

An abstract painting with vibrant, expressive brushstrokes in shades of blue, red, orange, yellow, and white. The composition is layered and textured, with some areas appearing more defined than others. In the center, there are faint, overlapping shapes that suggest human figures or forms, possibly in a dynamic or dancing pose. The overall mood is energetic and complex.

Stories from the In-Between

Relational Practice Teaching Tales

Thom Garfat, PhD and Heather Modlin, PhD

Editors

Stories from the In-Between

Relational Practice Teaching Tales

Thom Garfat, PhD and Heather Modlin, PhD
Editors

Stories from the In-Between

Relational Practice Teaching Tales

Copyright © 2026 The CYC-Net Press

Cover art: © Steve A Johnson

<https://stevejohnsonart.us>

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photography, recording, or any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers. The book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade, or otherwise, be lent, resold, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition, including this condition, being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.



<https://press.cyc-net.org>

Contents

Introduction	vii
Thom Garfat and Heather Modlin	
The Birthday	9
Heather Modlin	
Save the Date	12
Kaitlin Ahonen	
The Gift of Time	15
Noor Almaoui	
Unknown Transforming Moments	18
James P. Anglin	
Echoes of Courage and Hope	20
Paul W. Baker	
The Puzzle, the Goalie, and the Power of Showing Up	23
David Brennan	
The Torn Sock	28
Monica Calciu	
Push, Pull, Dance	31
Thom Garfat	
That’s My House: Painting Possibility with Intention	36
Deb Cockerton	
“Not You Again”	41
John M. Digney	
Chicken and Five Feet of Fury	47
Janel Dupley and Karl Gompf	
We Never Know: So Keep the Faith	50
Lorraine E. Fox	
Stay Wide-Eyed and Curious	53
Mackenzie Fraser	
Platform Two	56
James Freeman	
Engaging with Alan over the Years	61
Leon Fulcher	

The Name Game	66
Thom Garfat	
Life-Space for Life.....	71
Kiaras Gharabaghi	
A Night with Lisa.....	75
Heather Modlin	
The Choice.....	79
Mandy Goble	
The Trip from Hell.....	82
Grant Charles	
Today my Career Would Have Ended Before it Really Began.....	85
James P. Anglin	
Capelin and Conversations	90
Jamie Lynn Greene	
What the River Teaches.....	93
Stephanie Griffin	
Side by Side, Not Face to Face	98
Sean Guptill	
Meeting Them Where They Are At	102
Thom Garfat	
Heard at Last	106
Anni Leminen (story relayed by Jari Jauhiainen)	
The Pancake.....	108
Vanessa Hillier	
A Home for Everyone.....	112
Lorraine E. Fox	
This is the Direction We Are Going	114
Michelle Holbrook	
Bath Time	118
Heidi Holloway	
The Mangoes and the Magic of Mehdi	122
Tuhinul Islam	
Working with Joey.....	130
Lucky Jacobs	

Brunch	135
Heather Modlin	
The Many Uses of Garlic	138
Thom Garfat	
The Unexpected Outcome	143
Steve Jacques	
Held In Practice	150
Ayman Kothiwala, Yvonne Gomez and Jessica Williams	
‘Overstepping’ with Dogs, Cows and Drunken Tour Guides!	156
Harrison Dax Nash	
Gramma Mary ... and Adam’s Spaghetti Tacos	160
Andy Leggett	
The Stakeout	164
Sarah McCarthy	
Talent Review	169
Roxana Mocârță-Croitoru	
Rebuilding a Life Beyond Care	172
Kiran Modi and Ranjana Srivastava	
Playing Hockey	178
Heather Modlin	
The Leaving	182
Caroline Moore	
Love on the Roof Top! The Power of Never Giving Up	186
Harrison Dax Nash	
I Don’t Think I Can Do This by Myself ... You’re Going to Have to Help Me	190
Penny Parry	
Spooning, Tea and Sympathy	195
Jack Phelan	
Over the Backs of Horses	197
Renee Piercey	
Tiger	202
Heather Sago	
The Privilege of Being ‘Locked In’	207
Mike Shea	

The Baby-Blue Baby-Grand Connection.....	212
Martin Stabrey	
Leighanne's Amaryllis.....	217
Laura Steckley	
So, She Drew Her Story	220
Zeni Thumbadoo	
When Presence is the Intervention.....	224
Werner van der Westhuizen	
The Orange.....	228
Thom Garfat	

Introduction

Thom Garfat and Heather Modlin

Storytellers

Human beings are, by nature, storytellers. Most of our communications are via stories. We share our desires, our wishes, our experiences via stories. Here's an example ...

“I was walking on the river the other day when I saw ...”

