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Contents

Memory, Creativity, and Spontaneity: Characteristics of a CYC Improviser

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In this third article of a series of six, the author looks at improvisation concepts from several art forms (music, dance, and theatre). He argues that these concepts are essential elements needed by all effective CYC practitioners. The concepts discussed include memory, creativity, flexible, spontaneity, mindfulness and relationship with others.

I came to child and youth care through theatre. While developing productions with young people I discovered I enjoyed the *process* of working with children & youth, sharing stories, imagining what could be and creating art, more than I enjoyed the performances that resulted. The creation and rehearsal processes became longer and longer and the performances we developed had shorter and shorter runs. Beyond the enjoyment, I also found that the most interesting, challenging and transformative moments happened off stage — in the development. This realization led me to change my path from theatre artist to CYC practitioner. I now find that the two cannot be separated for me and this series of six articles are my exploration of the relationship between theatre, improvisation and child and youth care.

In this article I will look at fundamental elements of improvisation across several disciplines and how the concepts that define improvisation are also essential for child and youth care practitioners (CYCs). I will argue that not only is improvisation a helpful framework for working with children and youth, but that the characteristics of improvisation are composed of qualities, approaches, and skills that all effective CYCs need.

What is improvisation?

At its base, improvisation is being able to act, and react, in the moment. Hodgson and Richards write that improvisation in drama utilizes "the spontaneous response

to the unfolding of an unexpected situation, and the ingenuity called on to deal with the situation; both of these in order to gain insight into problems presented" (1974, p.2). When CYC practitioners work with young people we are constantly responding to situations we are presented with. Many of these situations will be unexpected, at least initially. The more experience we have (hopefully) the less frequently the situations will be unexpected. Practitioners are called upon to use their ingenuity in interactions with children, youth and their families. Yet, improvisation is not about inventing a completely new response every time we are presented with a situation. Discussing improvisation in music, Whittall writes "(t)he ability to improvise has long been regarded as one indication of good musicianship, but the skill it represents has as much to do with memory as with genuine creativity" (n.d.).

Every situation CYCs experience will be different and each individual unique. We cannot rely upon the same response to every situation; however, we do rely upon our memory and experience to make informed decisions. Stuart (2013) identifies the three stages of CYC practitioners' professional development as novice, experienced and mature (p. 52). With each stage comes a greater level of expertise and an ability to be more responsive to the person in the moment. As the practitioner develops s/he moves from a focus on personal safety and external controls (stage 1) to individualized approaches (stage 2). In stage two the "skills related to

implementing external controls, applying theory and creative intervention techniques are developed" (Stuart, 2013, p53). Interactions at this point require flexibility and individuality (Garfat and Fulcher, 2011), premised upon a sound understanding of CYC skills and techniques. The practitioner does not "make it up" they utilize knowledge (memory) and creativity to act. When we notice (Garfat, 2003) the unfolding situation we engage with the person to work with them in trying to gain insight into the opportunities (Brendtro and Shahbazin, 2004) presented. We draw upon our ingenuity and practice-based wisdom. Improvisation is a building upon what has happened prior. It requires a close attention to what the young person is doing, and how our presence is impacting them. Returning to the stages of professional development, in stage three "the practitioner focuses on observing self and self in interaction with clients" (Stuart, 2013, p. 53). As a mature practitioner the CYC is being mindful.

The definition of improvisation by Hodgson and Richards begins with the concept of being spontaneous. As I hope is clear above, when I write of improvisation in CYC practice "spontaneous" does not mean random actions that have no forethought or are not grounded in intentionality. Nor does it come "without any external stimulus" (Spontaneous, 2014). Young people do things for a reason and we should only ever be doing something with the young person for a reason. There is always preparation and intentionality in our work. Spontaneity in

our work is about "acting voluntarily and from natural prompting" (Spontaneous, 2014). The roots of spontaneous come from Latin and mean, "of one's own accord, freely, willingly" (Spontaneous, 2014). We are making a choice to engage with the young person, "participating as they live their lives" and "meeting them where they are at" (Garfat and Fulcher, 2011). Spontaneity is not impulsivity. Spontaneity in CYC practice is about responding willingly in the moment based upon skills learned and the needs of those we are in relationship with.

Improviser is a fitting descriptor for CYC practitioners. Indeed, improvisation has been used for decades in discussing how we work with children and youth "…it is poetry in motion, improvisation as in jazz. It is spontaneous — but not random — unfolding, open ended, the flow of life" (Beker 1991, para. 2). "Often I have written about how youth work is like a modern dance that is improvised according to the rhythms of daily interactions and the youth's developmental readiness and capacity to participate." (Krueger, 2010 para.2). In discussing work with children and youth Baizerman writes "(j)azz improvisation, not formal ballet, should be the metaphor" (1993, p.246). Poetry, jazz, and dance can all be useful metaphors for CYC practice. While metaphors are helpful, our work is frequently concrete. Improvisation is not only a metaphor for our work; effective CYCs have it as their foundation.

Aesthetics A-Z states that improvisation is "(S)pontaneous, imaginative yet mindful artistic creation through performance…" (Improvisation, 2010). The entry goes on to identify skills and creativity as being central to effective improvisation and notes the "shift from the idea of a work as a product to the idea of a work as a process" (Improvisation, 2010). Imaginative yet mindful, consisting of skill, requiring creativity, work as a process, these are apt descriptors for CYC practice. Viola Spolin, a formative writer and practitioner of improvisation in the theatre gives many definitions of what improvisation is. Here are several, which I think are particularly salient for this discussion (Spolin, 1990, pp383-384). I am following each of these with corresponding CYC concepts from Garfat and Fulcher's *Characteristics of a Child and Youth Care Approach* (2011) that align with Spolin (see table on the next page).

As can be seen from reading Spolin, Hodgson & Richards, Whittall and the Oxford English Dictionary, through the lenses of Garfat & Fulcher, Stuart, Krueger, Brendtro & Shahbazian et al. many aspects of improvisation are present within child and youth care.

Fear of risk taking and the unknown

One of the reasons audiences enjoy improvisation is that they don't know what's going to happen. One of the reasons some performers fear improvisation is that they don't know what's going to happen. In Characteristics of a CYC improviser: Approaching with "Yes, and…" (Vachon, 2014) I wrote about offers and blocking. An

IMPROVISATION …	CHARACTERISTICS OF A CYC APPROACH
… is permitting everything in the environment (animate and inanimate) to work for you in solving the problem.	Participating with People as They Live Their Lives Using Daily Life Events to Facilitate Change.
… is not the scene, it is the way to the scene	Hanging out, Meaning making
… is process as opposed to result	Connection and Engagement Rituals of Encounter
… is setting object in motion between players as in a game	Intentionality, Rhythmicity, Purposeful Use of Activities
… is solving of problems together	Meeting Them Where They Are At. Doing "with", not "for" or "to".
… is the ability to allow the acting problem to evolve the scene;	Hanging In Working in the now
… is a moment in the lives of people without needing a plot or storyline for the communication	Participating with People as They Live Their Lives Being Emotionally Present
… is transformation;	Using Daily Life Events to Facilitate Change Responsive Developmental Practice Meeting Them Where They Are At Hanging Out
… brings forth details and relationships as organic whole;	Examining Context Being in relationship
… is a living process.	Being in relationship

offer is "anything a person says or does. Offers are the building blocks from which improvisation is built" (Wirth, 1994, p.40). Blocking is a refusal of the offer; not accepting what the person says or does. To block is "to undermine the truth or intent of an offer" (Wirth, 1994, p.43). Many early improvisers are reluctant to accept offers because they fear what might happen. "What if I don't know what to do?" "What if my response fails?" "What if nobody laughs?" Beginning improvisers frequently don't feel prepared confidently to take an offer and advance it. Talking about the three reasons that improvisers block offers, Wirth starts with fear. "When someone makes an offer, you frequently don't know where it is going to lead and whether or not you will be able to handle it. By blocking the offer, you prevent it from going anywhere, keeping yourself safe … and the scene stagnant" (ellipse in original) (Wirth, 1994, p.43-44). The second reason he gives is "blocking for control: when you make an offer, you probably know where you want it to lead. When another performer makes a subsequent offer that doesn't fit where you wanted to

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go, you may be tempted to block it" (Wirth, 1994, p.45). The final reason is "blocking for laughs".

A fear of not knowing where something will lead, whether I will be able to handle it and a desire to control the situation is common for CYCs. Stuart, in discussing the levels of professional development as outlined by Jack Phelan, writes in level one "(t)he practitioner focuses on personal safety. The focus of skill development is implementing external controls, routines, and reinforcement related to client behaviours" (2013, p. 53). Anderson-Nathe writes about "youth workers' experiences of being stuck" (2008). He identifies five themes associated with not knowing what to do, two of these that align with Wirth are "Helpless, hopeless and out of control: Features of despair" and "Center stage: Humiliation, being found out, and the myth of supercompetence" (Anderson-Nathe, 2008, p. 38). I teach an introductory interventions course to prepare students for their first placement. I don't remember any student going into placement saying, "I am completely prepared to do this placement." Or "I have the skills and confidence I need to do this successfully." It is to be expected that student CYCs will have fear going into placement. Indeed, this fear may be healthy and help to keep the novice safe. It is also completely understandable that new CYCs will experience fear when young people make an offer. Offers, or what Freeman and Garfat (2014) call bids, (a bid being "the act of making an offer for something" [p. 25]) can frequently take on

the form of a challenge. It is easy to become scared and to attempt to establish control: when a 7-year-old girl you're are working with screams and swears at you after you direct her towards bed; when someone discloses that they are thinking of suicide; when a 17-year-old male you've only recently met, and who weighs 30kg more than you, refuses to turn off the TV as the football match goes into extra time. In these moments we can become scared, stuck, and in despair we sometimes block. When something happens that we don't know how to handle, blocking can be our way to refuse the moment. If we can somehow make the offer go away then (we think) we'll no longer be in a place of helplessness, we will not suffer the humiliation of feeling like a fraud. Our fear pressures us to respond not in the best interests of the young person, but in a way that attempts to reduce our own features of despair.

