one or the other.

June 2005

## *The Team Meeting: Act II*

*This is the second act of the short play (one act per month) that is based on conversations among youth workers that I have participated in and/or overheard. You are invited to join the dialog. This is the second act of the play. Act I was presented in the April 2005 issue of CYC-Online.*

### **Characters**

**Shantell:** A child and youth care worker (26 years old)

**Carlos:** A child and youth care worker (30)

**Angie:** A child and youth care worker (20)

**Bill:** The overnight worker (24)

**Camille:** The clinical social worker (40)

**Tony:** The child and youth care supervisor (35)

**A Child:** Eleven years old

Children from the treatment center

### **Act Two**

*Setting:* Curtain pulls back again on the team meeting. It could be the same meeting or another one. All the players are present around the conference table in the conference room at the residential treatment center. Lighting and props the same as in scene one.

**Angie** (*shyly*): One of the kids asked me yesterday if I slept with my boyfriend.

**Camille** (*cautiously inquisitive*): Did you respond?

**Angie:** Yes.

**Camille:** What did you say?

**Angie:** Nothing but they started to giggle and ask questions about how we did it.

**Tony** (*alarmed*): Did you tell them.

**Angie:** No. I said I didn't think it was appropriate to talk about that

and I asked them to get back to our discussion about their sexual feelings. But I'm not sure I did the right thing, because they started to get silly.

**Camille:** And what do you think is the right thing?

**Angie:** Well, that's what I'm confused about. I never know how much of myself to disclose.

**Camille:** And you don't think you reveal yourself all the time in the way you express your emotions?

**Angie:** Well yes, but I don't necessarily talk about it.

**Tony:** Why?

**Angie:** Because we're here to help them with their feelings, not ours.

**Camille:** Is that so?

**Angie:** I think so.

**Bill:** So it's not important that we understand and are in touch with our feelings?

**Angie:** Well yes I suppose it is. How can we ask them to be in touch with their feelings if we're not in touch with our feelings?

**Camille:** I agree.

**Angie:** So how much do you tell them?

**Shantell:** I don't think we should tell them much. We're not in therapy, they are. Besides my business is my business.

**Carlos:** I tell the kids a lot.

**Tony:** Like what?

**Carlos:** Like what it was like when I was a gang member?

**Bill:** Why do you tell them that?

**Carlos:** To let them know that I know what it was like for them. That I've been there and can relate to what and how they are feeling.

**Tony:** Have you really been there?

**Carlos:** Where?

**Tony:** Where they have been.

**Carlos:** I just said I was.

**Tony:** Yeah, but I mean can you ever experience what someone else experiences?

**Carlos:** Sure.

**Bill:** No you can't. (*Philosophical again*). We all experience the world differently based on our past and current experiences. There is no one reality or shared experience.

**Carlos:** Don't give me that bull. I know what it's like!

**Tony:** Maybe you know what it's like for you, but not for them.

**Carlos:** So what are you saying?

**Tony:** Your experience of being in a gang is not their experience of being in a gang. If you understand what it was like for you that's good, but it should also open you up to wanting to understand what it was like for them. Otherwise it robs them of the chance to be able to express their fears, guilt, etc. about being in a gang.

**Angie:** Can we get back to my issue?

**Camille:** Yes, let's talk about that some more. In situations when kids ask us difficult questions about things like drugs, sex, etc. how much should we reveal?

**Bill:** Well I read in one book that it's better to be open than closed, but another book I read said that we really should not share our histories.

**Angie:** I know. That's what makes it so confusing.

**Shantell:** Look, I was abused as a kid too, but I got over it. I tell the kids this straight up. That's why they connect with me, because I can show them they can get over it.

**Camille:** Let's look at it from the perspective Tony just presented. The important thing is that we understand and value our experiences and not try to impose them on others, but rather let them open us to and make us curious about wanting to understand the children's feelings.

**Angie:** So we should tell them everything.

**Camille:** No, that's not what I was trying to say. What I meant was that our awareness is revealed in the way we present ourselves and if the kids know we understand our feelings and this opens us to understanding their feelings they usually do not need to probe further. But if they sense our lack of awareness they will keep us on

the hot seat because they don't feel comfortable opening up to us.

**Angie:** That's difficult, to be like that, so sure of how you feel.

**Tony:** It sure is. But I think it's not so much about how aware you are as it is about your willingness to be self-aware. The kids know that we are not perfect and don't understand all our feelings, but if they sense we are trying they are more likely to feel safe with us and open up.

**Bill:** I like the way you put that.

**Carlos:** I don't. This is just a bunch of mumbo jumbo. The kids need us to be strong, certain, not navel gazers.

**Shantell:** I agree with Carlos. We have to show them we are strong, not wishy-washy. They need strong role models, not people who are always questioning themselves.

**Carlos:** Wow, she agrees with me for once.

**Shantell:** It's also a cultural thing. In my family we learned not to reveal our feelings to the outside world. It's the same for the Hmong and Native American kids here. It's disrespectful of the family, tribe and elders to do that.

**Carlos:** What have you been doing reading another one of those books about culture. In my world there's only one culture, the culture of the street.

**Angie:** I thought you said you were machismo. That's a Hispanic thing isn't it?

**Carlos:** (*Smiles at Angie*): You got me.

**Bill:** I agree, culture does influence how we express ourselves, but I don't think we can assume that culture influences all people the same. I know lots of Native American, Hmong and African American people who are very open about their feelings. The key is to be aware of how their and our histories influence the way we interact. There are also many other reasons such as temperament that determine how open we are.

**Angie:** It's all so complicated. I'm confused about what's the right thing to do?

**Carlos:** I think you are all in your heads too much. You're trying to intellectualize this thing. What you got to do is just be who you are. That's what the kids relate to.

**Camille:** I agree Carlos, but what does that mean?

**Carlos:** It means that you are in touch.

**Tony:** With what?

**Carlos:** With who you are man?

**Angie:** But how can you be so certain?

**Carlos:** By just being and not asking so many questions, and acting with pride and dignity.

**Camille:** Is it that simple? Isn't there a sense of false pride and dignity that comes from a lack of self-questioning and awareness.

**Carlos:** So what are you saying, that I'm not in touch.

**Camille:** No. I'm just asking.

**Carlos:** Just like a social worker, answering a question with a question.

**Camille** (*smiles*): I just don't know how you can be so sure of yourself.

**Carlos:** That's because you aren't.

**Tony:** Okay so I think we've gone as far as we can with this for now. Let's move on.

**Angie:** But I still don't feel my question was answered.

**Camille** (*Still seething a little from Carlos' last response*). There might not be one right answer. It's all situational. In one situation it's proper to talk about something and in another it's proper to just reveal your feelings by the way you are in the moment. The kids can usually tell.

**Angie:** But how do you know what's right in one situation and not another.

**Bill:** Look, we are all often confused, except for maybe Carlos (said sarcastically). The key is to continually want to know your self and to practice. Talking like this helps, I think.

**Shantell:** I think a lot of this talk is a waste of time. Gets us no place. If you don't know who you are you shouldn't be working here.

**Tony:** Okay, time, this discussion to be continued.

*Lights dim then raise stage left. A boy and his father are standing*

*together in a bar. A bartender dries a glass with a towel behind the bar with three empty stools. A piano solo of My Sweet Irish Rose is playing softly in the background. One beam of light shines down on the bartender, another beam shines on the boy and his father, who has a dart cocked in front of his eye. The rest of the stage is dark. There are no other props, just these and the dark background. A few feet away a target comes into view with another beam of light. The target is held in space by a thin, invisible piece of wire. A larger beam of light shines down stage right. All of the meeting participants are watching. Camille has her hand to her chin. Bill scratches his head. Tony is nondescript. Carlos has an open stance and is snapping his fingers slightly as if listening to some other music in his head. Shantell, her posture rigid and arms crossed in front of chest, looks bored. Angie gets down on the floor and crosses her legs in front of her. Music stops. Bartender and the team participants freeze as if captured in time.*

**The father** (*confidently*): Hold the dart like this in front of your eye.

**The boy** (*Brings the dart up in front of his eye*): Like this?

**The father**: Yes, that's it.

*Lights dim.*



July 2005

## *The Team Meeting: Act III*

*This is the third act of the short play (one act per month) that is based on conversations among youth workers that I have participated in and/or overheard. Act I was presented in the April 2005 issue and Act II in the June 2005 issue.*

### **Characters**

**Shantell:** A child and youth care worker (26 years old)

**Carlos:** A child and youth care worker (30)

**Angie:** A child and youth care worker (20)

**Bill:** The overnight worker (24)

**Camille:** The clinical social worker (40)

**Tony:** The child and youth care supervisor (35)

**A Child:** Eleven years old

Children from the treatment center.

### **Act III**

*The setting:* The boardroom at a residential treatment center in a large city. All of the characters are seated around the table. A rhomboid of light is shining through a window like in the opening scene of Beckett's *Endgame*. No walls or doors. The background is dark except for the light from the window shining on the characters and the table with books on a shelf on the side of the room opposite from the window through which children can be heard playing outside. A small overhead lamp shines on the books, a collection of classics in child and youth care work. Curtain rises. We re-enter the middle of the meeting. They are talking about the eight boys in their cottage.

**Bill:** One of the girls, Nikki, asked me to rub her back last night.

**Shantell** (*alarmed*): Did you do it?

**Bill:** Yes.

**Shantell:** Do you think that's right?

**Bill:** I'm not sure, that's why I raised it.

**Shantell:** Well I think it sends the wrong message.

**Camille:** And what might that be.

**Shantell:** It's too sexual.

**Camille:** Does it have to be?

**Shantell:** Well I don't see how she can take it any other way, especially after the abuse she's received from men.

**Bill:** But fathers and caring men do it all the time with younger children. Seems like it's a very natural thing to do to show care and affection. And it's probably what she needs more than anything else.

**Shantell:** What?

**Bill:** To be touched by a caring man.

**Tony:** Bill, you used the word natural. My question is natural to who, you or them.

**Bill:** Well that's a good question. I suppose it depends on what you experience. But if you've never experienced normal caring touch, how do you get to experience it if someone isn't willing to take the risk to try, especially today when men are being sued and accused all the time by kids. I heard at some places you can't even touch the kids. To me that's absurd. How can you connect if you can't touch. Touch is fundamental to healthy development.

**Camille:** I would agree, but is a backrub with Nikki the proper place to start?

**Bill:** Depends I guess on how she takes it.

**Tony:** And how do you think she took the backrub?

**Bill:** Appropriately I think.

**Tony:** Based on what you felt or she felt?

**Bill:** My sense of both I think. But I guess I should talk to her.

**Angie** (*Looking as if she did something wrong*): My God, I hug the boys all the time. Is that wrong?

**Camille:** I think what we just discussed with Bill applies with hugs as well. What does that form of touch mean, and given what some of the boys have experienced is it something you might want to risk giving off the wrong signal.

**Angie:** But I wasn't trying to send the wrong signal. Maybe I did though.

**Tony:** Well one part is to be sure about our intent, but then another part is even if our intent is good how is it received.

**Angie:** So are you saying we shouldn't hug the kids and rub their backs?

**Tony:** No. I'm saying that we should do it with sensitivity to the meaning of our touch.

**Carlos:** What a crock. Look, if you know what you're doing go ahead. I hug the girls and the boys all the time. I'm not sure if I'd give them a backrub, but that's just me. If you're someone who is trying to sexually abuse these kids or send mixed messages you shouldn't be working here. Give Bill and Angie a little slack. They were just trying to do what felt right.

**Shantell:** I think it's wrong. I don't think we should be running around hugging and touching kids because it feels right. These kids are confused about touch and it's better to err on the side of caution and to avoid touch except in some special circumstance. I hugged André when he left last week, but I wasn't running around hugging him when he was here. He knew I cared about him.

**Bill:** I don't touch simply because it feels right. I try to consider the meaning. All I was saying is it's difficult to be sure about the message I'm sending, just like Tony said.

**Carlos:** Look man, you did the right thing. I know Nikki. She is really a little kid inside looking for the affection she never got. If she took it sexually, I'd be surprised.

**Bill:** But don't you think I should talk to her about it?

**Carlos:** Sure, if that's your thing. Go ahead reassure yourself. Personally, I wouldn't second guess myself. If the kids get the wrong message at first they would know over time that I'm not like that. Most of them already do.

**Angie:** This boundary work is so difficult.

**Shantell:** Not if you're clear about your boundaries.

**Camille:** Are you clear about it for your self, or for what the kids need?

**Shantell:** Look, I know who I am, how close I want to be, and they

read that in me. I don't violate their space and they don't violate mine.

**Carlos:** Except when they're angry.

**Camille** (*deflecting the direction of the conversation*): Strange you should use the word 'violate'.

**Shantell:** Look Camille, don't try to analyze me.

**Tony:** Let's get back to Angie's comment. Shantell has expressed herself but I'd like to hear what some of the others think about boundaries.

**Carlos:** Well, it's like I said, if you respect your own boundaries and the kids' boundaries then it's fine sometimes to get close and other times to create a little more space. It's like a little dance. You get a sense of when to move in and when to move away based on the music you hear.

**Bill:** That's insightful. I hadn't thought of it that way.

**Tony:** What way?

**Bill:** That boundaries are elastic not rigid ... we create them based on our understanding of what's going on and our feel for the music or the emotional tension or lack thereof that exists. In philosophy, we sometimes think of it as the existential hum, hum meaning something inside that calls us to truth in the moment.

**Carlos:** Woa, brother. You really took this to another place, but I think I like it.

**Shantell:** What's next on the agenda.

**Carlos** (*smiling*): What's the matter you afraid if we continue you might let down your guard.

**Shantell:** (*a piercing glance at Carlos*).

**Carlos:** Look, all I'm saying is that what matters is how you come across to the kids. You might read what I do differently than I do, and I might read what you do differently, but we can never fool the kids. They know if we are real, and sincere about intentions. If we're filled with self doubt then they don't feel that way.

**Angie:** But isn't a little self-doubt human?

**Carlos:** Sure, but not about giving a back rub or hugging boys. If

something inside you says I'm not sure about what this means, then I'd say don't do it.

**Bill:** But you sound so sensitive to your feelings now and what it means. How come you didn't sound that way when we were talking about gangs?

**Carlos:** You misread me.

**Bill:** Well, I was already thinking that there is something about you that comes across in a sincere way, especially when I see the kids huddled around you in a conversation or activity. They seem to connect with you in a way they don't connect with me.

**Carlos:** Maybe you're in your head too much. (*Carlos mood seems to change. He is more sympathetic now*). Like I said man, it's not always what you say, but how you come across. I know their experience is different than mine and I think they know that when I tell them I've been there (*Carlos refers back to a conversation in Act I*). I just don't want and won't accept it becoming an excuse for them. Maybe I was wrong to let them stay up and watch the movie, but I think they know I wasn't trying to set anyone up or bribe them by letting down the rules a little. I've already talked to them about how they behaved and how disappointed I was.

**Tony:** Good.

**Carlos** (*continues as if making amends*): I was thinking Shantell that what you said earlier about culture was probably true in the sense that my culture is part of me, just as your dignity as a black woman does define us and how we see things.

**Shantell:** How couldn't it!

**Carlos:** It's just that I don't know how big a part. I know I'm not like a lot of my Hispanic friends, and you don't fit the stereotype of the warm caring black woman.

**Shantell:** What do you mean by that?

**Carlos:** Well, as you said you don't like to hug the kids. I see you much more like I might see a white businesswoman, dignified, well dressed and somewhat distant.

**Shantell:** I don't see myself as distant. I'm close to many of these kids. It's just that I think it is important to keep a little space between us because I know they will have to leave and I don't want

them to get too attached.

**Bill:** I think Shantell provides a good role model. The girls and boys respect her for her commitment and professionalism. But I'm not sure how much culture is part of this. I know I rarely think about my culture or ethnicity.

**Carlos:** That's because you're a white guy. But to me your whiteness is just as much a part of you as being Hispanic is part of me.

**Bill:** What do you mean?

**Carlos:** You act white. You have this sort of nondescript, bland way of fitting in.

**Bill:** I'm not nondescript, am I? I'm a little too heady maybe, but not nondescript?

**Shantell:** The reason you don't notice how people react to you is because of your skin color. You're seen as part of the establishment rather than different. Whereas being black immediately influences what people see, being white evokes little response.

**Carlos** (smiling, looking at Bill): Look bro, I like you. I see you as unique, the philosopher who really cares about the kids. I was just trying to make a point as Shantell just did about how we are all seen differently.

**Angie:** How do you guys see me?

**Carlos:** Raw, young, eager to do the right thing, caring.

**Bill:** I agree. I see you as a warm person trying to learn the ropes.

**Shantell:** Sometimes I think you go a little overboard in trying to get the kids to like you.

**Angie:** But I care about, even love them, and I want to learn to feel the same way about me so they can care for others.

**Camille** (*has been observing and quiet until now*): That's a little risky. You don't want to mislead them by getting too attached. You won't be with them when they leave.

**Carlos:** Maybe in spirit.

*The conversation continues ...*

August 2005

## Pueblo

Gang activity has been increasing in the little village outside the Pueblo. The village was founded by descendants of the Spanish conquistadors who made the Pueblos terrace the side of the mountain outside the Pueblo for farming. Then over time the Pueblos and Hispanics intermarried until their cultures were intertwined. Graffiti is showing up in the village on the shops, restaurants, and bars frequented by tourists and the new breed of settlers – artists, computer scientists, and retirees – who have come to live on the land with many of the comforts of the city. Subsequently, real estate and food prices are going up and up so that it is getting harder and harder for the locals to survive even though many of them live on valuable land. They could sell their land and make a big profit, but that would be for many of them like selling their heritage and families.

Like many of the “anglo” (white) youth who live in the area, many Pueblo and Hispanic youth are angry with their elders. Their parents’ connections to the past and in some cases their broken English embarrasses them. They don’t want the “old” ways. They want TVs, new cars and the latest video and electronic toys. A few weeks ago a couple youths broke into the police chief’s house to take his pistols and rifles. Huge rocks from the mountains have been put in front of a gravel parking lot in the village where they used to hang out at night in their cars, drinking whisky and taking drugs. They have moved down the road. The locals and new arrivals to the community are up in arms.

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There is an empty building that could be turned into a youth center, but a rich real estate speculator from California has his eye on it for condos, which will increase the tax base whereas a youth center will not. When speculators buy up land, the locals call it being “Californicated.” The police, mostly Hispanic, know the parents of many of the youth who cause the problems and are suspected of turning a blind eye, hoping that the gang activity will scare away

some of the outsiders who are driving up the prices.

Yet, despite these contradictions and changes in the village and Pueblo, there is still much warmth in the old adobe homes. At times it is as if the warmth from the ancient fires has lingered and created a strong sense of belonging and connection. There is history here and it is present in everyday life. Even the poor are rich with a sense of tradition and a lifestyle rooted in the land.

Wealthy and young whites have come here to experience the old ways of living off the land. At one point they came in droves to form communes, most of which have died off because the lifestyle of free love and communal living they promulgated could not survive. A few communes still dot the dry landscape on the mesa. They are referred to as the dusty people because of the way they look when they hitchhike into the village and the town down the road. Many of the Pueblo and Hispanic escape from the village and Pueblo, but many come back after they venture out into the traffic of the big cities. Their longing for the mountains and vast mesa that border their little village and Pueblo calls them back.

In recent years, economic times have gotten a little better for some of the Pueblo. Like many of the other tribes, they built a Casino, just outside the edge of the Pueblo, on Indian Land right next to the larger town about ten miles from the village. Gamblers have come and left their money. It is part of a cycle – a cycle in which the resources once taken away by outsiders are now being returned, though in another form. In Pueblo culture it is seen as spiritual, the coming around again of what belongs to them. Most of the members of the Pueblo, however, are still waiting for their share to flow to them the way the waters flow down from the sacred Blue Lake high in the mountains.

We drive past the Casino to the beautiful Pueblo, which sits at the base of the mountain. It's a sunny day. The smell of fry bread is in the air. Everything is much the way it was 800 years ago, except for the tourists who have come to buy the fry bread and trinkets. Getting a piece of fry bread from a Pueblo grandmother is like being attached again to something deep and profound, a place where mothers once went underground with their sons for days to mark the rites of passage.



The Catholic Church is in the center of the Pueblo, the church from which the procession marches on Christmas Eve, circling the huge bonfires in the courtyard that is filled with locals and tourists, who have come to pass their wine bottles and joints to one another, and to have another Christmas experience – a religious experience that somehow transcends religion on a night when everyone is welcome.

I stood here on Christmas Eve a few years ago next to a warm fire looking at the huge, star-filled night sky as the procession passed by with the Baby Jesus and Mother Mary in the arms of the Pueblo Women dressed in their beads and gowns and moccasins, with the men walking alongside firing their rifles – firing like a salute to the maker (God, Buddha, the Great Spirit). When the crack of the rifles was followed by deep silence, it seemed like something long ago, yet very present. I have never felt like that in a community. Warm outdoors on a cold winter evening, I experienced religion for perhaps the first time.

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But today is not Christmas Eve, it is just another sunny day in Northern New Mexico, a day much like many days 800 years ago and now. I look up towards Blue Lake where only the Taos Pueblos can go on their horses. I wish I could go, but it is their place to care for, as it always was, not an owned place, but a place to be honored as a gift from the Great Spirit, the way all the land used to be honored, or so the story goes.

As the sun dips a little lower on the horizon, warming the other tourists and us as we sit in doorsteps enjoying fry bread, suddenly the dogs begin to run to the edge of the village where the silhouettes of youth can be seen weaving and bopping their way back home from school in the town outside the Pueblo. It is a majestic scene, children coming home, greeted by their dogs beneath Blue Lake, the warm sun in their faces, mothers and grandmothers waiting.

As they approach their faces and clothing gradually become visible. Sort of like in movies where you see people slowly marching up over a hill toward you as you sit in a dark theatre trying to make out their faces. They are wearing team jackets and headphones that channel rock and Hip Hop into their heads, and carrying books that

teach them about math, English, and computers. They have the saunter, dip and bop walk of kids in the big cities and look like Home Boys, but I suspect they are mostly “wannabees” who are pretending they are in a gang. The past and present are in stark contrast in this moment as the youth move from one place to another on their journey to discover “who am I.” I wonder what they will be up to tonight? What kind of trouble and sense of liberation will they find as they search for self?

September 2005

## Corey the Bike Fixer

*Positive Behavior Facilitation (PBF) is a comprehensive approach to understanding and intervening in the behavior of youth. This piece describes the components of PBF.*

Having read about the owner and his work in the community, I walk into the bike shop called Corey the Bike Fixer's in need of a handlebar stem that will shorten my reach on my road bike.

A husky, short-haired man with a goatee approaches, smiles, and says, "The Dairyaire."

"Excuse me," I respond.

"The Dairyaire."

I smile and look around to see if anyone is listening. "How do you know that term?"

"I read your novel, *Floating*. You gave it to me when I came to see you about ten years ago. I was taking one of your classes and looking for something to read, and you gave me your novel *Floating*. I remember the Dairyaire because that's the place that kid danced as a male stripper when he ran away from the group home. What was his name?"

"Daniel."

"Yeah, that's it. Don't you remember me? I came to see you. I was working at St. Charles then."

"Yes, I think I do. You worked at Lakeside too, didn't you?"

"Corey," he extends his hand.

"Corey, of course. And you worked in Florida for a while."

He smiles, "Yes, that's it. I loved your book. Have you written others?"

"Yes. So how did you get in the bike business?" I ask changing the subject. I don't like to talk about my writing.

"Can I see some of it?"

"Yes, I'll bring something by. But tell me how you got into the bike business?" I look around. The little shop is packed with new and used bikes, which he fixes up and resells. In the back of the shop youth are repairing bikes.

"Well you remember all those bikes in the basement at Lakeside?"

"Yes, I do. I was supervisor of one of the cottages at one time you know."

He nods. "Yes, you told us that in class. You went there after you worked at the other place for a long time. You didn't like it there as much."

"Yes, it just wasn't the same at Lakeside."

"In the years after you left most of the bikes got broke and I began fixing them until every kid who wanted and earned a bike could have one. It was one of the most successful programs they had. I got the kids doing something productive, and we really connected while we worked together."

"Great work, Corey."

"Yeah, I thought so."

"So why did you leave?"

"The agency didn't value my work. When I applied for a supervisory opening they gave the position to someone else."

I want to say that being a good child and youth care worker doesn't necessarily make you a good supervisor but don't. "Sorry to hear that, but you seem to be doing some great things here and for the community. I've heard and read about your work in the *Express* (a local newspaper) without necessarily making the connection. That's why I stopped in."

A young woman and her father pull a bike out of a rack. "Excuse me a minute," Corey says and goes over to talk to a customer while I look around. I could use a new bike myself, but I want to get another year or two out of the one I still have. It feels good being in this place small and cluttered with bikes in an East Side neighborhood where people are trying to build community. This shop and the little bookstore not too far away where I go to readings are two good

examples of how small business, public places, and people more than anything else become the anchors in strong neighborhoods. Corey comes over with the customer and says, "This man was a big influence on me."

Embarrassed, I smile then say, "You were a big influence on me too, Corey."

"Thanks," Corey says, and turns to the customer, "So, look around a little and let me know if I can help."

"I heard about how you donated bikes to the neighborhood near the university to help with the traffic problems, and how you are offering inexpensive bikes to the people on the east side so they can get around," I say.

"Yeah, we want to be part of and help build the community. It's good for business and my neighborhood. Child and youth care taught me a lot, like how important it is to be sincere and genuine in my work here. I never try to sell someone something they don't want, and if they do buy something and don't like it, I'll always take it back or exchange it for something else of equal value. That's how I advertise, not with expensive radio ads that shout at people."

"You sell connection, dependability, a place to trust and count on."

"Exactly."

"That's why you're successful."

"I'd like to think so. When I sell someone a used or new bike I want them to know they can always come back with it for repairs or concerns and we will try to accommodate them."

"Wish more businesses were like that."

"I don't understand why they don't get it. ... So, how can I help you?"

I explain that the reach is too long for me on my bike, which I bought two years ago, and wonder if he has some ideas for how I can shorten it.

"Here," he says while walking to the back of his shop where he keeps the spare parts "try this," and hands me a shorter stem than the one I have on my bike.

"How much?"

"Take it and try it, and if it works come back and pay me or if it doesn't give it back?"

"You sure?"

"Yeah, I trust you. Anyone who wrote a book like *Floating* can be trusted."

I thank him and leave, a little unsure of his last comment. The book was fiction, and even if it rang true with the reader's experience, I'll never be sure how genuine I was in writing my first novel about my experience in child and youth care.

The stem works and I go back in a few weeks to pay Corey.

"Did you think *Floating* was real?" I ask him.

"Well, no, but real in the sense that a good story reflects an experience as seen by a person at a certain point in his or her life. Actually, I thought both the lead characters were based on you, the worker and the youth."

I leave satisfied and impressed by Corey's insight, and once again reminded to have confidence in readers, and youth, to get it on their own.

Two years later I return to trade in my bike, which never fit right. Corey spends time with me getting the bike I like to fit, and letting me test-ride it around the neighborhood. As I ride I think about how grateful I am to child and youth care for helping keep me youthful and fit, especially during a serious bout with cancer that I had the previous year.

I buy the bike and a few weeks later, I come back with my wheels in hand. I have been watching the Tour De France and like everyone am in awe of Lance Armstrong, who is also a cancer survivor. I wait outside while Corey sizes up a boy on a used bike. "How does it feel?"

"Good."

"It's yours."

"Thanks Corey," the kid says and races off down the street.

"So, how can I help you this time?" Corey asks me.

"I thought maybe I'd try a thinner tire."

He smiles, asks, "Been watching the Tour?"

"Yes, and trying to stay in shape like Lance," I respond.

"Looking for more speed, aren't you."

I hesitate, tell a little lie, "No," I just thought it would help me get up the hills in the country a little faster."

"Sure," Corey grabs one of the wheels, feels the tire. "It would help you know if you kept a little more air in your tires."

I smile then laugh at myself.

He smirks, pumps up the tire, and says, "Actually these tires if you keep them pumped up are faster than the thinner tires because these take more air pressure."

"You just cheated yourself out of a sale."

"You'll be back."

I smile again.

As I am walking away, he says, "You know you're too old to win the Tour, don't you?"

I continue walking, "What do you mean. I'm only 62."

"See you Lance."

October 2005

## *Reflecting and talking of New Orleans*

(1960)

*Near the end of my youth, I hitchhike to New Orleans. My first ride is from a bathroom fixtures salesman; I see the brochures strewn across the back seat when I get in. Tired, he doesn't say much as we exit Milwaukee and head south and west.*

*He takes me to Beloit and leaves me off in the parking lot at a diner. Hungry, I go inside and sit at the counter.*

*"How old are you sonny?" the waitress asks after she serves me a meal of roast beef and mashed potatoes. Her nametag says, Lucile.*

*"Nineteen," I say adding a year to my age.*

*"Where you headed?"*

*"New Orleans."*

*"That's a long way from Wisconsin."*

*"I know."*

*A trucker roars into the gravel parking lot stones spitting out behind the ten wheels. He sits next to me at the counter. "This boy is going south Frank," Lucile says.*

*"If you can wait until I get something in my stomach I can take you to southern Illinois," Frank says.*

*"Sure, thanks," I say.*

*Lucile gives me a free scoop of ice cream. "You'll need a full stomach to get to New Orleans, sonny," she says.*

*Frank flirts with Lucile. Seems like they might have done it before. I listen quietly as they talk about his travel down from Eau Claire, where he lives. He's hauling TV sets and refrigerators.*

*After he finishes eating, we roar out of the parking lot, Frank*



*blasting his horn for Lucile. High in the cab the flat Illinois countryside looks like a huge baseball diamond with farmhouses and barns as dugouts.*

*"Why you going to New Orleans?" he asks.*

*"To hear the jazz."*

*"How long you staying?"*

*"As long as my money holds out."*

*"How much you got?"*

*"About one hundred bucks in traveler's checks."*

*"That's not a lot."*

*"Maybe I'll get a job."*

*He tells me about his days in the Korean War. As he talks it seems like his best days are behind him.*

*"Good luck," he says as I get out and stand on the highway with my thumb out.*

*My next ride is from a heavyset man whose belly almost touches the steering wheel of his big Cadillac. He seems to be just roaming around the countryside. After several miles he says, "I took a sailor all the way to New Orleans a few weeks ago.*

*I'll take you too if you play your cards right," and reaches over and puts his fingers in my pocket.*

*"No, that's okay," I say as I jump out just before the next stop sign with my legs and suitcase trying to catch up to my body, just outside Cairo Illinois.*

*The next ride comes from a young man limping back home from a bad semester in college. He doesn't know how to tell his parents he flunked out. I feel sorry for him. He has a six-pack in the backseat. He asks me to give him a beer and tells me to take one for myself. We drink and twist and turn through the Kentucky Mountains. In Fulton I watch his taillights fade out of sight around a long turn and fall asleep with my thumb out and my back to the pole holding the stop sign.*

*I wake up with a cop holding me under each arm. They take me to jail and charge me with vagrancy even though I have one hundred bucks. The bench in the cell is hard. I dream I'm working on a chain*

gang. In the morning one cop drives me to the grocery store and has me cash fifty bucks of traveler's checks and give the cash to him.

"We don't like strangers around here, especially beatniks." He says when he drops me off at the edge of town. It's the first time I'm called a beatnik. I'm just happy to be on the road again. After a couple more rides, I'm stranded midday for a couple hours in the middle of Mississippi with the hot, humid sun shining down and a 'Watch out for Alligators' sign a few feet away. Slowly an old DeSoto approaches. Inside I can see a man with Harry Truman straw hat and the top of a little girl's head. He pulls to the side of the road the car almost rubbing against my body. I get in the backseat.

"We're just going down the road a bit to church," the father says as the little girl sits quietly beside him.

"That's good," I say.

"Have you found your savior?" he asks.

"I wasn't looking," I respond.

I wait for a long time in the afternoon sun. Finally another trucker takes me across the flood planes to New Orleans where I get a room in the French Quarter and a job in a hamburger parlor. It is a place unlike anywhere I have ever been. A foreign land where people stay up all night, and embrace their differences so that everything, including the food, seems to blend together to create culture where almost anything goes as long as it is done with respect for others and the way they make meaning of their lives. I meet all kinds of interesting characters in the hamburger parlor, and in the evening after work, I listen to some of the finest jazz in the world. One night I meet an older woman with dark curls in Preservation Hall. We hand her flask back and forth.

In the morning, with booze seeping from a black hole deep inside me, she stands alone on the balcony while I run through the moist French Quarter to St. Charles Boulevard. I run and run. Among the mansions word and image come together to create something at the edge of my consciousness, something important, something I can't put my finger on, something perhaps too beautiful or painful to touch just there beyond my reach.

"... a site of linguistic self-consciousness and a point on the map of the modern world that may only be a projection of our desire to

*give our knowledge a shape that is foreign to or other than it. Above all it is a place that is named." I read Seamus Dean's explanation of Joyce's use of language to name place in the introduction to Penguin Books 1993 edition of A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man.*

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**(2005)**

"You couldn't do that today," a young man in my youth work class says. We're talking while we wait for the rest of the class to arrive.

"Yeah, it wouldn't be safe. Things are much more dangerous today," another class member, a young Hispanic man, says.

"Are they really, or is it just that our fear has increased because of what we see in the media?" I ask.

"Maybe we are just more aware of the dangers. Maybe you wouldn't have started out if you knew what would happen to you back in the 1950's?" A young white woman says.

"Maybe. But do you think things are better or worse for youth today than back then?"

"Worse," a middle aged black woman says.

"But crime rates are down, aren't they?"

"For who?" the black woman says.

"Well, that's the question, isn't it?"

"Yes, statistics don't mean anything. It depends where you live, who you are, and what you experience."

"Good point, but can't we argue that youth today are more sensitive and accepting than ever before to differences. They certainly live in more integrated communities, and have more education and awareness about members of the opposite sex, and people from different racial, ethnic, and religious backgrounds."

"I suppose it could be better in some places, but again it depends where you live. In my neighborhood, racism and intolerance are worse than ever."

"Not in mine," an Asian man says. "I live in an integrated neighborhood and we all get along pretty well."

"But you live on the East Side. People are better off there."

"So, are you saying class is an issue?" the Asian man asks the Black woman.

"That's part of it... But like in New Orleans I think it is mostly about race. Those people were poor, but the reason they wouldn't let them cross the bridge to safety was because they were black...."

"But they were looting," a class member who has just arrived says.

"What would you do if you didn't have food or water?" another class member asks.

"But some were taking TV and electronic equipment."

"I heard whites and the police were too?"

*(As the rest of the class arrives, the conversation continues).*

Later, on my way home after class, I think about my trip to the New Orleans of my youth, how inclusive and accepting the French Quarter seemed, the music, the rich, totally unique culture, the limits I was able to test as I searched to find myself, and that wonderful and scary journey on the road.

There is a call out on the internet for youth workers to come down to New Orleans and help victims of Hurricane Katrina. Maybe they will find part of themselves there with youth amidst the jazz, floods, destroyed homes, and many social issues that have surfaced during the tragedy. If they do, it will be good youth work.

November 2005

## *Reflecting on Conferences, Playgrounds, Camps and Churches*

*Over the years, I have been fortunate to attend many child and youth care conferences. Often I share what I learned with students in my classes. Recently I reflected and more or less thought out loud about several of these conferences – and thoughts that they evoked, scenes and images from my other experiences related to child and youth care.*

In St. Gallen, Switzerland, for a child and youth care conference a dozen or more years ago. I check out the playground. I want to see where the youth play, shoot a few hoops. When I get there, no one is around, but there is a ball in the container on the pole that holds the backboard and basket, and the net is still on the hoop. I wonder how long both have been there; is it true that no one wants to take either? This could not happen in the U.S. where we have chain nets and you have to bring your own ball and keep an eye on it.

I take the public ball and shoot a few hoops. A youth joins me, impressed I think by the vigor with which I still play. He looks very punk with his purple hair in a Mohawk cut; very out of place with the gray conservative surroundings in a city in which, like every other city, town and village in Switzerland, every man, I am told, has a rifle in his closet, a rifle he has been given as part of his duty in the Army Reserves – a rifle only very few men have ever used to kill another citizen of this closed society that still has World War II very much on its mind. “You have to watch those Germans, they’re always in groups,” a Swiss man told me on a boat ride to a dinner for conference attendees.

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**(1957)**

*As I go up for a lay-up, a stone hits me in the back. We are playing summer ball on a playground in the center of the city where the home team usually wins, and I am not on the home team. Many things happen on the playground, but not a lot in between, or at least not as much as will happen years later. People watch us. If we break a window or try to steal something someone will call our house. Except late at night when we manage to take cars from the used car lots for spins. The window watchers had shut out their lights and gone to bed by then. If more drugs were around, we would have used them, I imagine, but they were harder to find. We got high getting in other kinds of trouble.*

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A few years ago in Copenhagen I borrow a bike from one public bike stand and leave it at another near my destination. Few bikes are stolen; getting around is easy. However, many of the youth seem lost. They walk down the streets not giving way, trying to be macho, and in their attempts to be different seem much the same in their nationalism as the youth in the U.S.

At a party at a residential treatment center the child and youth care workers get drunk, not thinking much about what it means to youth who have come from families where alcohol destroyed their unity. "The House of New Orleans," a worker sings as adults dance.

**(1970)**

*Every summer we take all the kids from the residential treatment center to a Lutheran camp. We are welcome here whereas we are no longer welcome in a suburban Lutheran Church where the boys' acting out is too much of a disturbance. Nor are we welcomed at the Lutheran church with a gym near the residential center that is a member of a different synod, one being Wisconsin and the other Missouri. I can never get them straight, but it seems strange that we are not welcome in every church.*

*In a couple years or so the Pastors on the board, exercising their good stewardship, will vote to make the treatment center a private center for only Lutheran children with parents who can pay for their treatment. It is one of the better public treatment centers now, but the Pastors are concerned that most of the children and child and*

*youth care workers are not Lutheran and that the workers have gone too far by reading from Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, and Kahlil Gibran (The Prophet) at devotions.*

*In their wisdom and stewardship the Pastors will also attempt during the transition phase to make a member of the church, a teacher, the child and youth care supervisor. This will cause the child and youth care workers, who want to be supervised by a member of their profession, to protest at City Hall and threaten to unionize, and subsequently the excellent center will be closed and all the boys placed elsewhere. In a show of unity that has not yet been replicated, the workers will have stood up for their own professional development as proud, peaceful protestors for competent care for youth.*

*Now as we start another week at camp, we are all committed to our cause and eager to learn as much as we can about child and youth care, but there are many things we do not know. For example, we do not know in 1974, or at least we do not recognize when those of us who are off for the evening go into the small town near the campgrounds to party at the local tavern, that the youth, most of whom come from alcoholic families and are experts at sensing a hangover, will pick up on where we were the night before and be frightened or at least a little more leery of us. We also do not know as much about sexual abuse and the meaning of touch as we will later. Nonetheless the days at camp are filled with one-on-ones, group outings, swimming with buddy checks, treks in the woods, boating and ping-pong.*

*Fortunately in that fall of 1974 we will also find a church, an inner city black church that welcomes everyone, and has a pastor that comes down from the pulpit before the service to talk with our boys, unfazed by their language and other means of expressing themselves. In this house of God they are welcomed unconditionally, and many of us will experience another sense of organized religion.*

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At an international conference in Milwaukee in 1994 child and youth care workers are introduced from 32 countries. When it is their turn, an integrated group of workers from South Africa stand proudly and receive the loudest applause. For years they had been meeting more or less in secret. But their new president has just been elected, and apartheid as it was once known has ended. They can stand in public without fear of repercussions.