Hear the story coming? I am about to tell you the story of my experience of walking on the river. And it is not just data I am going to share but the story of my experience.

Here's another example ...

“Heather and I were discussing different training methods when a young person came up and asked ...”

Again, hear the story coming? And you are curious, aren't you, about what the young person asked – because we want to know how the ‘story’ unfolded.

Once the story is opened, we want to follow the process and understand the ending. It is built into us to follow the story.

Child and Youth Care workers are exceptional storytellers. We were, initially, storytellers out of necessity. In days gone by, there were no college or university programs, no training programs, no organised way in which to teach us how to be with young people. So, we taught each other – through stories.

We shared stories after our shifts. “Let me tell you about the incident that happened tonight ...” Then, when one CYC tells their story another CYC says “that reminds me of a time when ...” And so, the education of each other through the stories of our shared experience unfolds. Learning from each other through the stories of our experience.

Even now, in formal education, while participating in training or listening to a speaker at a conference, we retain stories much more easily than dry facts. The power of storytelling is biological. Reading or hearing stories stimulates multiple brain regions, activating emotions and enhancing

understanding and connection to the story. We are hard wired to connect, and stories are the way we are stimulated to connect.

This is a book of stories. It recognises the historical foundation of the importance of storytelling for our learning in the field. It is ‘our way of learning.’

We called this book *Stories from the In-Between: Relational Practice Teaching Tales* because the stories in this book all speak to the relationship between self and other; the in-between between us. They are focused on various encounters which reveal the nature and characteristics of the relationships within our field – they are reflections of our attempts to be helpful and our process doing so.

No-one will relate to all these stories – but everyone will find in them some reflections of their own experiences with youth, families and the staff who work with them.

These stories reflect the diversity of our field – from Finland to Canada, from the front line to management, from self in encounter to self in wonder. Just as our field is diverse, so are the stories in this book.

We are hopeful that these stories might be both interesting and useful – for discussions in teams, or in classes or, simply in stimulating the reflections of the reader.

Stories from the in-between are about our work – the messy, frustrating, infuriating, sad, hilarious, heartwarming and triumphant events that fill our days in Child and Youth Care practice. As we received and read each story, we were struck by the creativity, generosity, and wisdom contained within them.

These are stories from our field and, as such, they are stories of inspiration and education.

We were inspired. We hope you are too.

The Birthday

Heather Modlin

Child and Youth Care practice occurs in the life space. This provides limitless opportunities to utilize daily life events, as they are occurring, to promote growth and change. To do this effectively, we must have a way of knowing the young people, which includes understanding the stories they have internalized about themselves and the world. Our understanding enables us to arrange experiences – thoughtfully, purposefully, and repeatedly – that counteract their stories. This process is illustrated in the story that follows.

* * *

Brian had been living in our group home for a few months, and his 15th birthday was coming up. He had been told by the other boys what to expect on that day and how much money we would spend on a present. When we asked Brian what he wanted for his birthday, he selected a stereo that cost double what we would normally spend. He was adamant that this was the only thing he wanted – if we couldn't get him the stereo, we shouldn't get him anything.

We faced a dilemma. Under normal circumstances, we stuck to the budget. The amount we allocated for birthdays was reasonable, in-line with what children in 'average' families in the community would receive, and it was important for our young people to understand the concept of budgeting.

These were not normal circumstances. Brian had been raised in an extremely neglectful environment, and we knew that many of his birthdays had been forgotten. He had a history of being let down by adults and he was expecting this year to be the same. By asking for something he knew was beyond the budget, we believed he was setting us up to fail him. So, we needed to create an experience for him that was unexpected and different.

On the big day, Brian woke up to a birthday extravaganza! The overnight staff had gone overboard with posters, streamers, and balloons. Within minutes, Brian had angrily torn down all the decorations. Luckily, we had an experienced and knowledgeable team of Child and Youth Care workers, and

they knew that this reaction was a result of the overwhelming emotions Brian was experiencing. Birthdays were already stressful, and now we had created a situation he had no way of understanding or processing.

There was no recrimination for tearing down the decorations, no comments about all the work they had put into decorating. The staff told Brian it was his birthday and he could do whatever he wanted with the decorations. They added that they couldn't not decorate because he was special and they wanted to show him how much he meant to them. This resulted in another angry explosion that was okay (and expected).

Throughout the day Brian struggled to regulate his emotions. He had refused to identify anyone we could invite to his birthday party, so we limited the attendees to the other boys, some of their family members (who had taken on a nurturing role with Brian) and the full staff team. We had his favourite food (pizza) and an ice cream cake. Brian tolerated this part of the celebration fairly well – he stayed seated at the head of the table throughout the meal and engaged in conversation with the others (as long as the topic had nothing to do with him or his birthday). His anxiety visibly started increasing when the presents were brought out and we all sang happy birthday. He was given the smaller presents to open first – mostly clothes and books. Then it was time for the big one.