When a young person acts in ways I'm not expecting, I frequently "don't know where it is going to lead". I can respond to the offer from fear. A fear response risks me blocking the offer and eliminating the opportunity for connection. I block in an attempt to create a safe space *for myself*. I try to control my own emotional state through controlling the young person. The interaction is no longer about me responding to what the young person needs; it is about me reacting emotionally to the behaviour of the young person. Fear can be a helpful emotion in our work; there are times when it may save us from dangerous situations. However, when fear prevents us

from accepting bids, the fear is no longer healthy or productive.

Instead of reacting from a place of fear, I can act as a CYC improviser. This means accepting that this is the bid which has been made. While I may have fear, I recognize fear is rarely going to lead to a strength and relationship-based response. I can accept that this is a moment in the life of the person I'm working with, I can permit everything in the environment (including my fear) to work for us, I can recognize that I am engaged in a process with myself, the young person (and anyone else who is present) and that we can all work together. These aspects of improvisation, as outlined by Spolin, allow the moment to transform. Rather than resisting or refusing the offer, I attend, accept and advance through saying "yes, and…"

Memory and play

"Improvisation" can be interpreted as actions taken without forethought or skill. Perhaps you've worked beside someone who likes to "wing it". These people may come into their jobs with little preparation, experience, or training and wing it because they have limited understanding of what else to do. They may initially come across as spontaneous and creative. New graduates and people without formal CYC training may see winging it as part of the work. Jack Phelan, at the keynote address for the 2014 Ontario Association of Child and Youth Care conference spoke about how similar first year CYC graduates and people with no training might look to

those who do not understand relational child and youth care (for an article on the same ideas see Phelan, 2014). To the uninitiated it may look like a popularity contest: which of the staff do the young people want to spend the most time with? Who do they want to dress like, talk like, and act like? Some people observing these two individuals might think that really there is no difference between the skills of college or university graduates and those who just stumbled into the job. Early in their careers both these individuals may create or respond to actions without much pre-planning; they may wing it:

- The new graduate because they are still in the process of integrating their learning and trying to understand the implications of all their actions.
- The untrained, according to Phelan, because they do not know any better.

Initially both may *look* equally good (or poor) without *being* good. The new graduate is in what Garfat identifies as phase 1 of their professional development: "(i)n this stage the worker, often insecure, frequently confused and overwhelmed, but deeply caring, has a tendency to 'do for' young people" (2001, para. 13). The untrained may have just as deep a caring tendency and be equally committed. "Wanting them to succeed, the worker does things for the young person so that they might experience success rather than failure" (Garfat 2001, para. 13). This could easily be imagined for either of these two staff members. According to Phelan, it is in

the second and consecutive years that the quality of the workers starts to become apparent.

An example of looking good without being good comes from my own musical experiences. During elementary school I was recruited to the school band, based upon my "natural ability" to echo, with my voice, notes they played me. This was an assessment that all the students in the school went through, back when there were dedicated music teachers. I was given the double bass to play; I learned some very basic skills on the bass. When I was in grade seven I switched schools. They also had a band; there was no one else at the school that played bass. They immediately put me into the advanced band so the only bass player in the school would be in the most prestigious band. I found myself well below the skill levels of all the other students. Being the only bass player, though, it was easy for me not to be heard. It *looked* good to have me there, despite my lack of ability. I really showed my value at performances. No one could really hear what I was doing so I was free to be as creative as I wanted to be when it came to looking good. I would spin the bass, flip it between hands, and lower it close to the ground all while I continued to "play". I would put on a performance with the bass, rather than performing the bass. The audience thought I was great and enjoyed watching me. The conductor knew I could barely play, the rest of the band also knew how weak I was, but to the audience I was great. To the uninformed I looked as good as the rest of the band, I may even have looked

better than they did. But if anyone asked me to play by myself, I barely knew what to do. I was too busy trying to look like Lee Rocker (the bassist from The Stray Cats) to learn the fundamentals. I gave up the double bass. All the work of learning how to be a musician took a lot of time and energy, it was more fun to play with a bass than it was to learn the skill that would make me a competent bassist. For some people who come into a job working with children or youth, it may be more fun to play with young people, rather than to learn the skills that would make them competent CYCs. I have argued elsewhere (Vachon, 2013) that people without formal CYC training may be excellent practitioners. I do not see this as a contradiction of what I wrote above. Individuals who learn the skills to play the bass, whether in school, through mentoring, with private tutors or elsewhere have learned to play the bass. It is not Julliard alone that makes them great musicians; it is their capacity, their perseverance, and their practicing with honest self-assessment and feedback.

Skilled musicians who improvise have memorized vast quantities of music. Through this memorization (along with practice) they have learned the foundations of how to play. In hip-hop, "free-styling" is spontaneously creating lyrics off the top of one's head. This is a form of improvisation that requires a strong knowledge of words, rhymes, and rhythm. If one watches the same MC do multiple free-styles, one can see the phrases and structures they return to again and again. One can analyze how the artist uses these

phrases in new ways depending on whether they are "battling" with another artist or performing alone on stage, and who the audience is. All free-stylers have a limited vocabulary that they draw from, yet the most competent make each time unique and relevant to the specific moment. This is the same for Jazz musicians; they have phrases and melodies that they continuously return to and depart from. The DJs playing the club XS in Vegas have1000s of tracks with them, any of which they can choose based upon the moment. They memorize the beats, drops, and energy of these tracks.

Great DJs play the audience as they play songs. In playing the audience, they are engaged in a reciprocal relationship with them. The DJ creates opportunities for dancers to express themselves; the dancers play in the sounds (milieu) provided by the DJ. For the dancers, playing becomes a moment of freedom, freedom to express, sweat, connect, and be open to possibilities. Baizerman writes, "Youthwork is playful in intent, style and practice in that it is an open moment pregnant with possibilities which youth make into words or actions, a glance or a blow" (Baizerman, 1989, p. 5). Baizerman understands that "play as freedom is a primary form of openness, of possibility" (1989, p.5). The DJ watches for moments of possibilities. They look for when dancers come onto the floor and when they leave, when they raise their hands in the air and when they lower them, the DJ paces the music with crescendos and breaks. This relationship between DJ and dancer is what Mark

Krueger called rhythmicity (Krueger, n.d.). Krueger understood rhythmicity as being the "fluent, reciprocal, interpersonal interactions" (Krueger, para. 6) between practitioner and young person. "…human connections are formed in large part through a series of moments when workers and youth are at one — a quiet moment sitting on the couch together, a tucking in, a walk, a conversation — and that in these instances there is almost always a sense of both rhythm and presence. Worker and youth are there and in synch" (Krueger, para.17).

Structure and creativity

Improvisation is a development from knowing. One cannot improvise until one understands the structures, rules, limitations, and possibilities. Improvisation begins with learning the knowledge. Once we have a solid foundation we can begin to adapt and apply the knowledge based upon the individual needs of the young person we are working with. Moving from novice to experienced to mature practitioner. " … the CYC Practitioner is flexible in interactions with each person, recognizing that there is no one approach or intervention which fits for everyone, or applies in all situations" (Garfat and Fulcher 2014. P. 12). We must improvise; if we stick to a single script (this is **the** rule for people who miss curfew, swear at staff, refuse to do a chore, etc.), then all our responses will be the same, regardless of the needs of the individual we are working with. I remember speaking with the Exec-

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utive Director of a mid-sized children's mental health organization several years ago. The organization ran group homes, open detention facilities, a shelter for street involved youth, and provided "outpatient" individual & group counseling. We were talking about the abilities and limitations of recent graduates. He said he really appreciated recent grads' enthusiasm, passion and commitment but he found their practical *knowledge* lacking. He said most came with few tools and limited understanding of the possibilities within them. Once they tried that tool, if it was not effective, they didn't know what to do next. They lacked flexibility and creativity; they lacked the characteristics of a CYC improviser (my term, not his). The image that comes to me as I write this is that of a saw. A handsaw is great tool for cutting wood, and it can also make beautiful otherworldly music when used as an instrument.

Improvisation in a CYC context is not winging it. Improvisation is being fully present, being fully aware, having tremendous skill to respond to whatever the offer is, and knowing what offers to make ourselves. "No matter where CYC Practitioners work, what they do is always intentional. This does not mean that one abandons spontaneity. But even in the moment of spontaneity, the Practitioner continues to reflect on their intention(s) in the moment. This is, in essence, reflective CYC practice." (Garfat and Fulcher, p.11). To improvise means reflecting upon, and learning, from what has worked, and not worked, in the past. To watch a begin-

ning musician and a seasoned one, it is clear who has the skills to improvise and who does not. I teach a college level introductory CYC interventions course. I frequently demonstrate being a CYC by responding to situations that the students come up with. We'll have a student play a young person and I will be the CYC. I don't know in advance what the situation is. Using the many characteristics discussed above, I respond to what they come up with. The more I do this, the more comfortable I become. I always ask the students for feedback afterwards. We all critique what worked and what didn't work. When I ask students to do interventions, as the practitioner, at the beginning of the semester, they often have little idea what to do. The interventions are frequently punitive, not based upon relationship, and they frequently stop the intervention to "start again". Over the course of the semester they become more comfortable and competent. While this may seem self-evident, it is important to highlight in the context of this discussion. People become more competent the more opportunities they are provided to act, have successes, make mistakes, receive feedback, and try again. They are learning the basic skills (to use an image from music, the scales) they need to be responsive practitioners. They are memorizing techniques, they are applying these in different situations, and they are being creative in their responses (using tools in different ways with different situations). They are making inelegant sounds with the handsaw — but they understand it does

more than cut wood.

In contact improv, a form of improvisational dance composed of moves related to physical touch — lifts, balances, momentum and other weight-bearing activities — each dancer responds and relies upon the other.