At the same conference, workers from former soviet countries are in attendance. For many of them it is the first time they have left their country. Getting here for many of them has cost them from a third to half of their annual salaries. There are also many committed local child and youth care workers, but some were unwilling to drive across town to attend unless they could have paid time off.

At another conference in Czechoslovakia in 1990, shortly after the velvet revolution which restored capitalism and democracy to Czechoslovakia under the playwright leader Vaclav Havel, a Czech worker in a workshop asks a Western worker in English (the Western worker does not speak Czech) about individual treatment plans. "In the past," he says, "We had to work only with group plans. We did not have individual treatment plans."

"How did you manage the kids?" the Western worker asks.

"We had strict consequences."

Soon drug use and crime among youth will rise in Czechoslovakia.

On our visit my son and I walk through the city getting a feel for the landscape. Already most of the youth seem to look more like him than the youth hanging on to the Soviet ways.

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In Canada, the government often helps pay for the child and youth care conferences and this makes it easier for workers to attend. They seem to have more of a true youth culture in Canada, as opposed to our culture of exploiting youth for material gain, and subsequently their conferences are always lively and well attended. We had this once in the US, a true youth culture, I think – or maybe I am just fantasizing about Canada and us. Funding does seem worse. Many of the youth agencies, especially the small ones that often do the best job, are struggling just to keep their doors open. Society and the government for the most part want everything for kids and staff done cheaper. This year, however, our State association is expecting a large and enthusiastic attendance at the annual conference.

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Long ago I learned that it is both better and worse, and similar and different elsewhere for kids. We can learn from this, and of course from self as we are in these experiences.



December 2005

# *Weave and Bop; Dip and Slide*

I have been thinking a lot about children in the US who have children and the conditions they grow up in, and this poem came out:

*Weave and bop;  
dip and slide*

*Weave and bop;  
dip and slide  
What's up, man?  
What's happening, brother  
press flesh  
wanna be*

*Weave and bop;  
dip and slide  
break dance  
spin on your head  
force time  
to stand still*

*Weave and bop;  
dip and slide  
ride blue lights  
and bass speakers  
roam*

*Weave and bop;  
dip and slide  
    dwell like a man  
    inside a woman  
    he does not love;  
    live in a reservation  
    of despair*

*Weave and bop;  
dip and slide  
    match colors  
    this gang; that gang  
    walk your baby to the store  
    this hood; that hood  
    find a morsel of sweetness  
    for a tiny mouth  
    your mouth; my mouth*

*Weave and bop;  
dip and slide*

*Weave and bop;  
dip and slide  
wanna be.*

February 2006

## *Talking structure, control, and consistency*

*W*e, eight youth workers and I, are all sitting in a circle in one of the cottages at the residential center in the U.S. I just finished doing a workshop. It feels good here and I like the workers. It's a cozy place with the youths' watercolors on the walls and comfortable chairs and a couch. A couple workers are sitting on the floor. It's middle fall, the colors outside the window are brilliant.

"So, what are you saying – that it's our problem?" a young woman who doesn't look much older than most of the kids asks, rather perturbed.

"No, not at all."

"What do you mean then?"

"Well, often when structure, control, and consistency become a big part of the discussion then often it's because it's an issue we are struggling with ourselves – which is quite normal, especially when we are just starting out."

"I still don't get it."

"Me either," the supervisor, a young man says. "We have to have some structure and consistency otherwise the place will turn to chaos. These kids don't have much internal control."

"Absolutely. I agree."

"So?" the girl says. "Now you agree. I still don't get it."

"It depends I guess on what you mean by structure and consistency. A fair amount of which I believe comes from us. If we're internally and externally consistent, and aware of our own limits and need for structure and control, then it becomes less of an issue, I think, for the kids. It's a balancing act I think. If we want structure and consistency we need a fair amount of planning, routines, rules, etc., and people have to have been consistent in implementing these, but sometimes we can go overboard – and when that

happens it might be that we are feeling powerless or a little out of control, or inconsistent, or frightened, or insecure and the structure and consistency are needed as much for us (or maybe more) as for the kids.”

“So, is that bad?”

“It’s not about bad or good. It’s about recognizing what is, and dealing with it.”

“What do we do in the meantime?”

“I think we work on it until we feel confident that we can use our power in a way with youth that they will feel empowered to follow rules and routines. The ability to say ‘no’ for example with conviction and without threats or consequences, or in a way that they understand that we are in charge and comfortable with our authority. And the best way I know to do it is to talk about it and help each other. I know it took me a long time and lots of help and reflection to get to that point in my own work. I remember early in my own career I was frequently giving consequences and/or restraining youth and by my eighth or ninth year I did this very infrequently.”

“What changed?”

“Well, I learned many preventive and intervention techniques, but I think more importantly I became more self aware and self confident so when I said ‘no’, they knew I meant it. I remember one of the most effective youth workers I worked with in this regard was a woman about five- feet one-inch tall. Everyone wanted to work with her because she had such a command of herself, and subsequently the kids listened to her... She didn’t have to threaten or bribe them, or have lots of rules, because they knew if they listened to her they would be engaged in something much more productive.”

“How do I become like that?” a smallish young woman asks.

“By becoming as self aware and gaining as much experience as you can, and by wanting to, as you are now...”

## Waiting, Anticipating, Space and Place

Lately, after drawing (writing) a self-portrait and literally hundreds of sketches about my experience in child and youth care, I have been musing on several themes that seem to be undercurrents in many of my experiences. Inspired by my friend, colleague and mentor, Mike Baizerman, who did a lot of his own musing (see for example his column *Musing with Mike* in a dozen or so editions of the *Child and Youth Care Forum*), I try to 'free associate' with the goal of comparing my experiences as a youth, with what I thought in hindsight were the experiences of the boys I worked with. I do this with the belief that the major challenge in child and youth care is to understand, not to change or prove, as we are so often led to believe today. And musing helps deepen my understanding by exploring themes freely from several perspectives.

Here are some of my musings on waiting, anticipating, space and place, four themes that I have spoken about in earlier editions of this column. Please feel free to muse along with me:

Much of youth is about waiting. In my youth, I waited for someone to show up, to go someplace, or for something to happen. Sometimes I tried to make it happen; other times I just "hung out" waiting for it to happen. I would dream about and plan out the things I wanted to happen, a vacation up north, a trip someplace, a date, sex. Time passed so slowly when I waited for these things. I tired of waiting, stopped waiting and tried to make it happen sooner, which never seemed to work. Or I counted the hours thinking that would move things faster. It never did. I waited in the dentist's office or for my father to come home on the bus. I wanted him to come but sometimes he didn't. I didn't want my turn with the dentist to come, but it always did. In the army reserves I hurried up and waited. I waited to be an adult, to drive, to grow a mustache, for the "one," the girl who didn't come, but whom I finally met when I wasn't waiting. (Often the things that meant the most in my youth

were not the things I waited for). I waited at the new shopping mall, I waited bored out of my skull, I waited, waited, waited.

The boys I worked with seemed to be constantly waiting, mainly for something good to happen. They had waited in fear based on a history of the things they waited for never really happening while something they weren't waiting for did – rejection, abuse, the police, a slap across the face, sexual abuse, and failure. Yet they still waited and believed something good would happen. They would be saved, cared for, liked, admired, or famous despite the odds against it. Daniel, the boy in several of my sketches and my novel *Floating*, who is a composite of two boys I knew, waited wondering if he would be like his father while he waited for the chance to dance and show others his creativity. He tested and waited for me to hurt him. It took all my strength not to do what he was waiting for. His sense of waiting changed, slightly.

As I waited for my father to show up after work, they waited for their parents who never showed up, while my father always did, later sometimes, but he always came home. My mother was always there when she was supposed to be. I did not have to wait for her. Their mothers were rarely there when they were supposed to be. Yet they waited for them to “show up.” Even when their parents were there they waited for them to show up. Physically present their parents were often elsewhere, drunk, drugged, preoccupied, self absorbed, unavailable. The youth waited to be in their presence but no one was home. They were there but not present, around but not available, at least not in the way they wanted them to be, with care and concern for the boys and their well-being. Thus the boys waited for parents like the ones they thought other boys had – the parents who would never come because they did not exist. They made up parents so the other boys would think the parents they were waiting for were good parents.

These boys also waited for the system to help. Hour upon hour, day upon day they waited for someone, something to acknowledge them. They waited in line, for a placement with a good family, or for medical care. All this waiting drove them nuts. And still they waited, and simultaneously anticipated, as did I.

Like most youth, I anticipated driving my father's car and having my own car, going up north, meeting a girl. I anticipated growing up, being free, and on my own, the days when I could do what I

wanted whenever I wanted – or so I thought. I would drive away, go up north at the drop of a hat, and have my own money to spend on the things I wanted. I anticipated seeing a friend again, a girl I loved, having a cat, getting a bike, swimming, becoming a professional basketball player.

Gradually and more frequently the anticipation of the end of something took over from the beginning. For example, I would wait all year to go up north to spend time at a cabin on a warm inland lake with my family, then once I got there I would worry about (anticipate) the end. As I got older I became less and less excited about going, until I eventually would rather stay home with my friends. As a young man I drank and used drugs to stay in a place where the anticipation of the beginning merged with the anticipation of the end. Ultimately I would be let down because nothing lasted. It took me a while to get out of this and to learn to enjoy the moment, to just be without waiting or anticipating, a lesson of youth learned through experience that shaped my happiness and fulfillment as an adult. Now I have a place up north I can go to almost any time I want and just be.

The youth I worked with and try today to understand in hindsight, anticipated mostly bad things happening. Their dreams had been repeatedly unfulfilled. They had been disappointed time after time, got their hopes up only to be let down. So many of them began to anticipate these things happening and did anything they could to avoid the future. For many of them there was no future. Friends had been killed, parents jailed, the world witnessed and experienced as a violent short-lived place. Others wanted no future or past. They wanted now, because that was for the moment, the safest, least painful place. If they anticipated something bad would surely happen, and often it did. Limbo was a better place.

Like all youth, I often waited and anticipated in spaces and places where something might happen. I put myself where there was possibility. I was bored somewhere, positioned “just in case” (Baizerman, 1995, p 340) a girl I liked would show up or an older kid would drive by in a customized car and give me a ride. We might rumble, or tumble in these places, the park on the street corner. They built a shopping mall on a field next to a creek that was our ball diamond, and fishing place, replaced a place of excitement with something predictable, dependable, the same as other malls that

followed. We found another place to do our thing. I sat on the shore of Lake Michigan and dreamt of being at sea, rode the train to the jazz festival in Chicago, which was like “another planet,” and hitchhiked to New Orleans, a place unlike any other I had been.

What I am is inseparable from these places, often places where I am waiting near water as in my fragment poems. They shape me, and the meaning I make of the world. I am the Midwest and New Mexico of my youth. The east side of Milwaukee, the duplexes and bungalows I grew up in. The horseback rides I took into the mountains.

My room is me. I shape this space and it shapes me. It is a predictable safe place, the room of my youth. It is also a boring place, a place of waiting, anticipating and longing to be somewhere else. Yet, I return, often, to “my room,” or the room that *is* me. Like others when I am away from home for too long I seek familiar places. I enmesh myself in the waters of home, the familiar walls, and long for the weather after a while. Memories are connected to these places and spaces as in the photos of my youth, leaning on an oar, sitting in my father’s chair, looking like Ricky Nelson at the Thanksgiving dinner table.

I took two youth I worked with to thanksgiving dinner at Suzanne’s parents’ house. They did not know how to behave in this space and place. It was foreign, unfamiliar. Thanksgiving was not a place of happy memory for them. There had been no thanksgivings, at least not the way we remembered it, or if there was one it was not happy. They were not fed at thanksgiving. The trust that comes with being fed in general was not part of their experience. So they acted out at Suzanne’s parent’s house. Threw the mashed potatoes. I had to discipline them. Eventually they settled into the space, the home that was not their home, even though they might have wished it so. Meanwhile Suzanne’s parents got to see the work I did – the good and the bad of it, the joy and the sadness, the anger and excitement, the fulfilment mixed in with the struggle.

Like many youth today, the youth I worked with grew up in frightening places. The places in which they waited and the things that happened usually were not good. The hood, the street corner, the alleys were riddled with gangs, drugs and crime. They tagged these places to call them their own. They belonged in these places and the places belonged to them for better or worse. Home was often a



cold place without enough blankets and human warmth, a place of frigidness or gushing guilt-ridden permissiveness, or both or neither. Something in these places was better than nothing. Home was not a home, but a temporary dwelling or shelter and sometimes not even that. There were no trips up north, jazz festivals, or hitchhikes to New Orleans. Or if there were it was usually on the run from something rather than to something. They got away to other places to avoid being abused and often found themselves in places where they were abused again. The spaces and places that shaped them and they shaped were not the spaces and places of a happy youth, but rather spaces of horror or of unpredictable and unrelenting disappointment. There was little sunshine in these places. Yet, they managed to find some. They turned their reservations of despair into the hood – a surreal world of crime, belonging, graffiti, drug deals, and shootings – into their own worlds. What they did in these places and spaces was not acceptable, but it was understandable. The places they hung where something good might happen even if it didn't. The war zones they wished were the playgrounds of a happier youth. They gazed at these worlds from the nonexistent backseats of their parents' cars, a cockeyed view, but their view...

#### **Reference**

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April 2006

## *Motion and Stillness*

Last month I began to share some of my musing on themes that have emerged over the years from my sketches about my experience in child and youth care. I continue this month with my thoughts on motion and stillness, two themes, which I wrote about briefly earlier in this column. My belief is that we have to continually try to understand themes like these in order to be in child and youth care with youth.

Again, please feel free to muse along with me. I begin with two sketches, one from my youth and one from my work with youth:

(1957)

I grab the car keys off the kitchen table, tiptoe down the back stairs, take a deep breath of late August air, back the Dodge out of the garage, and creep between the rows of clapboard duplexes – the houses and people in them familiar by the steps I take to the grocery store and in games of kick the can.

At the end of the alley, I turn east. Burleigh Street is bathed in the warm glow of lights. A sole pigeon disappears beneath the hood and reappears eyeball to eyeball with me before flying off. The playground where I shoot buckets and the cemetery where my brother taught me to drive pass on the left.

Once I reach Lake Michigan, I park next to the pavilion, which sits on the bluffs like a balcony above nature's great symphony, and get out. No one else is here. As a path from the moon runs across the black water to my feet and white capped waves pound the rocks along the shore beneath me I repeat the word pavilion, "pavilion, pavilion, pavilion," until it loses meaning. Then chilled I drive down to the shore and park next to the breakwater where one by one the waves crash over the top of the car and wash down the sides, cocooning me in water with the lights from the ships on the horizon shining like diamonds through the windshield.

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(1974)

"30 all," Bobby, 17, says.

"36 to 26, my favor." I hunch over with my hands on his knees.

"No. 30 all, lets go, take it out!" Bobby snaps a bounce pass to me.

"30, 26." I turn with the ball on my hip and walk to take it out of bounds, Bobby runs behind, bats the ball away, grabs it, charges the basket, takes two steps up the brick wall, leans out in front of the backboard, and dunks the ball.

I look out the ground level window. It's a cold, grey, fall, Wisconsin day, 1974. Leaves have piled up against the grating. We're in the small gym in the basement of the residential center for troubled boys, playing one-on-one basketball, or buckets as we call it.

"Let's take a break." I sit down on the scuffed wood floor.

Bobby spins the ball in his hands, stands above me.

"We'll have to rake the leaves later," I say.

"Not me."

"I meant the other boys and me."

Bobby used to live here. He's returned to visit, and play some one-on-one.

"I always liked this little gym," Bobby says.

"Why?"

"Because I can stuff."

The basket in the rumpus room is eight feet high instead of the usual ten feet ...

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As a youth and as a youth worker I was constantly in motion. I was moving, doing something. Motion was always there at the edge of my consciousness. It was something I did, heard, and/or flowed between us that I could not quite understand, yet vital to knowing my experience and the experience of others. The titles of my novels were *In Motion* and *Floating* because this emphasized the meaning and importance of motion in work with youth. Put simply, we were more often than not in motion.

Sometimes I think of motion as the existential hum or a rumble beneath the surface that we often feel and hear, a life force perhaps? Motion is also, as Aristotle said, the mode in which the future and present are one, or perhaps a state in which we can be totally in the moment. And, then motion is just plain movement, or getting from here to there or nowhere, the movement without which it is impossible to imagine being alive.

I run everyday because I enjoy moving. Frequently, after the initial pain subsides and the endorphins kick in, I get the runners high. My activity and I are one. Time is lost and everything is in synch. I can go for several blocks and not remember the distance in between. You might also say it is my flow or optimal experience, and as such is a metaphor for how hard work leads to fulfilment in life.

When I feel connected to others motion is usually involved – for example, the shared rhythm of a conversation. We are doing something with each other: talking, working walking, dance, or running. “I am still happiest moving in Suzanne’s presence,” I write in one of my sketches about the woman I have lived and been friends with for many years.

Similarly, I was often connected to the troubled boys when we were running, swimming, or playing one on one basketball. I used to get a small group of them up early in the morning for a run. At first the pain made it difficult. Then as they got in shape, often we experienced a feeling of harmony in the middle of the run when we shared a common pace. Once the word spread other boys wanted to join in. They saw it as something special. Usually when we were lost in our motion, or enmeshed in an activity, we were in it together. I still remember those times as some of the most fulfilling times in my work. I liked the action and struggle in the work as well. With some fear and apprehension, of course, I felt alive in the midst of trying to resolve a physical struggle or restraint, or chasing a youth who was running away.

Rhythm, motion, and stillness are closely related. The rhythms of our motions as we seek resolution/stillness. Rhythmic interactions forge huge connections (Maier, 1992), and let us know when a struggle is ending – the tension in the arms, back and neck eases and subsides. As in modern dance, we line up and pass through, close or far, boundaries and human connections formed by our

positioning, mirroring back, pauses, and ability to freeze ourselves in the timelessness of the moment. We are in and out of synch with youth and their developmental rhythms.

As a child I was always in motion. I felt a need to move. I ran from or to something. The murmur and hum always seemed to be there, just beneath the surface. Moving made me feel free at least for the moment. I often moved from one place or thing to another, one dream or fantasy to another, childhood to youth to adulthood and back. Usually this went smoothly but sometimes I did not want something to change or end, so I moved away, or avoided the transition. I went somewhere else, or did not show up. Or I sped up the transition by moving ahead or away from what I was doing.

The boys I worked with were not used to smooth transitions. Things usually went badly when they moved from one place or activity to another. Their histories of movement and transition had been filled with failure and rejection. They had moved from one home to another, from awake to sleep, sleep to awake, and crafts to dinner with some difficulty and fear. They did not have a normal sense of moving from one thing or place to another with relative ease and success, much less with moving from more challenging events to another. Learning to experience and master transitions was a big part of their care. Getting from here to there successfully without rejection, fights, abuse, failure or neglect helped them deal with change and separation.

I am often moving toward stillness. I move to find peace and quiet, or am drawn to a place of quiet and stillness such as the peace I find when I am exhausted after a run. I long to just be, or search for just so-ness ... or, to just be. Or I am moving toward death, or to return to the womb. I like to be in a still place, empty of thought and worry, a place I find for which I have too little time. In the middle of a run I lose all contact sometimes with time and space. I am suspended, still, yet moving, just being. As a boy I stared at my feet or the wall until there was nothing. When I hurt inside, I felt better just being totally still, or numb. I stiffened my body on my bed until nothing moved. It was one way I had of coping.

Youth I think often run around, make noise, holler, and move to achieve similar states. They hear and try to rid themselves of the hum or rumble. Something moves inside them and they move to get

away from it. Their anxiety is uncontrollable except when they run, fight, or lash out. Motion is a defense against the pain inside. Stillness is a dream, to be in a state of nothing, their heads and bodies rid of the thoughts and call to action that drives them to move and act the way they do. As a young boy my mother used to get concerned when I ran and hollered through the house for no apparent reason ... I understood this about the boys I worked with ...

May 2006

## *Passing through, lining up, and basketball*

It's near the end of my spring youth work class, which I have taught now for more than 20 years. Last week Kaseva, who grew up on a Navajo Reservation, played classical guitar, and his flute. The rest of us danced. We practised two movements I had learned a few semesters ago from a modern dance teacher who I had invited to our class, passing through and lining-up.

As Kaseva played we wove in and out in the middle of the room. We went wherever we wanted, and surprisingly did not bump into each other. First we did this with no eye contact and then with eye contact. This was done to practice and demonstrate passing through.

Next, we lined up with each other. I stopped the group in the middle of our passing through and we lined-up with another person in a way that our body language mirrored back our impressions of that person at the time. We tried to make whatever configurations best represented what we felt about the other person, and/or ourselves in relationship to the other person. Throughout Kaseva changed the tempo of the music, and our moods and movements automatically followed.

These two movements from modern dance, lining-up and passing through, exemplify rhythmic interactions, I explained. "Youth work, as I have said many times, is like a modern dance in which we move through a day in and out of synch with youth. The challenge is to get a feel for work so we can form as many moments of connection, discovery and empowerment as possible."

Then we explored together the relationship between what we had just done and various techniques and practices we had learned earlier in the course, such as mirroring, body language, rhythmic interaction, and proximity. I have done this before. Almost always it works as a good learning exercise. Getting up and doing something

gets us in the mood for discussion, and of course lets us practice, and this in turn sheds new light on our topic.

While we were talking I said that basketball was also a good metaphor for me. Often I played three-on-three or one-on-one basketball with the youth. Similar to a modern dance we lined-up and passed through as we competed, which brought in another element for discussion, competition, its role and place in youth work. "In hindsight," I said, "It wasn't so much about competition as process. We were feeling each other out, gauging the space between us, moving toward a goal (basket), defending, facing off, facing one another, not facing one another, giving eye contact, not giving eye contact, faking, not faking, etc."

Then the others shared their examples of things they liked to do, soccer, dancing, painting, and hoola hoops, in which they felt they had similar opportunities for rhythmic interactions, engagement, etc. At the end we had the epiphany once again that yes, this is where most of the development in our work occurs, in these interactions – whether a game or chore or sitting quietly each moment, movement and interaction had enormous potential.

As we talked, I smiled to myself. I was back home, where I started as a young youth worker who believed that all my interactions could be powerful if I knew what I was doing. After all these years it still boiled down to this, something so simple, yet complex.

Then Kaseva asked if he could play his flute for us. He explained that as a young boy on the reservation he heard the Navajo play their flutes and he wanted to learn to play.

"Was it hard?" one of the class members asked.

"Sort of. But once I decide to do something with my music I stay with it until I get it."

"It's the same with your classical guitar isn't it. You are really very good." I said.

He smiled, played his flute, and took us to another place, a very ancient, haunting place. It was beautiful. Afterwards we talked about how music was his grand passion, and how important it was for the kids to find something they were passionate about, and us as well. "To be good at youth work you have to be passionate about it don't you?" one of the students asked. I smiled and said yes.



“Remember how Kaseva made a health food dinner with the youth on his field placement. At first they didn’t like it because the food was not the fast food they were used to. But then sensing Kaseva’s fondness for cooking they got into it, didn’t they Kaseva?”

“Yes, it took some time, but eventually they really started to like the food. But I think they liked cooking it with me even more.”

Then others joined in with examples from their field placements. Time went quickly. Before we knew it the class was over. We said goodbye, and “see you next week.” I packed the materials and stepped outside. It was a nice spring evening. On the way home I felt good, and sensed that the others did as well. We were on to something that was old and new.

## "No Farting in My Van"

Late last month I attended a child and youth care conference, *Child and Youth Care in Action* (love that title) at the University of Victoria, their first conference for graduates of their child and youth care program, community partners, and others interested in learning about some of the latest developments and approaches in the field. It was an excellent event and learning experience (as are all the conferences at the University of Victoria) with inaugural keynotes in the names of Henry Maier, and Jerry Beker, who I enjoyed seeing and talking with again. Like he did for many others in the field, Jerry helped me get my work published and has served as a mentor over the years. Henry Maier as most of us know died in 2004.

When I wasn't at the conference, I was with my friend Gerry Fewster. He has a beautiful home in Cowichan Bay, about 25 miles north of the city. We joked and "talked smart" as we usually do. We both see *being in the moment* and/or *point of interaction* as key to child and youth care. If we can get this right we believe everything else will follow as we try to create moments of connection, discovery, and empowerment. You have to show up and be there first, in other words, before you can get anything to work.

Many of the workshops at the conference seemed to support this point of view. For example, I attended a workshop by Hans and Kathleen Skott-Myhre, *Radical Youth Work: Love and Community* in which they used post-Marxist concepts as a foundation for their discussion. During the workshop they said many intriguing things that got me thinking, none more than their use of Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo as examples of revolutionaries – Diego, working from the outside to create change, and Frida from the inside out. And very interesting definitions of love and community that these two career "direct line" workers offered, based on their experience and reading of philosophy and a number of other literatures.

Earlier Doug Magnuson and I had written critical responses to Hans' challenging article in the *Child and Youth Care Forum*. As he and Kathleen spoke, I wished we had had a chance to speak and get

to know each other beforehand because it was obvious that we shared many similar views. I really liked their definitions of love and community, and their emphasis on youth as agents of their own change.

When the discussion shifted to rules, they seemed to be saying much of what I had tried to say in my workshop titled, *Hesitation, Motion, Stillness, Space, Place, Light and Dark and other themes in Child and Youth Care*. Their feelings, like mine I think, were that in programs where people are self-aware and comfortable and confident in their personal authority, few rules are needed because youth, even the most difficult ones, respond to these people with a sense of wanting to develop their own awareness and inner sense of boundaries. Youth respond, in other words, to the sincere, genuine, secure sense of the other Self because this other self makes them feel safe, and open to exploring their own built-in inner controls and feelings.

Anyway, as we were discussing this one youth worker, a middle-aged man I had talked to earlier after my workshop, a seemingly very experienced and competent street worker (I wish I remembered his name) said, "I don't care what you say, one rule I have is *no farting in my van*."

We all laughed, of course, but his point was well taken. In child and youth care we need to know our own personal boundaries, as well as have some super-ordinate rules, not many, just a few to let the kids know that certain things simply are not permissible for anyone, like doing drugs or hurting others. Then within this context of everyone pitching in around the big rules, situations can be handled as they arise in our interpersonal relationships.

Karen VanderVen and others have written extensively how point systems and handbooks of rules have gotten in the way of creative, and more fulfilling interaction in child and youth care, and there does indeed seem to be a movement afoot to get back to personal relationships and developmental activities as the foundation for creating safe, invigorating, discovery filled, change-oriented programs for children and youth.

A central challenge in this movement I believe is finding the right balance of rules and personal authority and doing it according to the developmental needs of the child and youth care staff

members who need time to develop the confidence, knowledge, skill, and intuition that many of us more experienced workers developed over time. In the meantime we have to continually work at being aware of our own boundaries and decide which are the few rules we absolutely need to reinforce consistently. “No farting in my van” might be one that others find useful.

July 2006

## Lunch 101

Often when I refer to a story *Grilled Cheese* I wrote several years ago, youth workers can relate. They remember the grilled cheese lunches they had with the kids. So do I. Every once in a while I make myself a grilled cheese sandwich, in part because the aroma takes me back to those moments of both happiness and struggle. I remember how much we (kids and staff) all looked forward to those sandwiches and tomato soup after an active summer morning. I also remember arguments and food fights. Most of all though a grilled cheese sandwich just tasted good. So when I get the urge again I make another one.

Someday I want to teach a course called Lunch 101. In my university courses we talk about and/or practice many activities like transitions, bedtimes, kickball, painting, etc., but I have never devoted a whole semester to one of these very important activities. Lunch would be a good place to start I think. During the course we might begin with a role-play then spend our time constructing, deconstructing, and practising the activity while making connections to readings and other aspects of the work.

After a role-play in which one person was the worker and the rest of us mimicked youth (acting the way we have experienced or think youth act at lunch) we could ask what do we need to conduct a successful lunch? An understanding of the significance of food in human development and how trust and attachment are often rooted in feeding might be where we begin. The worker who learned this would not take food away or use it as punishment or reward, but rather see it as a vital part of building trust and connections with youth who might have experienced little of either. Taking food away would be the same as taking away development to this worker. We could also discuss stories youth bring to lunch. For example lunch (or breakfast or dinner for that matter) might not be familiar to some youth, at least not the way it was conducted at the youth center or group home or residential facility. These youth might have had to scrounge up what they could for lunch or dinner – a bottle of

pop, or a bag of junk food someplace. Sitting down with others and having manners during what is a very sophisticated social experience might also be foreign to these youth. Lunch at home, if it was held together with other family members, might have been filled with fights or arguments, or absent or angry parents. When the bowl of potatoes was passed the youth might have had to dig in for fear of not having enough to go around.

We could also consider culture, and the related meaning of food. Questions we could ask would be: Is the food being served and the way it is being served familiar or unfamiliar based on the food, rituals and customs of the youths culture? Is the youth used to eating meat and potatoes, or beans and rice, or pasta, or all of these? How is the meal paced and celebrated or not celebrated in the cultures the youth come from? What does food represent? Is mealtime a spiritual experience? Or has the youth ever had a chance to experience meals the way they are customarily served in his/her and other cultures?

While preparing for lunch, decisions about where to sit and how to pass or not pass the food could be given careful attention. Do we have sit down or cafeteria-style meals? If the latter were chosen people behind the counter serving the food would be seen as playing a significant role. I would encourage sit down meals where workers served the food because I think it is more personal and creates excellent additional opportunities to form attachments and relationships during the meal. We would discuss in detail how a connection was formed as the worker passed and/or served from the bowl, the movement of the arm and smile saying "I am here with youth having this lunch, making sure you are fed."

As we practiced lunch, pacing would be given special attention. The beginning and ending and in-between parts of lunch as well as the transition to and from it would be seen as significant learning opportunities as would meal planning and preparation – getting and leaving lunch as important as eating together, the fears and/or joys of coming to lunch, which could be loaded with happy or unhappy memories as suggested a moment ago. Making meals together would be seen as a golden opportunity to further connections, skills and relationships for the present and future.

During lunch 101 we might make lunch together, each student and professor could lead making a lunch from his or her culture.

Then we would eat together and talk about all the above, practising as we went along. For several years, I have either gone out to eat or made a meal with the students for our last class together. This seems to help pull everything together and help us transition on to the next meal (class).

I could go on and on of course, making connections with the research and literature in our field as I went along. We might even have a course called Advanced Lunch. But I think you get the point, especially if you work in a program that pays attention to these practice issues that one might argue are the crux of our practice (we used to say if you could get the daily routines down you had 50% of the work mastered), and are often unfortunately missed in many programs and classes today that have forgotten our roots.

I know for example after we talk about lunch in our undergraduate and graduate classes and the students go on to their field placements they either come back discouraged or encouraged by the attention given to feeding and food at their placements. We usually try to eliminate those places that do not get it, and strengthen our list with places that do. Generally if lunch is a good experience so is the field placement. When workers in our continuing education classes who are already working in the field share examples of the attention they pay to meals, we try to weave these examples into our discussions with the undergraduates. On the other hand when workers speak about depriving youth of meals as a policy at their agencies we usually ask, "Have you really considered what you are doing?"

In the discussions it seems we are all having these days with funding agencies about outcomes, I like to say, "Lunch would be a good outcome. If a kid could have a good meal, this would be a very good outcome." You can imagine the response this gets from the funding sources while at the same time if there is a committed and competent youth worker in the discussion, his or her eyes will light up. Anyway, wouldn't it be great if we could have more courses and conversations titled Lunch 101?

I'm hungry. Lunch anyone? How about grilled cheese?

August 2006

## *More thoughts on Power*

**T**his month I continue some of the musing I started a few months ago with more thoughts on power. If you are a regular reader, please excuse me if I repeat some things I have said earlier. Some themes in my reflections keep reoccurring in new contexts. Seems like a timely moment to think about power, as it has become a major issue around the globe, just as it continues to an issue in our work.

I do not consider myself very knowledgeable about philosophy. I am drawn to it though. There is something about philosophers that I can hear, but don't quite understand. Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, and Foucault to name a few. Similar to the way in which I reflect on experience, my mind and eyes bounce around when I read these philosophers. I page forward and back through their narratives.

The way they write, almost as much as what they say, intrigues me – the rat-tat-tat of their words. I go back again and again trying to relate to what they are saying, sometimes literally going back to a library or bookstore to look again at a phrase or thought. Then after I put the book down I feel I am changed in some way, the way I am changed by a poem that has a little mystery to it, but whose images linger. It is this desire to understand, I believe, that makes me human. I want to know other, the world around me, and myself, and therefore I am.

Thus, in this fashion, I try (humbly) to share some of my thoughts about power as they emerged from my sketches and my reading of philosophers, artists, researchers, and child and youth care workers. My hope is that these thoughts will ring true with the reader's experience and/or raise questions.

Power is something we all have within us. There are two general types of power, positive and negative. The competent worker's power is positive. He or she is powerful. Negative power is often abusive. People who use their power in a negative way often feel powerless.

The powerful person does not impose or try to give power to or



take power from someone else. He or she believes in the power of his or her self and therefore the power inherent in other selves. The powerful person cares for, plans and implements activities, and relates with others in a way that they can feel and take advantage of the sense of the power that is within them. These workers do not empower youth but rather create opportunities for youth to empower themselves.

The powerful person cares for self and for other. Because he or she truly values self, she or he values others. Because he or she cares for self she or he is capable of creating an environment with others where others can care for self and be cared for. The powerful person's care for other, like his or her care for self, is unconditional and nonjudgmental. He or she accepts self and therefore accepts other.

Gerry Fewster writes a lot about how the major task of the worker is to be present in the moment, self aware, open and available to mirror back one's experience of other. There is nothing more powerful that a worker can do than give a youth his or her undivided and attention and sincere genuine responses.

The amount of power one has is in direct proportion to the sincerity and effectiveness of one's quest to know self. Those who want and try to know self are powerful because their power is an expression of their quest which manifests itself in respect for self and other, and subsequently commands the respect of others.

The powerful worker has presence. He or she can say no and expect an appropriate response, not because of imposing his or her power on the other, but because he or she is secure in his or her power, and the other senses and respects it and has on some level a desire to have a similar power. The powerful worker can say *I think we can do this* because the worker believes it about him or her self and the other, and therefore the youth, child, or parent believes it about him or her self. The powerful worker is in control of self when self needs control and therefore does not need to control others, because the worker believes others have the capacity to control themselves. A helping hand might be needed at times but the helping hand is offered with the belief that the child or youth can regain his or her own control.

The workers' relationships to their power changes – sometimes

they feel powerful and sometimes they feel powerless. This is normal, and part of the experience of being in child and youth care. Sometimes we feel competent, in touch, and powerful; and sometimes we feel incompetent, out of it, out of control and powerless. If the workers are aware of their feelings of powerlessness, children respond well to these workers because they recognize that the workers are human and aware of self, just as when the workers are aware of their feelings of inadequacy, sadness, etc. What is harmful is when the workers do not recognize their feelings and try to prove themselves with the children.

A former gang leader once said to me in a class, "You can't teach me anything. I've been there and therefore I know what it's like for these kids."

This was not a powerful youth worker I told myself and responded, "Your experience is helpful if you understand it and how it has impacted your life, but if you really understand your experience then you would not assume it was someone else's. You would be curious about what it was like for the youth, just as you were curious about what it meant to you."

He stared me down in class as if he was "dissing" me. I thought how powerless this person must feel and wondered if he was still in a gang.

When I consult or sit in on discussions in team meetings and classes and the conversations shifts to "We need more control over these kids," I usually respond with the question "Who is out of control?" sensing that it is probably the workers who feel that way about themselves. I often apply this same line of thing to myself when I find myself, a controlling person, trying to gain control again. "Am I out of control or feeling powerless?" I ask myself and usually the answer is yes. When I am in this state I am more likely to use my power to control someone who trusts me, and I am also vulnerable to being controlled and to losing my freedom, because I am willingly or perhaps inadvertently succumbing to those who would abuse power and control. So I try to snap out of it, and try to help youth learn to do the same for themselves.

Like many workers, I sensed early in my career that some structure and control was needed with troubled kids but it took me a while to fully realize that this came mostly from me being confident

and in control of myself when it was needed. Without a degree of inner certainty my power, and my ability to handle my fear and anger, my control and structure techniques were usually met with resistance. They worked much better when I had confidence and self-control. There were many things that went into reaching this point, not the least of which was an understanding of my own childhood and my relationship to people who I perceived, often wrongly, to have power over me.

Today when child and youth care workers say to me that they were in a power struggle, I say, "You lost."

"Why?" they ask.

"Because to be in a power struggle your power has to be up for grabs, and if you believe that then your power can be taken away and it will be. Others can try to limit, usurp, diminish and overpower your power, but it can never be taken away unless you are willing to give it up. If you make the issue *competition for power* then you are more than likely missing the real issue, which is that the other is feeling powerless and so are you by trying to show you have it." The competent worker knows and believes that his or her power is not up for grabs. It is part of who he or she is, and it shows through.

A powerful person or society in general does not restrict the freedom of others, unless the other does something that infringes on the right to freedom of others. Freedom is part of care for self and thus respected in others. Using power to take away freedom is the most damaging thing one can do to other. Thus it is not taken lightly.

Powerless workers resort to "points", "levels" and other artificial systems to control. They can't control the kids with their own positive power, which emphasizes the youth's power, so they have to create systems of reward and punishment that manipulate and impose power from the outside. "Level" systems work better when children and youth feel empowered in the systems to make choices for themselves that will lead a greater sense of self power, or the sense that "I can do it".

Foucault, who studied abuses of power with the mentally abused and prisoners, speaks about the ontology of care for self, freedom and power. He refers to Greek philosophers who said that ethos was in the ability to care for self. The person who cared for self was not

likely to abuse his power, but rather care for others and thus nurture the power within them. Doug Magnuson in our field, along with Mike Baizeman, philosophers of sorts, wrote about youth as temporal agents of their own change as the focal point of a moral of praxis in child and youth care. Among other things, this article is an enlightening treatise on power and its role in child and youth care. The more we respect their agency, the more we recognize and nourish their positive power.

Children and youth who have been abused and neglected have not had as many opportunities to feel powerful or empowered as children who live in more healthy conditions. These abused and neglected children have been the victims of others' abuse of power and their own propensities to do the same because it is what they know and have experienced. These children and youth have not been raised by people who care for themselves. These peoples' powerlessness and inadequacy, and lack of self-awareness have been manifest in anger and abuse of other/self.

The child and youth care worker recognizes this and does not try to replicate what other adults have done to the child or youth. He or she does not abuse his or her power. The worker also recognizes that we live in a society where power is often displayed in negative ways, and freedom restricted by the images presented in the media, images that have a great capacity to lie and steal the power of choice from the viewer – hypnotic images that aren't truthful. Images that say and get you to believe you need something even though you don't. Images of superior humans are particularly dangerous. Think of Hitler and the power of his images of the superior German as depicted in the photos of the times (I forget the photographer's name, a woman with great artistic talent but unfortunately the wrong message). Think of the modern ads with the perfect air brushed bodies, not that the motives are the same, but both abuses of power, I think, both adept at portraying images of something that does not exist.