While slowly removing the wrapping paper he was saying “I know I'm not going to like this.” It was clear that he was bracing himself for the inevitable disappointment. When all the paper was removed, it took a moment for him to realize what he was seeing – the stereo he had requested. His eyes filled with tears, and he abruptly got out of his chair and ran to his room.

After about 20 minutes he returned to the kitchen, where everyone had been patiently waiting for his return. Now he was ready to accept his gift and tentatively started inspecting his stereo. The other boys – who normally would be quibbling by now about how much more we spent on Brian's birthday than theirs – were excitedly admiring Brian's new stereo and pointing out its cool features to him. They knew that this was a unique situation.

Brian remained in our care for two years. By his next birthday, he had no difficulty asking for what he wanted and accepting the attention that came with celebrating birthdays!

* * *

In this story we see the importance of having a way of knowing a young person and how our understanding of them impacts our interactions with them so that we are responsive, not reactive to their actions. We also might notice how important it is for a young person to have a different experience of themselves in relationship with significant others in their life.

Reflective Questions

- How does this example illustrate the importance of knowing the young person, and understanding the meaning behind behaviours?
- Why was it important to ensure that Brian did not experience the expected disappointment on his birthday?
- How did this moment connect with the bigger picture of Brian's life?

Heather Modlin has worked in the field of Child and Youth Care for over 35 years. She is presently CEO of Amal Youth and Family Centre in Newfoundland and Labrador. Heather has published numerous journal articles, book chapters, and co-edited books. She has served on national and international boards and is currently Chair of the Board of Governors of CYC-Net and a board member of FICE Canada. Heather has a PhD in Child and Youth Care from the University of Victoria. In 2017, Heather received the YWCA Woman of Distinction Award for Community and Social Development in NL and in 2024 she was the recipient of the Unity Award.

Save the Date

Kaitlin Ahonen

The characteristics of a Relational Child and Youth Care approach “speak to how we are with young people, in all of their diversity and life experiences, understanding that people’s lives are very much impacted by social structures, power relations, racism, exclusion, marginalization and other dynamics” (Garfat et al., 2018). This story is about making an individual feel seen and heard and shows the power of hanging out and mattering.

* * *

In 2018, I had started my first *big girl* job after graduating in CYC and was working with a young girl, Maggie, a 16-year-old with Cerebral Palsy, Intellectual Disability and a seizure disorder. She was a twin; her sister was developing typically and lived out of town with their father, and she would only get to see them a few times a year. My role with Maggie was to work on life skills with her in the community. The specific goal Maggie, her Mum and I set out was for her to gain independence by learning how to use a debit card and budget her pocket money.

I would pick her up from school once a week, we would go to the bank, check her balance and then once we knew how much money she had we would go for an adventure to purchase something small within her weekly budget. This was often ice-cream at Dairy Queen (DQ), we became frequent visitors of our local DQ over the time we worked together.

When sitting at DQ, often playing cards, we would chat about anything and everything. Maggie was insightful about her ‘diagnoses’ and what they allowed/did not allow her to do. One day she was telling me that she really missed her sister and was jealous of her sister because she was learning how to drive, had a bunch of friends and had a boyfriend!

What a complete difference to what she was experiencing.

She was put into the special education class in school where she did not feel like she belonged. She was never allowed out in the community without a

trained adult due to her seizures and most of her 'friends' were her mother's friends from their church. She felt, from my understanding, very isolated and stuck in body that was constantly stopping her from living what she thought was a normal life, one that her twin sister was living a few hours away.

This was a topic we discussed often as it was very clearly what she thought was her most difficult adversity. "I don't know why I have to be like this, I just want to be normal teenager" she would say to me.

She would often speak to me about how her biggest wish in life was to just go on a dinner date, without supervision.

Throughout that year, I had plans to move to New Zealand and I was working with Maggie up until my departure. As my time with her was coming to an end, we were having the same conversations around how all she wanted to be was 'normal.'

Then I had an idea.

I checked with my manager to make sure it was okay, and once I got the okay from her, I contacted the girl's Mum. Mum was happy for me to proceed as well.

So, on my last planned session with Maggie, I asked her if she would like to go on a 'date' with me. I said I would come pick her up from home on Friday night, that we could dress up, and that I would take her for dinner to a spot of her choice. Her face lit up.

"Yes! I have never been to a restaurant without my mum before! Can we get really dressed up?" was her reply.