> Contact Improvisation is an honoring of every moment. There is a sweet surrendering that happens when our bodies stay faithful to what is happening now, and now... and NOW! One learns to recognize and differentiate subtle impulses in our movement choices and our partner's choices. We begin to decipher the cues that we give and receive which tell us when to lead or follow, when to go up, when to go down, where to touch, how to lift, when to slow down, and when to be still. In this form one learns to stay in integrity with each choice, never forcing, never rushing. When Body, Mind, and Spirit are united in their instinctive wisdom one finds ones self at home in every moment expressing one's true nature. (Zemelman, n.d. para. 2)

This description captures many of the essential elements of engaged child and youth care. Being in, and honouring, the moment ("working in the now", "being present" Garfat and Fulcher, p12); tuning into the subtle impulses and choices that others make ("rhythmicity"); deciphering the cues we receive and responding accordingly ("flexibility and individuality" p.

12); knowing when to lead and when to follow ("Doing 'with' not 'for' or 'to'" p. 11); and an awareness that we need to be "at home" in our-selves, expressing our true nature ("It's all about us" p. 15).

I have taken several contact improvisation workshops and been to many "open jams" (where anyone can come and dance with others). There is clearly a movement vocabulary that one needs to have in order effectively to dance. There are cues that the dancers give each other, ways to communicate (without speaking) that allow the other person to determine what each partner knows, what each partner's strengths are, what each partner's limits are. I also found that the more experienced my partner was, the safer and more competent I felt. The safer I felt, the more I was able to take risks and push myself. The inverse was also true, when I danced with someone who had little experience (the same as, or less than, me, when I was first learning this form), I felt very inelegant, I was often at a loss as to my next move, I perceived myself as having limited skills. I wonder how many young people feel this in their work with CYCs? Some practitioners seem to almost always know what to do, things flow, there is a safety for risk taking and pushing. Whereas with other workers it feels awkward or hard, problems happen, there is a lack of perceived safety and the young person is consequently not willing to take risks.

CYC improvisers have many characteristics that are needed in work with children, youth and their families. We are *skilled* and draw upon the *memory* of past

interactions. We use our *creativity*, *imagination* and *ingenuity*. We recognize that the work is a *process* that requires us to be *flexible* and *spontaneous*. We *prepare* and are *mindful* in all our interactions. We understand that we *solve problems together* in *relationship with others*. We work towards *change* through *permitting* everything to aid in *transformation*.

I think it is appropriate to leave the last line of this article to a CYC practitioner who has been instrumental in helping me understand the relationship between CYC practice and improvisation. "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" (Krueger, 2010, para. 2).

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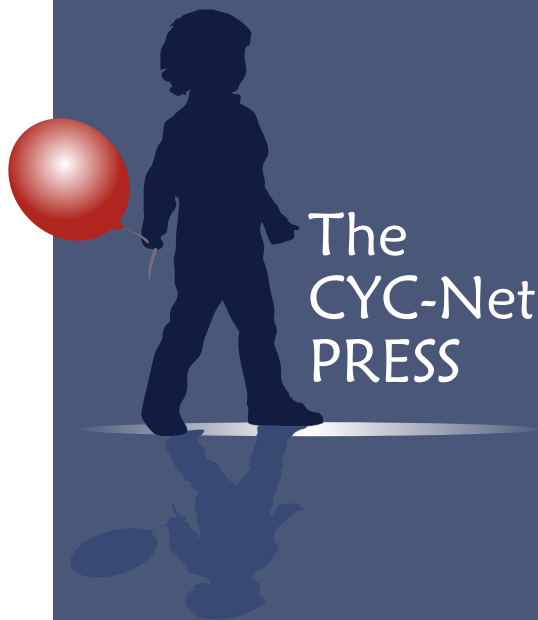
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What Are They Dreaming About?

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Sometimes I wonder: What are young people living in precarious circumstances, dreaming about? I mean quite literally, what are they dreaming about at night, when they are sleeping? With the holidays approaching, those dreams might well be particularly intense. Are they dreaming about their families? Happy times with parents and siblings, or terrible times featuring violence, abuse and conflict? Are they dreaming about returning home for the holidays, participating in holiday rituals, consuming holiday food? Or are they dreaming about being excluded from the

holiday spirit, being abandoned, rendered irrelevant during this supposed time of love and joy? We do of course talk with youth about their dreams, as in where they might see themselves in the future or what sort of life they hope to have someday. But we don't ask them much about their 'real' dreams. In fact, it seems that we generally take very little interest in what happens for young people while they are asleep. For the most part, we rejoice that they are in fact asleep, which improves the prospects for a quiet shift.

Some time ago, I, along with my friend Carol Stuart, wrote about the virtual life space, and suggested that the concept of life space ought to include the imagination, one's dreams, one's nightmares, and also those moments we spend day dreaming about this or that. After all, we argued, our lives do unfold in those spaces, even if our level of consciousness within those spaces may vary, and even if how our lives unfold in those spaces may well be invisible to the outside observer. So it is in this sense that I am increasingly curious about what young people dream about. But perhaps on a more mundane level, and disconnected from theory, I am curious about it just because I know so little about it. I can talk at length about the young people I have met and describe their visible lives, their tangible experiences, the things that are recorded somewhere, that can be traced through social histories, information sharing with other professionals, and sometimes just asking the youth or their families/caregivers. But dreams are an entirely different thing; they are not recorded anywhere, and even the young people themselves may or may not be able to remember what they might have dreamt about three nights ago, much less a year ago on a particular night.

I am no expert on dream analysis. But I do know that dreams are connected to our everyday lives in some way; sometimes our dreams or our nightmares are ways of re-living particular experiences, sometimes they appear more as abstractions of specific moments, and quite often they reflect a story based on a fleeting thought we may have had recently, or an unconscious glance at an image on TV, a billboard, or in a store front. Sometimes our dreams are about the things we are lacking in life and wish we had; at other times, they are about the things we wish we never experienced, but that keep coming back to haunt us. Regardless of what our dreams actually are, we spend a lot of time dreaming, and we dream more regularly than most other things we do. In fact, the experience of dreaming is arguably one of the most predictable experiences we will have in life, partly because we can exercise only very limited control over what our brain does while we are asleep.

There is a whole body of literature, and an extensive research agenda, that seeks to explore the connections between trauma and dreams (usually nightmares). Many of the young people we meet have been exposed to trauma in some way or another. But we often have no idea about how that trauma manifest itself in the young person's everyday life, preferring instead to focus on the symptoms of trauma,

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which often ends up being little more than behavior management strategies taken straight out of 1980s group home manuals. Perhaps this has to do with our own discomfort in dealing with the trauma of the young people; anxiety about whether or not we will be able to handle it if we begin to talk about. It seems like a lot of energy and investment is going into training people in trauma-informed work, re-shaping programs to become trauma-informed, and just generally incorporating the language of trauma in therapeutic services for young people (and also for veterans).

I am a little torn about all of this. In general terms, I have often lamented our impulse to get 'clinical' about what are usually little more than the very human, very personal, and very mundane characteristics of everyday life. But I have to acknowledge that trauma-informed care provides a very compelling case for a greater focus on adjusting our services, structurally and procedurally, to the possible impacts of on-going trauma. What remains to be seen, however, is whether or not the very excellent research and literature on trauma-informed care actually changes much in the everyday life of group care, foster care or even family-based care where we, as child and youth care practitioners, may have a role to play. My bias is to focus on those things that we can definitely do, so long as we recognize some value in doing so and also some level of congruence with relational practice. And so I wonder: Could we make a concerted effort to talk with young people a little more often about what they are dreaming about?

I think we should. In fact, I think it is hard to claim a commitment to relational practice that does not include a real interest in and engagement with the dreams that unfold in the life space of the young people we meet. If we omit this conversation from our practice, we send the message that dreams are not part of everyday life, serve no purpose in the healing journey, and therefore are not worthy of discussion or conversation. I wonder, then, how many young people we spend time with for months on end are sad to not have an opportunity to talk about what might be of considerable importance to them. If they take the risk of bringing up their dreams, who knows what sort of labels might be imposed on them; will they be called psychotic? Will they be written off as crazy? Will they be deemed to have issues with distinguishing meaningless dreams and fantasies from reality? Perhaps some pills could cure that problem. I therefore believe that we should take the initiative, and ask, ever so casually, about their dreams often and without judgment. They know they dream; we know they dream. So why not create a space that is safe, accessible and serious and authentic, to talk about it?

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EXPLORING SEXUAL DIVERSITY:
Helping children and young people develop understanding and respect for differences in the human family

Lorraine E. Fox, Ph.D

Sex and Sexuality: Understanding the broad spectrum within the human family

Issues of sexuality have been prominent on many fronts recently so it seems appropriate to talk about sex: understanding the development of sexuality, how humans end up with such diversity sexually, and how we can help kids, and ourselves become comfortable with sexual diversity.

It is my hope that talking about sexuality openly will be helpful to parents and others who work with young people in developing more comfort when talking with children and teens about sex.

Take a minute to review your own childhood and what you were and were not told about sex. Take a minute also to recall the comfort level of your parent(s) and teachers when they approached the subject. Although many eons have passed since my own dismal sex education, I find in my own work that I am amazed at the misunderstandings that continue with regard to the wide variety of sexualities that develop: what they are and what they mean. I am also disquieted by how difficult

adults continue to find these conversations. If knowledge is power, as we've often heard, hopefully adults will feel more "powerful" – able to feel assertive and able to influence others – in confronting issues of sexuality with children and teens.

Sexuality, especially gay sexuality, has become a topic of social conversation in at least three areas, and for some in worship communities taking a stand on acceptance of sexually diverse congregants even a fourth.

1. The news has been abuzz with the implications of recent court rulings with regard to marriage equality and the in- your-face acknowledgment that people who are sexually different have been denied their civil rights under the constitution. This "sea change" in American society will reverberate for many years now as state after state has confronted their own laws around marriage equality. As we move into 2015 more states allow same-sex marriage than deny it.
2. The attention that has been given to

bullying, at schools and in the news, and in our own column last year, has pointed clearly to the disproportionate victimization of children and young people who seem to be developing into either a homosexual orientation or who are gender non-conforming, causing anxiety and aggression among their peers.