The worker also realizes that we live in a society where groups directly or indirectly try to impose their power on others, men over women, straights over gays, white over blacks, and conservative Christians over all others, etc. These abuses of power have clever messengers in the media, cultures, families, communities, and religions. Distorted images of the powerful and oppressed are all

around. Supposed champions of freedom blowing others to smithereens, defenders of human rights violating human rights, advocates of tolerance exposing their own religious intolerance, and advocates of families and childcare discriminating against those who do not fit their mould.

It's confusing to say the least – these mixed messages about power and how one gets or buys it. The self-aware worker is challenged daily not to be seduced and fall into the same trap. He or she is not seduced into thinking his or her power is based on what he or she can buy. He or she does not hurt others in the name of preserving freedom, or use his or her gender or culture or social status to gain power over other.

There is power in doing. Power generally cannot be exercised if nothing is done. The powerful worker is engaged with other and the activities of daily living where power can be experienced with other. Children and youth are more likely to experience healthy power when they are involved with other rather than just sitting around. They can exercise their power in the task at hand and with the persons they are interacting with. Note the preposition “with.”

A worker cannot exercise his or her power sitting in the office with his or her feet on a chair. The worker has to be on the floor, both feet, metaphorically now, planted in activity and relationship. Sometimes doing nothing, however, is powerful. The worker shows self-restraint. Instead of doing something for a youth, she or he lets the youth experience it, or instead of saying something the worker lets the youth figure it out. This too is powerful.

Being generous and mastering something are powerful acts. When one gives something valuable to someone else this is very powerful and fulfilling. Being able to master a task – playing a piano, drawing a portrait, doing dishes, raking leaves – is powerful, so is being independent. Mastering something and having something to give is liberating. Being with powerful workers is also liberating. Healthy identities and a sense of personal responsibility are developed in part when children and can incorporate parts of these workers into the development of a unique, free, independent and interdependent self.

That's it for now. I'm out of steam, but not power. What are your thoughts on power? I'd love to hear them.

## *Careless to caring for troubled youth: A caregiver's inside view of the youth care system*

In the past, Americans assumed that troubled youth were well taken care of once the proper service or placement was identified. The general feeling was that people who ran programs for youth knew what they were doing. Fortunately, recent investigations and the current push to de-institutionalize services have alerted people to the inherent dangers in this kind of simplistic thinking. In scrutinizing programs, however, the media and investigators have tended to accentuate the extremes rather than concentrate on the daily dilemmas and problems encountered by caregivers and youth. While the public needs to know about extreme cases of neglect and abuse, this information presented alone, as it often is, does little to improve the caregiving system. All it really has done is shift the public attitude from being very naive to being extremely skeptical about the youth care system.

I have developed four examples for this chapter in an attempt to paint a realistic picture of what happens to many youth in need of special programs. As the reader shall soon learn, these programs can't be characterized as all bad or all good. Instead, a more accurate description might be that these programs are places where youth are often caught between caregivers' honest intentions to deliver the best possible care and their frustrations over not receiving the training, supervision, and support they need to deliver it.

The first example shows what often happens to a youth in a program where caregivers are unable to maintain a long term commitment to their work. In this particular program, like so many, sufficient resources were put into materials, supplies and programs, but not into salaries and career incentives for caregivers.

## **John**

John, a troubled ten year old. had been giving his third grade teacher a difficult time for several months before she finally went to the principal and asked to have him removed from her class. John fought with his classmates. used obscene language. started two fires in the wastebasket and never did his class assignments or homework. The teacher was aware of John's long history of troubles and his miserable home life. but things had reached the point where she felt completely helpless. Besides, it just did not seem fair for her to have to spend so much time with John at the expense of the others.

Under these circumstances the principal felt justified in requesting another diagnostic evaluation to determine whether or not an alternative placement might be more appropriate. After the evaluation and much deliberation among school officials. county social workers and John's parents, a consensus was reached to refer John to Hilldale, a local residential treatment center for emotionally disturbed youth. Hilldale had just made some major revisions in its treatment philosophy and its physical facilities. As a result of these revisions, Hilldale's staff were able to boast that they were capable of helping some very difficult youth in a relatively short period of time (18 months to two years). Homelike living quarters intensive individual and family therapy, a special education staff and dedicated child care workers, were some of the enticements offered to the referring agency and John's parents.

As part of the referral process, Hilldale sent a team of workers to observe John at school and at home. During these visits John got to meet Jack, a social worker, Melissa, a special education teacher, and Rick, a child care worker. Together these people formed one of Hilldale's treatment teams. Their purpose in observing was to determine whether or not John would be appropriately placed at Hilldale and, if so, in which treatment group. This was also viewed as an opportunity for John and his parents to become familiar with some of the Hilldale staff members.

The referral process led to an agreement among all those involved that Hilldale was indeed the best possible placement for John.

When John arrived at Hilldale. Jack, Rick. and two additional child care workers. Kathy and Jeff. were there to greet him. The

Hilldale staff had decided that John would fit in best with a group of six youths being treated by the staff members who had done the intake study. And as was the Hilldale policy, these staff members were responsible for making John's arrival as pleasant as possible. So, together with John's mother (his father had gotten drunk and couldn't make it), the staff helped John unpack and get accustomed to his new room.

Once the unpacking was done. John's mother went down to Jack's office for a visit and John and the three child care workers sat down for some cookies and milk. It was at this point that John, learned about some of Hilldale's basic rules, got an idea of what a routine day was like at the center, heard about the recreational activities the group participated in, and got to know more about Kathy and Jeff, the two child care workers who were not involved in the referral study. After about an hour of discussion John also got to meet his roommate, Tony, and the rest of the group.

It didn't take John long to realize that the child care workers, Kathy, Rick and Jeff were the people he would be spending most of his time with. One of them was always there: in the morning, after school, at night, on the weekends and during the day when he couldn't hack it at Hilldale's school. Under these circumstances it was only natural for him to begin to feel if he was going to risk being friendly with an adult. It would probably have to be one of these three.

Rick was 24 and had been at Hilldale for about a year. He had a degree in business administration, but after becoming frustrated with the business world, decided to try his hand at working with kids. Kathy was 22. She had just started at Hilldale. Her degree in Art, combined with a great deal of enthusiasm for working with youth, seemed to make her an excellent candidate for child care work.

Jeff, at 34, was considered the old pro. He had gone into the Army after high school and, after a six year hitch, decided to get into child care work. Hilldale was the fourth center he had been employed at in the last ten years, but his supervisor was convinced that Jeff had finally found a home. At least, nothing in his first two years at Hilldale indicated otherwise.

At the first six month progress report meeting, Rick, Kathy and



Jeff reported that things were going about as well as could be expected with John. There, of course, had been all of the usual phases that take place during a child's adjustment period: a honeymoon phase in which things seem too good to be true followed by a testing phase in which the staff saw John's behavior extremes and, finally, a settling in phase in which John began to behave as had been predicted by his third grade teacher and his parents.

Several positives were also noted. John had excellent athletic skills and he seemed to be getting along quite well with Harry, a boy in the group with similar interests and abilities. But, perhaps most important, John was beginning to develop a good relationship with Kathy. Jeff and Rick reported that he looked forward to her shifts on duty and according to Kathy, John was beginning to talk with her before bedtime about his problems. This was extremely significant, considering that John's previous interactions with his parents and other adults had been characterized as very distant and non-communicative.

Jack, the social worker, reported that family and individual therapy were still in the early phases of getting to know each other. Jack seemed quite surprised when he heard that John was getting close to Kathy.

In school, Melissa, the special education teacher, was totally frustrated. She was grateful that the child care workers were helping out by taking John for a portion of the school day and involving him in arts and crafts projects. But even during the limited time that he was in the classroom, his short attention span and his high anxiety level made it very difficult for him to get any work done. Melissa felt that as she got to know John better, and as he began to experience more success on the living unit, things would also pick up in the classroom.

So after six months, John's prognosis was guarded, but tempered with some optimism due to his relationship with Kathy and Harry and the success he was having in athletics. One evening, about eight months into John's treatment at Hilldale, a special group meeting was called by Kathy. This worried John as it did the rest of the group members because special meetings usually meant there was either a major discipline problem or one of the staff members was about to leave Hilldale. In this case the latter proved to be true. Kathy was leaving Hilldale to pursue an opportunity that would

“help her grow as a person.” Actually the job had become too demanding. The long hours and constant verbal and physical abuse that ‘were part of child care work had squelched the initial energy and enthusiasm Kathy had brought to the job. Besides she had found a part-time job that paid almost as much as her full-time child care job and this would give her an opportunity to return to school and get the additional training she needed to become a school teacher.

Even though Kathy made a point of assuring John that he had nothing to do with her leaving. John couldn’t help but feel that it was his fault. As far as he was concerned, this was just another case of an adult abandoning him because he was too difficult to get along with. He was more convinced than ever that he was no good and that it really wasn’t worthwhile to try to get close to – and trust adults.

During the next month John was caught trying to set a fire. He also got into several fights and created several major disturbances in school. Then, as if Kathy’s leaving wasn’t enough, a similar announcement was made by Jeff. He had accepted a job as a bus driver. The increase in pay was something he really needed for his family.

Jeff’s announcement came as a complete surprise to the administrative staff. but not to Jeff’s fellow child care workers and many of the youth. He had told them that he had put his name in at the bus company several months prior to his announcement, and he had been expressing anger towards administrative and clinical staff members. Jeff didn’t feel his input at meetings was really valued and he was certain that other staff members were jealous of his ability to handle the kids.

Although John had not been as close to Jeff as he was to Kathy, he nonetheless felt very insecure about Jeff’s leaving. Jeff was very dependable and he was viewed as the one person who could usually restore order when the group got out of control. Jeff was also coach of the football team. After he left, John stopped going to football practice.

At the first year’s progress report meeting all the staff felt that John’s condition had deteriorated over the last six months. This was understandable considering both Kathy and Jeff had left. Rick

reported that he was trying to get a better relationship going with John, but he was finding it very difficult because he was so busy helping the new child care workers.

Two months later Rick announced he was leaving. He was “burnt-out”. Trying to break in two new child care workers was just too much for him. He was also bitter about the fact that he didn’t receive any additional incentive or recognition for all the extra hours he put in when Jeff and Kathy left.

Rick’s colleagues were also aware that he was troubled by the fact that his friends didn’t think very highly of the kind of work he was doing. They would say “we admire you for having the patience it takes for working with these kids”, but privately they were questioning what he was doing with a job that had little if any future.

At the eighteen month progress report meeting, Phil, Barb and Dave, the new child care workers, reported that some small gains were being made with John. There were, of course, the usual phases that take place when a child attempts to adjust to new staff members: a honeymoon period ...

Emotionally disturbed youth in residential centers often find themselves in situations which are already too familiar. Many of them have been physically and emotion ally abandoned many times prior to entering residential treatment. Needless to say, continual separation from one child care worker after another does little to restore their confidence in themselves and adults in general. And these youths are often placed in residential facilities as a last resort the hope being that the intensity of the live-in situation will create an opportunity for meaningful adult-youth relationships.

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## Exploring Class and Critical Race Theory: Rethinking how we/I might have gone wrong in developing the profession

*"Youth workers are members of an oppressed class," says Tony, a member of our staff who is working on his dissertation and has read Pablo Freire like many education PhD candidates.*

*"What do you mean?" asks David, another staff member.*

*"Many of the workers who come to our continuing education and credit classes make minimum wages and are overwhelmed by their lives outside of work. Last week several of them told me they carried guns because they felt so unsafe in their neighborhoods," replies Tony.*

*"It's getting bad isn't it?" I ask.*

*"It's always been a rough life," David says.*

*"Yeah, but I think it's worse now. Many of these workers have the same issues the kids have to deal with, and they get no supervision," Tony says.*

*"So, what are you suggesting?" David asks.*

*"That we have to be sensitive to this in our classes."*

*"In what way?"*

*"We have to adjust our expectations. They simply don't have time once they leave to do assignments."*

*"I refuse to do that," I say.*

*"I agree," says Lucy, another staff member who lives in the same neighborhood as many of the youth workers. "Many of them do quite well despite the hardships."*

*"I don't think you understand. Many of them come from similar abusive situations as the youth," Tony says.*

*"I understand. I was in an abusive relationship. But some people are more resilient than others," Lucy says.*

*"I agree. It won't help to water down our standards because we feel sorry for some of the workers who really need some counseling. That's not the purpose of our classes," says David, his voice rising.*

*"What is?" Tony asks.*

*"To teach them to be competent workers," David says.*

*Lucy nods.*

*"I'm conflicted. I don't want to lower our standards, and at the same time I am sensitive to the needs of some of the workers. But I'm not sure it is our role to sit here and think of them as an oppressed class. This touches on my own identity as a youth worker and it doesn't feel right. I'd rather teach resilience and self-awareness, and create opportunities, as we are doing now, in our classes for them to voice their opinions and shape the curricula ... make the classes an empowering experience. Not maintaining our standards suggests we don't value or are looking down on them."*

*"I agree," Lucy says.*

*"I don't think you guys are getting it. I'm saying they are overwhelmed with personal, financial, and professional responsibilities and by not taking this into consideration we are not respecting and valuing their role in our community," Tony says.*

*"Framing it that way makes it more understandable. But I'm still not sure that's a reason for lowering standards or treating them as oppressed. When I was a youth worker I went to school and worked sixty hours a week and I made it ..." David says.*

*"Yeah, but don't forget the cultural aspect. Most of our students are people of color."*

*"Are you saying I'm privileged because I am white?" David says slightly irritated again.*

*"What are you talking about?" says Ron overhearing the Tony's and David's last comments.*

*"How many of the workers in our classes are in an oppressed class, and how difficult it is to survive much less go to school," Tony says.*

*"I'm a black man and I don't feel oppressed," Ron says.*

*"Yes, I don't like to be categorized that way either," Lucy says ...*

Recently in part in response to conversations like this and articles I read, including articles about critical race theory (CRT) and class (Skott Mhyre & Gretzinger, 2005), I re-thought my youth and many years of involvement in a movement to professionalize youth work. I had felt that discussions about race, ethnicity, class, and gender in youth work should go something like this:

... The most successful youth workers are more or less radical entrepreneurs. We don't enter the field to make money, but we find ways to make a living by being creative, getting educated, grabbing the bulls by the horns, and making a career for ourselves. Empowerment comes from within. We are not empowered by others but rather we empower ourselves by working with others to advance our cause to improve care for kids. In order to do this we have to stay and survive. This means we have to be advocates for ourselves and our work. To get ahead requires hard work, education, commitment and creativity. Doing this, getting ahead and learning and becoming as skilled as possible, is honorable in a field plagued by high rates of turnover and incompetence. It is the ethical thing to do, to survive and flourish, and despite the obstacles it can be done if we work at it.

Further we all build and shape ourselves into the world through unique cultural, familial and communal experiences. Culture, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual preference, etc. in this context affects all of us differently. We all have our own stories and it is important to understand in the context of these stories. For example, the way we and others see the world and make meaning in part is determined by the rituals, traditions, views and beliefs of our culture and families. There is, however, considerable diversity within, between, and among cultures and how culture influences any single individual. Thus the only way to understand how culture influences another person is to speak across the spaces of our experiences (Sarris, 1993). Further, if we value our own culture and how it shapes and

affects us then we are more likely to value and be curious about the culture of others. Cross cultural work in this regard is empathy, or the desire to want to understand and know another person, while simultaneously recognizing that we can never have another person's experience or literally see the world through their eyes. If we practiced this kind of cross cultural work it would lead to greater acceptance and understanding in youth work ...

I also felt that care of self, as Michel Foucault argued, was the ethos of civilized society (in Rabinow & Rose, 1994). People who care for self are much more likely to care for others. Critical race theory (CRT), however, seemed to argue that this was not enough. Despite our best efforts to relate to each other with sensitivity to our differences, the laws, policies, programs and practices of a predominantly white society directly, indirectly, intentionally, or unintentionally suppressed multiculturalism (Jay, 2003; Deyhle and Parker, 1999).

Recently in writing about power, class, and CRT in youth work, Skott-Myhre (2006) argued that one of the problems is that workers are not visible and this makes it difficult to value youth. I am simplifying here but I believe his point was the absence of workers in a field that was trying to focus on youth involvement and agency created an equation for progress in which half was missing. And that therefore we were more or less destined to failure as a field just as relationships are destined to failure when only one person is there.

Thus, in considering class and CRT I felt I had to explore my own youth and background (make myself visible) and question how it might have contributed to my participation in hegemony, class divisions, and some of our failures in the development of the profession, which by all accounts is struggling in the U.S. as elsewhere when it comes to creating a competent, diverse workforce:

My older brother and I were the sons of parents from German families that like most German families in Milwaukee had abandoned most of their culture during two world wars. Suffice it to say it was not popular to be German in those days in America (1940s and 1950s), and so most of these families pretended not to be, some even changing their names or

pronunciation of their names. Krueger (Krooger), for example, became Kreeger. German, which had been the primary language in the schools before WWI, was rarely spoken in public, and not at all in our house.

We lived in a duplex in a lower middle class neighborhood on the Northwest Side with blue and white collar families. Our friends were largely Italian, Greek, and Jewish. Strangely we did not talk much about the war, or even know much about it and about our parents', their relatives' and their ancestors' conflicts. This was not "our business." Maybe they talked about it in their homes, I'm not sure. We didn't in ours. The Jewish kids' Sabbath was on Saturday and their houses and Italians' houses looked and smelled different inside than our house, but that was about it as far as I was concerned. Oh, and the Jewish girls were not to date the gentiles, although most of them did.

Racial slurs and jokes were not used at home. My parents had been "dirt poor" as kids and somehow emerged from it without the overt biases and prejudices that I saw on the playgrounds. My father called the women at work, who were mostly secretaries, "gals" but that was about the extent of what I heard from my parents that today might be considered derogatory, sexist, or racist.

At the time "negroes" were in increasing numbers moving north for the city's high paying blue color jobs in industry. My father, who often told me stories about how rough he had it as a poor kid, once said, "It would have been much more difficult if I were a colored person." Nonetheless, there were few children of color in our school. I went to the black section of town to play basketball and listen to music. In those days we were not afraid to go into the black community, at least I wasn't. Parents and adults, black and white, seemed to watch out for us.

In preparation for this article I rode back to my old neighborhood. In Milwaukee many of the good paying jobs have disappeared during the past decade. Subsequently, most of the houses were run down. Young black men walked the streets. A couple stepped in front of my car and "dissed" me (Milwaukee graduates less than 35% of the African American men from high school). Three young



black women sat on our porch steps with young children (Milwaukee has one of the highest rates of teen pregnancy). When I pulled into the alley and rode behind my old house, I was frightened. A satellite dish had replaced our basketball backboard and hoop on the garage roof. Garbage had not been picked up. It was very different yet I felt a sort of odd kinship with a young man who stared at me over a fence.

When I grew up there most of the families seemed to want to forget and escape into the *American Pastoral* as Phillip Roth later called it in his Pulitzer Prize winning novel (Roth, 1997) about those times. My father worked for the same life insurance company all his life, hardly ever missing a day. My mother had been a “flapper” who smoked, drove and worked long before it was popular. They worked their way out of poverty and through the depression to the middle class, waiting to have children until they could afford it when they were in their mid thirties.

Like other members of my generation I escaped from the pastoral into rock and roll, jazz and the beats, and then in the 1960s into drugs, alcohol, free love, free speech, civil rights and anti-war protests, although unlike some of my more fired-up, fervent friends I was less active on the political side of the things, still preferring, I think in hindsight, the beats, identifying more with Miles Davis with his head bent over his trumpet and his back to the crowd than in your face Jimmi Hendrix.

While I worked with youth, I joined with other youth workers in an effort to form a profession. Together, black, brown, men, women, etc. we organized, spoke out, and wrote about our importance to youth and society. We did not see ourselves as an oppressed class but rather revolutionaries who were going to change the “fucking excuse the language” youth work world. There were the usual tensions, power struggles, differences (geographical, racial, cultural developmental, etc.), but on the whole we respected and valued each other, perhaps because of what we learned from and about working with kids and civil rights.

We stayed away from labels with the kids and ourselves. Terms like “white privilege” would not have been used other than perhaps in the context of humor because white privilege would have stigmatized someone just as other labels did (Magnet, 2006). We were well aware of the inequities associated with the color of a person’s skin

and the history of racism in the country. Jane Addams, Martin Luther King, Gandhi, Malcolm X, Angela Davis, Joan Baez, Huey Newton, Robert Kennedy, George McGovern, Eugene McCarthy, Saul Alinsky, Caesar Chavez, etc., had been our influences (in my case taking on more importance after I found my cause), and we wanted to move on while recognizing and trying to rectify disparities in class, race, etc, that made it more challenging for the youth and some of us.

Looking back you could say we wanted to maintain the innocence of our struggle in which despite our different races, cultures, and classes we had found something similar that called to all of us in our brotherhood and sisterhood for the cause (Magnet, 2006). After three black presidents I became the first white president of our national association, and was followed by a gay president. We made progress in developing a knowledge base for our field, and in showing how practice with youth could be improved. We raised the standards in many states and countries for practice, developed bachelors, masters and Ph.D. programs, and increased cross-cultural sensitivity and awareness in our field. Many of us seized the opportunities in our emerging profession and advanced our careers. Some went on to high level appointments in government. Others became executive directors of youth serving agencies. Many became superb practitioners. And I became a professor and founded a research and education center for youth workers.

Yet, salaries, support, preparation, and working conditions on average for youth workers did not improve that much, if at all. In some places the work was done better than ever, but in comparison to other industrialized countries (generalizations are always difficult), we did not do very well, in part because of cuts in funding for programs for youth. Youth and particularly youth of color, continued to be exposed to risks and challenges that made it difficult for them to develop and succeed in our society. Some would argue that during this period things, with the exception of a few upswings, actually got worse for youth and youth workers.

My colleagues and I often wondered why? Were we too idealistic? Were we wrong to focus on knowing ourselves in a way that genuinely opened us to others with the hope they would do the same for us? Had we underestimated the power of racism, hegemony, and white privilege? Were we too self-serving and not enough

youth focussed? Was it because our voice was not loud enough? As the distribution of wealth widened and more youth were impoverished, why were we, like other human service groups, losers in the political, social and economic debates?

Lately, I have been second guessing myself, partially because of the trip back to my neighborhood, which I mentioned earlier. I wonder if I hadn't missed something all along. When a black former president and friend, Norman Powell, who preceded me as president, insisted on not sitting with his back to the door in a restaurant, should I have been more sensitive to my white privilege, racism, profiling, etc., and how it influenced the way he saw the world. When we were refused entry into a Florida nightclub because of our dress when two young white men had just entered in T-shirts, and he smiled at me, had I underestimated how much of an impact this had on his and other youth and workers of color attitudes about life and our efforts to change things? Should I have listened more to my father when he told me his trip out of poverty would have been much more difficult if he were colored? I thought I had but maybe not with sufficient understanding.

Were we, as self-styled revolutionaries, naive about how ingrained racism and prejudice were in relation to youth work, a racially mixed profession whose membership in many urban communities today is predominantly Black or Latino? Had we (I) not been able to see the neutralizing powers of our collective experiences in a country that is predominantly white? Were we not as sensitive to these issues as we had thought we were? I don't know.

Or, did I overlook, for example, how much this meant to boys like Daniel in the novel I wrote about youth work? How it influenced their world view and interpreted how I interacted with them? Did I miss something hidden in my profession, and/or community? Did we miss something that was hidden in our multicultural curriculum and activities and instead suppress the very initiatives we were trying to undertake (Jay, 2003). And/or was it just all part of living in a country that has never really valued people who work with other peoples' children, and children without families? In capitalism will youth always play second fiddle to war and profit (McNaughton, 2006; Skott-Myhre & Gretzinger, 2005)? Or was it just simply about racism in a society with widening class divisions in which people of color always seem disproportionately to wind up on the short end of

the stick?

I have also been wondering if journey was the wrong metaphor as Halse (2006, pp. 105-106) recently articulated in her argument that as an interpretive device in Western auto/biography, "journey" tends not to reflect what it purports to represent. Had we deceived ourselves by framing our work as a shared journey into believing something other than what was occurring, and inadvertently clouded our arguments and steered our focus from the reality of the moment, past and present?

Anyway, these are the types of questions some members of our field and I have been openly asking. We don't necessarily have an answer to these questions other than perhaps all of the above as it applies on a case by case basis. Meanwhile to remain optimistic some of us have told ourselves we were doing fairly well in comparison to other professions at similar stages of development. Over the long run, whether or not in the ebb and flow of these political, economic, and social tides our work and approach will have a major impact on youth and workers is debatable, but we continue the struggle, naively perhaps, with the hope that it will as long as we are in it together and able to question ourselves.

In the article mentioned above Hans Skott Myhre (2006) argued that we have to make ourselves visible in order to value the other. One of the youth workers in a study I did a few years ago said the major challenge in the work was to "show up." Gerry Fewster (1999) challenges us to be present, open, and available to mirror back our experiences of the other. In these conversations and discourses about the profession and our successes and failures in relationship to race, culture, and other differences, I would like to think that I am present, available and visible ... or at the very least that I try to be.

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January 2007

## Bulls and White Nights

A young man on a horse approaches from the side of the hill in the forest, his silhouette intermittently reappearing between the trees. As the sound of the hoofs gets closer and closer, I lean on my cross country ski poles and watch. With his long coat flowing behind with the horse's tail it's a majestic scene. Afterwards, I return to my cabin on a small lake and fall asleep near a warm heater:

*About a year after we enroll him in modern dance, Daniel takes the stage wearing black running tights. Across his bare chest and arms are wisps of black and red like in a Franz Klein painting. He jumps into the composer's aching harmonies: an ice skater gliding effortlessly, a Spanish dancer, feet stomping on the ground, chest out, arm circled overhead, a ballet dancer leaping. It's all there for those who care to see. He's trying to exorcise the demons from a horrifying childhood. At the end he's curled on the ground, an exhausted Nijinsky.*

My stomach growls for something to eat. I put on my leather jacket and back between the tall white pines. At the stop sign I turn up the heat then turn right. Ahead, two bulls are running in the ditch next to the road. I slow down, pull alongside and roll down the window. The sound of their hoofs hitting the snow reminds me of the man on the horse I saw earlier. After the bulls turn into the woods, I continue over the open creek. The Moose Inn is down the road. Joe, the owner, added carpeting and female bartenders, but it is still a country bar by most appearances. The waitress steers me to a table beneath a beer sign where there is enough light to read.

"The usual?" she asks.

I nod then call my neighbor about the bulls, but no one answers. While I read and wait, an older couple at the bar tells a story about a cat that got caught in a chunk of snow behind the wheel of their

pickup and was still alive when they got home. No one questions this. The Moose Burger arrives shortly. It's reliable like the story I'm reading, Brezin Lea, by Ivan Turgenev.

*"I told the boys I had lost my way and sat down among them. They asked me where I was from and fell silent for a while in awe of me. We talked about this and that..."* (In Penguin Classics 1967 edition of *Sketches from a Hunters Album*, p.103)

I sit and read a while longer then say goodbye to the waitress and the bartender. On the way home my mind drifts out across a white cornfield towards the moon. Suddenly around a bend the two bulls appear in the middle of the road. The car swerves to the left and back across the road where it comes to rest in a ditch. With the red oil light flashing in the dash, the bulls stare at the car. For a moment I think I see the young man on the horse. He's wearing a Hessian hat and carrying a long spear, which he points at me then he smiles and disappears.

The bulls lumber across the road into the woods. Fortunately it only takes a moment to dig out. I keep my eyes riveted to the road the rest of the way home. The smoke coming from the chimney is a welcome sight. I stop to piss in the outhouse. It's cold, but I get it done, then stand on the hill over the lake a moment, listening to the wind make a sweet crying sound as it moves over the ice.

*"... in the darkness we saw a figure coming toward us... But we were mistaken, it was not he."* (From Dostoyevsky's *White Nights*, the third night.)

I call my neighbor again about the bulls. He answers this time, thanks me, and says he will look for the "damn bulls." After warming myself by the fire, I work some more on my latest sketch about Daniel and the other boys I knew at the residential treatment center. I want to capture a moment of connection but can't get it right. A bat fooled out of hibernation by the heat, buzzes overhead, then crawls back into a small crack in the ceiling, all its energy spent with nothing to eat. Unable to write anymore, I put on my old military overcoat and take a walk on the frozen surface of the lake. It's

quiet and still. In the faint light of day, I can hear my feet hit the ground like a distant heartbeat.

*...Like drizzle on embers,  
Footsteps within me  
Toward places that turn to air...*

– Octavio Paz, A Draft of Shadows



February 2007

## *Monks in Training for War*

Like many others, I have been thinking a lot about war, youth, and lost childhoods. Recently I brought out this poem, which I started a few years ago, and began to work on it. All my poems are works in progress. This one is based on memories of basic training in San Francisco during the Viet Nam war. I joined the reserves to avoid the draft. After basic training I went home to serve out my time on once a month weekends and summer camps while I worked as a child and youth care worker. The other kids, mostly poor kids, were sent to the jungles. I can still see some of their faces. I used to lay awake at night in the barracks and think about how we were being brainwashed, and how lucky I was to be going home. One night I got up and snuck out of the barracks and sat by the ocean contemplating swimming away. I remembered how as a boy I had swum "up north" in the warm lakes of Wisconsin.

A few of the kids had died from spinal meningitis. When they got sick someone would come in the barracks and take them away and we would never see them again. It was cold and damp, I remember, because they had to keep the windows open for circulation. The pacific sea breeze would flow over the covers. This all got me thinking about lost childhoods and experiences I have had since those days, and how in many ways little has changed.

I offer the poem as a small contribution to the effort to raise consciousness for peace.

## *Monks in Training for War*

1.

*hands bled on rungs  
of overhead ladders*

*script and discipline fed in  
pills of deceit*

*under the covers  
shrapnelled ejaculations  
and shattered solitudes*

*wait for the quiet*

2.

*Such injustice  
to steal youth*

*into the longing  
and the sea*

*Of Being Numerous*

*opposition kept afloat  
in Oppen's Tao stone  
full of holes  
through which  
breath and water flow*

3.

*heads turn up  
then down  
then up again*

*submerged in the ripple  
that stirs close to the mouth*

*beneath the branches  
the spore is  
a clavichord of the tree  
and the tree is lust*

*words stolen  
on the way to the  
spearman's light*

4.

*a bullet hole  
in rivers  
and canyons of bark*

*a small lake of white sap*

*look into it  
touch  
the cold milk*

5.

*low crawlers  
In the Zen of war*

*moving in place  
of shadow and light*

*words let go and reclaimed  
let go and reclaimed*

6.  
*in the distance*

*Tres Orejas*

*Abiquu San Francisco*  
*red cliffs*  
*parks and oil fields*

*cows walking*

*in dry river beds*

*a hacienda*  
*almost reachable*  
*in the still moonlight*

7.  
*dawn and the staccato voices*

*of lingering night*

*the rat tat tat of machine guns*

*tears like mist drying where*  
*shadows fall into*  
*the rising sun*

8.  
*in the barracks of despair*  
*the blood letting almost done*

*callused hands*  
*losing buoyancy*

*the words grappling*  
*in the waves repeated*

9.  
*struggling for breath*  
  
*necks stiff*  
  
*another glance*  
  
*at the lights from the night ships*  
  
*on the watery windshields*  
  
*of distant dreams*

*"There are things we live among  
And to see them  
Is to know ourselves"*

– From George Oppen's *Of Being Numerous*

March 2007

## *Beyond Beats and Rhymes: Looking For Leadership*

A couple weeks ago I attended a screening of a documentary movie titled: *HIP-HOP: Beyond Beats and Rhymes*. The event was well attended. In the Milwaukee audience were university professors, youth workers, agency administrators, and youth from programs in our community including, *Running Rebels* and *Urban Underground*, two youth groups engaged in community building (civic engagement) activities in Milwaukee. The movie was directed by Byron Hurt and featured known artists Mos Def, Busta Rhymes, Nelly, and others.

The intent was to raise questions about the messages and meanings of hip hop. Like many people, the director, an African American athlete who grew up on rap and hip hop, was concerned about the sexist, misogynistic, violent, homophobic, materialistic messages that the music was conveying to African American youth. The film would be followed by a panel/audience discussion (by coincidence CNN devoted two hours of prime time discussion to the same topic the next week).

We saw the uncut version of the documentary. I've been around, but I must say I was shocked at what the male youth (boys really) and musicians were saying and doing, to women and themselves in particular with their self demeaning behavior. It was far more extreme than I thought. Worse yet, they didn't even seem to know that rather than look tough and cool, they really looked insecure and crude to the rest of the world outside of their little circle. A circle we all knew was very difficult to break free from, the pressures to "be tough" in the hood these days being perhaps greater than ever. The survival of many youth is dependent upon their ability to conform to these hip hop "norms." Breaking free, which is something that many youth dream of, takes an almost heroic act. I admire no one more than the youth who have the strength to move out of these cycles of self-destruction.

As I watched the performers spew their hate and anger for the establishment, themselves, women, gays, and whites, I tried to remind myself that all generations of youth go through something like this. The goal is to shock adults. We did it with rock and roll, free love, etc. Yet this still seemed excessive. The glorification of violence and the disrespect for women and gays really got to me. The only purpose in the music and videos, it seemed, was to demean others, and for young men, who were basically frightened and insecure, to appear mean, tough, and macho.

Some in the audience thought it was funny. I was in the group that did not. We saw this form of commercial hip hop and rap as undermining and weakening a whole generation of African American youth. What could be a beautiful, poetic, powerful art form was being used to exploit, for the sake of profit, youth. Most of the rappers in the documentary and videos (we were told) drove rented cars and wore rented jewelry. Further, they were singing what the producers (mostly wealthy, white, men at the head of record companies and radio distributions) told them to sing. It was like they were slaves all over again to commercialism and the market. And victimization, sexism, violence, and death were hot.

One commentator used an analogy to cowboy movies. Violence, racism, homophobia, and sexism have been part of American society forever, he argued. Indeed it is pervasive throughout the U.S., as it is in much of the rest of the world. Commentators on CNN built on this argument the following week. But as I sat there that night I asked myself, does that mean we should continue? Is this the example from white culture that you want to emulate? Same thing for materialism, I thought. Just because mainstream American culture is so materialistic and empty, does that mean you want to claim it as your right and create a symbol of happiness by showing all that expensive “bling (jewelry, gold chains, etc),” clothes, and cars? What does that get you – stuff, but not happiness? “Make love not war,” was our cry. There were problems with this, of course, but at least the message one of love not hate, and inclusiveness, not division.

Maybe I was missing something I told myself as two people next to me seemed to agree with the commentator. Maybe there was some hidden or subliminal message here aimed at telling us all to wake up and fight for change? But if the intent was to stir people to

positive action, a subliminal message would only work if it did more good than bad, in my opinion, and this one clearly did more bad, at least the way I saw it. It shocked, and stirred negative reaction. It did not attempt to propose an avenue for change, or maybe it did.

What struck me about midway through the film, as I am sure it has struck many others, is that these young men do not have any leaders. We had Malcolm X, MLK, and Bobby Kennedy during civil rights, each with a different approach but all working for change. The rappers in this documentary appeared to have no purposeful agenda other than to shock, demean, and make money. They were in the face of society with nothing to back it up other than self-abuse.

Fortunately most of the youth and the panelists agreed with the film maker, who said that he had become very concerned about what it was doing to the “black” community. A couple of young African American men who were working on their Ph.D.s and a professor along with a woman who ran a shelter for battered women gave the youth a clear and powerful message that this kind of music and commercialism was hurting them. And, the youth for the most part agreed. Several stood up and said they wanted to be known for who they were, not as part of a culture of destruction. These young men and women were proud, thoughtful, and creative. The snickering stopped because the mood of the crowd was that this was not cool. I left feeling better, more hopeful, and ready to discuss the documentary in my class.

Two days later I went to a movie called the *Factory Girl*, which was the story of Edie Sedgwick, a woman who Andy Warhol made famous for “fifteen minutes” in New York, who died of an overdose after he stopped exploiting her and she was left, abandoned by her wealthy family, to fend for herself out on the street. It struck me that our generation, while involved in a movement for change and civil rights, had also turned its back to some of the same kind of sexism, and exploitation for profit – something which remains widespread today in the media and over the internet.

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When I got home there was an e-mail from my friend Norman Powell. Ralph Kelly the first president of our national child and



youth care association had died at age 69. He had been ill for a while, but it was still a shock. Ralph, an African American, from the New York association of workers, had been our role model, the first child and youth care worker to lead us toward a multi-cultural effort to improve the quality of care for youth, and gain respect for people who worked with them. He was the man who led us through the early (and in many ways most difficult) stage of professional development. He had harnessed the energy and racial, geographical, cultural, and social differences, and got us to work together. The leader of the caravan of vans that carried us across the country to meet in hotel rooms where we slept in closets and anywhere else we could to pile as many people as possible into one room. We were poor, broke, child and youth care workers who found each other in our cause to improve care for kids. And he was the one with the maturity, experience, and sense of self-command and leadership to rein us in and keep us on task. Later he went on to reform the juvenile justice system in Kentucky while completing his PhD. He will be missed.

I called Norman the next morning and we talked about Ralph, helped each other grieve. Norman, also an African American, was the second President. For many of us he was the model of how we wanted to be seen as workers. Having served in the Peace Corp before working as a child and youth care worker and then going on to get his PhD at American University, Norman was and is “the professional worker.”

It was good to reconnect. We talked for some time about the past and present, his family, my family, etc. At one point I told him about the documentary on Hip Hop. We were in agreement about the need for leadership. “They need it more than ever today,” he said. As usual we talked a little about the good old days. Like most generations, of course, we thought the leaders of our age were better.

As we talked I was reminded of a conversation I had with Doug Magnuson, who said he wished he had been part of our generation of child and youth care leaders: the ones who started it all in the 1960s and 1970s. It was flattering to think that I was part of that group, but to be honest I think the best leaders and leadership styles are still evolving.

When the conversation shifted to politics, Norman and I both agreed that Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton would bring youth

into the forefront during of the next presidential election. Hillary had been involved with the U.S. national association in the early days when Bill Clinton was Governor of Arkansas. Her work with the Children's Defense Fund had been an important part of drawing awareness to issues with youth at risk in the U.S. And Barack Obama, what a positive role model he would be. Maybe like Martin and Bobby Kennedy they would bring youth and civil rights and inclusiveness back into the discussion.

When Norman and I began the conversation I was nostalgic and sad about Ralph. Afterwards I was energized by my discussion with my "ol' buddy," and went through the day thinking maybe more young people today would find the purpose in child and youth care that we had found, and make it something better. The youth and leaders at the Hip Hop discussion, "the civic minded, capacity building running rebels and urban under-grounders," were good examples in my opinion of what we can look forward to. In the meantime, maybe those of us who have been around for a while should work harder at mentoring and recruiting the next batch of world changers in child and youth care. My sense is that they are all around us in droves, and just need a little nudge.

So long Ralph. Thanks. You're the first. Keep the faith, bro.

*(Ralph Kelly 1938-2007)*

April 2007

## Triage

Two new workers face me across the table. One, Chelsea, is about 22 and just graduated from the school of social work, the other, Nicolas, is about 27 with five years working for the county under his belt. I am the consultant. We are meeting for the first time. I have been here before with two other workers to discuss cases for the Inroads, a transitional living program for youth 18-22.