We had a fabulous time. We went to White Spot restaurant, just the two of us, in our fancy clothes and we had what she considered to be a 'normal teenage Friday date night.' We finished off the evening with a sundae and a drive. It was bittersweet to say goodbye to this beautiful girl. Her Mum took photos of us all dressed up in their garden at their home, and it truly felt like a magical evening for us all.

This has been an experience I will never forget. It was such a special moment for her, getting to just feel 'normal' for an evening. And for me ...

* * *

This remains one of my most special memories from that job as it showed me how being in relationship and participating with others as they live their

life can be such an impactful experience not only for the individuals we are working with, but for ourselves as well. Sometimes meeting others where they are at and just hanging out can be where the magic really happens. Mattering exists in how we are with others. Showing up and being human and willing to connect is what I feel is at the core of CYC and what makes it special and unique.

Reflective Questions

- How could or why would this experience have been impactful on Maggie?
- How do you think this experience impacted Maggie's sense of self?
- Has there been a time in your career that you have worked outside of the box to meet someone's need you're working with?

Reference

Garfat, T., Freeman, J., Gharabaghi, K., & Fulcher, L. (2018). Characteristics of a Relational Child and Youth Care Approach Revisited. *CYC-Online*, 236, 7-45.

Kaitlin Ahonen is a CYC graduate living and working in New Zealand. Kaitlin currently works for the Child Development Service in a small NZ town in the middle of the North Island on the west coast. Kaitlin grew up in British Columbia, Canada, and has now been in New Zealand for over 7 years. Kaitlin's happy place is in nature, in and amongst the trees and by the ocean; or curled up at home with my partner and two cats. Kaitlin is passionate about living an active lifestyle and spending time outdoors.

The Gift of Time

Noor Almaoui

The best relational work is genuine and authentic. Strong connections can develop when we bring our true selves to the center stage and allow ourselves to be seen. This gives permission for others to come forward with vulnerability as well. Many of the young people we work with have the best BS meters. They see right through us when we're not being real. This story is about the power of genuinely caring.

* * *

In 2019, Andie was one of my first clients in intensive community-based services. She was 14 years old at the time, and I was a Lead Clinician waiting for my two-years post degree milestone that would make me eligible for the supervisory position I had applied for. When Andie was assigned to my caseload, my supervisor warned me that she had a long history of canceling scheduled appointments or just not showing up altogether. The beauty of community-based services was that if the client did not show to a scheduled appointment, you had the opportunity to collaborate with a natural support such as parent at home or a counselor at school.

Andie was a bright young girl. She was the youngest of 3 children. Her eldest brother suffered from bi-polar disorder, and she began engaging in self-injurious behavior after witnessing her older sister attempt suicide. She had worked with a few of the clinicians in our office prior to working with me and her services were discontinued due to lack of participation. Her mother was a long-time single parent, and Andie had last seen her father at the age of 7, not long before her sister's suicide attempt. Her mother cleaned homes for work but was required to attend many appointments for herself and her children which impacted on her ability to work. She had a first-grade education and often got into fights with Andie because of Andie's refusal to stop cutting. Andie had an estranged relationship with her mother because she often said that her mother 'just didn't get her.'

Andie had been psychiatrically hospitalized a couple of times for suicidal ideation. This is what brought her to our program. So, anytime we had scheduled appointments, it was critical that I showed up and tried to reach her every single week. After about 6 months of sessions, many of which had been canceled, Andie asked me to meet at my office for a session instead of at school or home. This was not typical, so I was curious about the sudden change of heart. I began our session as I normally would and Andie tearfully shared her experiences with her brother's mental health, how it affected her family, and what her experience was like walking in on her sister in the bathtub with bleeding arms. I noticed that she was visibly starting to get tense at the memories, so I felt the need to focus on the now and help her be present. I opened my palm on the desk between us, inviting her to place her hand in mine, and reminded her of the present moment. It was important to me that she saw her strength then, so I thanked her for her bravery in sharing such scary memories. Her eyes became wide and she abruptly ran out of my office and out of the building. I followed her to apologize for startling her, but I could not find her. I tried to call her phone and she would not answer. I sent her a text message asking if she was ok and apologizing for what had happened. No response. I became a little worried. Luckily, she lived close to the office. I called her mother who was at home and asked if she had seen her. Her mother said she had not seen her, and I informed her of what happened and asked her to call me if she saw Andie. About an hour later, Andie's mother called me to confirm that Andie had arrived home safely.