3. The field of Child Welfare has finally recognized that lesbian, Gay, bisexual, transgendered, and questioning children and gender non-conforming young people have been treated unfairly by the system designed to care for them. In response, legislation has been passed requiring both professionals and caregivers to discontinue practices of discrimination. In addition, it is now a requirement that people working with LGBTQ children and teens receive specific training on understanding these issues.

4. If you are a member of a faith community that has taken a stand to be openly welcoming and affirming of LGBTQ people, children are then exposed on a regular basis to the variety of sexualities possible.

For these reasons, we owe it to our children to be knowledgeable about sexual differences, and to be courageous in moving beyond "tolerance" to being accepting and affirming of these differences. Being willing to confront our own prejudices, discomforts, and misunderstandings is a gift we give our children.

One of my favorite quotes is from Ram Dass: "We're all just walking each other home". Each other means ALL of us. So it is my hope that the walking path will become crowded as adults walk the path together, considering, understanding, and learning to love, as we've been taught to do, those like us, those not like us, and those who need more than anything to feel as welcome in the world as anyone else.

History and the slow march toward justice

We can help children understand issues of sexuality by using the history they study in school about how social changes happen.

All cultures develop at their own pace and frankly very unevenly around the world. I would like to say that our Country helps to lead the way toward social justice but I don't think that's true.

The United States tends to march behind some and in front of others as far as extending the benefits of equality for its' citizens.

Children will study in school how adults have always been challenged by issues of justice and seem to take them on one at a time. Children who are now exposed to Modern Family and many shows on television with gay characters would be astounded to know how very recently gay people have come to be represented in a positive way in the media. Teenagers who saw Heath Ledger and Jake Gylenhall play gay cowboys, and Annette Benning and Julianne Moore play a lesbian couple have

no idea that straight actors playing gay parts is a radical step from the not too distant past when gay actors, such as Rock Hudson, only played straight parts. So you should tell them. It's good to use things that happen in your home (television) and things they learn in school to help them grapple with the way things change and the pace at which they do.

No one thought much about having very young children work in factories rather than go to school right here in America. Now the American media rants about "third world" countries who use children to manufacture products we buy, but we did the same thing. Tell them. Slavery and the "owning" of humans by other humans was something that not just people, but many Christian people, were quite comfortable with. Until many persons of conscience, both religious and non-religious, came to believe that such a practice was totally unjust and fought to overcome the complacency with the degradation of other human beings. Issues of racial equality, reparation, and striving toward justice is still in the news today as States makes moves to do away with "affirmative action" and people of color are regularly gunned down in our cities and towns.

Not that long ago, in historical terms, white people felt "entitled" to have sex with people of color against their will. If people of color had sex with white people against their will they were hung.

Children will have studied how not only were people of color considered "less than" white people, but women - their mothers, aunts, and sisters - were consid-

ered "less than" men and not allowed to vote. Gay rights and the fight for marriage equality are just the latest major social challenge involving sex, following the fight for marriage equality for inter-racial couples.

For reasons I'm always puzzled about, "society" has decided it has the right to say who can love who, who can have sex with who, and who can marry who. Give your children the "context" with other similar issues, so they can have a better understanding of what they see and hear now, in the media, in school, and in church about the current controversies around sexual diversity.

In terms of getting along with adults and peers in other settings it is also important for children to know that every time society/culture decides to make a change, people "split". They disagree, and can become pretty ugly about it. Watch current relevant movies with them: Lincoln; The Butler; Fruitvale Station. While teaching about the rights of all people to love who they love, we also want to teach them that unfortunately this is a pretty new idea and friends, neighbors, and colleagues are not in harmony about changes regarding sexuality. Help them watch with interest the struggle between those wanting to hold on to past traditions, and those pushing for change.

As we focus on issues of sexuality and how to help children and young people learn to accept and affirm sexual diversity, in themselves or others, it will be helpful for them to understand why these issues are difficult and divisive, as ALL issues of justice have been. Fortunately for Ameri-

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cans, the younger generation does not seem to have to struggle as much as older people with difference and diversity including sexual diversity.

Words, nature and the "Natural Order"

In an attempt to regulate society, people often resort to the misuse of language to bolster the point of view they want to advance. Over history this has been done to keep various classes of people "in their place", and is still done in many ways.

Children, for example, are often not referred to as "citizens", and therefore although our constitution grants certain rights to citizens, these rights often do not extend to children. In order to support the notion of males as being superior to females, so- called "generic" terms for people are kept male identified: **man**kind; hu**mans;** hu**man**kind; wo**men.** Even today many people addressing a group will say, "Okay **guys**, let's settle down". In a mixed group no group leader would ever say, "Okay girls, let's settle down". "Dude" is often used to refer to anyone as an expression: there are no "Dudettes".

Throughout the march toward justice and equality we have heard things about homosexuality as being "un-natural". Of course, we heard the same thing about mixed marriage not that long ago.

Again, rent movies like "Lincoln" and "The Butler" so they can hear the arguments about the legitimacy of slavery by references to "the natural state" or "the natural order", which then equates "white" with good, white people as intelligent and superior.

Cowboys who are the "good guys" wear white hats. Dark hatswere worn by the "bad guys", who were often presented as being dumb, or even evil, or less than, like black people.

An interesting problem with the misuse of language is that even when language is used correctly it can be common to misinterpret it by giving it a negative meaning. For example, how do you respond when someone says that homosexuals are "abnormal"?

If your instinct was to correct that statement or to hear it negatively, you have confronted the problem with language.

As a matter of fact, homosexuality is **abnormal**. To be normal is not the same as being "good", or "healthy". The word "norm" means "most". When teachers grade on a "normal" curve, they consider how most students did. Some students will be below the "normal curve", but others will be above it! I have a Ph.D. which is true of less than 1% of the population (except at IUCC). This makes me "abnormal". If you are a blond or a redhead, you are "abnormal". If you have perfect pitch – you guessed it, you are abnormal. The word "deviant" has the same meaning. To be deviant is not necessarily good or bad, it just means that someone is different from the general population. One can "deviate" from the norm by being exceptionally talented, as well as by being unusually evil. It is true that heterosexuality is more the "norm", but that does not have implications for being

"natural" or healthy. "Nature" loves diversity. Witness the Eagle and the Lion, and also the Anteater and Armadillo.

As parents and adults working with children and young people, it is important to listen to the words they use, and how they use them. As we know from the problem with bullying, words can hurt. But words can also cause unnecessary confusion. If one of your children is exceptional in some way, either due to deficits or gifts, they are abnormal. Help them to learn what that word means and to be comfortable with being "out of the norm". Also teach them not to use a word that is intrinsically non-judgmental in a way that seems to put others down.

Another language task is to help children, especially teenagers who will be grappling with their own sexuality, how to listen carefully to uses of certain words to misinform. For example, one often hears the term "sexual preference" when referring to homosexuality, although it is never used to refer to heterosexuality. That word is used for gay people so that efforts to "convert" a gay person to a straight lifestyle seems likely to be successful, since one can always learn to enjoy a different flavor of ice cream if the store is out of your "preferred" flavor. That is why the word "sexual orientation" is more accurate than "sexual preference". If sexuality were really a preference for everyone, we would hear the word used equally for straight and gay people.

The words "queer" and "faggot" and even homosexual were replaced by the word "gay" for the same reason that

"black" replaced the "N-word", Negro, and Colored. It was an effort by members of a disparaged community to erase the many negative connotations that became associated with the words. Later, for black people, the term "African-American" was introduced by Jesse Jackson, in an attempt to widen our definition of people of color to include more than the color of their skin and to link people to their heritage. This is another example of quite recent social transition, demonstrating that people seeking equality engage in a **continuous process** to gain respect. The use of certain kinds of language is crucial for conveying respect.

Interestingly, now there are some people of color who are objecting to the term "African-American" since many black people are not actually African by heritage. This illustrates, again, the power of specific language, and how words stir sensitivities in individuals.

Finally, in the 1980's, at the height of the women's movement, many gay women wanted to declare that issues between gay women and gay men were different, so many began using the word lesbian rather than gay, a distinction that is important to some gay women but not to others.

The use of language and the struggle for dignity and equality are very much intertwined. When children understand this, they will learn to become more respectful, and follow Micah's instruction to "love kindness". One of the ways to be kind to others is to be thoughtful in how we refer to them.

The Gift of Diversity and Nature's Natural Order

A visit to the Discovery channel (which, by the way, should be on a different channel every night, don't you think?) will reveal one of nature's great gifts to us all: a world filled with difference!

Not only are there different species, almost too many to count, but even wide variances within each species. Any study of nature will quickly reveal that the Creator has no problems with difference. This includes the diversity of sexualities within various species, including our own human species. Having considered that "deviant" and "abnormal" have no moral meanings we acknowledge that such terms only point to a spectrum of difference inherent within nature. When we say that someone is "average" looking, we are only saying that someone

is not extraordinarily beautiful or handsome, or unfortunately unattractive. We are acknowledging that along the spectrum of appearance there is wide diversity of appearance. Being of "average intelligence" is the same: some have unusually low I.Q.'s and others are exceptionally bright: most of us are average, or normal. Why some people are so surprised and even disturbed that there is a similarly wide spectrum of sexual attractiveness can be a little puzzling. In fact, you know that

people different than you find people you would not even consider as an affectionate or sexual partner very appealing. We now take for granted that God/Nature/Creation contains a wide spectrum of

difference in all plants and other living things. If we can accept this rather obvious truth we can move on to arming ourselves with information. This information will help us help young people who will learn as they grow about the wide variety sexual attractions and self-definitions. Although for most adults the letters "LGBTQ" are unfamiliar, they are becoming used so often that soon almost everyone will at least be exposed to this designation. In guiding children through the array of sexualities we want to have a clear understanding of what each of these "labels" imply. This is especially important for parents as kids will often hear only loosely constructed labels thrown around, often to disparage themselves or someone else. Young children often throw words like "queer", "faggot" or "gay" around knowing only that there is some negative connotation to them, but not knowing what they are actually saying.