Like most programs of a similar nature, Inroads has to make tough decisions about which kids it can help and those it can't. The funds are limited and the challenges with most of the youth overwhelming. Despite the odds, however, some do make it. They overcome their abuse and lack of education, job skills, and stable family environment. Most of them have had several foster care placements. Chelsea and Nicolas try to help them get connected to resources and people. Right now they have ten cases, each one with a number of major challenges.

"So, how do you like it?" I ask as we wait for the supervisor, Juan, who will be a few minutes late, to arrive.

"It's fine, but hard. These kids have so many needs." Chelsea says.

"I like it much better than the program I worked for at the county," Nicolas says, referring to his previous job.

"Why?" I ask.

"Much smaller. We have more autonomy, and can make decisions about how to work with the kids rather than having everything dictated and scripted. At the county they call the program, Wrap Around, but I really felt it was more like suffocating families with red tape, goals, outcomes, and a revolving door of case managers. No one really listened to the kids and families. Here, at least we can do that."

"There is something to be said for smaller organizations," I respond. "Large ones in many ways often begin to mirror the same

problems they are trying to solve.”

“I think I can relate to these kids because I am so close to their age,” Chelsea says.

“Yes, I suppose that is helpful if you are in touch with who you are.”

“What do you mean?”

“Our experience is helpful, but only if we understand that it is not the same as the youth’s experiences.”

Chelsea looks puzzled. I look at my watch. “We can talk about this some time but we better get started... Juan can jump in when he gets here. I like to work this as a discussion. You choose a case you would like to talk about and I’ll raise some questions and try to provide some insights that we can discuss together, okay?”

“Great,” Nicolas says and looks at Chelsea. “We decided to talk about Maria, a new case that has been referred to us. We are not sure if we can help her or not.”

“Let’s hear it...”

She’s 19, no kids, but living with a woman 25, sleeping on the couch and drinking. Every Thursday they get a couple bottles of vodka and drink it over the weekend. As best as we can tell, she’s gets drunk Friday and stays that way through Saturday.” Chelsea starts.

“Family?” I ask.

“Mother and step father, but he raped her when she was younger, and she ran away and gang banged,” Nicolas responds.

“Still involved with the gang?”

“She says no, but they live right in the hood, and it’s pretty hard to avoid without getting hurt,” Nicolas responds.

“Drugs?”

“Again, she says no, just the alcohol, but we doubt it. Besides the alcohol is bad enough”

“Working?”

“Part time,” Chelsea says.

“School.”

"No, but if we let her in the program, she'll have to be working and in school."

"What about this older woman she lives with?"

"We're suspicious."

"Why?"

"She might be in the gang, doing drugs, and sexually abusing her." Chelsea sighs. We are all "bummed" now. These cases are not easy to hear.

"If you decided to accept her for the program, where would you start?" I ask...

"The drinking and drugs," Chelsea says.

"Before that?"

"What do you mean?" Nicolas asks.

"Be there and listen, hear what she has to say."

"Oh, yeah, we've been trying to do that."

"Good."

"But she can't be in the program unless she is working and going to school and I don't think she can do either while she is drinking?" Chelsea says.

"How bad is it?"

"What?"

"The drinking?"

"Bad."

"Does she think so?"

"No, she says it's not a problem, she's just bored on weekends."

"That's a problem..."

"I know."

Juan enters. "Who are you talking about?"

"Maria."

"Yeah, I'm not sure we can take her. We got twenty other kids on the waiting list..."

Later, I drive back to the office thinking again about how our

children are growing up in war zones without the resources needed to fight the war. How we are triaging our most precious wounded. How in my role as a consultant I can offer insight and speak with the workers about the importance of listening and being there for youth like Maria. I can agree with them about the need to get her off the drugs, empathize with them about Maria's plight, feel bad about the decision they had to make not to accept Maria in the program, but along with my colleagues I have not "earned my pay" when it comes to convincing politicians and others in our society who ignore these and the children in the countries where we go to war.

A few weeks later I attend a lecture by Amy Goodman from *Democracy Now*, an independent news organization I watch on public access television. It is one of the few places I can find the truth about what is going on around the world. During her speech, Goodman speaks about how the images we are shown shape our opinions and how the real images of the war in Iraq are not being shown. We do not see blown up children, or even the coffins of bodies coming home.

I think about how images of children like Maria are rarely seen in our community, and wonder if they, we, anyone would look? Would they turn off *American Idol*, and shift their attention to these kids who would settle for just being cared for instead of famous.

They say we take better care of our wounded now in Iraq. We are keeping alive soldiers who died from similar injuries in other wars. Why then is triage acceptable at home with children? We have the knowledge, skill, and technology to help these children. And not just here, of course: a former student returned last summer from Kenya where he worked in a residential program and the stories he shared about too many kids and too few resources were all too familiar. All over the world we are triaging services for kids because we don't have the will to spend on them what we spend on killing each other.

To get out of my "funk," I tell myself that a moment of presence and listening can make a big difference. Youth often fondly remember these moments later when it is time to make a decision about the course of their lives. Maybe Chelsea and Nicolas gave Maria a few of these moments when they interviewed her for *Inroads*, and that even though she wasn't accepted for the program she was heard.

May 2007

## *The New Salons*

In a previous column I wrote about a meeting I had attended in our community to discuss the use of offensive language and images in rap music. I also wrote earlier about the concerns and misunderstandings people had about graffiti art. Recent events in the U.S. have further heightened the need for these discussions.

A few day ago I watched a documentary about the impressionist artists and their struggle for acceptance in the French salons. Seen as outsiders because they painted outdoors, these now famous artists had to develop their own ways and studios to have their work viewed by the public.

In relating all this to youth and their development in contemporary societies and cultures, I could not help but wonder if in the midst of debates and efforts to discourage offensive language and images we might also be stifling very legitimate forms of expression? In the proper contexts, graffiti art, rap, and hip hop are beautiful and power vehicles of expression for young people. It is sad and infuriating that they have been appropriated by gangs and greedy corporations. So I wrote this fragment poem to frame the questions in a slightly different way.

### *The New Salons*

*"Nobody wants it  
on their garage door"*

*"but it's art"*

*"that's questionable"*

*this is my court  
the hip hopster tells  
the judge*

*politicians, neighbors and  
skateboard shop owners*

*the marketplace  
sitting in review  
of tagging*

*making art  
impressions (ists)  
working outdoors  
on streets, traffic signs  
and park benches  
without gallery*

*except Philly  
and high fashion  
warehouses*

*appropriated by gangs  
and corporations  
marking place*

*deafened and blinded  
by misogyny and greed without self  
homophobic rappers  
seek attention*

*while others  
claiming turf*

*like Cezanne reach  
over and over  
and over again  
and leave behind  
patches  
of light and dark  
on urban landscapes.*



July 2007

## *The Wall*

Near my house, they are building a wall. I am watching it grow as I run past. The house around which the wall is being built is a short distance from my house but a world away. The soon to be newly walled in house is on a street (Lake Drive) that runs on the bluffs above the shore of Lake Michigan in Milwaukee. And in Milwaukee, as most cities in the US, the closer you live to the water, the richer you are. The house around which the wall is being built is a mansion. It is part of the new landscape the owners are creating. It frames their property, and their garden, and is quite elaborate. A wall around their wealth you might say.

It's not a big wall, really. But it is a wall. A symbol. It is being built by migrant laborers, who are paid minimum wages, and in part to keep out the poor, I imagine, like the said migrant workers. On the wall is a sign that says the house is protected by an invisible security system. The owners are afraid that they will be robbed or even hurt by people like the laborers that are building the wall. Even though statistically they are more likely to be killed by food poisoning, which is also a very remote possibility given they have enough money to buy the best food.

Food poisoning is a more likely possibility for the laborers building the wall and their children, who do not have health insurance and have to buy their food from warehouses. Still the laborers are working hard on the wall so they can feed their children. It is taking a long time, the building of the wall. The owners are fussy. It has to be just right so it keeps the property value high.

Often when I run by, the woman of the house is in the yard overseeing the building of the wall with a cool drink of some kind in her hand. She does not offer the laborers anything to drink, at least as far as I can see in the short time I pass by on the run. Instead she teases them with her drink and short shorts as she orders them around, suspiciously I imagine.

The wall must be costing a lot—once you add up all the hours of

labor and the cost of the bricks and mortar it will run in the thousands, more than a hundred thousand, perhaps. Such a waste I tell myself, this walling off of rich and poor. How much better we could spend that money to make people happy and safe: schools, health care, better food for all. What a shame that my near yet faraway neighbors are walling themselves off here, and on the borders. What do these walls they build with the money they get from us create? Are they walls around our selves that keep us/them from seeing in? Out? Don't the owners know what a blight they are on the landscapes.

I run each day. Sometimes in the middle of the run when the endorphins kick in I can see a better world for children and the people who rear them. I get high on ideas. This wall near the end of my run brings me down. So I pick up speed trying to get high again before I arrive home, and go to work. I imagine a city with good schools, health care for everyone, nice parks, and safe streets with good public transportation for everyone.

Howard Gardner, the professor who introduced the idea of multiple intelligences, argues that there should be a cap on wealth. He says that when people accumulate too much the quality of life for the rest of us goes down. Some wealthy are generous, but for the most part the money, as we used to say, more or less “tinkles down” for kids in need of better schools, homes, families, and opportunities. I tend to agree.

My city, Milwaukee, used to have progressive, socialist roots. We had some of the finest schools, transportation, and parks in the country. Now the schools and parks and public swimming pools are falling apart. Young men and children are shooting each other at alarming rates. And the rich are getting richer.

The problems of course are not all due to the widening distribution of wealth, but it is more and more distasteful to have to go to the wealthy for the money many of them made from our sweat to meet the basic needs of our community. One thing is certain, expensive security systems and walls are not the answer. They never were, and can't be built fast enough to keep out the problems because the people creating them are inside the walls as much as outside.

In a capitalist society when does wealth accumulation stop being an incentive? When does it have a reverse effect on the common good? This is an age old question? Right now I am on the side of the wall that says enough is enough. The trickle has become a sporadic dribble in relationship to the need created by concentration of resources in the hands of a few. Howard Gardner is right about capping it off. He's a smart man. If we don't figure out a way to distribute the vast wealth in this country we'll all be in the wall together.

*We don't need no education  
We don't need no thought control...  
All in all it's just another brick in the wall  
All in all you're just another brick in the wall*

*From Pink Floyd's, The Wall, Another Brick in the Wall Part 2*

September 2007

## Death, beauty and other paradoxes

Recently, at my cabin in Central Wisconsin, on a sunny day, while wading in shallow water, I read Janet Newbury's masters thesis. Her defense at the University of Victoria School of Child and Youth Care would be that afternoon. I would participate via teleconference. She had done a study of loss and written a powerful account of the stories and feelings of her subjects, who she had asked to look back in reflection on a loss that had occurred many years ago when they were young children. Captivated by her work, the depth of her insight, and the rich stories her study revealed, I got lost in time.

The day before I read her work, it just so happened, I had been reading *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* by Czech novelist Milan Kundera (1999 translation). At one point he referred to a story by Thomas Mann that spoke to the phenomenon of "death/beauty."

*" 'Like a golden ring falling into a silver basin.' After first acknowledging that the small acoustical detail could be inconsequential, I think Thomas Mann sounded that faint, clear, metallic tone to create silence. He needed that silence to make beauty audible (because the beauty he was speaking of was death beauty)." Death beauty is a phenomenon of the innocence of youth, which is lost in the hardening and noise of life (The Book of Laughter and Forgetting, 1999 edition, p.143).*

Janet's thesis and my reading of this passage by Kundera got me to thinking about paradoxes like death beauty and their meaning in our work with youth. It struck me that this is not talked about much. Death, mortality, angst, and suicidal thoughts are, of course, discussed at length in the literatures in several fields. But it seems as if we really do not have much discussion about how our daily work with children and youth is full and rich with these feelings and

thoughts. Death beauty, in particular, it seems is often “lost in the hardening and noise,” or skirted around or ignored as a part of life that is often at the edge of our consciousness. Or rather than talk about it as part of the lived experience we tend to talk about how to cope with and get over loss, or to look at it in hindsight, or as an inevitable part of the future rather than as part of the present.

In e-mail correspondence, Marie Hoskins, professor at U of Vic, told me in her work with girls with eating disorders, they often “play with” this notion of death beauty. I like that idea of “play with.” Play not meaning “play” to me in the literal sense, but rather (without minimizing the severity of these feelings and thoughts) that they mess around in their heads with and sometimes act on or test perhaps these feelings as part of their daily existence. This is serious stuff in many cases, but it is also to a lesser or greater degree simply part of youth and being in youth.

When I was a child I remember dropping a replica of the Statue of Liberty into the ocean. My parents and I were on the ferryboat back to the mainland after visiting and climbing up into the real statue. Only a few moments earlier I had pleaded and begged for the replica until my mother gave in. Then as we were riding back to shore I began to think about how bad I would feel if it dropped into the water. It was as if once the thought entered I had to experience the feeling of loss.

To be *in* youth work *with* youth it is important to understand and experience these paradoxes with youth as part of life, and by doing so we (youth and youth worker) actually become more alive in our work. It begins, of course, with our own experience. When I read Kundera’s passage, for example, I knew exactly what he was talking about. In my youth I used to place myself, not necessarily with conscious awareness, in states of death beauty. There was a certain quality of numbness or nothingness to these states that seemed at times both comforting and scary. I was called to and compelled from the stillness. What was life like without me, what was it like to be dead, would people like me more if I were dead, and was I really alive? were questions I might have been toying with in those moments. Sometimes I would repeat a word like ‘conundrum’ over and over again until it and I lost meaning, to get a sense of what it might be like. My sense is that feelings something like these are not uncommon undercurrents in the motion and action of youth work,

and that part of our role is to acknowledge or manifest this as part of our presence in the moment?

Suzanne Vandeboom, the artist, told me in a phone conversation, that since she was a child she wakes up almost every day thinking about death and its role in her life as a woman and artist. I see this as a very powerful part of what makes her and her work so alive.

Kundera (1999) was saying that the innocence and beauty of these deep and profound feelings we have as children seem to get lost in the busyness of moving on with our lives. We forget, or leave behind, the very parts of us that are important to stay in touch with.

In his *Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, Kundera shows forgetting as a way of ignoring the history we wish to preserve, and laughter as a way of covering the sadness and joy we cannot stand. To know these paradoxes, it seems, might be another way to improve our ability to be with youth. Also if more child and youth worker workers learn to write about death and other important phenomena with introspection, and curiosity, the way Janet did, our work, I think, will become more alive as part of our field's discussion.

## Peace

Like many of you, I imagine, I have been thinking about peace, and what it means in relationship to youth work. On the one hand it seems so simple. Most people want peace I believe. We seek peace, not war because we know that there are no winners in war, just as we know we can not think of our work as a battlefield. We do not misuse our power as human beings, anymore than a good youth worker would misuse his or her power.

We recognize, struggle and respect different points of view and experiences as part of the journey we are on as we strive to connect, discover, and empower in our daily interactions. Competent workers are always trying to move and speak across the spaces of their experiences with awareness that they build and shape themselves with youth into the world through unique cultural, familial and communal experiences. These workers are curious about and respectful of the stories of others (colleagues and youth) in their efforts to live and learn together. Youth workers who misuse their power to physically control or abuse others are generally thought of in youth work as being insecure and unaware. They must impose their power on others because they feel powerless, just as youth who try to hurt other youth and us, are often afraid and insecure.

So why do we let leaders who need to exercise their power by waging war steal peace from us? Is it that we are not brave enough to stand up to them? Why are we so silent, especially in the US (I would say my country but lately I have not been feeling like I am a citizen of the US) when it comes to peace? Shouldn't youth workers be at the forefront of the marches? After all aren't we the experts on conflict resolution? Has our field become populated by so many insecure and powerless workers that we can not mobilize for peace anymore than we can mobilize for improving the care of youth through professional development?

Are we now a profession of mostly victims who let the "man," or the "woman," dictate the conditions of the battle to us? Have we lost an ability to frame the conflict and resolution? Is it acceptable

to spend a trillion dollars on a war that has resulted in the deaths of almost a million people while we spend in comparison a mere pittance on youth who are increasingly being left behind on the streets? Is it acceptable for us to let politicians say we must continue to fight to preserve our honor? What honor is there in being part of the death of so many people? I don't get it?

*The Ecology of Human Development* in which every child needs “one person who is crazy about him or her” is out of whack at the macro level. The micro interactions of our work are occurring in a macro world of violence. And yet, we seem relatively quiet on this larger caring front. Perhaps we do not sense strongly enough how this larger world is connected with the moments of connection we strive for when we try to just be with youth?

Howard Zinn, the great peace activist, who also wrote *The Peoples' History of the United States*, recently said the leaders of the U.S. today are more alien to him than the aliens they are trying to protect us against. Why do we let these strangers run the nations in which we are trying to care for youth? Are we alien to our cause?

The other day, I spoke with a new group of Public Allies. These are young adults who recently became affiliated with our Youth Work Learning Center at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Like a modern day Peace Corps, Public Allies are part of a national initiative called Americorp that provides support for them to have a year of meaningful public service in local communities followed by scholarships to return to school. Many of the new Allies will work with youth in programs focused on the arts, health, child welfare, social service, and youth work. They will address issues related to poverty, homelessness, lack of health care, violence, gangs, etc. As I looked around the room, I saw several allies with fire in their bellies. I could tell they wanted to “Change the f...world,” as I remember my colleagues and I did in the 1960s and 1970s.

Poetry also helps me find hope and understanding. I reread poets like George Oppen, who wrote during the Viet Nam war to begin in his famous poem, *Of Being Numerous*:



*There are things  
We live among, and to know them  
Is to know ourselves*

*Occurrence, a part  
Of an infinite series*

*A sad marvel;*

Inspired by *Of Being Numerous* I also work on my own poems. Following are two that are related to peace. An earlier version of *A Prayer for Monks Asleep* was published in this column a few months ago. It is a reflection on my concerns about youth men and women who are being trained to fight wars. Even though it is based on my own experience in the military (I was a reservist) during the Vietnam war, working and reworking it helps me make some sense of what is going on in Iraq.

The second poem *Of...All in a Dream* is a reflection on the interconnectedness of relationships, history, the environment, and peace that was inspired by KD Lang's version of songs of my youth by Canadians, which my friend Thom Garfat played at a party I attended that he held for number of peace loving youth workers from around the world:

### *A Prayer for Monks Asleep in the Barracks*

*low crawlers  
in the Zen of war  
hands bled on rungs  
of overhead ladders*

*nothing left to give  
the taking easy  
script and discipline fed  
in pills of deceit*

*under the covers  
shrapnelled ejaculations  
and shattered solitudes  
wait for the quiet*

*men who share  
the same sleeping quarters  
develop a strange brotherhood  
beyond ancient communities  
of dreams and fatigue*

*writes Camus in The Guest*

*such injustice to steal  
youth*

*on this damp cool night  
into the longing  
and the sea below*

*opposition kept afloat  
in Oppen's Tao stone  
through which  
breath and water flow*

## *Of ... All in a Dream (Four Fragments)*

1.

*High on all in a dream  
all in a dream    caffeine  
I look out from the walls  
          of  
fallen white pines  
to cranes nesting  
in the solitude  
          of  
low ceilings  
on the shore  
          of  
wetlands and homes*

2.

*where Aldo Leopold    and Gary Snyder  
and Potowatomi sat    by rocks  
as if    deposited  
through the ice by the hand  
          of  
God*

*like plovers on fence posts  
imagining the interconnectedness  
of rain and sand  
pterodactyl flights of fancy  
all in dream all in dream  
skimming over the oils  
          of  
memory and modern civilization*

3.  
*above the clear waters*  
    *of*  
*the abyss*  
    *of*  
*deep fantasies*  
    *of*  
*lust*

*Oh, I could drink a case of*  
*you darling*  
    *of*  
*restraints*  
    *of*  
*wars*  
    *of*  
*all that jazz*

*here in the downdraft*  
*on the other side*  
    *of*  
*the lake*

4.  
*peace at hand in my retreat*  
*where KD Lang   sings Neil Young*  
*in Hymns of the 49th Parallel*  
*yellow haze of the sun*  
*and sliver space ships break the fog*  
    *of*  
*weather discontent*

*"... It is true that the artist is not dependent on the subject in the sense that he (she) can be judged by its intrinsic interest, or the discussion of his (her) work can be the discussion of its subject. But the emotion that creates art is the emotion which seeks to know and disclose. The cocoon of "Beauty" as the word is often used, the beauty of the background music ..."*

– George Oppen (2001) in *The Mind's Own Place* in *George Oppen: Selected Poems*.

December 2007

## *Where the landfills used to be*

*R*ecently after a trip to the dump (recycling site) to see if someone could pick up a load of junk at my cabin on a small lake, I reflected on youth:

*Where in the shade of  
a toll booth an  
inspector watches  
engine oil toys  
and appliances separated  
from ground waters  
in the irretrievable containers  
of lost childhoods*

seepage slowed  
the lake breathes

*"can someone  
pick up a load at my place?"  
I ask across the dusty lot*

when I was a little boy  
God was a farmer with a straw hat  
and milkers driving a cloud with a  
tractor steering wheels

*and the expressionless  
man in bib overalls responds:*

we have someone who  
will do it for free

*to which*  
*I recall*

in this divide  
is the other after  
the sorting

*What's in our library for doing child and youth care? "Well, dah!"*

People who visited Henry Maier's home in Seattle often spoke about his study where he was surrounded by his books. The library is now at the Youth Work Learning Center at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee where I worked. The other day I browsed again. It's not a large library, but it is a rich library with Henry's famous books put on several bookshelves by the staff members here, who like so many of us, were influenced profoundly by his work on "doing" developmental care.

Jerry Beker and Karen VanderVen, two other leaders in North America probably have much bigger child and youth care libraries. They never seem to throw anything away. If you have been to their homes or offices you know how the material is organized in ways that only the two of them can probably understand (postmodernism and meaning making in the truest sense). But if you want to know the history of child and youth care in the U.S. it is probably in those piles with many of the most significant and creative contributions coming from them.

Gerry Fewster in Canada has a study with books about relationships and self, which stretch our thinking, imagination, and practice for working with kids in relationships. I love that library. Thom Garfat and Brian Gannon have created a library for all of us and shared their unique and powerful ways of thinking about our work. There are, of course, thousands of personal libraries in our field.

On one of my daily runs recently (the source of much of the material presented in this column), I thought/speculated, in the middle of my runner's high, about what's in all these libraries and my own library, which includes many books by the people above. What's similar in the libraries of people who have studied and done child and youth care for many years, and how does it contribute to



all the new libraries and classes in the field? What do these libraries tell us about who we are as a field? What patterns emerge from these books and thinking that define us and our work? Obviously no one could more than scratch the surface of all that has been written but in a runner's high anything is possible once you clear out the neuron pathways,

Two themes emerged from the kaleidoscope of ideas, research, and thinking that flashed in front of my eyes, sort of like the patterns that emerge from the randomness in chaos theory: Relationships and human development. Without an understanding of relationships and human development and their multiple applications in the lived experience (interactions between workers and youth), we do not have child and youth care. Everything seems to move forward and back from these two ideas/phenomena, at least for me and many others, at least the ones I read and talk to.

"Well dah," you might be thinking as the kids often say when something is obvious. And my response would be, "Yes, well dah." This is not a new discovery or an easy one to disagree with? But if this is true, why do we so often take it for granted and leave it out of our discussions? Unless, unlike me you never find yourself drifting away from this simple yet complex truth about the work? To steal from the political phrase that was used by Bill Clinton's staff to win the U.S presidency, "it's about the economy stupid" I often have to tell myself, "It's about relationships and development stupid." Or I read a new article with a slogan or quick fix that suggests child and youth care occurs with technologies that produce outcomes in a vacuum of measurements and schemes devoid of selves and developing beings and, for a moment I get seduced, before quickly returning back home.

My interests these days is on knowing and describing what is. I think of child and youth care as being *in* and doing *with* youth relationships and development. For me that's the primary goal and outcome of child and youth care and what I try to teach – the dance of relationships and development. When I prepare my classes I often think about the richness and power of thought that has been added during the last fifty years to our literature as we have tried to become and define ourselves as a profession. I am also amazed at the similarities with what people have been saying all along, and the continual refocusing on relationships and development in action

as an interpersonal, inter-subjective and contextual process of human interaction in the lived experience. And the way our understanding has been deepened with quantitative, qualitative, experiential, and creative ways of thinking about the work people began to promote years ago as essential for helping children and families.

For example, my colleague Quinn Wilder is conducting an inquiry into the relationships between youth workers and youth in a community organization, and being genuine and sincere is a major theme that has resurfaced again. “Well, dah,” right? But not in the contexts in which he has shown and interpreted these phenomena, based on his unique experience and understanding of previous work, so that his findings show themselves with a fresh set of eyes in a new context, and enlighten us all, and remind us again of all the work that has been done to show development, self, development in action. Reading Quinn also reminds me of the libraries and words of leaders like the people mentioned earlier who show us how we can weave care, learning, relationships, and counseling into the activities of child and youth care. I can see the rich stories in journals and books that show how it is done and the multiple ways we connect, discover, and empower with youth. What a wonderful library it is that we have created together and continue to build and how clear it becomes when I am high in the middle of a run.

## *Of, with, in, act. Do, move and be: Defining relational work*

In late May about a dozen of us who have been doing, thinking about, and teaching youth work for several years will gather in New Mexico for a retreat that I jokingly refer to as the “talk smart institute.” Most of us have wanted to do this for some time. Participants will include people familiar to many of you who read CYC-Net: Thom Garfat, Gerry Fewster, Karen VanderVen, Carol Stuart, Jack and Marilyn Phelan, Leanne Rose, Hans and Kathy Skott-Myhre, Jerry Beker, and Doug Magnuson. In preparation for the retreat we have been suggesting questions to explore. One of the questions was suggested by Thom Garfat: How do we think about relational work? That’s a really good question, I thought when he presented it, and I have been thinking about it ever since. Here are a few of my initial thoughts.

In general, as is evident in the title of this column, I see relational work mainly as a way of being *with* youth in the lived experience. We bring ourselves to the moment and relate with youth, family members and other workers. Our goal together is to create as many moments of connection, discovery and empowerment for ourselves with each other.

Several years ago Mike Baizerman gave me insight into relational work in a review he wrote of my book of short stories, *Buckets: Sketches from the Log Book of a Youth Worker*.

*Youthworkers don't build trust mechanically like carpenters build houses, they are in the world with youth, and, in so being, disclose trust as fundamental to being together as persons... (Baizerman 1992, pp. 129-133).*

A major challenge we all face in relational work is to *be* present, self-aware, and visible so, as Gerry Fewster says, we can mirror back our experiences of the youth. There are many distractions in

our lives that keep us from remembering, doing, and understanding this. I know, for example, that I am often most present when I am doing something with someone, but I am never quite sure how I got there or why I feel that way. Henry Maier's notion of rhythmic interactions always stands out for me when I think about this, as does Jerry Beker's call to hear it deep and look to the questions that do so much to determine the soul of the work.

I also think about what it means to be numerous, or as George Oppen wrote to begin his classic poem, which I referred to previously in this column, *Of Being Numerous*:

*There are things  
We live among and to see them  
Is to know ourselves*

All of this is to say that when I think about relational child and youth care work, I think of it mostly with words such as *in, of, be, with, among, move, be there, be still, dance, run, act, play, understand, and do*. I do not think of relational so much as relationship (long or short term, or good or bad or how to create one) but rather as a way of existing with self and other (child youth, youth work, family member) in a way that creates an atmosphere for development and relationships to occur.

What do you think? I'll let you know what some of the others say after we talk smart. Quinn Wilder who is doing his dissertation on relationships in Child and Youth Care will be taking notes. What makes this retreat extra special for me is that we will hold it near my mountain home (straw bale house and adobe Hogan studio) Suzanne and I built with friends in Northern New Mexico. One night is already planned for a sunset dinner followed by a bonfire under a sky full of stars, a perfect relational opportunity in my opinion.

June 2008

## *Initial reflections on the 'talk smart institute' and relating*

"Relationship based practice is oppressive." This comment by Kiaras Gharabaghi was one of many comments that still ring in my head from a two and half day conversation in the mountains of Northern New Mexico where 14 of us talked about our experiences in the field (some with 30, 40, and almost 50 years experience). Kiaras made this statement at what we jokingly call the "talk smart" institute, a three day retreat, which was held in the Taos Mountain Retreat Center. We had come to talk about topics and questions such as where is the field going, can we help support the development of new leadership, and just what is relational practice?

The original idea was simply to set aside time for a small group of people with several years of experience to have a conversation with no intended outcome other than the process of raising questions and exploring what we had learned. We were confident that if we got together and talked each of us would leave with several epiphanies to fuel our work in the future. Personally, in my 40 year career I don't think I have ever been more moved than I was to be part of this conversation with the knowledge that several of us have been working together for a good portion of those years to help develop our field in North America. And here we were relating, debating and thinking about ideas like: is relationship-based practice oppressive?

Present were Thom Garfat, Karen VanderVen, Quinn Wilder, Jack and Marilyn Phelan, Frank and Vicki Eckles, Andy Munoz, Carol Stuart, Hans and Kathy Skott-Myhre, Kiaras and me. Picture us sitting in a circle on couches with the Sangre de Cristo Mountains looming out the large windows surrounding us, coffee brewing and peacocks crowing. Present in spirit and conversation: Jerry Beker, Gerry Fewster, Henry Maier, Fritz Redl, Al Trieschman, and many others who have done so much to develop child and youth care over the years, names, along with those in attendance, familiar to many of

the readers in child and youth care and CYC-Net.

"Yes," I thought as I looked across the room at Karen VanderVen, who has written so beautifully about how we relate in activity, careers, postmodernism, curricula, and dozens of other topics, and someone I feel so fortunate to call a friend and colleague for so many years. Why? Because as Kiaras was pointing out, at least the way I heard it, is that the word "relationship" can be used to create something that is controlling, primarily self serving, and detracting while we should really be focused on relating in the moment to young people, and it is our ability to define how we relate in daily experiences perhaps more than anything else that defines who we are as a field. Relational child and youth care practice in other words is not relationship based it is relational and all that goes into defining what that is.

In my last column I wrote about how in preparing for this institute I thought about relational as defined with verbs and prepositions – action and being words: Do, be, in, with, run, move, etc. 'Process', as Thom said at the retreat and in his writings. I had not thought so much about how relationships can and are used to oppress. Or how, in our efforts to define something as good as relationship, we had perhaps shifted attention away from what is really the essence of our work: being relational in a variety of experiences and activities that are child and youth care.

In my relationships I have always found words like marriage, partners, couples, and friends somewhat limiting and at times stifling because these words really say little about what exists between two or more people while evoking a whole range of stereotypes that get in the way of knowing the people involved and what they are doing or have been trying to do. I have also often been annoyed at times (turned off) by people who say I am a good child and youth care worker because I have good relationships with the kids. I often wonder is that the youths' impression or yours, and why do you think that needs to be so? Similarly phrases like strength-based and asset-based practice make me leery because they leave out the notion of youth work and youth as a struggle that is informed as much by mistakes, needs, and weaknesses as positive attributes and results.

What I want to know more about in my definition of relational is how do we relate to kids during, with and in lunch, basketball or a

conversation and how does that connect with what we have learned about ideas like developmental care, communication, group dynamics and the lived experience that we have talked about so much over the years? I have a “good relationship” with the kids really tells me little, and even causes me to question are you really the best person to have a relationship with the youth? Shouldn’t your role be to connect, discover, and empower with youth as often as possible in a way that will let them relate to others in the future in a way that will be fulfilling, I might ask?

Or, shouldn’t our role, as Thom reminded us, be to create these moments for their memory bags so that when they think about connecting to others in the future they will have this experience of connecting and relating with others in, as Karen VanderVen shows us, “activity?”

And shouldn’t our role be as Jack Phelan showed us throughout the two days in the stories of those “real” good and badly handled daily events that can serve as powerful learning experiences if you have good supervision and mentoring and teaching of the kind he, Carol, Thom, Hans, Kathy, Vicki, Marilyn, Frank, Andy, Quinn, and all the others have tried to provide over the years?

Shouldn’t we be doing relational child and youth care across all the domains, and in all the competencies that Carol, Frank, Martha Mattingly, Peter Rosenblatt and hundreds of other have so beautifully articulated in the North American Certification Project while simultaneously challenging ourselves to consider that we have ignored or not paid attention to the repressive forces of the larger social/political/class systems as Hans and Kathy challenged us to do? Shouldn’t our role be to be relational in a world of “hope”, as Andy kept reminding us, as well as in a world that sometimes ‘sucked?’ to quote Kiaras again? Yes, to all of this, I thought.

In a sign of how far the field has evolved, throughout the two days we were as self-critical as affirming. We were able criticize ourselves with the knowledge and awareness that like good child and youth care workers the beauty of the work is that we learn from mistakes and successes. Subsequently, humor was plentiful, nothing like a good laugh, if you want to be relational.

Other themes of note for me that ran through the discussions were the tensions between good, bad, and real practice. How do we

prepare our students and ourselves for what we face in the lived experience, and if programs are really invested in bad practice is this where we want to prepare people to practice? On the other hand, what is realistic for them to encounter in their experiences in the very real struggles that exist and what are realistic mistakes and failures as they gain experience and maturity?

We also spent some time on the importance of interdisciplinary work, and letting in as many influences as possible to enrich our knowledge base and experience as well as the continued importance of hope as we acknowledge the struggles we face. For example, we acknowledged that the conditions and the progress in several domains in the US for developing the profession have deteriorated considerably while the knowledge base and identification of standards has grown considerable. Canada on the other hand seems to have grown in practice, education, and perhaps incentives for workers although there is some concern that given the conservative government, widening of distribution of wealth, loss of jobs, and economic downturn in several provinces, they might be facing some of the challenges the US has been facing in child and youth care as the social economic conditions have worsened.

Anyway, so there I sat with all these experienced, wise, funny, humble, and good people talking about and looking at our work from developmental, post Marxist, capitalist, entrepreneurial, revolutionary, literary and a number of other perspectives including bad practice, "what sucks," and what is or isn't child and youth care. It was a time of affirming and critical reflection that I will never forget, a time that extended to three wonderful dinners and breakfasts, and a time that will surely spur more conversation on [www.cyc-net.org](http://www.cyc-net.org) and the literature in the field as written and talked about by the participants in their own words and meanings.

On one of three glorious evenings we partied at the compound (straw bale house and adobe Hogan studio) Suzanne and I had built with friends, and the conversation was enriched by Suzanne's artwork and creativity, the insight of our long time friend Kevin and Carol's husband Ian, and a visit from one of my son's friends, Joy, from San Francisco who was passing through on her own "spirit quest."

Then, a few days later, as I drove back out of the mountains, and across the great plains and through the sand hills and Indian



reservations of Nebraska and South Dakota to the lakes of Wisconsin and my other home, listening to Neil Young's *All in a Dream* sung by KD Laing, Eddie Vedder's *Society* from the *Into the Wild* soundtrack, and a guitar solo of a Bach concerto, I searched for but could not find the words to describe how grateful I was to have spent my career being with such accepting, open minded and open hearted people as I had just been with. A special THANK YOU to all of you who came and enriched my life!

August 2008

## More thoughts about place

I remember the weathered barn wood we hauled from the countryside to panel the living room in the treatment center to make it “homey” with walls on which we could also hang things with hammers and nails – things that were expressions of the kids who lived there. I also remember the small gym (rumpus room) with the eight foot basket (instead of the standard ten foot basket) that seemed just the right size for our one on one, two on two, and three on three games of hoops. And I remember the lakes, one after another that we portaged to and from, and the field behind the treatment center.

Youth workers in my classes and studies almost always include something significant about place in the sketches they write about their experiences with youth. The rumpus rooms and woods, and bedrooms and kitchens in their stories are part of what they hear, see, and remember. These happy and scary, pleasant and unpleasant, cluttered and neat places give a moment or story shape.

Place is both a physical and emotional phenomenon. We bring a sense of place to our surroundings, and both influence our behavior and actions. Youth is shaped in and with a sense of place – the street corners and playgrounds of our youth, the places that Herb Childress and Mike Baizerman wrote about where youth hang with a sense of anticipation.

Seamus Deans explained how James Joyce thought of Dublin in the introduction to Penguin Books’ 1993 edition of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*:

“...a site of linguistic self-consciousness and a point on the map of the modern world that may only be a projection of our desire to give our knowledge a shape that is foreign to or other than it. Above all it is a place that is named.”

Milwaukee is my Dublin, especially the part along the shore of Lake Michigan, the “Michigami” and linguistic self-consciousness I

escaped to as a youth running from the American Pastoral to look at the ships on the horizon. The kids I worked with had their own “Dublins,” often dark places from which they wanted to escape for other reasons. Some had never even been as far as “the lake.” When I took them to “the lake” it was as if they had gone to the Atlantic Ocean.

Henry Maier wrote about the need for public and private spaces in group care. “The space we create controls us” he said. Jerome Bruner and others have written about how place plays a key role in determining how we build and shape our selves into the world. Most architects, artists, musicians, writers, actors, and directors of course get this.

In an issue of *CYC-Online* Kiaras Gharabaghi wrote about a good place where staff focused on creating positive memories. Unfortunately, like many places, this place was closed because it did not comply with current policy and attitudes focused on output rather than input. In the same issue Karen VanderVen wrote about places that dehumanize children, sometimes unintentionally, with point systems, early bedtimes, and no touch policies.

As I write this, I am reading a wonderful manuscript by Hans and Kathleen Skott-Myhre that argues for a radical approach to ethics that is focused in part on Foucault’s notion of the care of self. Wouldn’t it be wonderful if more places for kids were places with this sense of ethics, good places, places where as one of my favorite poets George Oppen wrote about in his poem *Of Being Numerous* where we see ourselves in the things we live among, the places where we can get enmeshed again in the timelessness and space of youth again as described by Doug Magnuson and his colleagues in writings about the agency of youth.

We live in places, good/bad, happy/sad, and safe/unsafe places at times. This is the nature of things. Unfortunately the kids we work with have too often been in bad, sad, and unsafe places. One of our goals is to change their sense of place by creating places where new meanings are made. Places that stimulate creativity, participation, and expression and at the same time make them feel safe – spaces or places without place, as Hans Skott-Myhre writes in his excellent, thought-provoking new book, *Youth and Subculture as Creative Force*, which is receiving much of my attention this summer.

Students in my classes can usually tell shortly after they enter a group home, shelter, treatment center, or community organization if it is a good place for kids and families? The atmosphere is warm and welcoming, and the surroundings are filled with sounds, colors and objects that show that youth and staff live and relate here. People in these places do “things” together.

The Latino Community Center, where I am conducting an inquiry with five youth workers is a good place. When I visited there previously the students felt more or less at home, and energized by what they saw. The director, a former student of mine had turned it into a place that reflected the diversity, culture, and needs in the community of which it was a part. Sometimes we walked on the streets around the center and saw the other places from which the youth came and lived. The director recently left the center. Last week I went there to meet with the youth workers, and it seemed a little lonely without him.