I tried to set up weekly appointments thereafter to discuss what had happened. She would agree to sessions but not show up. One day, she finally agreed to meet with me at her house and was present for 30 minutes of the session. It had been some time since her last hospitalization, and she had successfully stopped cutting at this point. She told me she was no longer interested in continuing services and that she had gotten what she needed from treatment. Her mother obliged and told me she would follow whatever Andie's wishes were. I did not feel confident with her terminating services at this juncture. However, she was stable on her medications, and the services were voluntary after all. So, we ended services.

In 2022, one of my former staff asked me if I remembered Andie. I told her of course I did! She told me that she was aware that I had worked with Andie since I had come up in conversation when she had been discussing

former treatments with Andie (who was now her client). She then informed me that Andie had something important to tell me. We arranged to meet in the office one day and I would join them for the beginning of their session. I joined their meeting and Andie smiled widely when she saw me. She told me she was very happy to see me. It was a pleasant surprise given how things had ended with Andie so long ago. Andie started the conversation by telling me ‘you changed my life.’ I was stunned by her comment. I asked her how. She then told me ‘You showed up for me and gave me hope that people really do care and therapy can change my life. So, I came back. And it did.’ I had tears in my eyes and continued to ask Andie about her life. She excitedly shared with me all her successes over the past 5 years and thanked me multiple times for being there for her and for not giving up on her. It wasn’t until that moment that I finally felt that she was engaged and we were connected.

* * *

In this story, we see the power of patience, persistence, genuine care, and unconditional positive regard. Sometimes, we’re not awarded the fortune of seeing the differences that we make. However, I urge you to hold faith that when we act with good intentions and treat the young people we serve with unconditional positive regard, we are planting seeds that change lives.

Reflective Questions

- What was done in this story that gave Andie the message of genuine care?
- How did follow-through play a role in reinforcing care?
- Why is unconditional positive regard powerful and necessary for authentic relationship?

Noor Almaoui is an Implementation Specialist at Sycamores in Los Angeles. She is a trilingual, multiracial owner of Universal Ethos, Inc where she provides a variety of mental health and social services to children and adults nationally and internationally. She has extensive direct line and supervisory experience in community mental health and crisis management, and has presented at CYC Conferences in the USA, Canada and Ireland.

Unknown Transforming Moments

James P. Anglin

During one of my own research studies that involved visiting 10 group homes at any time of day or night, weekends and weekdays, over a 14-month period, I heard many stories of transforming moments.

One that stands out, and that emphasizes the importance of moments, even those of which we are totally unaware, involved a young boy of about 12 years old. When I was asking him for his permission to interview him about his experiences in one of the group homes I was studying, he asked: “So you want to talk to me about my experiences so you can help other children have better experiences in care, right?” I replied “Yes, that is my hope for this study.” “Okay, I will talk to you” he said.

Amongst what he told me was a story about coming down the stairs from his bedroom in his pyjamas on a Saturday morning and being stopped in his tracks when he heard two staff members arguing in the kitchen. He sat down on the stairs, frozen with fear, listening to the male and female workers on shift continuing to argue. After a while, the arguing stopped, and he continued down the stairs into the kitchen. The two staff members were making pancakes, and greeted him with a cheery “Good morning, want some pancakes? We have real maple syrup this morning.” The boy then told me that this was the first time he had ever witnessed a man and a woman arguing when the man did not beat up the woman. He said, “I realized then that there was a different way for a man and a woman to relate to each other, and I decided I wanted to treat women in this different way.” I am quite sure these two staff members had no idea that this had happened for this boy, but their moment of respectful disagreement gave this young man an experience that he would never forget, and that may have broken an intergenerational cycle of domestic violence.

This story taught me once again that we must never underestimate the power of moments. And we need to always strive for respectful interactions,

and with all people, as we never know which moments may be transformative for someone. (...) I know, both as a parent and as a former direct-care worker, there were too many opportunities I missed, living and working with others, to really listen, to get behind the behaviors, and to respond with loving care.

Reflective Questions

- How can an agency promote healthy interactions across all members of staff, so that the young people being cared for experience positive adult-to-adult relationships?
- What are the key elements of positive staff relationships?
- Do staff in your agency/program understand that often we may never really know what impact we have on the young people and their families? How might this affect their approach to their work?

(Used with permission from the Foreword to *CARE Edition 3: Creating conditions for change* by Martha J. Holden, 2023: Child Welfare League of America).

James P. Anglin began by studying philosophy before realizing that the meaning of life is loving creatively – loving something, anything, and doing it with passion – and where better to do that than pursuing a life-long career in Child and Youth Care work. From front-line to management to graduate study to policy analysis to developing standards of care to program development to teaching and training to research to international partnerships to writing to reflecting on moments and meanings. Grateful for the journey for the friendships for incredible learning for opportunities to experience diverse cultures for each step on the journey toward being human.