Using sexual designations loosely and without understanding is a problem for at least three reasons. One, if they don't know what they are saying they may cause hurt to another person without taking responsibility for the harm caused by their words. Also, if someone uses a derogatory term toward them, it may be meant to cause intentional harm. In this case, the child or young person should know what they are being called, and whether it "fits". If it doesn't fit, we can help them learn how to respond to such name-calling and to remind them that being called something doesn't make you something. Thirdly, sometimes the label may be accurate. In

this case, we will want to help children develop assertive and self-confident responses to avoid feeling degraded and negative about themselves.

The use of labels related to sexuality is especially complicated because there are no outward signs that give "proof" of one's sexuality. For example, a white skinned child would never be called the "N-word" because clearly it doesn't fit. Someone who doesn't wear glasses would not be called "four eyes" and a tall kid would never be called "shorty". But how one **feels** is only known internally, so it makes all of us fair game for being mislabeled and potentially mistreated, or being labeled accurately and being mistreated.

It is the job of parents and other adults to "arm" children with confident responses to any labels directed at them which will take the power away from anyone trying to use negative labels to hurt them. We also want to remind children that "labels" in and of themselves are not positive or negative. The label "applesauce" on a jar of applesauce is not good or bad, but a description of what is inside of the label. In the same way, calling someone by a description should not be negative, unless someone has decided that being "applesauce" is bad. Unhappily, because not enough people enjoy the wonderful diversity of nature, and difference often causes anxiety in people, some labels, even when they are not "name-calling" are experienced as negative.

On the continuum of sexuality, some people are called "straight" or "heterosexual", which means that they have affectionate or sexual feelings for people of the "other" sex. Some people are referred to as "lesbian", which means which that they are a girl or a woman who has affectionate or sexual feelings for other girls or women. Some people are called "gay", which currently means either a man who has affectionate or sexual feelings for another man, or either a man or a woman who has same sex attraction – similar to the way the word "human" or "person" refers to both men and women. The term "homo" (which means "same") is sometimes used as a short word for homosexual and is always meant as a put-down of someone with same sex attraction.

Someone who is "bisexual" or "ambi-sexual" has affectionate or sexual feelings for both people of their same sex and people of the other sex.

The words lesbian, gay, or bisexual refer to how people feel about other people. The word "transgender" refers to feelings a boy/man or girl/woman has about themselves, as far as whether they feel inside like the sex nature has assigned them. And "questioning" people are those who, for whatever reasons, aren't sure about themselves. There are specific issues and challenges encountered by each of these groups of people. Understanding these challenges can help young people decide to be kind.

This is part 1 of a 3-part article. Parts 2 and 3 will appear in the next two issues of CYC-Online.

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Responding to Pervasive Shame without Punishment

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In my October column, I wrote about children and young people who experience pervasive shame and posed a query about how we maintain boundaries, set limits and create safe environments without exacerbating what can often be a vicious cycle for them (see http://www.cyc-net.org/cyc-online/oct2014.pdf, page 21-23). This month's column will attempt to answer that query.

As discussed in October's column, disruption-repair (or the re-establishing of harmony in the relationship) is essential to keep the shame that a child experiences from parent disapproval or admonishment from turning into pervasive shame (or an enduring sense of being bad). Similarly, children and young people will also need some degree of disruption-repair when they come up against your personal boundary or limit on their behaviour. This repair may take simple and even subtle

forms. For example, depending on the strength of the relationship, eye contact and a smile may be enough to bring your relationship with a young person back to an even keel. You may also naturally do other things that promote disruption-repair; these may include giving an explanation for the boundary or limit, identifying what you think the child is feeing and offering an empathic response, expressing how you feel about what is happening, diverting the child's attention to something else, or even simply staying physically and emotionally present with the child through the process.

With some kids, re-establishing harmony in the relationship is relatively easy. They may be looking for reassurance and reconnection. They may already feel badly about what has happened and having a firm but caring adult response may come as a relief. There may be an initial rough

patch, but making that connect is pretty achievable. Kids like these are unlikely to have repeatedly been left in pervasive shame, and they will likely have developed a capacity for guilt and empathy. As a result, they're probably not the ones who we find it difficult not to punish.

Kids who have frequently been left in pervasive shame will often unconsciously adopt angry, aggressive behaviours to cover the unbearably painful feelings associated with shame. As a result, their development of empathy and tolerance for guilt will have been compromised – empathy and guilt are far too threatening and overwhelming to be felt, let alone digested and integrated into one's personality. Pervasive shame not only interferes with the development of a conscience, but the capacity to form and maintain relationships more generally. This makes the problem of disruption-repair all the more challenging. It is impossible to re-establish harmony in the relationship if there is no relationship to begin with. Moreover, if the relationship is precarious and/or predicated on beliefs and meanings from previous damaging relationships, disruption repair will be difficult. Importantly, though, it also may be the very stuff of relationship building.

So how to do it? I don't think we, as a sector, have this figured out – hence the difficulty in avoiding punitive responses in practice. I wonder how many times this is at the core of placement breakdown. What follows are some ideas, based on years of practice, contemplation and scholarship, about how to maintain boundaries,

set limits and create safe environments with kids who experience pervasive shame.

- Stay as much in relationship through the setting of the boundary or limit as possible. How one does this will vary based on the relationship itself and the style of related both bring to it. Some things to consider in how you do this include:
  - Conveying care in your words, your affect and your non-verbal communication. As much as possible, the limit should be based in care. For example, keeping a young person in because you're concerned about what's going on with them and want to spend some time with them is a very different message than preventing a young person from going out because their behaviour doesn't warrant the privilege;
  - Remaining emotionally available through the process. Again, this might be similar to the previous bullet, but also might include making your own thoughts and feelings available to the child and showing genuine curiosity and concern for his or hers.
  - Resisting the temptation to shut-down or engage in counter-aggression. Again, this is consistent with the previous two bullets, but it is worth a mention. Sometimes we can shut-down or appear to shut-down in our efforts to remain calm, and for some

young people, this will be experienced as abandonment (though they may not be consciously aware of it). Counter-aggression can take various forms, but I suspect if we're honest, one of the most common ways it manifests is in the way we set consequences for mis-behaviour.

- Be firm. Having the requisite mixture of warmth and firmness can sometimes have a magical effect, so in your efforts to remain in relationship, be sure that you don't then send mixed messages. Anglin refers to communicating 'with expectation in their (staff member's) voice' (2002, p.68) and I think this is very useful.

- Keep consequences, if you use them, as manageable as possible.
  - They should be logical – related to the infringement;
  - They should be proportionate – not necessarily to the behaviour but to the child's developmental

capacity. A seven-day curtailment of a particular privilege will be far too much for a child who has little grasp of that duration of time;

- If you can let consequences unfold naturally, then better yet. A deliberately inflicted consequence is not a natural one; one that arises naturally as a result of a child's behaviour and then is processed with him afterward can be very helpful. There may be times when allowing a natural consequence may be too great a risk to the child's (or another's) well-being and this, of course, should be avoided. It may be helpful to communicate this to the child, particularly if you have had similar communications about natural consequences that have previously unfolded.

- Remember that you may well be absorbing the unbearable (unconscious) shame and related feelings from a child who is suffering from pervasive shame.

Consider:
- how you can tune into that;
- what it might tell you about what is going on for the child; and
- how might you 'give it back' in a more manageable form.

- Be aware of and work with your own triggers and reactions to behaviour or situations that you find difficult. Use supervision, team meetings and informal discussions to tease out and make sense of what is yours.

- Capitalise on opportunities for modelling. Kids with pervasive shame may have little idea of what it might look like to fix things when they mess up, so be sure to highlight your own mess ups and make visible your own efforts to fix things – individually and as a team, big things and little things. A culture where this is the norm is more likely to be a safe place where children and young people can begin to actually feel the impact of their actions on others.

- Avoid the temptation to make simplistic assumptions about what a young person is experiencing based on surface behaviour. This is especially difficult with young people who use aggression pro-actively (rather than re-actively). On the surface, it may appear that they have no feelings about their harmful behaviour, or worse, that they derive some satisfaction from it. While this may indeed be the case on a superficial level, there are deeper layers that un-

derlie what's going on, and helping a young person to experience him or herself more fully is part of the process of developmental recovery. This will likely be threatening to the young person and will require your own persistence and a dogged commitment to knowing him or her more fully.

- Actively maintain perspective. It can take a very long time, with repeated efforts on the part of skilled and caring adults, before a child can even begin the process of shifting out of their defences against shame. Try and remain hopeful and optimistic while also bringing patience and a long-term vision to the process. With some kids, this takes a lot of endurance. Also, remember that kids will make progress, but when faced with something too unmanageable, will likely regress. Sometimes it is during periods of regression that it is hardest to see a child's progress as real, and as worth supporting.

This is merely a start, and I'd be interested in your thoughts about, additions to or even disagreement with them.

Until next time…

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Creating an Oasis in the Classroom

Kathleen Cameron

Abstract

During my graduate training I wrote an autoethnography and conducted a self-study of the intrinsic and extrinsic factors that contributed to me being at risk for poor academic outcomes. In exploring my childhood experiences in the education system, I recalled that after a very difficult school year and a tumultuous relationship with a teacher that was for me, from an academic and emotional perspective, devastating, I found myself in a classroom that in comparison to the previous year, felt like an oasis. I described the teacher of that peaceful classroom as an "oasis teacher." Forty years later, that experience, and that teacher continues to affect my own teaching practice.

Introduction

Towards the end of writing my thesis for a Master of Education, I thought, "Where … when is this going to end?" Before returning to post-graduate studies, I'd acknowledged that being a student had never been an enjoyable experience for me but had resigned myself to the fact that further education would be necessary to improve my employment opportunities. I had been working off and on in the child and youth worker field since 1986 and like others whose articles have appeared in this journal, it is something I just fell into after getting my undergraduate degree. I did not plan this career.