No place is perfect, of course, but people in the programs where youth and family development is the focus make a sincere effort to make the place feel like an environment where participants and guests are welcome and encouraged to interact. Like most homes these places have good and bad parts that are often determined by the experience and meaning of place children and families bring with them. The difference is that they are always seeking to make as good a place as possible, a place where people can connect, discover, and feel empowered. The pictures on the wall, the tone and tempo and the smiles say lets learn and grow together. These are “customer friendly” places where what is being marketed and sold is a chance to relate, discover, and be with others. Positive memories are made in these places.

In his teachings and writings, Jack Phelan has this wonderful way of addressing youth workers and their development in places that are both good and bad at times. His goal, as he explained recently, is to help the workers understand how to make these good places as often as possible as they mature and learn from their mistakes. His classroom is a good place.

Every city, town, and country has its oppressive places run by the control, and sometimes religious “freaks,” who think of space and place mostly as a chance to restrict and shape personalities for a future as cold, closed, and limited as the place in which they find

themselves. These controlling places try to make consumers, religious crusaders, and employees out of children instead of fulfilled and happy youth who have a chance to become their dreams. The workers and leaders live above, not “among” the children and families. The signs on their doors and walls have messages that “come down” from some mysterious higher authority. Presidents, preachers, gods, and captains from some place unfamiliar to anything democratic, spiritual, or humane.

These places in my opinion should be boarded up and nailed shut, just like the barracks that teach young men and women to kill. We should replace these places with “homes” – cabins, cottages, hang outs, playgrounds, and woodland and mountain temples of hope – schools, after school, and group home programs that invite, inspire, value, and respect the creative and intellectual capacity of each young person to find his or her way with the guidance of a fulfilled adult.

My dream is for a contemporary civilian conservation corps of young people who would build these places with adults – “habitats for humanity” across the land, not just the wood frame habitats, but the parks, streams, lakes, playgrounds, schools, and streets where everyone walked and played with their heads up. And we could easily pay for it with the money we have spent blowing up other places.

Maybe, just maybe, the mood is changing in the US, and there is more room for places where “the agency” is the youth and workers who “own” and shape it. Perhaps the progressive social attitudes people in Milwaukee and other cities once had about its parks and schools as community, rather than company, property are also on the rise again, and public utilities, parks, and schools will once again become public. Isn't it nice to think this is all might be true, and we could create places such as this one where Camus, disillusioned with his country after the war, found self again?

“The day before yesterday, on the Forum – in the part that is badly ruined (close to the Coliseum), not in that extravagant flea market of pretentious columns found under Campidoglio – then on the admirable Palentine Hill where nothing exhausts the silence, the peace, the world always emerging and always perfect, I began to rediscover myself.

It is this that the great images of the past serve when nature can accommodate them extinguish the sound that lies dormant in them to gather the hearts and forces that will better serve the present and the future. It is felt on the Via Appia where even though I arrived at the end of the afternoon, I felt it inside me, while I was walking, a heart so full that life could have left me then. But I knew it would continue, that there is a force within me that moves forward..."

*Albert Camus Notebooks, 1951-1959, p. 121\**

In child and youth care we can show the way by reminding ourselves to revisit the meaning of place. We can ask ourselves questions like does this place welcome, can the kids see themselves here, are they part of making and shaping it, do the rooms, doors, and windows open to others and close when needed for privacy? Is this a place where I would want to put my head on a pillow at night or come in off the streets? Is this a place that stimulates discovery, experimentation, and risk taking that can lead to healthy development and happiness? Is it a place where the lessons learned teach the value of hardship, hard work, stick-to-itiveness, dependability, predictability, unpredictability, experimentation, risk taking, engagement, community, belonging, and struggle that lead to connection, discovery, and empowerment rather than distance, more anger, and dissatisfaction?

We can also be advocates for shutting down the truly bad places. The places that deceive with control and false promises of outcomes aimed at turning youth into being adults without providing the opportunity to be in their youth with child and youth care workers.

## **Notes**

\* For those readers who are not aware Albert Camus was a French journalist and Nobel Peace Prize winning novelist, who became disillusioned after WWII when the country he loved and had hoped would become a democratic bastion of freedom, invaded Algiers where he had worked and lived. According to his letters he spent much of his life, before he died in his forties in a car crash, searching for meaning and place.

## "Home"

Last month I shared my reflections about place as a sensory, emotional, physical, and social location. Since then I have thought again about the meaning of home, and how it is a place of many emotions, feelings, and associations. A place many of us escape from and return to, a place we all need in some ways but not necessarily always a physical or good place, which I think is perhaps something we put too much emphasis on with homeless and other kids from troubled or abusive homes. We want to give them a good home. But home is a good/bad, happy/sad, permanent/impermanent place that is real in its multiple meanings, and surroundings, an inner location to be in and out of at times. A place we have to be willing to be in and with kids rather than being preoccupied with finding for the future homes that often do not exist for them or us for that matter. So, in this context, home is more a place we carry with us than a place we go or return to. Further, no matter how hard we try, we cannot really, as the famous line from Thomas Wolfe goes, "return home again." "Why would I want to?" is not an uncommon thought among youth trying to escape to other places, and an even more telling and realistic comment among youth who have been abused at home.

I think I had a sense of this when we tried to create a homey feel for the kids with the "weathered barn wood," I wrote about last month. Even then in the early days of my career, I sensed that "home" was filled for them, as it was for me, with mixed emotions. When I wrote a chapter a few years ago titled *The Quest to Know: One Man's Inquiry into Why He's Home*, and said that I, like others, "felt at home in child and youth care almost from the first day," I didn't mean I was in a house someplace. I meant that I was in a physical, emotional, and psychological place that felt as if it was the way being home should be because it was real to me in all its darkness, happiness, and sense of purpose. I was surrounded by others in which my inner sense of home, including the emotions that went with it, could find a way to express itself and be useful in my

interactions. When other workers said over the years that they found a home in youth work, my sense was that they meant something similar.

“Home” in this context is as much about helping young people experience and understand the meaning of what home is for them, a meaning that allows them to be enmeshed with workers in their experience of home and to learn from it. Or, as Mike Baizerman wrote and spoke with me years ago, develop places where workers don’t build trust like carpenters build houses but rather by being with youth in the world in a way that discloses trust as being fundamental to being together as persons.

Home for many youth is not where the heart is but rather where the broken heart is. The hood, the street, and the gang are home. Not the church, temple, mosque or school where many of them do not feel they belong. Home is a messy place of mixed values, securities, and insecurities. But it is home, as safe or unsafe as it might be. Our job is to create with them a different sense of home. A home that is somewhat dependable and predictable as Henry Maier argued and at the same time a home where nothing is ordinary as Adrian Ward has written, also a home where the rhythms are consistent with each child’s readiness and capacity to be there, as Vera Fahlberg wrote about.

To do this of course we have to feel at home in our work and understand our own sense of home and what it means so that we can be open to the possibility of youth finding and feeling at home with us in these places. As I look back at my writing over the years, place, and home are always somewhere within a few pages. Like the youth workers who write sketches with me of their experiences, I cannot see myself with or without the kids outside of place or home. If we are not there, we are always trying to find it. Further, it is as if getting there is more important than the arrival. In our work, questioning these experiences leads to a deeper understanding of their meaning.

As with many things I often find it helpful to express my ideas and feelings about life, and child and youth care in a poem, such as this poem about my sense of home as a youth as I see it in hindsight:



## *Home*

*I have never wanted  
a home per se*

*Home is here  
outdoors in traffic  
where I breathe  
in the cool fresh air  
and the morning sun  
washes over my face  
like a warm wash cloth*

*Rilke's home  
without lamp  
or table or chair*

*a route peddled  
all day long where  
light enters  
the pupils, lingers  
and escapes*

*Voices muffled  
in the hum of engines;  
crows silent  
as I walk beneath them*

*William Carlos William's  
Pastoral of properly  
weathered places*

*houses close together  
on lawns  
German, Jewish, Italian,  
Arab, Spanish, Black, White  
families concentrated  
inside still...*

*as I move past*

I have always felt more at home outdoors than indoors where, as a runner, I find comfort in the interplay between motion and stillness (existential hum), and this poem helps me understand why. In some ways I think this also opens me to understanding kids who live on the streets. Although their worlds are quite different, there is perhaps a similar anticipation about finding self there outside the sterile, or sometimes ugly, stifling, confines of home. All youth want at times I think to find themselves outside their homes.

Poets and readers of poetry might recognize the reference to Rilke's powerful *The Panther* poem above, which is based on his observations of a caged panther. In reflection as a boy I think at times I tried to escape my cage. Rilke also gave writers some of the best advice ever in his *Letters to the Young Poet* when he encouraged them to listen to their inner voice.

The following poem by William Carlos Williams, which I referred to in the poem above, helps me when I try to understand why I felt at home in youth work:

### *Pastoral*

*When I was younger  
it was plain to me  
I must make something of myself  
Older now  
I walk back streets  
admiring the houses  
of the very poor  
roof out of line with sides  
the yards cluttered  
with old chicken wire, ashes  
furniture gone wrong  
the fences and outhouses  
built of barrel staves  
and parts of boxes, all,  
as if I am fortunate,  
smeared a bluish green  
that properly weathered*

*pleases me the best  
of all colors  
No one  
will believe this  
of vast import to the nation*

Some readers will note that I have shared these poems before. Often I go back to these places of vast importance to the nation and self, places like the pavilion in the park above Lake Michigan that I often run past. When I was a child we made lanyard bracelets there on rainy days (Def: Pavilion: a temporary shelter; the external ear).

I return to my old neighborhood, see how run down it has become, and hear the sounds of the streets and houses on which I peddled papers early in the morning while I wish for something better for the residents.

I still love the first breath of fresh air when I step outside in the morning and hear the birds chirping the way I did when I grew up in that neighborhood and peddled newspapers. I have a cabin on a lake (I am here now) because in part it reminds me of how we went “up north” when I was a boy, and how I hated it when the vacation was over and I had to wait until the next summer. Now I have a place up north I can return to almost whenever I want. Most kids I worked with did not. I want to bring them here.

In summary, home, like all places, is a phenomenon that calls out as being important to understand in our work, and my life. To know ourselves and our work is to know the place in which we find ourselves with youth and in our own unfolding youth.

## Poems and rhizomes

Last month in this column I ended an exploration of the meaning of place with two poems and a brief explanation of why I like to reflect on child and youth care, express myself, and find meaning in poems. The movement, juxtaposition of time, and sense of meaning between the lines of poems helps satisfy my curiosity about the work.

Recently, I read more about rhizomes in an article in the journal *Qualitative Inquiry* (QI) June 2008 issue: 'The Narrative Construction of the Self: Selfhood as Rhizomatic Story'. I had been reintroduced just a few weeks earlier to the rhizome by Hans Skott-Myhre in his writing on youth as a creative force, and here it was again. In Skott-Myhre's book, *Youth and Subculture as Creative Force*, I saw youth unfolding as unique developing beings in creative and multiple forms without restraints of stereotypes and development stages. The Belgium authors in QI (Sirmign, Devlieger and Loots) defined rhizome (a phenomenon found in the work of French philosophers Deleuze and Guattari) as: an underground root system, a dynamic open, decentralized system that branches out to all sides unpredictably and horizontally.

According to the QI authors rhizomatic self-stories have multiple entry points and constantly change. We define ourselves in the contexts of certain time or situation in conversations and interviews. This resonates for me with the way I juxtapose prose poems or sketches in writing my self story, a work in progress shown in reflexive time that moves forward and back. In my youth work classes, we do something similar when we share moments (short vignettes or prose poems) from our youth. We question and think about how these moments are metaphors for our stories at a particular point at time, and that the story might take a different shape if we entered it in a different moment. This helps us have empathy because it gives us a better understanding of how stories change.

Poetic/rhizomatic thinking also resonates with my notion of youth work as a modern dance that is improvised to the multiple

rhythms and unpredictable directions and meanings of the work—an existential hum or jazz perhaps. Often as we move through a day with youth we find ourselves in unscripted moments that require our ability to improvise to the conditions and sounds we face and hear. Themes from the research, theory, and practice are undercurrents that take off in different directions during the dance. This is not to suggest that youth work doesn't require planning (choreographing) and interactions, programs and interventions geared to youths' unique developmental needs and strengths, but rather that much of the time as a process of self(s) in action it is helpful to understand and think of the work this way.

The unpredictable nature of poetic, rhizomatic thinking also supports the notion that relational child and youth care practice is a way of being in the world with youth that is best defined in prepositions and verbs, such as act, do, with, of, in, be etc. rather than absolutes, nouns, acronyms, and slogans that ultimately become stereotypes for relationships and development.

Once we name (label) something there is a tendency to fit youth into the name, or for it to be a fixed way of thinking, and this increases the danger of making youth *subjectums* rather than *subjectus*, as Skott-Myhre writes. Naming of course is unavoidable, but we have to be careful or we risk adopting a linear perspective fixed in time and space that inadvertently or perhaps intentionally leaves or assumes youth and relationships with no individual agency of their own. They become the objects of our political, social, economic, and emotional good/bad intentions.

In poetic and rhizomatic thinking together with youth, workers enter and change their stories in the present in spaces and places as they work in time that moves forward and back where events take on meaning in their occurrence and their reflection on them. They are not fixed on naming the work, but on being in it with youth without fearing its complexity and randomness.

Development can progress in predictable and unpredictable directions with their interactions fitting more with youth's capacity and readiness in the lived experience.

In the following poem I reflect on youth, my own and others, in what might be called "reflexive rhizomatic" time. Some of the fragments have been presented in different versions before in this

column:

## *Of Youth (4 Fragments)*

*George Oppen wrote in the beginning of Boy's Room:*

*A friend saw the rooms  
Of Keats and Shelley  
At the Lake, and saw 'they were just  
Boys' rooms and was moved...*

1.

*After reading Camus  
with the sun  
setting below the western trees  
to Copland's Fanfare for the Common Man  
and falling asleep  
to Appalachian Springs*

*Their words return in  
a crane's haunting call  
echoing across  
the still surface  
of the waters "up north"*

2.

*Back in the city  
a father walks away from  
his teenage daughter  
who is sitting behind  
him at a picnic table hand  
slid up the side of her face*

*he does not turn back*

*resolute in the  
spring dance of drift*

*his steps quicken*

3.

*"Nobody wants it  
on their garage door"*

*"but it's art"*

*"that's questionable"*

*I don't care what you think*

*this is our court  
the hip-hopster tells  
the judges and neighbors  
sitting in review of  
the new impression (ists)*

*working in the new outdoor salons  
on traffic signs  
brick walls and park benches*

*still reaching like Cezanne  
for a mountain  
and leaving behind  
patches of light and dark  
on urban landscapes*

4.

*"...go to the zoo and look  
at an animal for days weeks if  
you have to until  
you can see it..."  
Sculptor Rodin told the poet Rilke*

*Before my appearance*

*What did the conductor*

*see from the roof ?*

*the seamstress  
in the corner of her eye*

*the girl behind the wheel?*

*the boy over the handle bars?*

*the young woman who  
smiled coquettishly?*

*the man with an eye  
on the target?*

*"Travailler, travailler, travailler!"  
Rodin shouted  
and Rilke looked until  
he heard the silence  
of the panther's eyelids closing*

In this form of rhizomatic, poetic, fragmentation I see myself in youth work in reflexive thought. My quest to know self, the work, and the other is deepened in the process of writing and thinking. I move from a haunting reoccurring reflection on my youth, to youth in society and back again. I long for youth and wonder about what life was like before my youth existed while exploring youth's existence in my community. Evoked between the lines are many questions, images, and ideas about being in youth work. My thirst and curiosity (empathy) is quenched for a moment before I move on to the next story or poem that is written when being and doing are once again together and apart in my practice. This too is child and youth care work.



## Noise

*"Whereever we are, what ever we hear is mostly noise. When we ignore it, it disturbs us. When we listen to it, we find it fascinating..."* (Composer, John Cage)

Recently, when I read this quote in an article, 'Sound and the everyday in qualitative research', *Qualitative Inquiry*, (Hall, Lashua and Coffey, 2008), I was reminded of the time I met contemporary composer John Cage several years ago in Milwaukee.

Suzanne had invited me along to a lecture he gave to her art class at the university. Afterwards, he took us on a walking tour around the campus. Every few steps he would stop and encourage us to listen to something: jackhammers, birds, motors, human calls, and sirens. You could tell by the look on his face that he was truly inspired by what he heard. His mannerisms, enthusiasm and humor were contagious. If we listened, he said, we would hear a concert.

I tried to immerse myself the way he did in these sounds. Later, in reflection, I saw many connections with my work with youth at a residential treatment center. Noise, along with more pleasant sounds, was part of the concert of every day life we experienced together. Shouts, screams, clanging pots and pans, loud radios, and slamming doors were mixed more pleasant sounds: cries of happiness and discovery, quiet conversations, and the gentle breaths of boys finally falling asleep at night.

Today, contemporary musicians like David Byrne, former lead singer for *Talking Heads*, show us how to hear and appreciate these everyday sounds. Reading the article in *QI*, however, took me back to what I had learned from Cage and some of my previous reflections in this column on space, place, waiting, motion, and the rhizomatic, poetic thinking I talked about last month. Noise was/is part of the reflexive, relational experience we have with youth, a phenomenon or theme in the nexus of our daily practice that twists and turns through what we do together.

You could say noise is part of the existential hum: the rumble/jumble of daily living, boredom, and waiting we try to escape. As Cage said, if we ignore noise, it often “disturbs” and unsettles us. Even if not consciously heard, it is there shaping and influencing us and the way we move, act, and live. We try to get rid of noise because it interferes and/or stirs something in us we don’t want to deal with. When it gets out of hand, it drives us nuts. It’s so loud we can’t hear ourselves think. So we try to quiet things down. And this often needs to be done, so we can create an environment for relating, interacting, and developing. “Quiet down!” we shout, perhaps not recognizing the noise we are creating.

But maybe we go too far sometimes in trying to get rid of noise. Maybe we should follow the advice of Cage and the researchers in *QI*, and acknowledge and develop a fascination for noise as a central part of the lived experience of youth work? Maybe we should get to know noise a little better by asking what does it tell us, and how does it influence our interactions? What is this thing that subtly and not so subtly is helping move us forward or back in our interactions? How does noise contribute to the mix of sounds in our work, and what are its benefits and deterrents? Then, as the *QI* authors, suggest, integrate noise into our planning, descriptions, activity, interpretations, and communications with youth so we can learn more from practice.

In my youth work class we are moving into a section on activities. The students are reading one of Karen VanderVen’s (1999) classic articles, ‘You are what you do and become what you’ve done’... I’m going to tell them noise is part of what we do and who we are, and see what they say. I’ll suggest that a good activity is to go with youth on a walking tour and create a concert by stopping to hear the sounds around them, and discuss together how these sounds influence the way they live, learn, play and work together. Perhaps, they can also use it as an opportunity to introduce the youth to composers like Cage and Byrne, two “rappers” of a different sort and time.

As I’m finishing writing this in a coffee shop, which is connected to the local owners’ supply house, I hear music, coffee roasters, and people coming in and out on their way to work. There is something about being surrounded by this noise that makes me feel alive in the world, and inspired to write about it. Teenagers come in for a

little meeting before they go off to the School for the Arts. Community members get their morning fix, and say hello. As I write, I am in the traffic of human life, noise a conscious and unconscious part of what I am trying to say. The coffee bean roaster and BB King, "who'd a thunk" this would be a good combination?

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January 2009

## *Images of Thought*

*"Certain things lie beyond my scope. I shall never understand the harder problems of philosophy. Rome is the limit of my traveling. As I drop asleep at night it strikes me that I shall never see savages in Tahiti spearing fish by the light of a blazing cresset ..." I lose myself in and try to grasp Virginia Woolf in the Harcourt Brace Jovanovich 1959 edition of The Waves, p. 186 as I search again for the meaning of this scene:*

**(1970)**

I take six boys from the treatment center where I work camping in the Door Peninsula about 140 miles north of Milwaukee. It's near midnight. We're sleeping in the tent. I'm half awake. Daniel, one of the boys, gets up, pulls on his swim shorts, and leaves the tent. I put on my swim shorts and follow out of sight. A year ago I would have tried to stop him. He would have run away. Now he is starting to change. It's a warm August evening. Once he reaches the bluffs, he stands a moment and looks out across the water.

**(2008)**

I stop writing and reread what Gilles Deleuze, who produced works of philosophy, literature, film, and fine art, said about "image of thought." According to the interpreter Deleuze, "exposed pictures" amidst the repetition, difference, plateaus, and multiplicity in the connections he saw in his ways of doing philosophy (*The Deleuze Connections* by John Rajchman, 2000, p. 33).

I duck behind a tall clump of grass and watch as he races back and forth across the sand, stopping now and then to charge up and down a dune then gliding again along the shore until he collapses at the waters edge.

"I do not know what the spirit of a philosopher could more wish to be than a good dancer. For the dance is his ideal, also his art, finally also the only kind of piety he knows, his divine spirit," I think of Daniel, then my father dancing in the moonlight, and remember a

quote I cannot find from Nietzsche and use it in the adolescent development class I teach to describe the importance of presence, history, culture, and rhythm in interactions with youth.

Caught up in the mood, I race down the dune hollering at the top of my lungs. He stands and faces me. At the last moment I veer off and dive face first into the water. We play and splash each other for a while. "Let's see how far we can swim," he says, and we swim out a ways, heads turned up toward the sky and down into the water the light and dark connected to the movement of our head and arms and legs, then return and sit on the beach with our chins on our knees and the moon running across the water to our feet.

"Do you think I'll be fucked up like my ol' man?" Daniel asks with his voice shivering.

I hesitate and with my voice also shivering, say, "No."

*In his analysis of Camus' The Stranger, Sartre said the choice the great novelists like Camus make is to rely on images rather than arguments because of their belief in the futility of all explanatory principles. Instead they rely on the power of words that appeal to the senses. Of his own work Sartre said, "The only way to learn is to question."*

February 2009

## *Breaking the tiles*

I use the pickaxe to break away the dried and cracked, old floor tiles. The other volunteers, Public Allies, and youth, use paint scrapers to get the pieces the pickaxe can't break loose. Some sweep and pick up the pieces and put them in large plastic bags to throw in the trash.

We are in the basement of Urban Underground for a day of service to celebrate Martin Luther King's birthday. Urban Underground engages urban youth in civic minded projects. Like most youth programs they need more funds. We are fixing the place up. I'm in the "thick of it" on the tile removal crew, others are painting upstairs.

Dust covers our goggles and clothes. It is messy business, but fun working together. I have the easy part. The tiles that respond to the pickaxe loosen much easier than the ones stuck to the floor that I leave behind for them to scrape. It's a good developmental activity: I can see my progress as I work side by side with them. This nasty looking instrument does good work, I chuckle to myself.

"Hey, let me use that for a moment," a young man says, catching on.

I smile, hand him the pickaxe, get down on my knees. He hands me his scraper. I work on tile in a doorway, stamped down by years of foot traffic. "This is really stuck."

"Tell me about it," the young woman working next to me says.

More volunteers arrive. Too many hands for the task now, but somehow we figure it out, and make relatively "short shrift" of a big job. The floor is ready to be recovered with fresh tiles or carpet—"new ground" for youth and staff to walk on as they go to various activities.

It feels good to be doing child and youth care again. On days like this I really miss it. I wipe the dust off my face and clothes, put on my coat, and say goodbye to the tile crew. A young man bumps fists with me, the latest way of connecting and parting and saying "cool."

Upstairs several volunteers are painting. I can barely pass through the hallways. I make it without getting paint on my clothes, just a drop on the shoes. I chat for a moment with director of Public Allies, our partner, who sponsored the day of service. Public Allies is sort of an urban Peace Corp that provides a year of service for young people taking a break from their education to get some “real life” experience. I praise her for the good job she did in organizing the event.

“You really went to town with that pickaxe” she jokes.

“Yup, I’m the man,” I joke back.

“You jumped right in.”

“I learned that in child and youth care,” I say and step outside into the cold winter sunshine. I grew up in this lower middle class neighborhood. It still has problems. People are even poorer now. Many of the good jobs have left town, but it is much more integrated. An elderly African American man tips his hat to me. I smile back.

Everyone in the community seems cheerful. Tomorrow we inaugurate our first African American president, Barack Obama. According to the news, he is putting in his own day of service at a youth serving organization in Washington DC to honor the man who was so instrumental in getting him and us to this point.

The last time I felt this way about the country was in 1968 when Bobby Kennedy ran for president. He had a similar sense of humanity and compassion. I was at summer camp in the Army Reserves when I heard of his death. Like many college students, I had joined the reserves to avoid the war I opposed. I cried and felt empty when I heard the news.

Later that year I went to work in a residential treatment center because I wanted to do something meaningful. My colleagues and I were going to change the world for youth, including this neighborhood. We didn’t think, however, we would ever find another leader with as much compassion as Martin Luther King or Bobby Kennedy. Those days seemed gone. Now, maybe they are back. Norman Powell the second African American President of our national child and youth care association seems to think so. He is going with his boys and wife to the inauguration. I talked to him on the phone a few days ago. We liked the possibilities. Barack and Michelle

Obama did youth and community work in Chicago when they were younger. Both were involved with Public Allies.

Norman and I, along with millions of others, did what we could to help him get elected. For a moment, it feels good again to be from the US. Many of us kept our yard signs up long after the election. Much work for youth and the country yet to be done. I'm trying not to get my hopes up too high. Next week I will ask my new university students what they did on their day of service. If they are like the students last semester they'll want to change this new world and be excited about the possibilities in connections. We marched, organized, and rallied. They volunteer and use the internet.

This morning as I write this at a coffee shop in the Riverwest Neighborhood, black, brown, and white youth and adults mingle with coffee before school and work. Next weekend many of these people will attend a poetry marathon to support the independent community bookstore, Woodland Pattern, down the street. Small local businesses are supporting the event. Artists and poets are devoting their time. A youth reading kicks off the event first thing in the morning. Maybe the winds of change are picking up. I'd like to think so.



March 2009

## *The closing: Alinsky revisited*

In 1976, the place I loved to work closed. It was a publically funded residential treatment center for emotionally disturbed boys owned by the Lutheran Church. The board of directors had decided the church was losing its influence. Originally they had planned to close gradually. Their first step would be to replace the current supervisors, my colleague and I, with a teacher who was a member of the church. The next step would be to raise private funds. This would free them of public funds and allow them to preach more of the Lutheran doctrine.

The child and youth care workers and I did not like this. Together with our social work and education colleagues we had built the program into one of the finest interdisciplinary teamwork programs in Wisconsin. We were proud that we served children and families from diverse backgrounds with many different belief systems.

I had moved up the ranks with them and was named their supervisor along with another man who had mentored me in my early days. My replacement was nothing personal I was told by the executive director who had been assigned to pass on the news from the board. I was an excellent child and youth care worker and supervisor according to my evaluations, but, I was not religious, which meant Lutheran. While it was true that I was not Lutheran and did not want to be (I had abandoned all organized religion early in my life), I did not like the insinuation that I was not spiritual. Recently I had read to the youth from Khalil Gibran's *The Prophet*, and spoke again about Martin Luther King and how important it was to find something outside your self to believe in. This, however, was not the religion, or sense of spirituality, the board of Pastors was looking for from me and my colleagues who had their own sense of open minded, humanitarian spirituality. "Humanism" was not an accepted form of religion to the pastors; it was the enemy to religion.

The workers felt betrayed. They wanted to keep their supervisors. I was moved. "Why don't you make one of the Lutheran child and

youth care workers supervisor of the education or social work department?" they asked the board. The workers knew, of course, that the board really did not look on us as qualified professionals the way they did the teachers and social workers even though the teachers and social workers saw us as equal in our interdisciplinary teamwork. We had insisted on mutual respect, and ahead of our times perhaps, it was gladly given by our colleagues in social work and education with whom we had really become true team members, making and implementing decisions together. It was the church that was behind the times, not them, many of whom were also destined to unemployment because of their lack of "Lutheran-ness."

The workers explored the option of unionizing. The board did not like this. They already felt they had lost too much control over the workers. The union was surprised to hear that the workers were not interested primarily in organizing for pay and benefits. They wanted to organize over the right and principle to have one of their own as a supervisor and not to be controlled by a board that seemed insensitive to the power and importance of child and youth care.

Upon hearing this news, the board threatened to close the center and open a new one immediately that served just Lutheran youth and hired only Lutheran employees. They would go totally private free of any restrictions connected with public funding. I got the news that this was indeed what they would do, and that the agency would close in 30 days, the day after I returned from a the first national professional child and youth care conference in Austin, Texas. We were angry and sad at the loss of the place where we had worked so hard together, but we really didn't have time to grieve because we had to find places for the kids.

The workers decided to try one last trick. They protested in the city square with a coffin and the grim-reaper (one of the workers dressed in costume). The message was the Lutheran Church kills a good program for kids, and leaves them homeless. Needless to say this radical, somewhat misguided, approach did not change many minds on the board of Lutheran Pastors, but you have to admit it was gutsy, and a sign of how strongly the workers felt about what was happening to them and the kids. Even though I was not the organizer of the protest, I was proud to be their supervisor and colleague. As a middle manager, I had tried to use a more diplomatic

approach with the board. Using what I had learned as a child and youth care worker, I tried to listen to, and hear what they had to say, and then propose an alternative. As part of our two pronged strategy, this was equally unsuccessful.

Eventually we found placements for all the kids and a handful of workers came with me and a group of the youth to another treatment center where we occupied a vacant unit, and continued to work as a team. Soon afterward I went on to found the Youth Work Learning Center where I still work at the University of Wisconsin Milwaukee.

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I was reminded of the experience of this closing just recently when our center along with several partners ran a two day community organizing conference based on the life and times of Saul Alinsky. A former high school classmate of mine, Sanford Horwitt who wrote an Alinsky biography, *Let Them Call me Rebel*, spoke at the event which was particularly significant and timely because Alinsky was a major influence on Barak and Michelle Obama and others such as Hillary Clinton and Cesar Chavez.

At the beginning of the event Sandy held up Obama's handbook for campaign volunteers and said it was pure Alinsky from a community organizing perspective. "I've been part of several political campaigns over the years, but clearly this was the best grass roots, campaign ever," Horwitt said, and went on to describe Obama's success in applying what he had learned from Alinsky, and others versed in the use of contemporary technology.

The informative and colorful presentation by Horwitt, which was filled with stories about how Alinsky got things done for the working man and women, made many of us in the audience remember and rethink our community work. Alinsky's work in the places such as backyards of South Chicago, then later within the civil rights movements were and are classic examples of how to create change through community organization.

One story Horwitt told stuck with me. It was about a meeting between Alinsky and Studs Terkle, the great US historian of the common man. One day, as the true story goes, the two met for the first time on a Chicago bus stop:

"You live around here?" asks Alinsky, a big, rather imposing man.

"Yeah, right over there in that building," replies Studs, outgoing, friendly always.

"That run down building over there?"

"Yeah that run down building."

"It's really run down."

"You're telling me. It's a wreck, rats, rodents, leaky plumbing, and terrible heat."

"You pay rent?" Alinsky asks.

"Of course I pay my rent."

"For that run down building?"

"Yes, I don't like it but I'm an honest man."

"Ever think about not paying rent?"

"What are you nuts? I'd get kicked out!"

Alinsky pauses then says, "Are the other people in the building as disappointed as you with the condition of the building?"

"Yes, of course, anyone would be, it's a dump."

Alinsky pauses again, perhaps with his hand on his chin, "Ever think about if nobody in the building paid rent."

"What kind of silly idea ... hmm" Studs pauses, contemplates.

After telling the story, Horwitt said that it captured the essence of the Alinsky strategy. It begins with relationships and agitation. You have to meet face to face and stir something up in people that they feel passionate about. Then you have to connect people who share that passion, in this case the renters perhaps. And then it takes collective action, focused on a specific issue, "Getting the place fixed up," that has a reasonable chance of getting a good result.

By the end of the two day conference, Horwitt and the other speakers had many young folks and community leaders stirred up to take action on something they felt passionate about that had a possibility of a good result. I thought about all the efforts many of us made over the last 40 years to gain recognition for the field of child and youth care work. Almost all of our successes met the criteria set by Alinsky. A group, sometimes a handful of us, agitated (spoke out) for something, rolled up our sleeves, and focused on

getting a result, usually on a local level, such as raising licensing standards for child and youth care work, creating a step system in an agency that would allow workers to advance and receive pay increases, insisting on workers supervising workers, or in our case developing an education and research center. Sometimes, however, we also worked together on a much larger scale, such as the early efforts to form a North American professional association in the 1970s and the current effort among many people and organizations in the US and Canada to create a national certification project.

And one by one these efforts perhaps more than anything else helped advance our cause, which still has a long way to go, but can find hope in the way the Obama campaign showed how engaging people in small projects on a local and national level can lead to big change.

In a conversation with Sandy afterwards, I said I had another reason why Obama won.

"Why," he asked.

"Because he plays basketball," I replied. "It's all about timing, teamwork, positioning, being nimble, and knowing when to change the tempo. Just like child and youth care work."

He laughed, perhaps remembering when we played basketball in high school.

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For me, in hindsight, the closing in the 1970s turned out to be a painful but positive and important event. Had it not closed, I might still be there, which would be okay because sometimes I still miss the work, but I have been happy with the way my work has gone since then. I was able to take those eight wonderful years with youth and use it as a source of my learning and growing over the next 32 years. Shortly after it closed I finished my PhD and founded the center where I often draw on those early years in my writing, research, and teaching. I have also tried to use what I learned from my colleagues about activism, and standing up for something you believe in! "It's your time to step up," I said to my students in class after the Alinsky lecture.

A few days ago I read an article about how important the Civilian Conservation Corp was during the Great Depression. It put young

men and women to work on projects that they could be proud of and gave them hope. This has been a dream of mine for some time. In the past when I mentioned it at community meetings, it rarely got much support from people with political power. People who worked with youth always thought it was a great idea, but not the politicians. They knew most youth didn't vote. Maybe the time has come to resurrect this idea for youth in Milwaukee and the US? Let's see, who can we agitate?

April 2009

## *something is amiss*

It's Saturday afternoon in the "community" coffee shop. The place is crowded. I am writing and using the free Wi Fi. A group of three kids, around 8 or 9 in age, are near the water cooler next to the counter with the accoutrements for coffee and bagels. This is not unusual. Often children come here with their parents. These kids, however, are unsupervised. They have been running in between the tables and filling their cups of water with sugar.

Something else is amiss. Over by the door three bigger kids, all hooded, maybe 11 or 12 in age are trying and failing to look inconspicuous. One of the big kids saunters over to the water cooler, while another circles around on the other side of the room, and the third stands by the door. A glass of water is spilled behind my back where the three little kids are sitting. A young woman comes out with a mop and treats it as if it was an accident.

"Sorry," one boy says, sounding a little too polite.

"Don't worry, it's only water."

The other little boys smirk. The bigger youth quietly step back to the door, wait.

"There's another spill over here." I point to a spot by the water cooler.

The big boys begin to circle again and meet at the water cooler. The little boys move to the rear of the coffee shop. When the big boys step back toward the door, they come forward to the water cooler again. This routine is repeated 2 or 3 times, each time the limits tested. Eventually all of the youth end up by the water cooler, acting like legitimate customers just fixing up their drinks.

The littlest one begins to provoke the biggest one by saying something I can't understand. He's in the big kids face, as they say.

His courage is admirable, but he is about to get the "you know what" kicked out of him. The young woman comes over and tries to calm things down with a cool head, but you can tell she is uneasy. I

store my computer, walk over, and in a firm, still friendly voice say,

“What’s up, guys?”

“Nothing,” one of the boys says sheepishly, as if to “put me on.”

Just then the little one lunges for the bigger one. Fortunately I can stop him simply by putting my arm out and firmly pushing him back. He does a few “your mamas” and then begins to shout how these bigger kids were picking on them in the park across the street. I am reminded immediately of my days in residential treatment.

Meanwhile another man has gotten up and says, “Let’s take this outside and talk.”

“Good idea,” I say.

“I’m not going outside with them,” one of the quieter little boys says.

One of the bigger kids punches air.

“I’ll take these three outside” the man says, selecting a good strategy to diffuse the situation.

“I’ll stay here and talk to these three.”

The leader of the big group “disses” (stares) down the little rivals.

The other man, cool and collected, keeps moving them with body language out the front door. I wonder if he is a youth worker. He has good technique, and timing. The bigger kids give him a little heat, but he doesn’t overreact and manages to get the three of them to go outside with him.

For a moment the little ones break away and start shouting at them in the hallway inside the front door. Stay between the two groups I remind myself. I bring them back in and have them sit with me by the counter that looks out onto the street.

“Where are you boys from?”

“Chicago.”

“What happened?”

“They started beating on us in the park.”

“Why?”

“Because he said something.” He looks at the littlest member of the group.



"You have to stop provoking them or you're going to get hurt."

"So, I can hurt him too!" Once again I can not help but admire him for standing up for himself; yet at the same time feel sad that at such a young age he has become so aggressive. Meanwhile the older boys have gotten on their bikes and are headed back to the park.

"Where are your parents?" I ask.

"They're coming to get us...There they are," one boy points at a disheveled rather young and overweight woman, and an equally disheveled thin man, perhaps a few years older. High on something perhaps, they look very disinterested as the young boys run outside and they walk off together.

The other man comes back in and we chat for a while. He is not a youth worker, just a student who felt he should have stepped in.

"They need some supervision," I say.

"Yeah, lots of supervision," he says.

I thank him and say, "I wish more people were like you."

"It's the only way we were going to solve this problem. It's everyone's responsibility."

I agree and sit back down to write this story for my column, saddened by the condition of the boys' parents, and the lives they must live. I am also reminded of the importance of proximity (a technique introduced years ago by Fritz Redl and David Wineman for working with aggressive youth). I am glad I was in the coffee shop with another man who "got it." Just as I am hopeful that President Obama gets it about education and care for kids. This could have been a much "bigger fiasco," as we used to say when we "came down" together after a shift. In hindsight, I probably should have stepped in earlier. I'm getting a little rusty.

May 2009

## *Careless to caring: still a long way to go*

In 1983, as an eager child and youth care worker who had just received his PhD and founded a university education and research center with other workers in our professional association, I wrote a book titled *Careless to Caring for Troubled Youth*. My premise was that turnover and lack of support for practitioners was a major problem in the child and youth care field. I argued that unless we could find a way to recruit and keep competent workers in the field the system would continue to fail many children and families. Much of my work was based on the positive experience I had had for several years as a child and youth care worker in a residential treatment center for troubled boys. Based on my experience and many other good programs I had learned about, I tried to show what could be done.

I used case examples to describe what happens to children and families that come into programs, bureaus and departments with high turnover, incompetence, and impermanence. I also showed how many well intended and committed professionals entered the field only to be discouraged by the lack of support and incentives they received to stay and develop as professionals. Along with this, I provided several examples of what happens when children and youth are fortunate to be in programs with competent, experienced child and youth care professionals, and argued that it was cost and treatment effective to invest in the training, supervision, salaries, and overall development of a child and youth care staff.

A few years ago members of the Academy of Child and Youth Care Professionals in the US and Canada wrote and published a position paper. We argued that in order to move forward in services for children and youth it was more important than ever to recruit, develop, supervise, and educate youth workers and to pay them a decent salary. Over the years studies in child and youth care and other human service fields have shown that education, supervision,

career opportunities, decent staffing patterns and working hours, team decision-making and adequate pay contribute to organizational commitment, job satisfaction, and productivity. The Academy said it was time to implement these practices on a broader scale.