Echoes of Courage and Hope

Paul W. Baker

Courage and hope are powerful forces that can reshape a young person's life, especially in the face of adversity and uncertainty. For youth who have experienced trauma, these qualities are not always instinctive – they are learned, nurtured, and strengthened through supportive relationships. This story explores how courage can emerge through connection and how hope can grow when someone believes in your potential.

In the heart of a small urban Texas therapeutic day program, 14-year-old Alex, a young person with a significant trauma history, paced the worn linoleum floors, his fists clenched and his face twisted in frustration. Alex had always been the kid who lashed out – knocking over chairs during group activities, storming out of conversations, or isolating himself when things got tough. His teachers called it ‘behavioral issues,’ stemming from a chaotic home life where his single mom worked double shifts and his absent father was just a faded memory. Deep down, Alex yearned for control, but every setback felt like a personal defeat, wiring his brain to react with anger rather than resilience. He watched other kids at the center effortlessly glide on skateboards in the outdoor park, laughing and high-fiving, but the thought of trying it himself terrified him. “What if I fall? What if they laugh?” he’d mutter to himself; his mind trapped in a cycle of self-doubt.

Enter Ms. Jordan, a seasoned Child and Youth Care worker with the local CYC program. She wasn't the type to lecture or punish; instead, she believed in meeting kids where they were – in their life-space, in the raw moments of everyday struggles. From their first encounter, Ms. Jordan focused on building a genuine connection. She sat with Alex during lunch, not probing his past traumas but sharing light stories from her own youth about overcoming fears.

“You know, Alex,” she said one day, “our brains are sort of like muscles. When we connect with others and try new things, it actually rewires those pathways – makes us stronger, more adaptable.” This was her awareness of interpersonal neurobiology, explaining how positive relationships could calm

the storm in his amygdala, the brain's fear center, and foster emotional regulation through shared experiences.

Alex eyed her skeptically at first, but Ms. Jordan persisted with a relational approach, consistently showing up with empathy and authenticity. She didn't see Alex as 'problematic'; instead, she highlighted his strengths.

"I've noticed how observant you are," she'd say. "You spot things others miss – like how that kid balanced on the board by shifting his weight just right. That's a real talent for detail."

This strength-based perspective shifted the narrative from Alex's deficits to his potential, boosting his self-efficacy. Drawing from positive psychology, she encouraged him to practice gratitude for small wins: "What went well today? Even if it's just showing up."

Over weeks, their bond grew – through shared games, walks in the park, and honest talks about feelings. Ms. Jordan modeled vulnerability, sharing how she once feared public speaking but built courage through tiny steps, reinforcing that optimism and perseverance could transform challenges into growth.

One afternoon, the therapeutic turning point arrived.

The skate park buzzed with energy, and Alex hovered at the edge, board in hand, his heart pounding. "I can't do this," he whispered, his old behaviors bubbling up – ready to throw the board and run.

Ms. Jordan knelt beside him, her presence a steady anchor. "Remember, Alex, we're in this together. Your brain's already wired for bravery; you've shown it in how you've opened up to me. Let's focus on what you can do – start with one push."

Her words echoed relational trust, reminding him that he wasn't alone. With a deep breath, Alex stepped on the board. He wobbled, fell once, but got up laughing – not out of embarrassment, but genuine joy.

By the end, he managed a short glide, his face beaming with pride. "I did it!" he exclaimed, high-fiving Ms. Jordan. In that moment, he felt the shift: courage wasn't about perfection; it was about trying, supported by someone who believed in him.

As Alex's confidence grew, so did his ability to manage his behavior, turning outbursts into conversations and isolation into connection. The day program became his safe space, where relationships healed and strengths flourished. Through his journey, Alex learned that courage is not the absence

of fear, but the willingness to try despite it, especially when supported by someone who believes in you. Hope emerged as he began to see his own strengths and possibilities, transforming setbacks into opportunities for growth. Ultimately, Alex discovered that with relational support, self-awareness, and small steps forward, both courage and hope can become lasting tools for resilience and change.

Reflective Questions

- How can CYC workers effectively use everyday interactions and real-time experiences to support developmental growth, emotional regulation, and meaningful change?
- In what ways can practitioners identify and amplify a young person's strengths to promote self-efficacy, resilience, and a more positive self-narrative?
- How can CYC practitioners intentionally build authentic, trust-based relationships within the life-space to foster safety, connection, and emotional growth?

Paul W. Baker is a neuropsychologist with professional experience as a special education teacher, school principal, Director of Clinical Services, Chief Operating Officer, Chief Executive Officer, and is the developer of The PersonBrain Model, a NeuroTransactional approach to help transform challenging behaviors through hope, neuroscience, and relational practice. Dr. Baker is the co-author of *The Hopeful Brain, The Minded Brain, and Better Behaviour ... Positively*, a frequent speaker at professional conferences and consults with organizations internationally across a wide range of human service areas. He is a former foster carer for 29 young people and the adoptive parent of four amazing humans.