While front line child and youth work moved and inspired me, I knew I'd truly found my vocational calling the first time I stepped into a community college classroom as a part-time

teacher. That was a huge irony given my very negative experiences as a child and youth in the classroom. I detested being a student, yet thoroughly enjoyed being a teacher! I felt the need to explore that dichotomy. As I began to analytically examine my educational history as well as my students' experiences in the classroom, it seemed only fitting that I should write about that topic as a final requirement to completing the post-graduate degree. I was the coordinator of the Child and Youth Worker (CYW) Program at Georgian College, teaching future CYWs about children and youth at risk for poor academic outcomes. My thesis was entitled *Risk, Resiliency and Academic Outcomes in the Context of One Individual's Life: A Self Study.*

In exploring my childhood experiences in the education system, I recalled that after a very difficult school year and a tumultuous relationship with a teacher that was, from an academic and emotional perspective, devastating, I found myself in a classroom that in comparison to the previous year, felt like an oasis. I described the teacher of that peaceful classroom as an "oasis teacher." Forty years later, that experience, and that teacher continue to affect my own teaching practice.

This paper is about the final steps of writing my thesis when I felt I'd explored every aspect of being at risk in the education system. I was at loss about what it had all meant, why I had embarked on the post-graduate and thesis writing journey and where I found myself as I came to the end of that journey. I had been working on my thesis for two years and was depleted.

I felt I was in a desert and my ideas and inspiration had dried up. And then the "oasis" metaphor I'd used to describe an important teacher in my past emerged to replenish me once again. I believe it is a metaphor that any individual can embrace to positively influence their own practice whether they be teachers or front-line child and youth counsellors.

Oasis

Oasis was autoethno- graphic, specifically, a self- study, and along with the chapters containing my literature review, methodology, and discussion and findings, I'd written a lengthy chapter called "The Story." The story was my own, mostly negative experiences, in the education system. I had been an at-risk child and youth who somehow found herself writing a Master's level thesis. I considered myself to be a voice not often heard in 'the academy,' that is, a child and youth at-risk for poor academic outcomes, who now as a middle-aged adult, had a voice to speak about those experiences. I was an insider coming out, so to speak.

What I hoped to accomplish from an academic perspective was clear to me. I wanted to shed some light on the experiences and perspective of a child who is struggling academically and falling through the cracks of the education system. I hoped it would affect teaching practice and that teachers who read my story might feel compassion for the child that was struggling in their classroom with the kinds of issues that did not evoke much

sympathy from teachers. I hoped they might feel compassion for the belligerent, difficult, disrespectful child who seemed hopeless and who the teacher might believe did not have what it took to complete higher education. What I was unprepared for was how the writing of the thesis would change me and affect my own teaching practice.

I began the literature review seeking knowledge of the intrinsic and extrinsic factors that contribute to children and youth being at risk for poor academic outcomes. The review focused on research that sought to explain why a child or youth who did not have intellectual or cognitive challenges still might experience poor academic outcomes. I also wished to review literature that examined resiliency factors. Specifically I wanted to better understand how an individual who did poorly academically in elementary and high school was then able to complete post-secondary schooling successfully. I was also interested in determining why some individuals who did poorly in elementary and high school, successfully returned to post-secondary education as mature students. I wanted to understand all of those issues that were relevant to my own history as a student.

The writing of chapters one and two progressed nicely and in a predictable way. The introduction and literature review chapters were almost completely an academic and scholarly exercise for me. How best could I introduce my thesis topic? What questions was I seeking to answer? What did the literature reveal about my experiences as a child and youth at-risk? I

think my thesis supervisor would agree that this part went smoothly. Those chapters moved back and forth between us with the expected suggestions for changes and additions to what I had already written. It was however the methodology chapter that started me on a different path and began to affect my emotional equilibrium. While researching and then writing about ethnography and self-study I was, at times, having consciousness altering moments where I truly felt I was in some other dimension. I often felt like I was speaking with two voices: that of the academic and the voice of the at risk child. I struggled first with identifying those two aspects of my psyche and then integrating them. I began my methodology chapter with a discussion of the dichotomy.
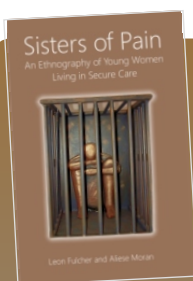
How does one rationalize the telling of one's own story? It is notable that, before I attempted to provide a rationale for readers as to why I chose self-study and this particular topic, I had to justify to *myself* why my personal story was important and worth telling. That need to convince myself of the value of my own experience was multi-layered. Initially, I had come to understand that I was an individual who was at-risk for poor academic outcomes and so did not expect to be writing a thesis at a Master's level. That presented an intellectual and psychological conundrum because I had been accepted into the post-graduate program and I was doing well academically. Reality and a core belief clashed. Logically, I could obtain that degree. Emotionally, I was in conflict and somewhat disbelieving that I was capable

of such a feat.

We can understand something *intellectually* but believe something completely different on an *emotional* level. Having internalized the belief that I was not capable of a high level of academic performance yet writing about that aspect of myself and my history in a Master's thesis seemed to be a complete contradiction. I believed those two internal views to be a dichotomy. The two perspectives *must* be mutually exclusive. As discussed earlier, that feeling of being in the wrong place and not belonging caused conflict in explaining my own reality and, on a deeper level, my own truth. At that point, I was intensely aware of a distinct split in my internal world. I could think and speak with two distinct voices, but in deciding to conduct a self-study I was taking the first step toward integration of these two voices. The current, educated, master student persona, was attempting to give voice to the other persona, the child and youth at risk for poor academic outcomes. (Cameron, 2008, p.29)

As the methodology chapter progressed, I became immersed in *writing about the writing* of my experiences. The words flowing from me to the keyboard and out onto the screen began to create an "in the moment" reality. I was right there, completely present and feeling the profound shift of my perspective. It truly was a life-altering experience. I became conscious of a merging that was occurring between two parts of me that represented my past and my present. I wrote in the chapter that:

> …. I was realizing that writing my thesis has been a journey within a journey. Outwardly, the journey was the telling of my story that took me, and hopefully the reader, to places forgotten or never visited before. Inwardly, the thesis itself represented a journey of discovery about my place in an academic environment as well as to my place now, in my life. One of my goals in choosing this topic and methodology for my thesis was to integrate the two voices with which I

spoke and the two perspectives with which I viewed the world and I believe I have achieved that goal. However, the joining was not seamless and was occurring not only outside of the thesis process. In fact, it happened through the process of *writing* this dissertation. Perhaps it might be defined as stream of consciousness data gathering. It is allowing the immediate emergence of my truth and understanding and discovery in the living, breathing document that is this piece of work. While writing this thesis, it allowed an unbroken flow of an awakening thought without objective, analytical discourse. This document became not just an account of my history and an assumed stance and analysis of that history or simply a perspective presented in words on paper. It also documents the unfurling of consciousness and stimulated personal growth that occurred at this very moment I wrote this page, this word. (Cameron, 2008, p. 50)

Deep stuff! I was feeling odd after all that and walked around for days in that altered, trance-like state. I felt a bit disconnected from the everyday world but sharp and clear on some levels. That knowledge, or spurt in self-awareness and what I termed as 'unfurling of consciousness' kept me in a surreal place not unlike being drugged. As I moved into the last chapter of my thesis where I was to write about my findings and make recommendations for future research, I was anxious.

Where does one go after a trip like that?

If anything can bring you back to reality and into your present life, standing in front of a room of young, perhaps slightly idealistic or slightly cynical students certainly will. It is difficult to fake it there. At least it is for me. So a few days after my mind-blowing stream of consciousness self-discovery writing stuff I found myself nervous, inarticulate and halting as I spoke to my colleague's child and youth worker research methods class, about what?...qualitative research and in particular, my methodology of choice, an autoethnographical self-study.

Normally, I am not nervous in front of a class. I thrive on teaching, contrary to my negative experiences in the education system as a student. But in that class, talking about my own research and educational experiences, I felt somewhat stiff and realized I also was feeling vulnerable as I read from my own thesis a piece about the importance of relationship between the teacher and the child. The students I was speaking to were future child and youth workers. My thesis was all about me, a child and then later a teen who fell through the cracks of the education system.. I hoped to 'inspire the desire' in them to advocate and support children in the classroom where and when they could do so. What follows are the sections I choose to read to the students that day:

Bonnie Benard (1997) discussed the possibility that we can all be "turnaround" teachers and that there are ways that a teacher can "tip the

scale from risk to resilience" (p. 2). In my educational life, I refer to "oasis" teachers who, while not necessarily turning my life around, certainly gave me a safe, restorative place to be for a period of time. I do believe it is possible for a teacher to have a profound effect on a child, both positively and negatively. Benard lists resilience skills as being "the ability to form relationships (social competence), to problem-solve (metacognition), to develop a sense of identity (autonomy), and to plan and hope (a sense of purpose and future)" (p. 1). I wish to restate that it is important to look for such skills in the negative and non-conforming behaviour of the problem student. For example, the gang leader may have excellent social skills and leadership abilities within his peer group. Although he is part of a youth gang, and perhaps anti-social in a conventional sense, he is a leader nevertheless.

With regard to my ongoing struggles with teachers and the relationships I had with them, at times I had to reject their opinion of me in order to sustain a strong inner core, my sense of self-worth and my confidence. As an adolescent and teen, I was caught in a pattern that was pulling me further and further away from an educational path. However, much of that behaviour and that tough, mocking, disrupting brattiness was a façade. In retrospect, I believe that

façade was protecting me from a terrible internal conflict. While I may not have been respectful of getting good grades, my teachers, the school culture, or the education *system*, I realize now I had a deep respect for *knowledge* and knew on some level that knowledge, and ultimately *an education,* was my ticket out of that life, and that persona.

As a youth, I *wanted* to be intelligent. I *wanted* to be educated. I do not believe I ever would have chosen to be a student disliked by her teachers. The only connection I had to believing I had a place in the classroom was through my relationships with my teachers. It had always been that way, and as that connection grew more tenuous, so did my sense of "place" in that environment. Finally, I could not be in a classroom at all and my place there was lost on an emotional and psychological level.