In their editorial, 'Telling our Story', in last month's *CYC-Online* Brian Gannon and Thom Garfat asked us to tell our stories with the kind of sensitivity, insight, and accuracy that goes into writing stories for the media that ring true with the experience of child and youth care as a counter to the "sensationalized" and "out of context" polarized or sentimental writing that has taken over much of the airways and print. Tell stories in other words that ring true with the experience.

When I started in the field, in the late 1960s it was clear to many of us that this is what we had to do. We had to tell our story, generate new knowledge, and get the word out about what we did. Our energy was focused on developing a profession with its own education programs and knowledge base. Most of us, as I recall, liked our work and the places where we worked. We were at home in child and youth care and wanted to stay. So we educated ourselves, performed at the highest level we could, and fought for higher wages and benefits.

In our efforts to show the value of child and youth care we told our real stories with pride. We tried to build our field by showing how complex and important the work was. Child and youth care in our stories was an imperfect science filled with moments of mistakes, discoveries, fun, struggles, pain, joy, and gut wrenching moments that made us laugh and cry. Many of us volunteered our time after long shifts to form our associations. Our motto was "ask not what your country can do for you but what you can do for your country." No one was going to provide us with the things we wanted unless we could show and articulate why we needed it. And we did this.

I was and am proud to be part of a long history of workers who were passionate about their work and spoke out about it. We "got on our soap boxes," as Karen VanderVen often says in her *CYC-Online* magazine column. We learned from the pioneers who had gone before us and from our mistakes and successes. We made progress in developing a rich literature, generating new knowledge, and organizing ourselves into a profession with standards of

practice.

Sometimes, when I read comments from workers on CYC-Net who seem stuck in a bad place and are waiting to be recognized and/or for things to change, I wonder why you would work in that place, or why do you bother to stay in this field? "Time for you to move on," I say to myself. On the other hand I have empathy for workers who like and are committed to their work and are trying to change for the better organizations, communities and countries where they work. I can relate to their struggle. I get excited about the potential for significant change they bring to the field with their soulful insight.

It is more important than ever today that we tell the story my colleagues and I tried to tell with a fresh set of experiences, eyes, and ears. We have to learn from the past and add new insights that ring true with contemporary challenges. Fortunately we have many new ways to get the word out such as CYC-Net. There is greater potential than ever to be heard. The challenge, however, is the same. We have to show how our work positively impacts the youth and families we care about. And we have to do it with the realism that comes from being professionals committed to creating change.

As I write this, I recall that it was a year ago in May that several of us from the US and Canada, who have been part of the effort to get the word out and professionalize the field for several years, met in New Mexico. The stories many of the participants shared before, during, and since then (on CYC-Net and elsewhere) are the kind of stories that need to be told. So are the stories of so many new voices that have "shown up" in recent years. We still have a long way to go. I also find that exciting.

I am reminded again of this section from doctor/poet William Carlos Williams's poem, *Pastoral* which he wrote later in his life at a time when he found himself at home among the poor.

*the fences and outhouses  
built of barrel staves  
and parts of boxes, all,  
as if I am fortunate,  
smeared a bluish green  
that properly weathered*

*pleases me the best  
of all colors*

*No one  
will believe this  
of vast import to the nation*

No one will know, of course, unless we tell them... and this morning, while I write again in the coffee shop, sun shining through the window, jazz and rap playing in the background, people coming and going, peaceful, the sleepy youth finish their coffee and bagels, and slowly head off to the School for the Arts while the community wakes around them.

June 2009

## *The "divine" child and youth care "milieu"*

A few weeks ago I visited with a woman I had not seen in over 42 years. When I first met her, she was in her early twenties and had recently left the convent. The life of a nun was not for her. She wanted to explore life and do good out in the world. It was the spring of 1967. She was about to graduate with a degree in philosophy and psychology. She was gorgeous. I passed her on a staircase, instantly knew she was special, and boldly told her I loved her. I had had "a few." She bought my humor and presence, if not my line. For a few weeks, we went out, took walks and had several long talks. I was impressed by her deep sense of conviction, the thought she had given to her future, and her willingness to take risks.

That summer she moved to Washington DC to look for work and eventually found it in the youth division of the police department, one of only 13 women on the force of 3,000. I visited her before I went off to be trained for the war in Vietnam. Drafted, I had joined the Army Reserves with the hope of avoiding active duty in the jungle. During basic training we corresponded. I went for another visit after my training. Then our friendship (for the time being as it turns out) ended. Let's just say I had a little maturing to do.

That spring, I met Suzanne, my partner all these years. She showed me what it meant to have a calling as an artist, and shortly after that I found my way in child and youth care. One night recently I was thinking again about the woman I last saw in D.C. and how she had influenced me with her thoughtful, free spirited sense of conviction. I wondered how her life had gone. So I "Googled" her name and to my surprise found her nearby just north of Chicago. Within an hour I got a note back saying what a nice surprise it was to hear from me and inviting me to visit. She seemed to have forgotten or forgiven some of my shenanigans.

I drove down from Milwaukee a couple weeks later on a sunny spring day. From the first moment it seemed as if no time had

passed. We had lunch and told our stories. Her story was truly remarkable. She had gotten a degree in law, helped prosecute organized crime in New York and went on to be a very successful corporate lawyer (as we ate I could not keep from smiling with admiration at the thought that this rather petite woman had taken on such risky challenges). I always knew she would be successful, she was and is very smart, hardworking and dedicated. And like many women she had balanced her career with a marriage and a son. A dozen or so years ago, she had also gone back to school to get a masters in social work and became a Jungian therapist. She had come full circle, from human services, to corporate law, and back to human services, all of which, of course, depend on having good people skills.

Our conversation continued on the shore of Lake Michigan where for more than 30 years she had been walking while 60 miles north I had been running. We both agreed it was not a coincidence that we had come together at this point in our lives to discuss how we had evolved. We discovered many similarities (we both had just one child, sons about the same age) and differences in the courses we had chosen. I was so happy to see her again and reminisce.

Later that afternoon we shared photos of our families. Before the visit ended she gave me a couple of books to read. She had expressed interest in my books and I ask her to share some of her influences. One of those books was *The Divine Milieu* by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (Pierre Teilhard or Teilhard as he is often referred to).

When I got home, I dove into the book because I wanted to know more about what had shaped her thinking back when she chose to leave the convent and met me. Reading the book was one insight after another of the kind that one has about someone in hindsight. For those who do not know (I didn't until she gave me the book), Teilhard was a Jesuit, thinker, scientist (geologist and paleontologist who helped discover Peking Man) and philosopher. He called himself a phenomenologist and challenged some of the traditions of the Catholic Church in an attempt to bring the inner world of faith together with conscious man's actions in the outer scientific world and the universe (faith and reason). His writing spoke to me the way a book that one reads and doesn't completely understand, but wants to, speaks, especially his notions of evolving consciousness

and detachment/attachment through action (Please excuse this vast oversimplification of a very complex, deep thinking man of faith).

I am not a religious person. I have not gone to church in a long time. But I do consider myself spiritual. The further into the book I read, the more I thought about the notion of milieu in residential care, or at least milieu as it was taught to me by many of the pioneers in the field. Like many of my co-workers and colleagues in the profession, I learned that the milieu was a place where everything we did for youth served a developmental and therapeutic purpose and was interconnected in the macro and micro systems in which we worked. If we planned our interactions and activities with this in mind there was tremendous potential in each daily living experience. Nothing was too small to consider; each interaction and activity had enormous potential. Books and techniques including *Controls from Within*, *Life Space Interview*, *A Guide for Child Care Workers*, *The Professional Houseparent*, *The Other Twenty Three Hours* and later *The Ecology of Human Developmental*, *Group Care for Children and Youth* and *Being in Child Care: A Journey into Self* showed us how to do this.

We also took the kids to church if they wanted to go and shared our individual feelings of spirituality with them. As a boy I had learned that God was love and Jesus was our earthly role model. As a young man in search of words and ideas to define my spirituality I was influenced by Erik Erikson's *Gandhi's Truth*, which I read after *Childhood in Society*, and books like *Siddhartha* by Herman Hesse. During devotions in the treatment center I read from Khalil Gibran's *The Prophet*. I read Thomas Merton, curious about how a man who had lived a wild young life became a deep thinking monk. Later I was influenced by the street wise, scholarly musings of Mike Baizerman who introduced me to Martin Buber (philosophy of dialogue and religious existentialism) and others who brought their spirituality to their work.

Back then my co-workers and I tried to introduce some of this thinking through our actions and speaking into the lives of the youth. We felt spirituality was as much in nature, the songs of John Lennon and Bob Dylan, and the writings of Gibran and many others, as it was in the religious dogma that some of them had or had not been exposed to.



All along, however, we more or less kept this part of the work compartmentalized from the work of development in the daily environment. It was as if there was this spiritual side of the work that most of us acknowledged but rarely strategically integrated into our case and/or treatment plans. It was out there, taken for granted as something to include as long as we were open-minded about the multiple and complex ways youth experienced and expressed their spirituality.

Reading *The Divine Milieu* and reflecting on these experiences got me thinking again about how perhaps the time has arrived when we can/should freely and knowingly make spirituality, in the broadest sense, a strategic part of our writing and activity and case plans for youth. Many undoubtedly have and will continue to do this. But maybe as a field we should make a greater effort (evolving consciousness) to integrate spiritual teachings with science and experience into our interactions during relational practice. Robert Coles has done this beautifully in *The Spiritual Life of Children*, I am told. Maybe more of us should weave this part of self, other, “otherliness,” and the world into the daily dance in the milieu. Recognize how it shapes youth in their search for meaning and identity as we plan and are enmeshed in our activity and relationships together. It would fit in nicely in the progression of thinking and action present in the powerful new book *Standing on the Precipice: Inquiry into the Creative Potential of Child and Youth Care Work* (2008) that speaks to the multiple ways youth develop and make meaning in the postmodern world.

In past columns of *Moments with Youth*, I have written about phenomena such as waiting, anticipating, motion, stillness, transitions, lunch and death/beauty. After reconnecting with my friend, I am curious again about the spiritual nature of these experiences. I see it as part of these moments just as relationship, presence and development care are. Our meeting also reminded me of how important our timeless encounters with youth can be, and the way these moments become parts of their stories as they grow, develop, and evolve.

When, eager to know why she had trusted and spent time with me many years ago, I asked my friend why she gave me Teilhard to read, she said, “One of the consequences is that I am an optimist. He was my intellectual hero because he introduced me to evolving

consciousness but I think he tried too hard to be Catholic. In an e-mail I wrote that it seemed we were both what Walt Whitman called, "Itinerant gladness scatterers." I prefer Leonard Cohen's "Our lady by the harbor; Jesus was a sailor when he walked on water", Zen Buddha, Jewish, Muslim, Christian spirituality and parallel universe, chaos, orthogenesis, and scientific thinking to any form of organized religion. In other words, I prefer the open-ended quest to the walls and constrictions of one faith or another. "Jesus was a sailor when he walked on water," Leonard Cohen sings.

We plan to continue our conversation about synchronicity and many other phenomena. Having taken up painting and photography, she is eager to meet Suzanne, and vice versa. Given Suzanne's ideas about the universe, work, death, and life that should be interesting.

July 2009

## Detachment/Attachment

Lately I have been reading Gilles Deleuze, the French philosopher who produced works of philosophy, literature and fine art. Although much of his complex thinking is beyond my grasp, it seems to resonate with the interdisciplinary, mixed genre way I have come to see child and youth care. He wanted his ideas to be played with. So I read and reread passages from his work and try to make connections with my own work.

Earlier in this column I wrote about how Deleuze saw new connections in repetition, differences, and multiplicity in his images of thought much the way the chaos scientist sees patterns that emerge from randomness. Deleuze notion of rhizomes also rings true with child and youth care as an evolving nexus of themes, practices, and ideas.

I got turned on to Deleuze when I read a paper by a child and youth care graduate student at Brock University. Not surprising the students' advisors Hans and Kathy Skott-Myhre often reference Deleuze in their writing about radical youth work and ethics. Deleuze also comes up in conversations I have with a philosophy graduate student who rents a room in my house. He loaned me his copy of *The Deleuze Connections and Critical and Clinical*, a book of Deleuze's essays on literature.

I find much inspiration in the thoughtful way my colleagues and young scholars are introducing ideas from philosophy, literature, film and art into their attempts to understand and shed light on child and youth care and human nature in general. They are not willing to accept simple explanations of complex phenomena.

Recently, for instance, I reconnected via e-mail with Janet Newbury, who first inspired me with a thesis she wrote for a child and youth care masters at the University of Victoria. It was an interview/story based account of how relatives dealt with family loss several years after a shipwreck, and subsequently one of the most alive and relevant child and youth care texts I have read. A passage

in her work about numbness led me to explore in more detail Milan Kundera's notion of death/beauty in an earlier *Moments with Youth* column.

Her work today is taking her in the direction of social activism, the relationship between meaning and metaphor, and many other places. She is challenging outcome focused, often culturally insensitive practices and policies set forth by funders, publishers, practitioners, and politicians who try to define and do child and youth care according to simple evidence and asset based criteria. She is also trying, like many young scholars, to understand the work as a relational, context bound and cultural process of interaction with multiple possibilities and complexities.

In these contexts one of the themes I have been curious about for a while is detachment. It is a theme in Deleuze's work, as it is in many of the philosophers, fiction writers, poets, and filmmakers I have referred to previously in this column. They all seem to suggest that if we detach ourselves in some way from our subject(s) and histories it opens us to new opportunities, insights and connections.

I interpret this as meaning if we understand our story, the social, cultural, and political systems in which we live, and do not let it interfere in our open-minded presence and interactions with children, youth, parents, co-workers and others, this opens the door to create new ways of connecting in daily interactions. We do our personal homework, and then get enmeshed in an experience with self awareness at the edge of our consciousness and let the action take us where it will, our prior experiences and perspectives fueling our curiosity as we search for new discoveries about self and other.

In an essay in *Critical and Clinical* on Beckett's *Film*, Deleuze comments on how Beckett's work was an attempt to free self from perception by other. In child and youth care we might imagine that, like a camera, our goal is to be open to youth free of perceptions other than the one created by the angle at which we observe. "To be" in this context is to be seen but not perceived according to any stereotype. The observer puts her/him self in the best possible position or "proximity" to observe.

In my classes I show students a video made by Sadie Benning. During her teen years, she videotaped scenes from her life. Not only did she create a piece of art work, she also provided insight into the

life of a lonely teen struggling with her sexuality. The camera listened and saw her with the unbiased and undivided attention she wished adults would give her. Thus, in class we practice trying to look in this way, aware of how our story (montage) shapes our view as we open our minds, eyes, and ears to what she is showing us and saying.

Another way to think of the relationship between detachment and attachment is if we let in the randomness and uniqueness of our interactions and stop trying to control our experiments (interactions) and outcomes, new patterns and possibilities constantly emerge. We plan carefully in advance, as the child and youth care literature clearly shows, according to youths' developmental capacity and readiness to connect and participate in activities, but our work is not rigidly bound by models or scripts. Instead, whenever possible, in the improvised dance of youth work we learn as much as we can about self, other, and the work, then free ourselves to respond to the ever changing rhythms of our interactions and experiences. Many abstract artists, poets, and jazz, rap, and rock musicians, of course, show us how to do this by drawing us in with their detached/attached images and rhythms.

We in a sense free ourselves of the psychoanalytic analysis and interpretations of the past. Lives are not boxed in by labels, categories, and numbers. Each participant in the interaction becomes his or her own agent in the moment and future. The past gives way to the new stories we create by our actions and interactions. We see the uses for "symptoms" and shape new, more useful steps and actions as we move forward together in the rat-tat-tat of action, reflection, action, reflection.

For me, at this point, this all sums up something like this: while we can never take ourselves out of our work and thinking, if we want to be creative and open ourselves to new insights and connections then we have to understand how our histories and biases get us to a certain point and try to put it in the background or at the edge of our consciousness as we use it to form new connections while we do, engage in, think, and write and speak about our work.

In this regard, I have always been curious about and inspired by workers who seemingly are so "into" their work on a daily basis (as I would like to think I was). They are constantly engaged in their activity with the others (children, youth, parents) leaving open the

possibility for change, learning, and growth. Subsequently their “attachment frees” to use a phrase from Henry Maier.

In my case, as I have written many times, this is most likely to happen in my reflexive and interactive work when I am in motion, or out of my head and into my body. I can listen, be creative, and enjoy an experience when I leave the past behind and am fully engaged with others, the work, and the world around me. I am in a sense lost in the activity, open and available to experience and show my experience, and this seems to connect.

When I simultaneously do child and youth care and/or write about it, I try, as Deleuze suggests, to open my self to new experiences, images of thought and lives that emerge free of much of the emotional and intellectual attachment to what was in favor of what is in the moment, and then continue to move on to a new insight about a new or old theme.

Whereas Deleuze might be suggesting an eraser of “the I” replaced with a new “vitalism” for life, my preference is for an “I” or “me” slightly out of the picture: blurred perhaps by its energetic movement through a scene with others: the Camus, Virginia Woolf, and Leonard Cohen I. The “I” introduced in 20th century American literature by writers who placed a self-questioning I in their work and were forerunners to many of the more sensitive young writers of today; the “I” of youth workers who get into their work the way Russian author Turgenev uses a sense of detachment to get into his landscapes with his characters in books like *Fathers and Sons*.

The themes that emerge from this writing/thinking, detached and attached work define child and youth care for me at a point in time. As I have written often before, presence, rhythmic interaction, meaning making, and atmosphere are four themes that constantly show themselves in moments of connection, discovery and empowerment.

Death, loss, and mortality are themes in the work of most, if not all, writers and workers I admire. Their quest to understand these phenomena seems to make them more alive. It is always there as the undercurrent, or existential hum, such as in the work of Albert Camus, Virginia Woolf, George Oppen, Milan Kundera, Hemingway, Raymond Carver, Marguerite Duras, and Samuel Beckett to name a few. I am interested in what they have to say, the pictures they

paint, the way their words move, the spaces in between, and the pauses their characters inhabit. The way their scenes capture the place in art and life where we are, as Strand wrote about Edward Hopper's paintings, compelled to stay and leave as we move toward stillness.

For example, the quest was evident in Camus' *A Happy Death*, *The Stranger*, short stories, and notebooks as he reflected on justice, war, relationships, culture and place. Jesuit phenomenologist De Chardin took his own path to understanding evolving consciousness and detachment/attachment through action as he separated from some of the traditions of the Catholic Church. Wim Wenders showed his journey in images on film in movies such as *Wings of Desire* and *Paris Texas*.

Loss was shown in the rhythms of Nick Adams footsteps as he returned from war in Hemingway's *Big Two Hearted River* and the currents of time running over the stones in Maclean's *A River Runs Through it*, which ends, "I am haunted by waters." It's in the tension and energy of Nick's movement across and in the landscape and the water running between the fly fishing brothers and Maclean's reflections back on those moments of his youth. In Sam Shepard's plays, *Fool for Love* and *The Late Henry Moss*, it is at the edge of his characters consciousness, propelling the dialogue. It is in Marguerite Duras' mirror as she watches herself age in *The Lover*; the light that enters Rilke's *Panther's* eyes, and so forth.

All of these writers and artists work(ed) with a sense of detachment. Distance draws them closer to their subjects and makes them present. Their quest can be seen, heard, and felt as they look back on it through the window of their parent's car. The images in their work have Wender's continuity of movement as they strive for Ezra Pound's fundamental accuracy of statement. Through their spontaneous, truthful fragmentation, like Whitman as interpreted by Deleuze, they become portrayers and conveyors of the best of life and lives in its current landscapes. Or, as Whitman said, "itinerant gladness scatterers" spreading scenes, cases, and sights, each one a granule in a larger evolving, yet to be determined, whole, painted like Cezanne by reaching for a mountain and leaving behind patches of light and dark.

These writers/workers' ethics is in their process as they search for stories, words, and images that ring true with the experience,

and invite readers to explore their own experiences with them and move beyond, each new action, image, or glimpse of the work that compels new action at lunch, bedtime, running, playing, working or wherever their relational developmental interactions take them as they try to be with youth and the world, learning and growing together.

In my work with youth workers and troubled youth I see a similar quest in their stories. In my classes we tell our stories with the knowledge that understanding our experiences opens us to the experience of others. We try to paint our pictures and images of thought. This helps us have empathy for one another. Many of them have experienced a considerable amount of loss and death. I find their resilience, vitality, and altruism inspiring. I am amazed by their thirst for life as they struggle to understand their own mortality and feelings of abandonment. This makes them, us, real, enmeshed in life sincere about our quest as we move forward without being weighed down by the past, and thus youth are more likely to join us.

I often find myself today as Deleuze suggests, trying to be with, rather than in and of the world of lunch, kickball, listening...

*I walk through the tall grass on the banks of the creek, red,  
black and brown stones scattered on the sandy floor.  
Memories, like stones, are shifted and polished in currents of  
time, I tell myself, and keep walking at a steady pace, lost in  
the rhythm of my gait, my eyes following a piece of driftwood  
moving downstream while I see youth anew ...*



# Fragmentation

In the early 1980s the international child and youth care conference sponsored by the School of Child and Youth Care at the University of Pittsburgh concluded with a recommendation that child and youth care adopt qualitative research as a primary method for researching and understanding the work. Since then the field seems to have grown in acceptance as a profession along with the growth in acceptance of qualitative research.

Today there are numerous descriptive and interpretive methods of qualitative research that help us understand our own experiences while we understand the experiences of others. Many researcher/practitioners, including myself, have turned to story and narrative to explore and show the work in contexts that resonate with the way our interactions occur.

Much of the movement in this direction coincides with the emphasis on meaning making, or the belief that we all build and shape ourselves in the world through our own narratives that are constructed with unique cultural, familial and community experiences. To understand one another we have to understand our own story and how it biases our interactions while we listen with curiosity about others as we try to speak across the spaces of our experiences.

The emphasis on narrative and story, one can argue, is also an outgrowth of the way most workers talk about their shifts after work when they sit down to reflect with one another. They tell stories to give their interactions tone, texture, humor, and pictures that are required to understand their interactions.

As exciting as this development is we have to proceed with some caution recognizing that most narratives and stories are “made up,” or fictional accounts constructed from events the tellers choose to include from memories or notes that have become a bit fussy and/or illuminated with time. All memories have a quality of not being entirely “real” simply because we can never remember everything

and or tell everything exactly as it occurred, and we choose to include or leave out parts. Meaning is made by the occurrence of an event and our reflection on it. Furthermore, most memories don't come to us in neat stories or narratives with clear beginnings, endings, or plots. They come instead in fragments of thought or images juxtaposed with other fragments, a sort of collage of memories in which one memory evokes another memory, insight, or emotion.

What we (youth and us) feel is to some degree made up from many images, emotions, and experiences, mostly in the present. Youth are often trying to tell us what they feel, think, and see from a flood of experiences that manifest themselves at that point in time, just as we might be flooded with memories and experiences of our own. This is their/our reality then, not forever, and not exactly as it was ever in the past.

If we want to fully understand, therefore, we have to open to what they are telling us, using our senses as much as our minds. "What are the images, behaviors, and metaphors they present telling us?" we ask with our eyes, ears, noses, feelings, and heads. If child and youth care is a developmental, experiential, and existential process of human interaction that occurs in multiple contexts, then part of the challenge is to take it for what it is without fitting it into a story or model or practice technique. An expression of anger or joy is an expression of joy as it is in the present as influenced perhaps by multiple feelings of anger or joy. Similarly an insight is an insight arrived at from many past moments or experiences. These emotions and insights are also works in progress, changing from one moment to the next with new experiences and discoveries.

This is why it is so important to listen with undivided attention and to be open and available to mirror back our experiences of them while simultaneously being aware of what others and our surroundings are mirroring back of us. The same can be said about us. The meaning we make of our interactions does not necessarily come in a story, or linear narrative. To know these moments we have to, as I wrote last month, detach ourselves a bit in our reflective work and get into the experience of being in child and youth care in the moment so we can feel, read, and see what is being told from our unique perspectives.

This is also why I have moved from telling stories to writing reflective sketches in which I fragment and juxtapose my

experiences as I explore youth work and my own youth unfolding over time, such as in the following new version of a sketch I have worked on for some time:

**(1959)**

Russo and I ride the North Shore electric train to the jazz festival in Chicago. He has a brush haircut; I have a duck's tail. We're both wearing leather jackets. The landscape is a blur, an endless stream of farms and telephone poles. To pass the time I drum on my knees while he bums a cigarette.

**(1990)**

*"I'm thinking of getting my ear pierced like you," I say to my son, Devon, on the Charles Bridge in Prague shortly after the Velvet Revolution.*

*"You'll just look like a middle aged guy trying to be cool," he smiles and hands an earring back to a young woman sitting on a blanket.*

*We leave the bridge and walk past Kafka's father's store to a pub in Old Town where we are seated with two young Hungarian men. Devon speaks to them in French. One's a carpenter, the other a tailor. "They know where I can get a Soviet Army coat," Devon says.*

*"Go ahead, I'll meet you later on the bridge." After he leaves, I stay and have a sandwich then return to the bridge. The night sky is clear, the water calm. Behind me an old man is playing the accordion, his arms opening and closing the bellows. I look at the castle where Vaclav Havel, the reluctant president, a playwright who wrote for the Theatre of the Absurd and later as part of a liberation movement from a prison cell, lives, and wonder if he can find time to write.*

*"What are you thinking?" The light is at Devon's back. He's wearing the long Soviet coat, his tall silhouette, faceless, his voice smooth, like the water that flows under the bridge.*

*"Nothing."*

**(1959)**

The reflection I see in the train window on the moving countryside is the face in my favorite photo of my mother taken before she met my father. She is smiling coquettishly from beneath the brim of the

flapper hat. I comb my hair back into my duck's tail, jut my jaw out, and take a sideways glance trying to look older.

**(1990)**

*"My ageing was very sudden. I saw it spread over my features one by one, changing the relationship between them, making the eyes larger, the expression sadder, the mouth more final, leaving great creases in the forehead. But instead of being dismayed, I watched the process with the same interest I might have taken in the reading of a book. And I knew I was right, that one day it would slow down and take its normal course." I read in Harper and Row's 1985 edition (p.4) of Marguerite Duras', The Lover while looking for a way to write my experiences.*

**(1959)**

Slowly the farmland fades into brown-brick buildings, then taller and taller buildings. From the train station, we walk inland. The city is like another planet: canyons of skyscrapers that block the sun, drunks, students, and businessmen all mixed together. We arrive at the Chicago Stadium early and toss coins with two other boys. Soon men in cardigan sweaters and women in evening gowns begin to arrive. Between us, Russo and I win a buck. By the time we finish, the stadium is almost full. We mill around, find our seats and wait. Eventually, the buzz of the crowd gives way to the mellow sound of Coleman Hawkins' saxophone followed by JJ Johnson, and Ella Fitzgerald.

Afterwards, still high on the music, we walk toward the lake. Outside a nightclub a picture of a woman with tassels on her tits is framed inside the cutout of a star.

"You boys aren't sixteen much less twenty-one," the doorman says to Russo.

Russo starts to argue. I pull him by the arm. On Michigan Avenue, he proclaims the Prudential building the tallest in the world. We cross the street into Grant Park. A bum hits us for a quarter. At the marina, a man with a torn jacket is fishing.

"Catch anything?" Russo asks.

"No, not yet," the man says. You can see his broken teeth when he talks.

"What you using?" I ask.

"Bacon."

"Bull," Russo says.

The man reaches in his jacket, pulls out a package wrapped in wax paper, unfolds the paper, and shows us the bacon.

"Never heard of that before," I say as the man puts the bacon back in his jacket.

The man looks at me. "Probably a lot of things you never heard of."

I turn my back to the lake like I heard Miles Davis does when he plays.

"Where you boys been?"

"At the jazz festival," I say proudly.

"No kidding. I used to play jazz."

"What instrument?" Russo asks.

"Piano."

"Where did you play?" I ask.

"All over."

"Why'd you stop?"

"Lost my timing."

### **(1997)**

*I stand across the street a moment longer. A light is on upstairs in my former writing teacher's house. Boxes can be seen in the window. The rest of the house is dark, the basement and the first floor, where, sometimes when I sat across from her at the dining room table and read my work to her, I could anticipate her response.*

*I used to make her laugh. It was easy. The slightest innuendo or hint of humor would set her off, in those days, when she laughed. She saw things where there wasn't anything. Always lurking, beneath the surface, there was something, for her, in a word or scene or image. Where I saw only the word or scene or image, she saw something more.*

*But there was nothing like now other than the sorrow. So I walk to the bookstore on the corner where I used to go after a lesson and read the jacket cover of Camus' first book, A Happy Death, reads: "For*

*here is the young Camus himself, in love with the sea and sun, enraptured by women, yet disdainful of romantic love, and already formulating the philosophy of action and moral responsibility that would make him central to the thought of our time..."*

## *What happened to carlos?*

Carlos was a good youth worker. He grew up in the hood, but did not join the gangs. With more than a touch of machismo and street smarts he managed to survive and get an education. People accepted him for his dedication to the community and the youth, who he wanted to help follow in his footsteps. Early on he sensed that community and youth work were interconnected. And when he started to work at the youth center where he “grew up” as a boy, he made sure that he spent as much time engaged outside on the streets as he did inside with the youth.

Some people did not understand him. They saw him as having too much machismo. They thought he was cocky. I saw this as a manifestation of his presence. This was who he was and it translated across cultures. He reminded me of a war veteran I had worked with years ago who was tough on the surface, but had a warm kind heart that connected with the kids. Like Carlos he was often engaged in activity with the youth. Both had a sense of dignity and confidence. Carlos' persona had been honed by a long hard fight to survive and make it. There was nothing to be humble about. Few youth could escape the clutches of the gangs the way he did and still remain in the neighborhood, trying to keep other youth from joining and providing a safe haven for those who wanted out. He was almost an island of gang abatement unto himself and this I admired.

This is not to say he wasn't afraid or insecure sometimes. Anyone would be in the situations he encountered almost daily. But he was a competent youth worker. He recognized and managed (at times masked) his fear in tough situations and did not let it get the best of him.

One night he took my class on a tour. We went to the youth center and then walked the streets. This was a good experience for many students who had led sheltered lives, and a reminder to others who had come from the “hood.” Carlos was in his element. He talked to the neighbors. A squad car pulled alongside and the

officers said hello to him. At one point he walked up to a parked car filled with youth who looked like gang members looking for trouble and told them to get home and do their homework. He encouraged us to pick up trash when we saw it. "I do this every night on the way home," he said as he picked up an empty can.

Before we returned to the center we visited an elderly woman. For years she had been handing out trash bags to kids and cops who would stop at her house for a can of pop. She is still one of the best examples of community organizing I have seen. Her strategies were providing a safe place for youth and police to gather and keeping the streets clean. When we left she hugged Carlos. You could tell she was proud of him. "She's my mentor" he said as we walked back to get our cars to go home.

Thus, when another community youth center on the same side of town needed a new director, Carlos seemed like a good fit. He knew the neighborhood and was a good youth worker. He would have to learn how to manage the center but everyone felt that, with proper support, he would be an outstanding leader who could relate to the workers, youth and families.

The situation Carlos stepped into was not a good one. The previous director, a supposedly reformed gang member, turned out not to have separated from the gangs. Carlos' job was to "clean" the place up and revitalize it as a place where youth and community development could occur.

Carlos worked hard to make it a success. He did everything from youth work to management to cleaning the floors at night. Youth workers from the community often stopped by at the end of the day to help with cleaning up. Gradually he hired his youth workers and paid them a decent wage. He tried to create a board of directors with business, political, and youth work skills that could support the center and help raise funds. Like many new programs he was caught in a cycle with funders who wanted him to prove himself before they funded him, while he needed funding to prove himself. Still he managed to put the program together using the same inside/outside approach he had developed as a youth worker. He told and encouraged his staff to work as much in the neighborhood as inside the center to develop community support. They reached out and welcomed youth and their parents to participate in their community programs.



Carlos filled the center with art work, computers, food and many recreational activities. A group of break dancers from the center performed at events in the community, including professional basketball games. English classes were conducted for people whose primary language was not English and food was served for children who did not get three square meals at home.

During the fall semesters I took the students for a tour and talk from Carlos or one of his staff. Sometimes we would arrive early and play games of pool, football or hoops with the youth. One year we attended a community-wide meeting directed at trying to stop youth from painting graffiti art on buildings in the neighborhood and, worse yet, from tagging buildings with gang signs.

Like most community youth centers the program struggled to survive in tough times, but it did, and by all accounts it became a welcome safe haven for kids in a troubled neighborhood. Carlos did everything he could to keep the place afloat and, like most experienced youth workers who become inexperienced directors, he made some good and some not so good management decisions. But no one could deny that his presence had made a difference in turning a chaotic, unproductive, center into a place where relationships and development occurred on a daily basis. Quite simply, it felt good to be there and the students recognized this in our conversations during and after our visits.

Last year I decided to conduct a study at his center. Carlos asked four of his most competent workers to participate. As in my previous studies, we wrote and interpreted sketches, stories, and poems based on the workers' experiences with youth. This began to reveal some new themes and new contexts for well known competencies and themes such as presence and listening. The workers had a hard time finding time for the study but we got it rolling. I was really enjoying listening to them read their stories and poems.

Then one day everything stopped. The board had asked Carlos to resign. No one was sure why. It seemed to happen overnight. To this day we still do not know what happened other than this: Carlos had been at a conference at which he was speaking about the success of a program his center participated in with other centers, in which they sent youth workers into the schools to help control gang activity and unwanted behavior. According to the data, it had been working and it had received attention in the newspapers. When he

got back the board members called him in and said they wanted a change, and asked him to resign.

So what did happen? No one knows for sure. Was it his style, his lack of experience as a manager, or something else? It seemed as if the center was surviving in difficult times and providing a rich menu of activities and services for members of the community. Maybe in his efforts to recruit board members from significant positions in the community he had recruited people who did not understand youth work, or him. Maybe he got in their face when he shouldn't have? Maybe they did not understand how messy youth work can be at times? Maybe, like many politicians and businessmen they did not understand relational/developmental youth work, and wanted to see more linear, easily categorized changes that for the most part do not exist in the complex lived experiences of youth work? Maybe they expected more than what was possible with the limits of available funding and resources? Who knows? One thing was certain, the kids, parents, and staff liked Carlos, and when he left so did many of them.

So what is the lesson? For me it suggests we still have a way to go as a profession in preparing competent youth workers to be leaders and in educating our community members and boards about youth work as an interpersonal, inter-subjective, contextual process of interaction that requires time, patience, hard work, and resources, and that change sometimes does not show itself immediately. In our community we have gone through a phase of having businessmen and accountants run many of our centers. This was even more disastrous because many of them promised results that could not be delivered and competed rather than cooperated with other centers. They did not understand the importance of relationships, activities and lunch as experiences and memories that sometimes take a while to show themselves in human change, especially for children who have not had many of these experiences. Carlos represented for me a return to hiring leaders who had experienced youth work and knew what it took. But perhaps Carlos, based on his experience, had too much faith in the process of relationships, connections, activities and development in a world mainly concerned with bottom lines and measurable results. However, perhaps times are changing, and if they are, do we need to better

prepare the new leaders? This semester I plan to talk more with the students about what it takes to run a center.

December 2009

## *Lessons of youth and activism from Camus' The First Man*

For the past two months I have been involved in a conversation with my friend Kiaras Gharabaghi, a regular contributor to *CYC-Online* (check out his column) about politics in child and youth care. A passionate spokesperson for better programs and spaces for youth, he initiated the conversation by more or less wondering out loud with me in an e-mail about why members of our field, including the two of us, haven't been more effective at promoting good child and youth care on a broader scale (he said it in more detail and much better than I can).

In one of my first e-mail responses I wrote:

Thanks for your thoughts on this topic – really got me thinking. Some of my musings/ramblings in response are:

I, of course, agree most with the third point you make. For me it more or less begins with Foucault's notion that care of self is the ethos of civilized society and the belief that the way we interact with youth and our friends and colleagues is interconnected with the way we interact with others. To be political we have to, as Hans Skott-Myhre writes from his post Marxist perspective, make ourselves visible, then as Gerry Fewster says from the interpersonal perspective, bring self to the moment and be open and available to mirror back our experience of the other as we work together for change.

In my own experience I seem to fail in political actions, debates, exchanges when I move too far away from this and think change is out there someplace or that some organization or group or union or collective action can do it for me. I think this is perhaps the major reason we have not succeeded yet in our efforts to organize as a profession (or, at least not achieved the political change we have hoped for). We have worked together collectively because we believe in

the power of collective action and rightfully so, but the part we have ignored is that it really does begin with the individual worker and the way he or she shows and conducts self in the social, political, developmental, relational world of child and youth care.

In this regard, our field has not produced a sufficient number of leaders (practitioners, administrators, professors, etc), examples, and genuine stories of practice to draw the attention needed for significant political, professional and social change. We have worked too hard at pulling along workers into our political movement rather than nourishing and developing workers who have the creativity, dignity, intellect, and self-confidence to grab the bull by the horns and 'umph' needed to sway and move public opinion, politicians, and funding. We need more people who are fulfilled and content in CYC (at home), know and accept it is their choice to be here, and who can show and tell the story of the power of youth work by being in it and articulating what they see, hear, and experience.

From early in my career I have felt that the most powerful thing a worker can do from a practical and political point of view is to articulate what he or she sees and experiences on a daily basis.

Knowledge is power only if it can be shared or put into action. Unfortunately we are still a field in which our voice is not loud enough and often our story is filtered through the words of those who have only a distant connection with what we do. There are many wonderful exceptions but not enough yet.

We are, of course, political beings who first and foremost change or influence political systems through our interactions with others. We try to use our power in positive ways to get what we believe the youth and we need to solve the social ills. We lead by example, by being ethical, concerned, caring citizens in our daily practice...

Shortly after we started this conversation, I came across a used copy of Albert Camus *The First Man* in an independent bookstore in my neighborhood, and found it relevant to what we had been talking about. So I began to write down some of my thoughts about the book, the man, and the way he created political change, then, because I was so moved by the story about his youth, it began to turn into an article. I shared some of my thoughts about Camus with Kiaras and he said he enjoyed what I had to say. Since I think it is

also relevant to discussions about leadership (recently on CYC-Net) going on in our field, I thought I would test it out here on CYC-Net online magazine and see if anyone is willing to give me some feedback so I could continue my discussion with Kiaras more enlightened.

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Albert Camus' *The First Man* was published in 1995, thirty-five years after his death in a car crash in 1960. The manuscript was found in the car. I recently found a used copy at an independent bookstore in my neighborhood in Milwaukee. The novel was based on his middle-aged reflections on his father's death in WWI and his poor childhood in Algeria. As a professor of youth work and creative writer, I was eager to read it.

The story for the delay in publication is well known to Camus scholars. As a prelude to this discussion, it bares retelling. According to his daughter Catherine's account, (in the Introduction), the work was kept from the public eye because, her mother, Francine, thought it would not be well received. At the time of his death, Camus had alienated French intellectuals, including Sartre, who favored a French communist regime and an independent Algeria under Arab rule. "For his part," Catherine wrote, Camus "had condemned the Gulag, Stalin's trials, and totalitarianism in the belief that ideology must serve humanity not the contrary, and that the ends did not justify the means."