The Puzzle, the Goalie, and the Power of Showing Up

David Brennan

This story captures, in its simplest form, the heart of why I do Child and Youth Care work. Out of all the moments I could have written about, this one stands out because nothing about it was scripted or clinical. It began with silence, a puzzle, and a choice to sit down. In the aftermath of a student suicide, when the school community was overwhelmed by shock and grief, this interaction reminded me that meaningful support does not always come from having the ‘right’ words or strategies. Sometimes it comes from noticing, waiting, and being willing to stay. This story reflects how relationship, built slowly and respectfully, can become the foundation for healing, coping, and resilience – especially when young people are navigating grief that feels too heavy to name.

* * *

I met Amanda the day after a student at our school died by suicide.

The school had designated a quiet room in the guidance area where students could come if they needed space, support, or simply somewhere to sit that wasn’t a classroom full of grief. It was not a dramatic space – fluorescent lighting, folding tables, boxes of tissues, and a few activities laid out for students who needed something to do with their hands. As a Child and Youth Care practitioner, I know that healing rarely begins with words. Often, it begins with presence.

Amanda was sitting alone in the corner of the room, working on a puzzle. She was tall for her age, hoodie pulled tight around her, eyes focused downward. She didn’t cry. She didn’t talk. She didn’t look up when people entered or exited the room. She simply worked on the puzzle with quiet determination, piece by piece.

I asked if I could sit with her.

She nodded.

That was it.

No conversation. No explanation. Just a nod. So, I sat down next to her and began helping with the puzzle. We worked side by side, occasionally sliding a piece toward one another, but without words. The silence was not uncomfortable; it was intentional. It was the kind of silence that says, *you don't have to perform your grief here.*

After a few minutes, I gently said, “If you feel like talking at any point, I’m here.”

She didn’t respond. She didn’t need to.

Sometimes our role is not to open doors, but to let students know they exist.

The next day, many of the same students returned to the room. There was a shift in the air – less shock, more sadness. Some students talked openly, sharing memories of their friend. There were tears, laughter, guilt, confusion. Grief, in all its messy forms.

Amanda came back too.

She sat in the same corner.

She stayed silent.

This time, I noticed her backpack. Her name was written across it in bold letters, underneath a hockey club logo. I’ve learned over the years that relationship-building often starts with noticing – really noticing – what young people carry with them, literally and figuratively.

I waited for a natural moment and asked, “Do you like hockey?”

She nodded again.

Progress.

“What position do you play?” I asked, keeping my tone light and curious, not interrogative.

“Goalie,” she said.

That was the first word she had spoken to me.

From there, the door cracked open.

I asked about her team, how long she’d been playing, and what she liked about being a goalie. She began to talk – slowly at first, then with more confidence. She told me she wanted to play professionally one day. She told me she was a huge Toronto Maple Leafs fan.

I paused.

“Well,” I said carefully, “I suppose we can still get along.”

She looked up at me for the first time and smiled.

I told her I was a Vegas Golden Knights fan. I explained that I had visited Las Vegas shortly after the arena was built and decided I wanted to cheer for a team from the very beginning. She laughed and told me my team choice was “questionable at best.” I countered that loyalty to the Leafs required a level of emotional resilience that should come with a warning label.

And just like that, we were joking.

What struck me most was not the content of the conversation, but the shift in energy. Amanda was no longer just surviving the room – she was connecting. From a relational CYC perspective, this moment mattered. It wasn’t therapy. It wasn’t intervention. It was attunement. It was meeting her where she was and letting her lead.

The following day, I saw Amanda in the hallway.

“Did you watch the game last night?” she asked.

I smiled. “I did. Did you?”

She nodded. “Can I come see you at lunch?”

That question – so casual on the surface – carried weight. It was an invitation into trust.

At lunch, Amanda finally spoke about her friend.

She talked about how sudden it was. How she kept replaying their last interaction. How she didn’t know what she was supposed to feel. She wasn’t crying the whole time, but her voice trembled. She said she felt confused that the world seemed to keep moving when hers had stopped.

I didn’t rush her. I didn’t try to fix it.

I validated her experience. I normalized the confusion. I reminded her that grief doesn’t follow rules or timelines. Together, we worked on grounding strategies – breathing exercises, short meditations, ways to notice her body when her thoughts became overwhelming. We talked about checking in regularly, not because something was ‘wrong’ with her, but because connection itself can be regulating.