That is what I was grappling with when my thirst for knowledge and a desire to be educated thrust me back into a classroom where, again, I felt threatened and like an alien that did not belong. It makes sense that that tough, and somewhat bitter (younger) persona then emerged to toughen me up and "belligerentize" me if you will, and get me through it. At the beginning of the writing of this thesis, I never would have believed that my teachers were so important to me or that their opinion of me was vital to my ability to be in a classroom. It is

my opinion that the relationship young people have with their teacher is paramount in cases like mine, when the teacher may be the only educated adult the child knows and the only reflection children have of themselves as a student.

My *oasis teachers* created a place where I could, for the duration of the school year, relax and feel safe. Such teachers did not have to do anything outwardly helpful; they simply had to refrain from making me aware of negative feelings they might have towards me or that I needed to defend myself. Giving me the impression they might like me went a long, long way with me. In my particular case, my grade three experience and the realization that my teacher did not like me threatened the resiliency factors I was using to help me deal with all the other issues occurring in my life. Students' relationships with their teachers occur on an emotional level. Sadness and sickness of heart results from someone you hold in high esteem letting it be known that she dislikes you. It can potentially be the most devastating thing a child can experience even as they float in a sea of other negative experiences and feelings. A teacher can become a resiliency factor in a child's or youth's life. (Cameron, 2008, p. 151–152)

After then reading about my grade four teacher who was, indeed, an oasis teacher,

I looked up at the class of child and youth workers and said, "You can…you must also become a resiliency factor in the lives of the children and youth you will work with. You *can* be an oasis for them." After that class, I marvelled at how exposed I felt. I really felt naked in front of those students. The subject matter was still so painful to me, just freshly written, and it was a huge leap of trust to tell them about it. My reasons for exposing to others that piece of my history were so that they might understand the feelings of an at-risk child in the classroom and that would affect their future practice as child and youth workers. I was aware of the fact that many of the young adults in my classroom had returned to college after similar negative experiences in elementary and high school. I hoped they recognized the importance of hearing the stories of children and youth and the importance of qualitative research and in particular personal narratives. I hoped they might begin to gather some of those stories when they were working in the field. I revealed to them that it was odd to think about the student I had been and the teacher I now was. When I left the class on that day, I wasn't sure I'd made any kind of impact., I was caught up in my own personal feelings about reading that material to them. Had I erred in disclosing that part of my past?

And this was the unsure, unclear emotional place I was as I neared the last few pages of my thesis. I was in a bit of a "So what, who cares, what now?" anti-climatic, post-epiphany state. On the following weekend, I sat in front of my computer

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working on the thesis as I had for what seemed like a million weekends before. It all felt very blah, blah, blah, blah to me. The thesis was almost completed and I was quickly moving away from the place I'd been in for the past several months. I needed to move on. It was time to end this chapter in my history and truly engage in my current life as a teacher. But how had I changed as a result of my experiences and the writing of my thesis? What had it all meant? I'd spoken of the journey but what place had I arrived at? I was stalled. Then I got an email from one of the students who'd been in that research methods class. That email allowed me to write the final section of my thesis entitled "Where Has This Journey Taken Me?."

"hey Kathleen,
Your message really hit home for me the other day in class. I was slower learning to read when I was young, and I was labelled as learning disabled. My mom fought for me to be taught the same curriculum as the other students. I was made to feel that I wasn't capable of succeeding in school. I finished high school with a 51 average so I passed by the skin of my teeth, I think mainly in part to the fact that no teacher really showed any confidence in me.
So I guess I struggle also with this discrepancy between how I do in school and how I feel I am doing, or where I want to go with my life. I was looking at Ryerson last night and I couldn't believe that I was actually considering university.
But thank you so much for sharing that and I can tell you, and many agree that you are an "oasis teacher" to a lot of us.
Scott"

Conclusion

I recognized that it had all come full circle. The final shift occurred for me. Some tethering to an old belief system finally let go and fell away. My past and my own difficult educational experiences could finally be left behind. I now had the opportunity to form relationships with my students that could transform us both and move us forward. I could create a therapeutic milieu in the classroom, an oasis where students might heal and grow. Most importantly, and I was astounded that I had missed this earlier, I could help my students integrate their two voices. Many of them also had internal struggles with what they'd come to believe about their potential and where they currently found themselves as successful students. While intuitively I worked to reach out to that part that existed in some of my students, I hadn't consciously addressed an important element of being an oasis teacher, and in fact was the most important thing that my grade four oasis teacher Mrs. Cotgrave had done for me. She put me back in touch with my own potential and my right to feel successful in the classroom. Many college and university students enter the classroom hardly understanding how they got there and on a deep level believing

they don't deserve to be there either.

The thesis, and what started out as an academic exercise, became the beginning and end of a journey that ultimately became about allowing me to reach out and to be affected by my students and my role as teacher on a very profound level. I had become someone else's oasis teacher and the magnificence of that hit me. That's who I was now. I could be an inspiration to those students, who, because of similar experiences to mine, were entering post-secondary education with a great deal of trepidation and lack of belief in their own potential. In writing about my own past and then letting it go, I began to truly feel what it meant to be an oasis teacher.

It is simply a gift from the universe to watch a student start to see themselves in a different light and watch them leave behind a difficult educational past and turn their face toward their own future and its brilliant possibilities. It has been my experience in the college systems I now work in that we fail to remember that many of our students are still very young and very impressionable when they enter our classrooms. Even mature students may still carry with them the beliefs they held and the behaviours they demonstrated in high school or even elementary school. When they enter our classroom we still have an incredible influence on them and we must be cognizant of that powerful influence and our responsibility to those students. We can still hurt them in that classroom or choose to help them thrive. Have you ever watched students rip through an essay you've handed back as they look for your comments? What have you written to them on that paper? It is small things that make a classroom an oasis instead of another gruelling exercise for students. From a child and youth counsellor perspective, there are many adults in every classroom that are still trying to overcome risk factors that have existed over the course of their lives. Is your classroom fostering resiliency? Believe me, it can foster resiliency, and it should foster resiliency, even for adults. That's what creating an oasis does. *Be* an oasis teacher. Making a conscious decision to create an oasis for the children, youth and adults you work with also creates an oasis for you. Everyone thrives.

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The Question of Tautology in CYC

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As is probably obvious in the way I write my columns here, I am more than a bit skeptical of claims to what appear to be obvious truths. I am particularly agitated by truth claims that are tautological or self-confirming on the basis of circular logic. This may seem obvious. Certainly, we in CYC with all of our training in critical thinking would be able to see such knowledge as the kind of superficial grab for power and control it represents. When faced with claims such as the following we surely don't nod with sage agreement.

Claim 1: kids need discipline, which is justified as true by the evidence that, when disciplined, children behave better. Better behavior is evidence of a child's happiness, ipso facto well behaved and disciplined children are happy children and happy children are a good thing. Or 2) children need consequences. We know this because when given consequences, children respond by modifying their behavior in what we define as a positive fashion. Those that do not are clearly unhappy and in need of further consequences until they can see the inherent logic of our approach and are enlightened by it so they can become well behaved. Well-behaved children are happy children (see above). Or 3) children who misbehave are evidencing some form of emotional or mental maladjustment. We know this because we have written books that characterize misbehavior as just such maladjustments. When we refer to such books, we can see the behaviors the children are manifesting are described there and as a result we can be confirmed in the knowledge that these children are suffering either emotionally or mentally. Suffering people are not happy. If we can get the child to quit misbehaving it will let us know they are no longer suffering from mental or emotional suffering. They will be happy (see above).

This kind of logic is deeply rooted in our psyches and in what Guattari called our pre-conscious social investments. It is a logic that is hidden within the way that rationality has taken hold in scientific claims. It works something like this. First you observe an object. Then you determine how it is put together and how that object's

compositional form is different than another object. You then give the object a name based on how you have described it. When you now see the object you call it by its name as though the name and the object had a natural relation. So, for example, early taxonomists determined what things were (say a cat) according to how they differed in composition from other things (say a dog). Having determined that catness is comprised in the way set out by the taxonomist, we now call all beings that look like that, a cat. If it walks like duck and so on.

Put simply, our description is only one way to describe the world and it is regrettably rather tautological in the sense that it first sets out the terms by which the thing will be defined and then claims that what is described is actually the thing itself. However, there is nothing inherent in the biological entity we call a cat that determines a) that it is composed in the way we have decided to divide the world up or that b) its relation to what we would call its environment is separable and discrete as cat/non-cat.

Let us take another example from nature, the distinction between the great apes and humans. Common sense and popular science would tell us that great apes and humans are taxonomically different. Humans are not great apes and great apes are not humans. However, this is actually trickier than we might think. The initial distinctions made between great apes and humans were premised more in the prejudices of the historical period in which they were produced, than an actual rendering of difference. Indeed, emerging science has found that genetically humans and chimpanzees/bonobos have 98.6% of their genes in common. Sexual maturity emerges about the same in both humans and great apes. They share an extended period of what might be termed childhood. They both have opposable thumbs and similar lengths of pregnancy. Chimp/bonobos infants and children, like humans, have a strong desire for play, learn through observation and imitation, are curious about the world around them, need constant reassurance and attention, and finally, need affectionate physical contact for healthy development. Great apes have a nervous system very much like human beings. They are capable of abstract reasoning, social cooperation, tool making, and have a concept of a self. Emotions such as pain, fear, joy, and compassion are available to them and great apes are extremely adept at non-verbal communication. In captivity they have learned to communicate with humans through American Sign Language.

This raises the question as to whether the distinction between great apes and humans is as clear-cut as we once thought. It is an interesting conundrum in that we have to wonder, if we wrong about that distinction, what else might we have distinguished and defined as a true distinction that might not be as clear cut as we thought?

Indeed, the category of the human body as bounded from its environment by the integrity of its biological composition, is thrown into question when we consider

the fact that bacterial cells outnumber human cells in the "human" body by a ratio of ten to one. Perhaps, the category of human ought to be re-thought? It might cause us to wonder if centering the human as the comparator for other taxonomic distinctions might be as problematic as the once popular belief that the sun circled the earth.