He was also in favor of a federated, multicultural Algeria in which Arab and European peoples would live side by side and be equally represented. Thus, just a few years after receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature, Camus the philosopher, journalist, pacifist, activist, and novelist was unpopular among many of the intellectuals in France and elsewhere. He had antagonized both the left and the right. At the time of his death he was lonely and under attack from all sides to destroy the man and his art, Catherine wrote.

Catherine and Jean her twin brother waited several more years after their mother's death in 1979 to publish the book. Catherine said she had to "learn how to deal with a work of literature" while involved with some of her father's other works. Then by the 1980s "voices had emerged that suggested Camus had not been so wrong and the old disputes had died down." So, afraid that someone else

might publish it first, and convinced that an autobiographical account of their father's life would be of interest to his fans and historians, the children decided to share the book with the public.

The original handwritten work had long rolling sentences and paragraphs instead of the shorter, concise sentences and minimal passages Camus was noted for. With minor edits, the children decided to leave the manuscript in its raw form because this would allow readers to hear their father's "true voice." The cover jacket suggested it was his most personal account. "The result is a moving journey through lost landscapes of youth that also discloses the wellspring of Camus aesthetic powers and moral vision."

After reading her introduction and a few passages in the bookstore, I took the book home and began to read the rest. Wanting to know more about how his youth shaped his philosophy and life as a writer, I read slowly, drawn in by his images, over the next few weeks while savoring several of the scenes of his childhood and my own in which I saw many parallels.

In Camus there is always more. His ideas and thoughts about social life, war, culture, and world affairs are perhaps more relevant than ever today with the conflicts in Africa, the middle-east, and US involvement. Although I don't pretend to be a Camus scholar, I have been fascinated by his thinking and writing since, like many others, I read *The Stranger* as a young man. I liked the simple, straightforward, minimal way he presented questions and moral dilemmas for the reader to think about in *The Stranger*, and later in his short stories. Often when I wrote my own stories and essays, I turned to this work for ideas about working with detachment, developing a sense of place, letting work stand by itself, presenting moral dilemmas, and creating scenes that rang true.

In more recent years, I read his short stories in *Exile*, his articles in *Combat*, the newspaper of the resistance organization by the same name that he was part of, and passages from his recently published notebooks, where, at times in the midst of despair, his search for meaning and place seemed comforting, and strangely optimistic, especially when in some of his darkest moments he would use his aesthetic powers to find self again on a walk in the countryside ("the wellsprings of his philosophy").

For instance on a trip later in his life to Italy, he wrote in his

notebook:

“The day before yesterday, on the Forum – in the part that is badly ruined (close to the Coliseum), not in that extravagant flea market of pretentious columns found under Campidoglio – then on the admirable Palentine Hill where nothing exhausts the silence, the peace, the world always emerging and always perfect, I began to rediscover myself. It is this that the great images of the past serve when nature can accommodate them extinguish the sound that lies dormant in them to gather the hearts and forces that will better serve the present and the future. It is felt on the Via Appia where even though I arrived at the end of the afternoon, I felt it inside me, while I was walking, a heart so full that life could have left me then. But I knew it would continue, that there is a force within me that moves forward...”  
– from Albert Camus *Notebooks*, 1951-1959 (2008, p. 121).

This search for self, his acceptance of death as part of life and the final outcome and the contrasts and paradoxes evoked from the dualisms at the center of his philosophy makes Camus more alive for me than many other writers and thinkers. He comes across as a “real” (he was not a saint), self questioning compassionate, peace loving man who had acted on and wrote with a certain sense of certainty about his beliefs. Further, like Vaclav Havel, another writer/activist I admire, Camus saw the absurdities and injustices in the world and yet continued to speak out on behalf of humanity and peace, and against nihilism in favor of the human desire to make meaning by choice and interpretation.

Perhaps not by coincidence, when I found *The First Man* I was in an e-mail conversation with a Canadian colleague about politics in youth work. We were questioning why we hadn't been more effective as a profession in advocating for the care of troubled children and youth. Along with many scholars, students and practitioners of youth work, we were concerned that our efforts had not convinced the general public and politicians in the US and Canada to provide the resources for the relationship based developmental approach, the field had argued for to help troubled youth overcome poverty and abuse. We had tried to reason with and appeal to people in



power with our research, writing, teaching, action, and speaking. Yet our countries seemed to be ignoring this evidence in favor of the latest quick fix, cheaper, ideologically driven approaches that were doomed to failure over the long run.

As Camus argued and tried to show in his life and work, I knew the way youth workers went about their work and lives was interconnected with social and political change. They did not live in isolation from the systems in which youth developed. If these systems promoted bad policies passed down from the top this was in part their fault. It was their job to make sure the system served them and the youth and not vice versa. This being the case I could not help but wonder why on the one hand we could be so certain about the power of good youth work, and on other hand so confused by the disconnect between this and the systems of governance in our countries that seemed to allow one incident after another of bad practice to be disguised as something positive. Why had we not been able to practice what we preached about changing lives and systems in our attempt to mobilize support for better care for youth?

Camus often wondered why his views and the views of his colleagues had not been more influential after WWII in making France a leader in social justice and human rights. This self-doubt and questioning along with his faith in human beings led to the work of deep questioning that made him the Nobel Prize winner. In presenting his views, as a journalist, activist, and novelist, in a way that encouraged readers to question their own morality and actions, he contributed significantly to the collective consciousness among people seeking meaning in truth and human justice.

Likewise in his fiction, Camus drew readers into his stories so they could make their own choices about right and wrong with the hope (I believe) that they would know justice when they saw it. For example, in his review of *The Stranger* in *Existentialism is a Humanism* Sartre wrote: "The choice the great novelists like Camus make is to rely on images rather than arguments because of their belief in the futility or all explanatory principals. Instead they rely on the power of words that appeal to the senses."

Perhaps, it is this "appealing to the senses" along with his search for place and justice that attracts me to Camus the most, I am not sure. I know I am not alone when I say that more than most writers and novelists he seemed to be able to create scenes and

situations that encouraged readers to try to resolve the dilemmas he presented with questioning that led to an opening of the mind and senses.

Thus, in addition to its relevance to current events, *The First Man* interested me for at least two reasons. I wanted to see how Camus the man and child developed as a humanist and activist who spoke out for peace and justice and influenced so many others with his actions. I was also just simply interested in his youth and what it might teach me that I could introduce to students and integrate into my own study of youth.

The change in style was a pleasant surprise, as his daughter and son thought it might be. Similar to when I read *Turgenev's Fathers and Sons*, Hemingway's *Nick Adams Stories*, Marguerite Duras, *The Lover*, Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*, or Norman Maclean's *A River Runs Through It*, I became absorbed in the places and experiences of youth. Early on it was obvious how his aesthetic powers were shaped by his youth and in turn how this helped him reflect back with new insight. In many of the scenes I saw his youth unfolding with a similar longing, searching, and tension for something more without saying it that the authors above exhibited in their characters' movements across their landscapes.

The story is based on a middle aged man's Jacques Cormery return home and reflections on how the loss of his father in WWI when he was a young boy shaped his childhood in Algeria and his development as an adult. Camus in middle age found himself ready to address some of the questions of his impoverished, fatherless childhood. He takes us forward and back in time while exploring in his unique way the social, cultural, familial, and moral issues of the period as he is raised by a stern Spanish grandmother, a passive, illiterate, almost deaf but loving mother, and a variety of men including uncles and eventually a school teacher who becomes like a surrogate father and feeds his hunger for discovery.

Good novelists like Camus create images that ring true and connect readers with their experiences. We are drawn into the story because we can relate. Although we grew up in very different times and places, his youth in Algeria reminded me of my youth in Milwaukee, Wisconsin in the 1950s and 1960s. My father, about Camus age, had also lost his father as a young boy and grew up in poverty

with his mother. There were also many scenes that evoked memories of the lives of the poor and troubled boys I knew.

Soon I found myself juxtaposing his scenes with sketches I have been writing about my own youth. In youth work as in many human service fields, we try to know self so we can know the other, and Camus gave me new insights into my experiences and the experiences of youth I had worked with.

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So what were the lessons learned so far from *The First Man* about how Camus' youth shaped him as a philosopher and activist? Perhaps what I already knew or expected: it was his love of youth and ability to evoke similar feelings in others that played a major role in the development of his philosophy. As he grew older he continued to learn from his youth: the good/bad, confusing/enlightening, sad/happy, longing/lusting, frightened/brave, searching/experimenting youth that is part of all of us.

Because his learning and experience of youth was part of him unfolding in the present, he was human, vulnerable, understanding, knowledgeable, genuine, open to the other, self questioning, and clearer about what he believed in a way that invited others to join. Just the way a competent youth worker who simultaneously interacts with youth and acts to change systems.

Camus loved and wanted to know the rich all encompassing youth that informed him throughout his life and this made him a compassionate empathetic activist who "showed" by being internally and externally consistent: he walked the talk. It seems to me the more people like this we have in our field the more likely we are to achieve our social, developmental and political goals. It will take time, but it is the "place" where change occurs.

## Czeslaw Milosz and W.S. Merwin on being here with youth

In this column I have written at some length about youth and youth work in reflection. There is much we can learn from our youth and our child and youth care experiences. Especially if we are present in our reflections with self awareness and an open mind similar to the way we try to be present in our interactions with youth.

In my own reflective work, I have been inspired by the work of philosophers, artists, poets, and writers. I find much confluence in their work with the work of leaders in our field such as Thom Garfat, Gerry Fewster, Jack Phelan, Janet Newbury, Karen VanderVen, Hans Skott-Myhre, Janet White, and many others. Each in their own way adds to the discussion about the interplay between being in the moment and learning more from the experience in reflection.

Recently, for example, after visiting my son in San Francisco, I browsed through a book of essays *Visions of San Francisco* by poet Czeslaw Milosz, winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature, who explored the relationships among, self, meaning, and place. In his opening essay, *My Intention*, he wrote: "I am here. Those words contain all that can be said... In any case, my consolation lies not so much in the role I have been called on to play as in the great mosaic-like whole which is composed of the fragments of various people's efforts, whether successful or not. I am here—and everyone is some 'here'—and the only thing we can do is try to communicate with one another."

In a book *Themes and Stories in Youth Work* several youth workers and I wrote together earlier in this decade most of them had their own way of expressing something similar. They were "here," I might now suggest, with youth in the moment in the daily living environment trying to communicate with one another.

In another essay, *Where I Am*, Milosz finds self in a contemporary society being changed by commerce and technology: The human imagination is spatial and it is constantly constructing an architectonic whole from landscapes remembered or imagined; it progresses from what is closest to what is farthest away, winding layers or strands around a single axis, which begins where the feet hit the ground."

Thom Garfat wrote a few years ago in one of his editor's notes for *The Journal of Child and Youth Care* (now *Relational Child and Youth Care Practice*): "Those footprints you see around you are on the border of your own reality not theirs (youth). Tread gently and with caution but do not be led by your fear. For in the territory of the children's reality, just where it borders with your own, lies the opportunity for change: for them and you." More recently Garfat wrote in a chapter in the book, *Standing on the Precipice: Inquiry into the Creative Potential of Child and Youth Care Work* about the "in between," or the space between self and other. The "here/there/where" relational work and human connections occur.

This monthly column is titled *Moments with Youth* because I think it is important to remember that youth work is primarily a process of human interaction in which we share the journey. Like many others I believe the present and future to advancing our knowledge base is in our ability to learn from youth, each other, and members of other disciplines as we try to describe and question the "what is" of our existential, developmental, experiential interactions with youth and families. And to do this we have to be here, there with youth in the spaces where development and relationships occur.

I see my arrival at this point as part of my development as a youth worker and professor. Early in my career I was more interested in writing about technique. I needed models and steps and acronyms to organize my thoughts. Now that I have the techniques I am more content with the chaos of thought, soul searching, and questioning that seems to lead to new epiphanies about the work, or, as I have often said, the simplicity on the other side of complexity that shows me how to improve the way I listen, or move, or have lunch with youth in moments of connection, discovery and empowerment we share.

In our child and youth care class we are reading Jack Phelan's chapter, 'Building Developmental Capacities' in *Standing on the*

*Precipice*. In the abstract he describes the challenge beautifully when he suggests, “Many CYC strategies are focused on creating responsible behavior not responsible people...”

The process focus relational/developmental emphasis seems even more relevant and important today when so many people are still focused on outcome rather than the process oriented, relational, and developmental approaches the field is advocating. For example, a few weeks ago I attended a community meeting where one of the topics discussed was youth involvement in decision making. The adults were suggesting that they could get a grant if we involved youth on advisory committees and in developing civic engagement projects with specific outcomes that would improve the community. I like the idea of involving youth in decision making when it is used to engage youth with us in making decisions about what we will do and how we will interact on a daily basis in projects and activities.

Too often, however, it seems the adults set youth up as decision makers to pursue civic, therapeutic, or developmental outcomes without acknowledging the youth are not necessarily always experts on their own experiences. Adolescence is full of paradox, soul searching, self questioning, and experimenting. Youth are “here” or “there” to experience and show self but not necessarily experts on making decisions about their future development or the societies in which they live. That’s what makes it such a rich period of life, the not knowing but wanting to know – the curiosity, experimentation, and uncertain/certainty that goes with being young and old. If we want to know youth and what they are thinking so we can make decisions together, then we have to be with them in the natural environments and speak across the spaces of our experiences. Their agency is in being who they are in the moment not in their ability to be prophets of their own futures. Their prophecy in other words is here with us now if we take the time to see and hear it.

My opinion of course is biased by my experience of youth and youth work. I shudder to think about how much of an expert I was on my own youth when I was a youth now that I have seen it in hindsight. Like most youth, sometimes, in moments of epiphany and insight, I thought I knew everything, and other times in moments of confusion and nothingness, I felt like I knew nothing. The trouble I got into was as valuable a learning experience as the success I had.

I knew the least of course about the future because I hadn't been there with the hindsight I now have.

Most of the youth I worked with needed a better understanding of themselves in the present before they could even imagine themselves in a future. This is not to say they did not have dreams of the way things could be, but rather they first needed to experience these dreams with others who sincerely wanted to know them as they began to know themselves.

It could be that I am a hopeless romantic trapped in the vision of the youth and youth work that is still part of me, changing and enriching itself in hindsight. This summer I heard W.S. read his poem *Youth* on the Bill Moyer Public Television show. I was so moved that I went out and bought his book *The Shadow of Sirius*. His "youth" is the youth I want to know.

## *Youth*

W.S. Merwin

*Through all of youth I was looking for you  
without knowing what I was looking for*

*or what to call you I think I did not  
even know I was looking how would I*

*have known you when I saw you as I did  
time after time when you appeared to me*

*as you did naked offering yourself  
entirely at that moment and you let*

*me breathe you touch you taste you knowing  
no more than I did and only when I*

*began to think of losing you did I  
recognize you when you were already*

*part memory part distance remaining  
mine in the ways that I learn to miss you*

*from what we cannot hold the stars are made.*



February 2010

## *Lost places*

In my last column in December I wrote about what I had learned from Albert Camus about youth and activism in child and youth care. Since then I have been thinking more about work that “appeals to the senses” as Sartre said of Camus’ writing, and of Camus’ incredible sense of place. With the awareness that poets are some of our best activists, I worked on and revised a few fragment poems from my reflections on lost places of my youth. So many of the places have been torn down, abandoned, “templelized,” white-flighted, commercialized, or gentrified. Staying in touch with these feelings I believe helps me have empathy for youth who have never had a home, and/or moved from place to place. It also helps me fight to save some of the remaining places.

Like millions of others, I have also been thinking about Haiti, all the lost people and places. For now, and perhaps always, it is beyond comprehension.

### *Friday Night at the Sherman Theater*

*They turned it  
into a temple  
and beauty salon*

*The place where I went  
to movies as a boy*

*Mr. Mac, the owner,  
white bucks and sport coat  
Looney Tunes*

*One eye closed  
the other on the screen to get  
a feel for Dr Strangelove*

*Landscapes and faces  
in gasps of air as lips  
and fingers explored  
the Gospel of lust*

*Not so different really*

\*\*\*

## *From the Basement of City Lights Bookstore*

*In the basement stacks  
philosophy and the  
rat tat tat of words*

*Sartre's The Wall  
beneath Duras, Camus  
Oppen and Miller*

*The rhythms of poets  
reading aloud  
on San Francisco sidewalks*

*deaf again beyond  
North Beach a refined figure  
rises to a dark room  
and locked door*

*enters the fray bent over  
back to crowd  
invisible key in hand*

\*\*\*

## *Where the Landfills Used to Be*

*As I pass on my bicycle  
the faceless inspector  
sits in bib overalls in  
in the shadow of a toll both*

*watching engine oil, toys  
and appliances separated  
from ground waters  
in irretrievable containers  
of recycled childhoods*

*In those days  
when God was a farmer  
with a straw hat  
driving a cloud*

*Bears came to  
the dump at night and  
the other was  
in this divide  
after the sorting*

\*\*\*

## *Driving Center Street*

*Once people found  
a good day's work here  
on Center Street*

*Vibrant with box offices  
and pretty girls and boys  
strolling together*

*Glad we hadn't  
moved to the suburbs  
we came for the night life  
from our homes  
a few blocks away*

*Now vacant companies  
and idle workers  
on street corners*

*wait for songsters  
to return from  
ranch houses*

*not far enough away  
to be in the country*

\*\*\*

## *Writing at Alterra*

*Back North in a  
coffee shop  
in Milwaukee*

*Dylan, BB King, passing  
students, and mountain  
footsteps quiet the hum*

*Like the traffic  
in Camus sidewalk café  
the day after  
he left the Via Appia*

*and found self again  
in the spaces in-between  
where nothing  
exhausted the silence*

## *The Quarter*

*Unlike any place  
I had been in my youth  
before the storm  
Hurricanes were  
the drink of moist magnolia  
and booze scented  
nights of jazz*

*and garbage scented  
aftermath mornings  
in Jackson Square*

*Preservation hall  
they called the place  
I heard the wisdom  
of generations  
built on the high ground*

*above the city  
that washed away  
years later*

Once I helped people clean up after a tornado. Nothing was where it was supposed to be. Homes, furniture, photos and appliances were spread and splattered all over. Trees were down. A boat was in one of the trees still standing. The whole thing was surreal. People seemed so lost. Their faces were blank. Then, they dug in and started cleaning up. I can't image what it is like when a country has been flattened. People who have grown up in countries destroyed by natural disasters and war can offer some insight, I am sure. Where does one start other than to relocate the self and begin to rebuild with the resilience of youth?

## *Thelonious Monk and the jazz of youth work*

The other evening looking for something to do out of town, I went to a lecture about Thelonious Monk at Indiana University's Black Culture Center. David Baker, chair of the Jazz Studies department gave the lecture. An experienced jazz musician, he had played with and knew many of the jazz greats. Baker was accompanied by a jazz combo that played a few of Monk's compositions including Blue Monk, one of my favorites. The presentation was conducted in an improvised conversation with the leader of the combo, a pianist, and the audience.

I am not a musician or a jazz expert but I do consider jazz to be the music of my youth, and my work with youth. No other form of music seems to resonate more with the way I hear the rhythms of those times. Often I have written about how youth work is like a modern dance that is improvised according to the rhythms of daily interactions and youth's developmental readiness and capacity to participate. In addition to being very knowledgeable and skilled, the most competent workers seem to have the capacity to improvise as they move in and out of synch with youth's developmental rhythms for trusting and growing.

Like the master youth workers, Monk was a true original. He influenced a generation of jazz musicians with his unpredictable, completely innovative riffs and melodies. According to Baker, you never knew where Monk was going but you wanted to go along. His playing had a sense of anticipation. If you played with Monk, as Baker did, you knew something new and fresh would happen and therefore you tried to keep up, which required a fair amount of technical skill. You wanted to be in the group, in other words, creating with him, because you knew or sensed something would occur that would make you a better musician.

When the combo played Blue Monk, I was immediately connected to a familiar melody, and when the work moved away I

waited too for a new connection. I felt as if I was home away from home. So it was in youth work as well. There was a certain sense of sound, rhythm and pace in moments of connection, discovery, and empowerment that was imbedded with any number of positive associations with and for the youth. They, of course, remembered these moments with their own Blue Monks.

According to Baker melody was the key to Monk's work, even as he seemed to move off in a non-melodic direction. His compositions and improvisations were full of dissonant harmonies and angular melodic twists. His approach to playing piano combined a strong percussive attack with abrupt, dramatic use of silences and hesitations. He was noted for his "hip" style in suits, hats and sunglasses. At times, while the other musicians in the band continued playing, he would stop, stand up from the keyboard and dance for a few moments before returning to the piano. When asked why he did this, Baker replied he liked to dance and wanted to stay busy when it wasn't his turn to play.

For me Monk's work shows itself in fragments and images that create both a visual and audio composition that sticks. I remember a Monk experience as I remembered a Miles Davis experience when he put his head down over his trumpet and turned his back to the audience lost in the music. More than Davis however, Monk, seemed to use movement the way philosopher Foucault did to stimulate new thought and action. And when he sat down again he was ready to go with something fresh and new, to take the group off in a totally unexpected direction. You have to see and hear it I guess to understand. I assume the child and youth care dancers out there get the gist of what I am saying and can make comparisons with their work, as I do.

In my child and youth care classes at the university, we spend time discussing rhythmic interaction as a phenomenon that forges human connection. To demonstrate we line up and pass through like modern dancers. We also play catch, and sometimes we play drums or move to guitar music. A while ago I sat in a drum circle with youth in a group home, and tried to replicate this on table tops in class. Three on three basketball evokes for me a sense of improvised rhythmic interaction. So does paddling a canoe or stirring a pot together. We read youth work articles on rhythmic interaction and stories of days when workers struggle and search for harmony.

Two years ago I gave a speech at the University of Victoria. While I tried to read a poem describing the central themes in competent youth work (humbly like Leonard Cohen) graduate students danced to the rhythms of African drums played by another graduate student. Next time I will try to bring a little Monk into the discussion.

I could not help but think throughout the evening that I was learning postmodern youth work through another form. Monk made meaning from his music the way youth made meaning from their experiences. He moved, played, and performed according to what he heard inside and saw outside. As an African American musician and poor child and man, Monk had a very difficult life. Fortunately he was resilient and found his passion and stayed with it besides being denied access to many of the venues and accolades that other musicians received. A generous man, he made something unique of himself, and shared it with others.

At one point Baker said children had their own jazz rhythms within them and it was important not to suppress these instincts. He shared the example of how the daughter of one of the members of the combo had shared a riff with him before the lecture. He wanted her to demonstrate for the audience but she was a little shy, the timing was off. A good, caring youth worker of sorts, he went with the flow and transitioned to the next topic, not wanting to embarrass or force her into something when she wasn't ready.

A discussion at the end of the lecture debated whether or not Monk's music, or any jazz for that matter, could be understood outside the cultural contexts from which it evolved. The scholars in the room seemed to agree that it could not. While I was not capable of debating this point, nor did I want to, I was certain that no matter who owned the music, it was the way I heard my youth and work with youth. When I said this to the audience, it was pleasant to see that several younger students nodded their heads in agreement. By coincidence, early in the day I had run into a young man who worked for us in Milwaukee ten or more years earlier in our transition living program for teens. I had lost track of him until then. He had become a teacher in the Black Cultural Center. Talk about chance encounters, connections, timing, transition, in-synch-ness, and harmonies. You have to be there to make it happen, right?



April 2010

## *seen through the eyes of a child: the El Salto discussions*

Oftentimes in this column I have referred to writers, filmmakers, thinkers, and artists who worked with a sense of detachment, mixed genres, and/or fragmented their work in an effort to portray what they saw or heard in a way that rang true. They tried to show what is as they saw it and let it stand for itself. This, I argued was good advice for those of us who researched, talked, and wrote about child and youth care, especially if we were concerned with capturing the essence of our experiences in a way that would open our work to the interpretations and questioning of others. As scholars and practitioners, our challenge, I argued, is to show rather than tell what we experience. If we could do this, others would be more likely to interact with and use our work in their own efforts to improve their practice and advance knowledge. Let the work stand for itself, in other words, so others can experience once again their moments with youth.

Perhaps it is not surprising that many of the thinkers, artists, and writers I referred to also tried to look at their work through the eyes of their child. Filmmaker Wim Wenders for example spoke about how images were more truthful when seen through the eyes of a child, and poet Mark Strand wrote about how looking at an Edward Hopper painting reminded him of how he saw Canada as a boy from the back seat of his parents car. The images Strand saw were moving and still, he felt compelled to stay and leave. There is something very appealing I find about this notion of seeing with the eyes of our child and knowing that this is what some of the most sophisticated artists and thinkers of our time tried to do. It was as if after they had mastered their craft, they were trying to free their minds of clutter and open themselves to the world once again with the innocence and clarity of their child.

A few weeks ago I was fortunate to spend several days with my good friend and colleague Gerry Fewster, author of *Being in Child Care: A Journey into Self*, and many other excellent works about being present, open and available with children and youth. Last year I also had the opportunity to read his latest manuscript on relationships between adults and children which is slated to come out in a few weeks. Perhaps no one in our field has done more to show us how to use our self awareness and techniques such as breathing to open ourselves to the experiences of others. As I sat across from him talking, joking, and exploring where our field has come and is going, I could not help but smile at how this man with so much wisdom still basically sees our work with the childlike innocence that comes from knowing something when one sees it and saying so. If you talk to Gerry for any length of time you can not help but be flooded with images from your childhood. This is his gift to us.

It seems to me that perhaps in our maturity as a field we might be advancing toward this point. As we attempt to free ourselves from the jargon and formal scholarship that comes with the development of a field into a profession, in our stories and writing we are trying to get back to that sense of clarity and innocence that comes with being able to see something for what it is through the eyes of our child, and subsequently revealing the simplicity on the other side of complexity. I'm not sure, but it is nice to think so. Certainly many of the stories presented on [CYC-Net](#) have this quality. It is easy to tell which writers are trying to speak to us in this way because these are the ones that evoke something from our experience and youth in a new light.

In a few weeks, I am heading to a second retreat in New Mexico with a group of child and youth care colleagues from Canada and the US. At the first retreat in 2008, which was reported on two years ago in this column, we discussed relational child and youth care, and leadership in the field. Our goal was to hold two days of open ended discussion in conversational style in a pleasant atmosphere about these topics and see where it took us. The results, which more than met our expectations, included a number of papers and ongoing conversations which we held online.

At the time we jokingly called the discussions the talk smart institute. Participants included people with many years experience doing, teaching, writing and thinking about child and youth care.

We simply wanted to set aside some time to talk with each other about topics we saw as crucial to advancing the field and our work. Most of us had attended many child and youth care conferences where we felt the best part was the opportunity to connect with each other after and in-between workshops, and often left wishing we had more time to spend together. So we created this time, were rewarded accordingly, and decided to do it again.

*The El Salto Discussions are designed to serve as a spring board for new discoveries in child and youth care practice. Held at a retreat center on the side of El Salto Mountain in Northern New Mexico, experienced members of the field explore important questions related to the future of care work.*

*Products include papers, ongoing conversations, projects, collaborations, and actions to support further professional development on behalf of children, youth and families. Energy for the discussions is defined by the Spanish word "salto," which conveys the idea of "jumping" or "leaping" into the future with our ideas, concepts, and visions.*

*Participants include practitioners, professors, instructors, supervisors, and others with considerable experience in child and youth care. Everyone comes at their own expense, an investment that most of us find well worth making.*

This year we will be reviewing our previous discussions of relational and developmental care, and exploring topics such as open access to child and youth care education and writing, certification of workers, and accreditation of education programs. I am going to try to prepare myself by getting back in touch with my child (I camped as a boy a few miles away in the mountains) so that I can offer something pure, original, and familiar to the discussions. In the future I will present some of what I learned here so others can join in if they wish.

A few days ago while I was preparing to write this column I spent some time talking to a 3 year-old Vietnamese girl who had come to live with her parents in the US. She was receiving radiation treatment after having major surgery for brain cancer. She was the first Vietnamese child in the US to have brain cancer, her father had told

me. The tumor was the size of his fist. Given what she had been through, I was amazed at how cheerful and energetic she was. We were sitting by the window and looking out at the rain. She was very talkative but difficult to understand. The surgery and her bilingual upbringing had made it difficult for her to find the words she needed to describe what she felt and saw. But this didn't keep her from trying. Her talk was almost non stop and even though I did not understand most of what she was saying, she seemed perfectly clear about it. At one point she said "snow" and pointed to the window.

"Rain," I said back.

"Snow," she said again.

I knew it was too warm to snow, but looked again and saw some of the rain drops shine in the sunlight that had broken through the clouds.

"See, snow," she said.

"Yes," I said smiling.

Then, never having doubted that she had been right all along, she said, "Bye sweetie," and ran off toward her dad.

Today, before I submitted this column, I read to her from a Pooh book. As I turned the pages we pointed at pictures of animals, trees, and rivers and named them. I admired again the certainty with which she labelled the objects the way she saw them. My spirits lifted, I knew I had just witnessed resilience in its most beautiful and primal form.

May 2010

## *Pictures of praxis*

*It was a clear, spring day. Natalie had taken the rest of the group outside the treatment center to play. Maria, one of the girls was still in her room. She did not want to join the group. Kent, another worker, talked to Maria for a few moments... She got up from her chair. Together they went outside and joined the activity...*

*'What Do Pictures Want?: the Lives and Loves of Images' is the title of a book by professor of art history and literature W.J.T. Mitchell, a scholar of images and their meanings. Recently I heard him speak. During the lecture he talked about how one way to look at images is with a fresh set of eyes, as philosopher Foucault had suggested. The viewer attempts to cast off preconceived notions, based on early interpretations or meanings, and instead looks at the picture for what it evokes. Or, said another way, the viewer tries see it for what it is for him or her with an open mind.*

**L**ast month I wrote on this same theme from another perspective. I referred to how many artists, philosophers and writers tried to see the world through the eyes of their child. This in part allowed them to look once again with innocence of a child. This was not to suggest that they could really attain this state again, but rather to say it was helpful to try. All of this reminds me of something I learned early in my child and youth care career: our subjective/objective observations of youth and what they do should be as free of stereotypes as we can make them. We were to report what we saw and felt, free of biases, academic jargon, and/or behavioral stereotypes. This of course is also good advice for the reflective researcher, searching for meaning and understanding in the images, pictures, and interpretations of his or her reflections. In good literature it is akin to the notion of making our work ring true.

Take the situation at the beginning for example. The challenge is

to paint this picture with words the way it was, and then talk about it or interpret it for what it is in the context of that moment for that youth and adult. While we can never be free of our biases and histories, we can try to see it as innocently as we can before we “load” it up with analyses based on theory and professional interpretations.

Recently after rereading for my youth work class, Jennifer White's (2008) chapter, 'Knowing, Doing and Being in Context: A Praxis-Oriented Approach to Child and Youth Care', in *Standing on the Precipice: Inquiry into the Creative Potential of Child and Youth Care Practice*, I thought how relevant this was to practitioners and researchers who wanted to show praxis, as White suggests, as a way of knowing, doing, and being grounded in responsible, ethical, self aware, and accountable process of action and interaction. If we want to know praxis, then we should try to show it as it is. According to Mitchell, at least the way I heard what he said, there are no models, boxes, or steps to fit this way of looking and understanding into because each picture, image, sketch stands for itself.

During a lengthy classroom discussion about touch we compared the White chapter to an article titled *A Moral Praxis of Child and Youth Care* (Magnuson, Baizerman and Singer, 2001) in which the authors speak about youth as an ends rather than the means as temporal agents of change. We interpreted this as meaning that our work was really about valuing and being in and with youth. To do this we had to take each incident of touch on its own merits and not attempt to apply or make rules that regulated touch. Our challenge was to first see a specific situation as it was as a way of knowing, doing, and being, and then let in some of our biases and the theories we had learned. These things are never separated of course but the challenge is first to try to see the situation as it was experienced, or show the picture: “the youth got up from the chair and joined the activity.” Or, “as the worker walked along he gently put his hand on her shoulder, removed it, and said I am glad you decided to come along,” in all its details with sensitivity to the meanings that worker and youth make of it as an every day event (Phelan, 2008; Ward, 2004) with youth.

So my answer to the question *What do pictures want?* in child and youth care is they want to be themselves and we should try to accommodate them while trying to learn from and share our

experiences. Showing our pictures in their natural state is at the heart of the development of our praxis.

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June 2010

## *El Salto reflections*

*The El Salto Discussions are designed to serve as a spring board for new discoveries in child and youth care practice. Held at a retreat center on the side of El Salto Mountain in Northern New Mexico, experienced members of the field explore important questions related to the future of care work. Products include papers, ongoing conversations, projects, collaborations, and actions to support further professional development on behalf of children, youth and families. Energy for the discussions is defined by the Spanish word "salto," which conveys the idea of "jumping" or "leaping" into the future with our ideas, concepts, and visions. Participants include professors, practitioners, and others with considerable experience in child and youth care. Everyone comes at their own expense, an investment that most of us find well worth making.*

**T**his is the definition that guided the discussions of 14 experienced members of our field on 4/30-5/2 2010. Many of the people in attendance are familiar to *CYC-Online* readers: Karen VanderVen, Jack Phelan, Carol Stuart, Frank and Vicki Eckles, Hector Sapien, Doug Magnuson, Quinn Wilder, Andrew Schneider Munoz, Hans and Kathy Skott-Myhre, Janet Wakefield, and me. As promised in an earlier column, following are my reflections on the event.

Kiaras and Hans discussing modernism, critical theory and postmodernism after the main discussion had completed and others had left the retreat room to go shopping or the hot springs near the Rio Grand Gorge. Listening in with my poet's ear trying to capture what they were saying while flooded with dozens of images that helped me see youth work in a new light. Earlier all of us sitting on four couches in a square with the Sangre de Cristo mountains in the background trying to "leap forward" with words in a discussion that took on a wonderful, non stop life of its own, egos to the side in favor of a critical discourse that was at once both agreeable and



confrontational in the best sense of the two words. Quantum physics as much of the discussion as art, music, postmodernism, modernism, politics, and care; new enlightened ways of thinking about how to teach the work and to think about lunch, basketball, and relational work and how it is replacing level and punitive systems of child and youth care we all know to be so harmful.

Dreams supported with proposed actions for a new virtual and real university that would give youth workers around the globe access to the tremendous human resources in the room and beyond. A consensus that we had to reach out across and work with all groups that worked with youth. A long discussion introduced by Jack of how to ease the endless tensions between practice and theory, and the role of intent and other factors in moving beyond as we continue to be and become as a field: accreditation of education programs and certification of workers seen as major steps for the field and our future; dozens of examples of how it all works. A realistic conversation that took into account the struggles we faced, mistakes we made, and the successes we had had, all evolving in the interchange that showed the maturity of members of a field who did not need to market or promote itself without acknowledging where we had been, good and bad as we search for a moral praxis.

Youth workers relating: dinner together at Mexican Restaurants, a wine and cheese at the Vandeboom Fine Art Gallery, and an evening hosted by Mark and Suzanne at the straw bale house and Hogan studio. People walking up the road together continuing the conversation from breakfast in the little village, Arroyo Seco, just down the side of the mountain from the retreat center; pairs and triads of people, rhythmically engaged in these conversations and latter at night in guitar, harmonic play and blues singing on those same couches where a different kind of music took over, all together, connecting, discovering and empowering in their play and serious talk. It turned out to be a three day event that was just what it was meant to be, at least for me and according to responses from others, for them as well. Three days of relating, challenging, rethinking, and stoking our fires.

July 2010

## *Remembering first days at Ranch Ehrlo*

*Oh my God*

*Oh my God*

*Oh my God*

These were the words of Lis Hansen a woman in a workshop I was conducting at Ranch Ehrlo in Regina Canada. I had asked the 100 or so participants to think of their first day on the job and draw or write it out in a narrative or poem. The purpose was to explore how our experiences helped shape our impressions and us.

By learning from these moments we can also open ourselves to the experiences of youth. For example, remembering our first day on the job can help us understand what must it be like for youth on their first day? We can never have their experiences but if we learn from and value our experiences, it can make us curious and open to a deeper understanding of what it is like for them. If they have been bounced around, abandoned, rejected and abused, what is the story they bring to our centers and how must it feel when they walk in the first time? Do they wonder will I be safe here, will people like me, what will I be expected to do, will I be kicked out again? Does it feel familiar and welcoming or cold and distant? Is this a place where eventually I will feel at home or want to run away?

When I send students out to explore youth serving organizations they can usually tell pretty quickly the good places from the bad places. In good places they feel welcomed. The sights, sounds and smells invite them to stay. It seems familiar or like home in some way. And it probably feels the same for staff and youth.

Ranch Ehrlo is a good place that has years of experience learning how to care for youth and staff. I felt welcomed there and assume most of the staff and youth do as well, especially with time. The administration cares for its staff with the expectation that they

will care for youth by constantly learning how to do it better and by being infinitely curious about the youth and the stories they bring with them. The homes and settings they have created are beautiful and cared for as well.

The leadership gets it. They have moved up through the ranks and understand what it is like. They attend the trainings. The message is: We value what you are doing and still remember what a joy and struggle it can be.

Most people have memories of their first days on the job. If they struggle and go through the day with experienced workers they aspire to be like, their memories and pictures (see previous *Moments with Youth*) of these difficult experiences are met with the possibility of better days to come, and undoubtedly it is the same for youth. These places have a sense of possibility for growth in the present and future. My first day was chaotic. I had too many youth to work with and too little experience. Nonetheless, I felt almost immediately that I belonged there. And fortunately it was a good agency in a period of transition to a better time when I would learn from several mentors and youth.

Many of us who struggled early on as youth workers had a feeling that despite what we were going through, we were “at home”. Something in our guts, souls, or hearts told us that no matter how difficult and gut wrenching it would be this is where we wanted to be and would stay. We admired our colleagues for their commitment. “You either throw yourself into it body and soul, or forget it,” a youth worker once wrote. This commitment and sense of personal permanence and desire to keep learning with youth made us good youth workers.

Places that create this sense of “being home” and provide mentors who have grown with the organization, are good places. They provide a sense of hope and well being for staff and in so doing provide the same for youth. Prior to my presentation each day at Ranch Ehrlo the administrators shared the results of a recent agency-wide committee’s study of benefits. Youth care workers would receive raises and increased vacation time. The decisions had been made together, from the ground up. I mentioned how comparatively what they had achieved in the way of benefits and pay far exceeded anything I was aware of in the US.

In writing about places in Canada he called “genuine”, Henry Maier shared stories he had learned from his visits. In his book on developmental care, he also wrote about the importance of care for caregivers. Ranch Ehrlo has created a genuine place that cares for staff and youth. Youth care workers and administrators walk the talk. On my visits to the homes, I saw many fine examples of workers and youth engaged in developmental activity. They were, as Karen VanderVen wrote, becoming what they did. The TV was off (yeah) and they were playing outside or having group meetings to foreshadow what was about to happen. As Vera Fahlberg had written, there was a rhythm to the rituals and routines of daily living. Structure was present in relationships, not in tons of rules and regulations. Process superseded outcome. The pantry was open. After a game of floor hockey one group was off to swimming while the night before, at another location, football and skateboards were the activity. Workers were engaged in youth with youth. Oh my God, how good it is here, I thought, and left with a greater sense of possibility.

August 2010

## Modern parenting

The other day, in the coffee shop where I write early in the morning, including this column, I watched a father and his son, perhaps six or seven years old, have breakfast. They come almost every morning and sit across from each other, usually silent as they wake into the day. It is as if they are doing the same thing I am doing, having private moments in public, the rumble in the background in some way quieting the existential hum and connecting them to community.