Over the next several weeks, Amanda and I had regular check-ins. Sometimes we talked about grief. Sometimes we talked about hockey. Sometimes she just stopped by to say hello. Each interaction was a thread, weaving a sense of safety and continuity.

Shortly after Winter Break, Amanda came into my office crying.

Her grandmother had passed away during the break.

This time, the grief was layered – fresh loss sitting on top of unresolved pain. She told me she felt exhausted, sad, and frustrated that ‘it was happening again.’ But then she said something that stopped me.

“I used the breathing you taught me,” she said. “And I bought a journal. I’ve been writing down my memories – of my friend and my grandma. It helps.”

That moment reminded me why relational work matters. Skills are important, yes – but skills land differently when they are grounded in trust. Amanda wasn’t just repeating strategies; she was integrating them into her life.

As the months passed, Amanda continued to check in. She talked about school stress, hockey tryouts, friendships. She introduced me to Sudoku puzzles and Wordle, insisting that they were ‘way more fun than puzzles.’ Our conversations remained light at times, deep at others. Always relational.

By spring, she was noticeably different – not because she no longer carried grief, but because she carried it with more confidence. She laughed more easily. She advocated for herself. She showed resilience without pretending everything was fine.

At the end of the year, Amanda asked if she could sign my yearbook.

What she wrote to me still sits with me:

“Sir, you didn’t have to sit with me that day to do the puzzle, but you did. Your kindness, support and help never went unnoticed. I’m glad I started coming to speak to you – even though you have poor taste in hockey teams.”

I wrote back in her yearbook: “You are welcome in my office any time! You have grown so much. And remember, I’m wise – that’s why my hockey team has won in my lifetime! Go Vegas!”

It made her laugh.

* * *

This experience reinforced something I believe deeply as a Child and Youth Care practitioner: relationship is the intervention. Sitting quietly with a student. Talking about hockey. Respecting silence. Not rushing grief. These moments matter.

I didn't fix Amanda's pain. I didn't take it away. What I did was show up – consistently, authentically, and humanly. And sometimes, that is exactly what a young person needs.

Even if they cheer for the Leafs.

Reflective Questions

- How does this story challenge traditional ideas of 'intervention,' and what does it suggest about the role of presence, silence, and shared activities in supporting young people through grief?
- In what ways did attunement and curiosity (e.g., noticing the backpack, following the student's interests) help build trust, and how can we intentionally practice this kind of relational noticing in our own work?
- What does this story reveal about resilience and coping, and how might relational connections help young people carry grief rather than feel pressure to 'move on' from it?

David Brennan is a Child and Youth Worker who graduated from Centennial College (2003), Ryerson University (2010), and Humber College (2023). He is also a licensed Meditation and Breathwork Teacher. He began his career with casual work at Aisling Discoveries and North York General Hospital and has worked with the Toronto District School Board since 2003. He is passionate about helping others find their light on dark days and empowering youth to reach their potential. David is a devoted husband, father, and proud dog dad to two Labrador retrievers.

This collection brings Child and Youth Care practice to life through vivid, relational storytelling that captures the complexity and beauty of everyday moments. Rooted in authenticity and genuine connection, these stories highlight the power of presence, curiosity, and humility, reminding us that meaning is often found not only in what is said, but in what is quietly held.

With a focus on reflection and growth, the narratives invite readers to challenge assumptions, honour silence, and reconsider perspective, while emphasizing the importance of mattering in the lives of children, youth, families, and practitioners alike. Shared experiences become catalysts for transformation, illustrating how young people can move beyond their self-perceptions and how practitioners grow alongside them.

Thought-provoking and deeply human, this book rekindles passion for Child and Youth Care practice and affirms that learning is lifelong.

Jenny McGrath, PhD – Department of Child and Youth Care, MacEwan University, Canada

This is a powerful collection that honours the moments where real connection happens. Through these short stories, the writers gently illuminate the everyday courage, compassion, and presence at the heart of child and youth care. Each tale invites the reader to pause, reflect, and recognise the profound impact of relational care that is often found in the quiet, in-between moments. This book is a joy to read and a moving reminder of why this work matters, celebrating the deep and lasting difference we make in the lives of others.

Simon Walsh – Chief Executive Officer, Allambi Care, Australia

Stories have always been a foundational part of Child and Youth Care practice. They are a great way to teach and give examples of what the texture of relational practice is. I read this book with such pleasure. The wide array of people who have contributed to this book brought together so many experiences and insights into what quality Child and Youth Care is as well as giving a sense of the history of Child and Youth Care. The critical thinking questions at the end of the stories also added so much to the learning.

Frank Delano – President, Professional Package Consulting, USA