Sometimes a friend of the fathers stops and talks while the son nibbles quietly on his muffin, or reads his book, his curious eyes looking over the pages. I can't help but wonder what is going on in his mind. Or, imagine what I might have been thinking at that age: probably our family vacation up north or what I would do when I could go to school and other places by myself, or drive a car.

It also reminds me of the days when I had "morning duty" with my son, and watched him through the years grow from a talkative boy into a quiet, often grumpy adolescent. Suzanne painted late into the night and liked to sleep in the morning then be available when he walked home for lunch and after school while I was still at work.

Like Piaget, I studied childhood and adolescence in part through watching him and the mood swings and intellectual and physical changes he went through and what he did or did not want to talk about at breakfast. Oh how happy I was when I no longer had to help him tie his shoes, find his mittens and get ready to go to school in the cold; now of course sometimes I miss those days, although our conversations now seem much deeper and richer than the grunts he exchanged with me as an adolescent when half awake he struggled to get his rapidly changing mind and body off to school where the world was unfolding with his peers. I am once again reasonably smart and wise to him; whereas then my stature seemed to have dwindled as he developed his abstract/hypothetical/deductive reasoning powers in the world that was opening wider and wider than our increasingly smaller and boring neighborhood.

This boy seems comparatively quiet for his age although I am aware each child has a different temperament. His book and imagination keep him busy. I was sort of that way as a boy. My mother fed me in the morning with food, stories she made up to get me to eat oatmeal, and words of wisdom. I would listen and then make up my own stories in my head. My father was usually off to work at the company before I got up. He was a loyal company employee: his greatest fear perhaps losing his job. My mother, an early feminist (flapper) ahead of her time, worked except when my brother and I were school age boys, and then she would get us off to school before she drove to the grade school where she was the principal's secretary who, as most of the students knew, ran the place. Despite her small stature, no one messed with my mother. She too had worked through the depression and knew what it meant to take education seriously. Students who fooled around could be sitting on the bench in the office where she would give them a lecture about the importance of their learning. Most did not return to that seat in the office. From her I got a sense of persistence and caring discipline that helped me as a youth worker. I also got a big supply of energy.

In the coffee shop several other men, childless perhaps, often congregate near the water cooler and accoutrements, take out cups of coffee in their hands, discussing the economy before they rush off to work during the current recession. You can sense their anxiety. At other tables women often sit longer discussing the challenges at their business and/or in the non profit community.

Whether these changes have been good or bad for child rearing in general is of course a topic of much debate. In many ways I do wish the US had policies that would give women and men more time off to raise their kids during the formative years. This would go a long way in preventing problems in the future, unless of course children, like many children in our community, had parents who were not able to raise them. Giving them more time to be home with their kids would be disastrous without providing equal attention and support for the parents.

I can not understand why we don't have higher standards and/or expectations for having and raising children in our country. We regulate, set standards, and have higher expectations for far less important activities. Anyone, despite their readiness or capacity to support another being it seems can have a kid. This of course is

another very controversial topic. I am not sure what the ultimate solution is other than more and more education, less poverty, higher expectations, making child rearing a priority, investment in support services, and qualified child and youth care workers.

A few days ago while driving somewhere I heard a story about a young teenage couple with two children living with the girl's mother and her brothers in a small house in Baltimore. The father had been unable to get a job and she was pregnant again. During the interview they emphasized that unlike the vast majority of people with kids in their neighborhood at least they were trying to stay together. For how long I wondered, and what will happen to those kids? There is always hope, but the prognosis based on statistics is not good.

But that day, as on other days, with many unanswered questions about how and who should parent, whether it is better today or in the past, I enjoyed watching this boy and his father. In reflection, there is something good about it, the way they are together in their silence in the world around them as they move into the day. He seems like a good dad, a man concerned enough to make sure his son has breakfast before he goes off to school, a man who wants his son to grow up as a responsible and fulfilled youth. I wish the youth whom I had worked with had had fathers like this. After they left, I reflected on them, my childhood, and my experience as a parent, and wrote a poem.

*Muffin eaten while his dad  
talks to another man  
a boy fidgets makes faces  
daydreams and waits*

*The father in work clothes  
delays momentarily the duty  
bestowed on him to get  
"the kid" off to school*

*In the background clustered  
around the water cooler  
other men in suits and ties  
tell jokes sheltered  
from the rains of recession*

*Having survived the depression  
my father left for the company  
before the rest of us got up*

*And my mother, a working  
woman and flapper ahead of her time  
after making and serving breakfast  
to her boys, soon followed*

*Now the women often leave  
before the men both longing  
to linger in the daydreams  
they once had*

*When morning opened  
to possibility in the sounds  
that circled around them.*



## *Where are the borders?*

There is a trail in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains Suzanne calls Beaver Trail because of the beaver dams in the stream that runs beside the trail, one of many dirt access roads open to the public. Often she and her dog Bear hike there. Bear enjoys the mix of water and hills, and so does she. It gives them a feeling of independence and freedom felt nowhere else: being in nature together with only their selves to rely on. It is "their place," that I feel fortunate to be invited to visit with them on occasion. There are few, if any places, more beautiful and peaceful. In the half light of the canyon, time seems to fade away in the clear mountain air. In the warm, majestic surroundings self seems less and less significant as we use our bodies to climb the road, our minds free to look about in the easy, yet rigorous climb, our breathing heavy then light at times, and our muscles warm with the ache of a good days work.

Lately though, the feeling on the trail has been changing. It started a couple years ago when Bear was attacked by a pit bull owned by a group of youth and adults camping near the stream. Without thinking Suzanne immediately jumped in and tried to pull the pit bull away by its hind legs, while I kicked at it's head, hoping to break the jaw lock it had on Bear's throat. Fortunately, Bear, an Aussie Shepherd had a thick coat of hair, but had the owners not called the dog off, I'm not sure we could have saved Bear.

Suzanne was livid that her beloved Bear was put in danger. You would think the owners would be apologetic. The middle aged men and women, however, seemed obstinate as if we had invaded their territory. "You should keep your dog on a leash," they said to us even though their dog had run one hundred or more yards to attack Bear, who would never hurt a flea, or stray from Suzanne toward strangers.

We let them know what we thought. "You don't belong here," they said. It was their way of saying "whites" didn't belong in the Southwest even though Suzanne had probably lived in the area longer than some of them. This made us both more angry and

frightened. The diversity is one factor that attracted us to the area. And for the most part everyone, Hispanics, Latinos, Pueblos, artists, whites and others, gets along.

We walked away with Bear and took out the cell phone to call 911. Then some of the youth from the group appeared on the scene very apologetically. This was either very sincere, which it seemed, or they were concerned that if the police came it would disrupt the activity going on at the campsite. They promised to tie up the dog, acknowledging that it never should have been untied. I felt comfortable with them and we spoke for a while about our concerns. They were handling it in a much more mature manner than their elders. So we cancelled the call, and went on our way.

Without wanting to jump to conclusions, in hindsight it seemed to us that something illegal was going on, perhaps a drug deal. We had noticed how the campsites were becoming more littered with broken beer bottles and other trash. People who used the sites seemed to be there less and less with the respect for the experience of being in nature. As we continued up the trail with Bear seemed to feel no less the wear for the encounter that had "freaked" us out. On the way down we came upon some rangers and told them about what we had experienced. They said they would check it out, and thanked us. Everyone, or a least every law abiding person, wants to keep that trail safe.

We had encountered something similar a year or so earlier when we hiked over a ridge on a trail further south in New Mexico. Off in the distance we could see a group of motor bikes and hot-rods parked next to a group of men in a small village. Clearly, something was going down. So we scampered away not wanting to be seen. Meth traffickers are not known to be friendly. Whether or not our assessment was accurate was not the issue, we discussed afterwards, as much as the sense of fear that drug trafficking has begun to impose in an area, where as a boy I first found a freedom unlike any other as I rode horses into the mountains. And Suzanne has found a sense of freedom in later life she never felt before, or at least since she was a small child playing on a farm in Central Wisconsin. When she moved out here full time, she had spent her time in the city, and was ready to get back to the earth and, as a painter, the incredible landscapes and colors of the Southwest.

Then, this summer, two youth were shot and killed at the foot of

Beaver trail, and in a strange way, this lessened the amount of what seemed to be gang activity going on in the campsites. After that, either the rangers and police began to take the danger more seriously, and/or the gang members found a new place with less attention that had now been focused on the trail. Not wanting to have her freedom restricted, Suzanne (and Bear) continued to hike there, much to my worry. To show me that it was safe, she took me there for a hike on my visit a few weeks ago although she admitted that she had gone there less often than in the past. Two crosses with plastic flowers, as is the Hispanic tradition in the area, marked the spot where they were killed. The reasons had yet to be released. Senseless, yes; guns involved, of course. Young people are shooting each other at unprecedented rates.

On our hike, I could not help but think about what it all meant. How not only the borders between our country and Mexico were an issue, but the borders of youth were also being obliterated by violence, drugs, and guns in many parts of the country. Dealers were going after the good kids in Milwaukee, I had been told by a youth worker a few years earlier, because they are not on the police's radar screens like the gang kids. Easy to think why don't they just resist until someone says, "Hand out these drugs at your next party, and if you don't I know where your sister is."

Three youth I knew had been killed over the years by guns, one I felt close to. This too seemed so senseless, each incident the result of a gun's presence, when in times past they might have simply "rumbled." Without the gun, perhaps only a bloody nose, rather than a dead body.

At the same time, crime continues to decrease in our country, at least according to the statistics. There is less crime of several types, unless you live in a certain place, or are a member of a certain culture or race. Then you are at much more risk as a member of a group where violence is a way of life: a neighborhood, a skin color, or country road, or mountainside where a culture of violence permeates almost every part of your youth, and you attempt to grow up in a surreal world of weapon, powerful drugs, and adults who can use and manipulate youth to stoke their wealth. In these worlds there are no borders of youth. The rights to passage and safe turfs are wiped out with false promises of material gain and threats too powerful to ignore if you want to protect yourself or your family.

I do not know what the answer is. If I could have my way I would create meaningful jobs, make hand guns illegal, and legalize most drugs with the awareness that alcohol, a legal drug is linked to more violence than any other drug, whether it's family fights, murders, or car crashes. Better yet, I would find a way to create opportunities to live lives that did not need drugs, unrealistic, of course, but worth dreaming about?

In the meantime, I can not help but wonder again, where is the voice of our profession in the broader discussions about how youth is being violated and stolen in unthinkable ways? Certainly, this is not new. Youth have been exploited throughout history in factories, homes, and on farms. Criminals have used them for their purposes, and some, generally not most, youth have been willing to go along with promises of easy money and a new sense of power. Maybe it begins to hit us more when it begins to intrude in the spaces where we least expect it; the mountain trails and streams where we go to be free, or to regain for a moment a childhood memory accompanied by the freedom of play.

On the trail that day I wondered if my concern about this criminal invasion of a space so special to Suzanne and Bear was an example that I had become less sensitive to the shooting of youth in inner city Milwaukee. Was it expected there and not here? I hope not. It should not be expected anywhere. Like many others I feel rather helpless about this. Maybe writing this column is one way to do something. I'd like to think so.

October 2010

## *In the spaces between*

Last night I heard playwright, filmmaker and story writer Sam Shepard read in Taos New Mexico. I have always liked his work. In his character's dialog and actions he has this incredible ability to create a sense that something is sitting at the edge of their consciousness that they can not grasp. It is there in the spaces between the words pulling them forward and influencing the way they are behaving. In movies like *Paris Texas*, the play *Fool for Love* and many of his short stories, the reader/viewer is captivated by trying to figure it out. What's going on that's not being said? We want to know even if the characters don't. Something is making them behave this way. What is it? The tension for the characters can be almost unbearable at times it seems. And then in other stories or character sketches he uses a similar technique to make us laugh. There is a sad yet uplifting quality to his humor because somehow he is able to see and show it in the context of a human condition that resonates with what we have experienced.

Most of his work is about character, not story *per se*. He develops his characters and what they do in a way that interests us. We can see and relate to people in his sketches and doing this we learn something about them and us. His characters and dialog feel real because, although they are not "Xerox copies," they are based on people he knew, including himself, and his experiences, many of which occurred in his youth. Similarly the scenes he creates in his sketches draw us in. There is a sense of place we can relate to or want to know.

So it is sometimes in youth work. Much of youth work occurs in those spaces between the words, the pauses and times when we are communicating with actions rather than words. We are in these moments with youth, our own and others. Often, however, in writing or talking about the work we tend to steer away from this very important part of the work. We want to prove or make it better or show how it works, rather than describe how it is as we see it, and learn from what it is while we let our actions together take us where

it will. This is not to minimize the fears and anxieties many youth have about the known and unknown. These feelings are real for them, and as workers we should as best as we can, help them understand and learn from these feelings.

What I am suggesting is that sometimes it is better just to let it go, not to try to seek an answer or make it better and instead just to be in these moments to see where they take a youth and us. Knowing when and when not to do this of course is another one of the master competencies in our work, but there is something to be studied and learned from here. How do we as workers as characters with youth learn to let the situation evolve to a point of discovery? How do we allow ourselves to be between the words listening and hearing “that something” just at the edge?

Most of Sam Shepard’s characters are troubled. They are dealing with loss, addiction, and many other problems that we can relate to. Life is not perfect in a Shepard sketch, play, or film. When asked about how he is able to capture the essence of their experience, he says it’s “all in the music.” There is a rhythm that carries the moments, actions, and words in a way that makes us curious about what happened or is happening. The tension is palpable and unbearable. We want to stay and leave; look at and away. We should listen more for the music in our work, get to know the spaces between. Maybe something will appear at the edge, just beyond our reach and compel us to stay there for a moment longer. Maybe we will hear something we haven’t heard?

## Post Program Identity

A man and a woman are talking at a party. She sips her drink, asks, "What do you do?"

"Work with youth."

"That's wonderful, must be hard work?"

"Yes, it's challenging but I really enjoy it."

"So where do you work?"

"On the street, in the house, the park, school, a hike..."

"Do you work for an agency or organization of some kind?"

"Yes, a group home."

"What's the approach? I'm a social work student and it would be interesting." The worker smiles, says, "We try to show up everyday. And we encourage the youth to do the same thing."

"That's it?"

"Pretty much. We try to be present, open and available to listen and understand. We also try to be energetically engaged."

"You need a degree for that?"

"Well it helps if you are curious and eager to learn about self and other. But the learning never stops really."

"So anybody who is curious and wants to learn can do it?"

"No not really, that's just a good place to start. You have to like youth, enjoy being in the thick of it, and try to understand your own story."

"That helps you know what it is like for them right?"

"No, it helps you know what it was like for you and should make you curious about their experience."

"Are there specific outcomes you are expected to achieve?"

"Every day."

"Like what?"

“Eat lunch, solve a problem, spend a quiet moment together, fix a flat tire, read to one another, share a feeling, and help others complete a task?”

“You’re playing with me,” she says as if she just caught on that maybe he was pulling her leg.

“No, not really, those are very important events in the lives of young people who have not had an opportunity to be with caring adults ...”

“Can you make a living at that?”

“It’s difficult, but it’s a good life.”

Unlike the worker above, I sometimes I think we still focus too much on program and our profession in defining ourselves. We identify ourselves by the program we work in and as child and youth care workers, or whatever our title is, often in comparison to other programs and professions. While this is an important part of our development, maybe we are ready to move ahead to a new way of identifying ourselves: by articulating what we actually do.

In conversations with the public and introductions during workshops or meetings, workers often speak of the program they work at or the program they used with kids. It is as if their identity is tied more to the program rather than the work they do. Henry Maier, noted child and youth care teacher and author, used to ask people to introduce them selves by saying something they did with children and youth. He, like other wise leaders, did not want us to get caught-up, or boxed-in, in our professionalism and programs. Our work was to grow, learn and develop with children and youth. He preferred that we spend more time on developing a rich menu of activities geared to the developmental readiness and capacity of youth to participate, and that we did this care, sensitivity, dependability and predictability, and rhythmic interaction. Space, place, time and engagement all came before program in his world of genuine practice. He had little patience for people who boasted about their programs but could not say much about what they did in their daily interactions. Karen VanderVen has challenged us for years to stay focused on activity and not use the step or level or other mechanical systems that keep us from getting engaged in the multitude of activities available to us.

I found this all reaffirming. As a young man I had felt from my



first day as a child and youth care worker that what I did was important: sweeping floors, playing kickball, breaking up fights, hikes, painting, lunch, and reading to each other were all an important part of what I did with children and youth. Where else can you play and get paid for it, we used to joke, even after a tough day.

This was good, hard work. It wasn't for everybody but for those who saw what could be done it was the best work around. Later of course from reading Henry and many others and attending conferences I learned how sophisticated it was and how the relationship between theory and practice could play out every day in every interaction if I knew how to see it. I used to like to say my job was to relate with youth and to try to weave as much care, learning and counseling as possible into every daily interaction.

These thoughts came to me when I was reading a chapter on Vaclav Havel in a book titled *Post National Identity*. Havel was the man who led the Velvet Revolution from his prison cell. Together with many colleagues who kept getting the word out through the underground, insisting on free speech, the Czechs eventually expelled the Soviet Union from their country. A tank is turned on its side in Wenceslas Square as a symbol of non violent resistance. I was there with my son and brother-in-law shortly after the revolution. A few days later we went to pound chips from the Berlin Wall.

Maybe if we focus on defining the universal nature of our caring interactions in daily interactions we could overpower the mechanistic, quick fix, outcome and evidence focus approaches that have for the most part attempted to undermine the importance of care work.

February 2011

## Poetics and the Language of Youth Work

*This column is another in a series of columns in which I have written about writing and morality in child and youth care. I was moved to write it in a recent discussion about meaning making, reflective research, and a phenomenological approach to our work.*

For many fiction writers, poetry is the truest way to portray an image or express a feeling. For example, prize winning novelist Roberto Bolano considered poetry the highest form of expression. He wrote poems when he was not working on his novels. Even though it was very difficult, he could say something in a few words than he could not say in the longer narrative form.

Some poems are written spontaneously like jazz. In general a poet works a poem until he or she feels it is just right or rings true. It can take days, months or years before it looks and sounds right. The author writes a first draft and returns (even to the ones written spontaneously) to it many times to try to capture the essence (hear it deep) of what he or she wants to say, or the picture the poem is intended to portray. The reader reads the situation in the moment as part of the larger whole, or their world view as shaped by their experience.

Similar to the way I wrote in October in this column (*In the Spaces Between*) about Sam Shepard, playwright and poet of dialog in his own right, in most poems the spaces between the words are as important as the words. The poet attempts to invite the reader into the poem to contemplate and relate the images related to the reader's own experience. The hope is that it will ring true for the reader as well, and this will make them curious enough to engage in a personal dialog or discourse with the work. Or to say, "Yes, that's

the way it is. I never thought of it that way, but that is the way I experience it. I understand. Or I want to understand more.”

The movement of words and the rhythm of a poem are crucial to its success. The tempo has to be consistent with the mood the writer wants to convey otherwise the poem does not read true. So is the ability to see a situation for what it is to the writer. When German poet Rilke lost his way, sculptor Rodin told him to go to the zoo and look at the animals until he could see them. Rilke went and looked at a panther for days then wrote this poem which I have presented in this column in the past (translated by poet Robert Bly):

### *The Panther*

*From seeing the bars, his seeing is so exhausted that it no longer holds anything anymore.*

*To him the world is bars, a hundred thousand bars, and behind the bars, nothing.*

*The lithe swinging of that rhythmical easy stride which circles down to the tiniest hub is like a dance of energy around a point in which a great will stands stunned and numb.*

*Only at times the curtains of the pupil rise without a sound ... then a shape enters, slips through the tightened silence of the shoulders, reaches the heart, and dies.*

In this poem, which is about a panther not youth work, Rilke captures the experience of the caged panther in a few words. When I read it I am overwhelmed by its clarity and power. I can almost feel what the panther must have been feeling. I am unable to go to the zoo and not think of it. When I first read it, I compared it to the experience I had with troubled youth who lived caged in their community and how we had to create experiences and activities that would make the light shine from their eyes in our activities and interactions.

The line “Properly weathered places” in William Carlos Williams’s poem *Pastoral* resonated almost immediately with my calling to escape the American pastoral and work with youth in urban communities. Williams, a medical doctor, was expressing how he felt more comfortable in places with a history of aging and poverty. His work portrays both the struggle and beauty of these places and the people in them.

In creating, writing and speaking about moments in our work, perhaps we should be more like the poet and try to capture the essence of what we want to say while paying attention to the mood we care conveying with everyday words. Poet Ezra Pound referred to this as the quest for fundamental accuracy of statement, which he saw as the sole morality of poetry. Much of the language and writing in our field is foreign to the way an event or conversation occurred. It is written sometimes to impress an imaginary audience of professionals, administrators and academics. Generally people like language that is clear and conveys an image of the situation the writer is trying to convey.

If we believe that our goal is to understand rather than prove, we should have confidence that, if we strive for fundamental accuracy of statement, it will advance our field just as poets have been instrumental advancing the social, cultural, and creative development of the world. This is not to say that we should write poems in place of our reports in articles and conversations, but rather that we could learn from poets and the power of images and words that ring true and be a little more like them by choosing with care words that convey the images, feeling state, or analysis we are trying to share, including acknowledgment of the dualities and absurdities in our work. There is something very important about a line such as, “He got up from his chair and joined the activity” when presented in the context of a youth who had avoided involvement. Or, simply, “He smiled,” for a youth who had been “caged” in a life of despair. Properly placed in a vignette or case example, phrases like these can be very powerful in informing us and the reader or listener.

March 2011

## *In the Words of Young Poets*

*This column is another in a series of columns in which I have written about writing and morality in child and youth care. I was moved to write it in a recent discussion about meaning making, reflective research, and a phenomenological approach to our work.*

Last month I wrote in this column about poetics and the language of youth work. A few days later, I listened to several young poets read their work at a poetry marathon in my home town, Milwaukee. The marathon is held every year at *Woodland Pattern*, a community supported book and literary arts center that serves as a social action and intellectual center in a relatively poor neighborhood. People from all income levels and races gather at WP to support and benefit from the arts. In addition to an excellent collection of poetry, Native American literature, and an art gallery, writing classes for young and old and community meetings are held there. Whenever I go to browse or listen, I feel at home. Often I go on Saturday evenings for readings from national and international authors I would not be able to hear anywhere else in our community. On Sundays musicians are invited to play.

I look forward each year to the annual marathon. For one day, from 10:00 AM until midnight poets read in five minute blocks. Schedules are handed out when you pay so you can decide which hours to attend. A hand stamp permits reentry in between grocery shopping and other errands. The poets enlist sponsors to make donations to *Woodland Pattern*. I contributed to a poet musician friend of mine who long ago decided to live the life of a poet by supporting himself with a job unloading ships in the harbor. In addition to being an excellent fund raising event, the marathon provides a chance to reconnect with friends during the breaks. The atmosphere in the packed house is electric. For a day, we are all poets and musicians reminded of the talent we have as human beings to live and be together.

Usually I stay for several hours until I can't sit or stand any longer. I always leave amazed at the amount of talent in our community, each poet with his or her unique way of seeing something. Some of the performers sing instead of read. Social change, love, loss, peace, and everyday events are major themes in many of the works.

It is a tradition to begin the day with readings from youth in a WP writers' workshop. This is my favorite part of the day. If for no other reason than I witness youth stand for the first time in front of an audience and expose themselves through their work. They nervously tap their feet and fool around as they wait. Each one tries to be nonchalant (cool) as he or she approaches/swaggers to the podium. Then afterwards with a big burden lifted from their shoulders they sit down knowing they "did it." No matter how polished or unpolished their work, all the readers receive a round of applause and appreciation for their effort. Empathy fills the room; we can all remember how difficult it is to stand in front of an audience and share our personal work. Much can be learned about disclosure from poets.

The emphasis this year on love and identify struck me. It seemed as if each young poet expressed his or her love for someone with longing and/or appreciation for that person who ignited fires in their hearts: a parent, boyfriend, or girlfriend (real, wished for, or abandoned). Several wrote about how they would leave their neighborhood and what they would become. They would not be trapped or caught up in life on the streets. Using their talent and commitment to do better, they would escape.

I shouldn't have been surprised I guess. These are major themes in adolescence. Every youth wants to be loved and special. No one wants to grow up in poverty and/or as a victim of gang life. But often what we hear in the music and poems of youth is violence, and/or despair. This is what sells. These youth however had dreams of a better world in which they could become something with and/or for their loved ones. And *Woodland Pattern* was a place where they could express how they truly felt. I admired their courage. They were "tough" in a more powerful way than they had been taught on the streets. It took courage to do what they did. I felt inspired, many of the words and images still whirling in my head as I listened to adult poets that followed.

Also by coincidence a few weeks ago I was given a small book titled *Time and Place* by Khalil Coleman, a young youth worker in our community [www.timeandplacebk.com](http://www.timeandplacebk.com). Khalil believes we can learn by analyzing stories. He has established a publishing, consulting, and teaching business he calls *Changing Lives Through Literature* [www.changinglives.com](http://www.changinglives.com). In *Time and Place* he tells the story of two youth B and K who have dreams, like the young poets, to escape from their lives in the hood. I was drawn to the themes time and place, which are instrumental in adolescent development and wanted to learn more. As B and K journey back and forth in time from the hood to school and more affluent neighborhoods they question the morality and reality of what is needed to survive on the streets of their neighborhood, and contemplate change.

As I prepared a review for the newsletter of our State association of child and youth care workers, I was reminded young people today are just as concerned, if not more so, about the need for social change, as were members of my civil rights generation. *Time and Place* was a call to action in the tradition of Camus another activist/philosopher who saw the injustice and absurdity in life but maintained his faith in the power of humans to act for change.

Then of course there were the demonstrations in Egypt. What a moving display of organic, non violent, civil disobedience. Chanting Arab "poets" massed in the square to throw out a corrupt government. Called to action on social networks and determined to stay, they supported each other with chants against the tyranny that had kept them suppressed for so long. It reminded me of the *Velvet Revolution* in Czechoslovakia when the poets and writers symbolically overturned a soviet tank with words. Never before, however, has the power of non violent protest been more widely witnessed than in the events of the last few weeks. Let's hope it continues as people continue to pour into the streets trying to be, as Gandhi said, "the change they want to see."

Let's also hope the young poets at *Woodland Pattern*, B and K, and all the other young adults longing for a more civil society were watching this powerful example of how change can occur if the will is there. There is also wisdom in these events for the leaders of the professions of child and youth who want to draw attention to the power of care.

"Love is all we need," sang John Lennon. "Foolish optimism" you

say. Maybe, but I am still moved by what I heard at *Woodland Pattern*, read in *Time and Place*, and saw in the square. Change, small and large, is in the power of silence and words heard, read, spoken, and remembered. Poetics is a force in and of itself that has the power to show and evoke the contemplation that leads to positive action. In a recent draft of an article we are writing together, Kiaras Gharabaghi (frequent contributor to *CYC-Online*) ended his section of the paper by saying, "And if you would like to accuse me of being hopelessly romantic with respect to child and youth care practice, I will thank you." Let's join him and the young poets on the streets still in our hearts.



April 2011

## Drop In

*This column is another in a series of columns in which I have written about writing and morality in child and youth care. I was moved to write it in a recent discussion about meaning making, reflective research, and a phenomenological approach to our work.*

Last week I went with my youth work class to visit a drop in center for youth. The drop in center is a collaborative effort. Several community organizations have pitched in to make it work. It is a place where hard to reach youth from the community can “drop in” for activities, group counseling, tutoring, video games, and/or just to hang out and get warm. They can also do their laundry and take a shower if they wish. Many of them spend most of the time on the streets, or moving from one house to another. And the center is a place where they can feel safe and meet some of their needs.

Word is put out on the streets about it through several sources, including a street van that drives around at night trying to connect with youth and steer them toward resources. A block from a bus stop it is easy for youth who do not live nearby to access. Bus tickets are handed out for future visits. What make the center work are the staff members and the youth. With a strong mentoring program developed by one of my former students, youth soon learn how to help one another. It is part of the culture of the organization. When you attend the drop in center you receive care and help, and learn how to give care and help to others.

No drugs or guns are allowed. Youth put their possessions in a paper bag before they enter, and collect them when they leave. The workers don't question what's in the bags. They suspect there are some weapons and drugs. This creates a moral dilemma. Like many of the staff members I was and am conflicted by this policy. The staff members' reason for this policy is that if they take these items away the youth might not return. I am not sure what I would do. The

idea that youth walk around on the streets with illegal weapons and drugs really bothers me, even though I am aware they feel guns are needed for safety where they live and drugs are prevalent. Too many youth are being shot in our city, often over drugs. Adding more guns and drugs to the situation doesn't seem like a good plan. No matter what their lives were like, I wouldn't want them to think I gave them permission to have these items. I would try to understand and say no at the same time. During my career I have known three youth who were shot and killed in accidents with guns. Each time it was such a waste of a young life.

Youth peer mentors taught our class. These are young people who are paid to mentor other youth. Most of them have previous experience at the drop in center or the overnight shelter the organization runs at another location. For this class, about ten youth mentors, young men and women, were on hand to teach about fifteen of us. First, they gave us a tour. A few youth were hanging out in the lounge area. Some were working on computers in the computer area. We saw the showers, and kitchen. Two youth were having a snack. A support group was underway. Several staff members and a student in field placement were engaged with the youth. Everyone was friendly.

The meeting was held in a dining area. We sat around several tables; the peer mentors and a staff member to one side and the students and me to the other side. The staff member was intentionally silent. He had just come from a support group session and wanted the mentors to run the class. A leader in developing the peer mentor program, he was not about to undermine the process. He was a student in my classes several years earlier. I jokingly made a bet with him beforehand that he could not stay silent. He won. The peer mentors ran the entire event. When they directed a question to him, he simply turned it back to them.

They had rehearsed the session beforehand. I was invited to the rehearsal but couldn't make it. The peer mentors gave me some heat about this. We introduced ourselves by saying two true things about ourselves and making one thing up. The group had to guess what was true. This was a fun exercise. Some of the youth made up bizarre stories about themselves. Some of these stories turned out to be true.

Then the youth told us a little about the program and what they

liked, mainly the food and staff members. After this we were asked to join in several role plays. The youth had chosen several conflict situations that occur at the center. First they showed us the wrong way to handle a situation. Mentors, playing the roles of youth, challenged, argued and resisted a mentor playing the role of a youth worker. When the worker "screwed up" there was much laughter.

Then they asked the students to step in and show how they would handle it. In one situation a youth entered the program under the influence of drugs. In another situation a young lady was disrespecting a worker. In each situation the students tried to be professional. They used preventive and conflict resolution strategies we had discussed and practiced in class. You could tell they were uneasy; they wanted to impress their peers and me. As they fumbled for the right thing to say or do, I got a kick out of it, and so did the youth, who "played them" for all it was worth. One young lady was particularly good at this. With a gift for street talk and an awareness of how touchy the workers might be about boundaries, she kept the student off guard. A couple students and one peer mentor in particular, who showed us how to do it, were effective. They were not trying to be anything other than themselves.

In one situation a youth was preoccupied with a hand held electronic device. There are so many today. For the most part I don't know what they are called or what they do other than process information and create instant access to friends, games, and any number of desirable and undesirable links. Let's just say it was a cell phone.

The preoccupied youth was supposed to be in a group activity. Two students tried to convince him to put the cell phone away and join the activity. He effectively got them into power struggles he knew he would win because they would try to reason with him, or do the right thing according to what they had learned in class. At one point one of the peer mentors, who I know, said, "Mark, you're the professor, why don't you show them."

I laughed nervously. I was on the spot. "Sure," I said and got up. They jeered me, jokingly. Several thoughts race through my head as I approached the makeshift stage. The crowd waited with anticipation to see what I would do. It was as if all I had learned and experienced in these situations raced through my head. Then suddenly as I approached my head cleared and I simply said "give me

that” and in one swift move took the device out of his hand and put it in my pocket. “We need you in our activity. You can have this back when we are done.” Surprised and caught off guard, the youth smiled and came along. The others applauded.

There was nothing professional about what I did other than I reacted naturally. It could have turned out differently, but it was the right thing to do at the time, and it showed that I really wanted him in the activity and wasn’t about to get involved in a game of reasoning.

I think the students were surprised by what I did. I was. Afterwards I felt very good about it. “Too often I think our professionalism gets in the way of doing what our instincts tell us to do,” I said as we debriefed in class the following week. “Maybe they should have the same thing about the paper bags I thought. “Give me those drugs and guns. They do you no good in here or out there. You are safer without them. We want you with us now, here in the moment, and later. ”

We went on to discuss the pros and cons of this comment. We tried to look at it through the eyes of the youth and our own stories. We also decided to donate some funds from the class budget for bus tickets.

August 2011

## *Growing Our cultural center*

Recently I was reading about the cultural center Albert Camus created with his colleagues in Algiers in the 1930s. It was a place where Arab, Italian, Spanish, and French could gather to learn from literature, music, and theater. During a period of political and social strife, they believed this would advance society and serve as a powerful source for political discourse, and activism. By watching and discussing a Chekhov play, for instance, not only would their lives be enriched, they would also gain insight for relating and acting together to improve social conditions.

I often go to an independent book store and art center in our community. It serves as a gathering place for people of all classes and backgrounds in a relatively poor section of town. On visits one is surrounded by evocative sounds, words, and pictures of culture. On Saturday evenings they hold poetry readings. Many of the presentations are followed by discussions with the performers. Sometimes people provide food, wine, and other goodies. On Sundays they have folk, rock, rap, and classical music concerts. The room where performances are held is also an art gallery.

Reading Camus reminded me that these centers are in and of themselves places and sources of social and political change. In our community if the center were to disappear, the neighborhood would truly be a different place. Something very important would be lost. While the impact cannot be easily measured, almost every one of the regular supporters agrees, it pulls us together in way that cannot be found anywhere else. The connections and discourse inspired in our gatherings can't be found elsewhere. So, we fight to preserve it; we give both our time and our money to a place that presents many sides to issues and life in multiple forms. It is a place that helps bind together the community.

This makes me wonder, where is the cultural center for *our* field? Is it here on CYC-Net? Probably more than anywhere else, yes it is. There is a wealth of material to be accessed and read here. Our field can be seen evolving without borders. Common problems and

solutions are shared. Issues are addressed. Some issues are left unaddressed, but at least they have been raised. People are telling their stories and writing their opinions. How to(s) are presented. New approaches and ways of thinking are introduced. Photos and art represent our work in action.

Is this enough however? Is our cultural center being sufficiently developed with philosophy, history, music, theater, art, and literature? Have we invited in outside voices, or are we still rather insular? Are the discussions enriched by the insights of people in other fields who have looked at similar issues from different perspectives? Can we see, hear, feel, debate child and youth care in its multiple forms, places, contexts, and cultures? Are we open to outside criticism and discourse?

My answer to all these questions is probably not enough. More pictures, songs, dances, plays, novels, stories, rituals, critical thinking, and collective action grounded in the real, often open-ended, mixed genre, rich accounts of our challenging work are needed. We can be more informed by music, art, philosophy, film, and literature in our work.

This will help us show the dualities and moral dilemmas that are often left unsaid or not shown in approaches and models not suited for our non linear, outside the box work. A good book, movie, theory, painting, or way of thinking is often open ended. The authors, writers, filmmakers raise questions knowing there are many more to be asked. These are not just good tunes or stories, rather thoughtful pieces that show rather than tell. We see their pictures and images as real at a point in time, knowing the rest is left to us to make better choices for ourselves and others. Or we just see something in a different light.

As we grow into the future, our cultural center will need more of all this to give us the legitimacy of a profession that is serious about trying to know and define itself as a human endeavor full of struggles, challenges, and differences that are part of being human. A field in which a play, film, painting, critical discourse, narrative and story is not just a metaphor for the work, but our very work with youth, and the way we show and discuss it in its multiple new forms along with what we have already learned.

## *The Place for Classics*

Lately I have been part of two discussions designed to identify classics in the field of child and youth care. These discussions I believe are in part driven by a concern that we might be moving too far away from our roots, and in part by a concern that the classic works might be forgotten or ignored as the field continues to change and grow.

Periodically, these conversations crop up. Perhaps when we are feeling less secure about where we have been and where we are headed. This desire to get back to our roots is not a bad thing in and of itself. Sort of like going back home to ground ourselves in something familiar I think. Reverence and respect for our elders is essential. Their work has been instrumental in understanding and doing relationships and developmental care.

I am always conflicted during these discussions. First of all, I know I can never really go back home. My life has changed with new encounters, memories and insights. Every time I go back I have mixed emotions. Fond memories are pictured differently in reflections and I don't want to give up the new view I have developed since then. There is something unsettling about being in a place that might not have ever been what I imagined it to be. There is also something very comforting in letting it be what I remember it to be.

There is no doubt that I should continue to learn from the classics and integrate what we learn into my thinking, writing, research, and practice. Like many others I am attached to classic works that shaped my thinking. I worry though that if I emphasize this too much I might miss some of the current creative thought. An argument can be made that some of the latest work is as relevant, informed, sophisticated and enlightened as the classics, and therefore deserves as much attention as the older work. Not that the classics of old were not as insightful (you could say they are timeless), but rather I might miss something if I ignore or brush over present work in favor of the past.

Sometimes I also worry that these calls to keep acknowledging the classics might be more for the sake of the old timers who were so instrumental in building that field and are holding on to some romantic notion of how significant a classic might have been for them. I say this of course as one of those old timers, romantic about the past. And with much reverence for my mentors, and the readings that shaped my thinking about doing and teaching child and youth care. My sense, however, is that their thinking changed with time as well, and they might prefer not to be identified primarily with their earlier, or a single, work.

Slowly over the years I have also been deeply influenced by novels, poems, films, paintings, and thinkers from other fields that present ideas and images that seem true to my experience and the subject matter. Some of our field's young student/scholar/practitioners are also writing some amazing articles. I guess what I'm saying is that I have to be cautious about going back without acknowledging and using the classics that are in the works every day. I also have to continue to be open to letting in outside influences. A classic is more useful when it is framed within new writings, pictures, and discussions that offer new insight with repetition, difference, simplicity and multiplicity. Works that show classics this way have potential to be new classics that advance knowledge. Personally, at this point in my career, I am partial to the ones that show rather than tell and evoke my own new discoveries.

A picture is worth a thousand words.

Note: I have intentionally not mentioned authors. There are so many old and new classics. The ones I pick today could not be the ones I identified before and others I will identify in the future. Ultimately a classic is left to the reader to determine. If it moves the reader to be with youth in relationships and daily developmental activities in new, exciting, and effective ways, it is a classic for him or her.





When I started child and youth care work with a fairly strict and formal classical education under my belt, I initially found the seeming waywardness of Mark Krueger's imagery hard to get my head around.

Paragraphs like *"Child and youth care work is like modern dance. Workers bring themselves to the moment, practice, plan (choreograph), listen to the tempos of daily living, improvise, and adjust to and/or change the contexts within which their interactions occur"* initially proved hard to parse and translate into relevant and usable ideas. However it soon became liberating to come across his sudden transpositions which always proved enriching and relevant to real-live youth work.

Mark was always most generous with his writing, and this book is a collection of his *Moments with Youth* columns which appeared in *CYC-Online* for almost a decade

Thank you, Mark.

— Brian Gannon



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