The production of humans and human development as somehow at the center of the network of living beings has been contested of late by scholars such as Veronica Pacini-Ketchabaw and Fikile Nxamalo at the Child and Youth Care Department at the University of Victoria. They draw on an emerging view of life as a complex and entangled web of animate and inanimate vectors of force that points towards the possibility of a post-human future in which the category of human begins to fade in favor of more complex understandings of how life intersects and is mutually informative and productive. Such inquiry and thought is directed towards an ecosophic accounting of what has been termed the anthropocene.

I borrow the term ecosophic from the psychoanalyst and activist Felix Guattari and deep ecology philosopher Arne Næss. Næss developed the term to describe a philosophy of ecological harmony or equilibrium. He suggested that its practical application would have to involve wisdom, which he suggested was the ability to develop policies on the relationship of all species contingent on the actual material and social conditions of the planet.

Guattari extended ecosophy using the anthropologist Gregory Bateson's concept of three interacting and interdependent ecologies of mind, society, and environment. He suggested that in order to have a functioning ecological politics we would need to recognize the richly entwined and mutually informative entanglements of our minds, our social productions and the realm of other species and inanimate systems of force (weather, geology etc.).

Ecosophy is a response to what has been termed the anthropocene or the period of history where the activities of human beings has had a significant impact on the earth's ecosystems. There is little doubt that the anthropocene has constituted what might well be described as a series of escalating geological and meterological events. These events have had a devastating effect on an ever increasing number of plants and animals. Indeed, there are scientists whose research seems to indicate that the anthropocene may threaten the humanoid species itself.

The logic that drives the anthropocene is another example of tautological reasoning. First we determine taxonomically that humans are somehow different from all other species. Then we create such difference as a hierarchy in which our difference both separates us from other systems and that such separation indicates a hierarchical difference. In short, we are not only different but also superior. We valorize the difference we have created and begin to imagine that our self-determined superiority exempts us from the broader logic of other living and non-living systems. We posit that the most important identity we
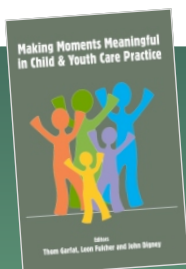
can have is to be human and that it our humanity that somehow will provide us with true joy if we can fully access it. This ignores the rather dubious history of human-centric projects over the millennia wherein joy was seldom the result of this odd form of specie-centric narcissism.

Instead, this use of tautological human-centric logic has led us into a series of ongoing projects that attempt to marginalize and disenfranchise, not only other species on the basis of their lack of human identity, but also other groups of hominids. This is the logic of racial and ethnic superiority and the foundations of various forms of domination and slavery. It is also the logic that suppresses non-European alternative modes of knowing that have more complex ways of understanding interspecies relations.

What does all of this have to with Child and Youth Care? I would argue that the tautological fallacies we noted at the beginning of this column are founded in the logic of the anthropocene. The taxo-

nomical and hierarchical logic that sets humans outside the web of life is the same logic that separates adults and young people, staff and administrators, academics and line workers. Because we are driven by a logic that functions on differentiating ourselves, we seek to find in that difference self-valorization. As a result, we fail to see the ecological imperative of what we hold in common. Pacini-Ketchabaw and Nxumalo's work calls attention to our failure to account for the intricate entanglements we have with everything we encounter as we live our lives. If we claim a field premised in relationship and caring, anthropocentric tautological ways of knowing and understanding are devastatingly inadequate. It is no longer sufficient to seek our common humanity – if we are to care then we must learn to care for all our relations.

Experiencing Joy in Childhood

James Freeman

This brief article discusses the experience of joy in childhood and highlights strategies to integrate into child and youth are practice including the benefits of recognizing rhythm in daily life, slowing down, and integrating fun into everyday life.

Keywords: *Child and youth care, child development, busyness, rhythm, joy, fun*

On a recent Saturday, my six year old son woke up and wrote out his agenda for the day. He enjoys writing and developmentally is in a stage of greater awareness of time passing and the rhythm of days and seasons as they come and go. Making the list was his idea and the content was entirely from his own thoughts. As the day progressed he returned to his list crossing out each item as it was accomplished. I was delighted to see some of his perspective and the sense of connections and rhythm he was experiencing as the day unfolded.
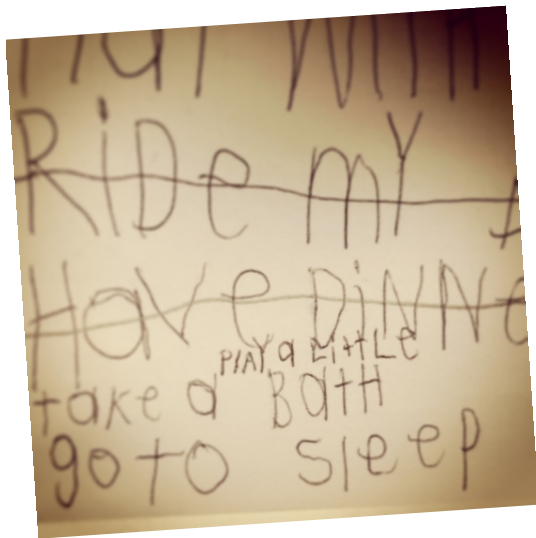
Rhythm and joy often go together

Think about the rhythm and enjoyment in his plan for this relaxing weekend day. Here is his list:

- Get up
- Eat breakfast
- Have summer sausage (a fun treat I had just brought home from travel to Milwaukee; we enjoyed this as a picnic together on the front porch)
- Have fun
- Take a nap
- Have lunch
- Play with Ashlyn and Andrew (his sister and brother)

- Ride my bike
- Have dinner
- Play a little (added later when more time was available)
- Take a bath
- Go to sleep

There is a lot we can observe in this sample of a child's day. Twelve simple items yet full of meaning. You can see the natural rhythms of daily life in his waking, eating, sleeping. You can see a flow of connectedness with others including family time at meals and special plans with his siblings. There is time alone and time with others. There are also concrete plans such as riding his bike as well as more indefinite or open space for opportunities that might present themselves. One might even extrapolate ideas about his levels of safety and trust in his environment during this day of relaxing around his home and neighborhood.

And notice that there is always space for a little more fun. After dinner, finding that he had time to squeeze in a bit more in his agenda for the day, he finds space in his day to add one more item on his agenda: play a little.

How does the experience of daily life unfold for the young people in your care? What is their perspective - and perhaps power and control - over what they choose to do and when they do it? Is there balance between the structure (e.g. school, organized activities) and freedom (e.g. unstructured time, exploration)? These are important questions to ask as we shape and support their development and daily experience.

There is benefit in slowing down

Most programs or households with young people depend on a basic structure. This is important in establishing a routine, but can also lead to unnecessary busyness if not kept in balance. Part of this hurriedness in life, that which often quenches our joy, has to do with how we understand and think about time:

> In [some] cultures, time is cyclical. It's seen as moving in great, unhurried circles. It's always renewing and refreshing itself. Whereas in the West, time is linear. It's a finite resource; it's always draining away. You either use it, or lose it. "Time is money," as Benjamin Franklin said. And I think what that does to us psychologically is it creates an equation. Time is scarce, so what do we do? Well, we speed up, don't we? We try and do more and more with less and less time. We turn every

moment of every day into a race to the finish line - a finish line, incidentally, that we never reach, but a finish line nonetheless. And I guess that the question is, is it possible to break free from that mindset? And thankfully, the answer is yes, because what I discovered, when I began looking around, that there is a global backlash against this culture [of busyness] that tells us that faster is always better, and that busier is best.
(Honore, 2005)

What would our days look like if we took a deep breath and viewed time more as a renewing and refreshing cycle, rather than a linear, fleeting resource? Our perspectives might become more open to finding more enjoyment in our days, adding more time for having fun as Alec did. Rather than rushing from one activity to another, we might find ourselves planning for time to play, take more naps, or enjoy our meals with one another.

Fun is a basic human need

Among the various models of basic human needs that we all use in our work, one of them includes fun as one of five basic needs - the others being survival, love and belonging, power, and freedom (Glasser, 1999). Fun is not only play, although surely includes a lot of that, but also enjoying the pleasures of life, recreation, learning, and laughing. Childhood requires fun as a prerequisite for healthy development. It is a primary driver of our imagination, exploration, and skill acquisi-

tion as we grow.

Consider the way one parent described childhood in the context of reflecting on Maurice Sendak's children's book "Where the Wild Things Are":

There is an inherent sadness to being a kid. There is this world created inside of a child's imagination, where the couch really is a pirate ship, and the carpet is a tossing sea, and the world plays along, and all of life is play. Until, we are called to wash our hands for dinner, and that ruins the game. We stomp pouting about the interruption, that is our parents wanting to feed us. And we get in trouble for having a bad attitude, and what the heck? No one understands me. And isn't life hard? (Waffle Wednesday Blog, n.d.)

Of course these transitions can be strengthened by being in sync with the child and connecting in ways that are meaningful to them. Yet, sometimes we forget what it is like to experience the imagination and joys of childhood. For some in the world that may be staying out after the street lights come on at night. For others it may be finding a lost futbal in the morning and an open patch of dirt to play on all day. Still for others it might be climbing up on a roof or sitting outside watching the stars at night.

One of the questions I ask my kids every night over dinner or as they go to bed is: What was one of your favorite things you did or experienced today? Sometimes I have a good guess about what they are going to say and sometimes I am totally surprised by their response. Their answers help me in understanding what is important to them in that moment and how to support them in their next steps of development. Their answers provide a simple way to measure the amount of joy and happiness they are experiencing as they grow.

Slowing down and intentionally allowing for fun and freedom in life is something young people in care or who are being looked after desperately need. We need to think more about how we provide room for "children to have fun, to develop a range of skills, and perhaps most importantly to build relationships with other children and with those adults to participate alongside them in activities" (Smith, Fulcher & Doran, 2013, p, 102). This is important for both homes, residential programs, and our communities in general.

What does your daily schedule need in order for you to experience more joy in life? How about the daily experience of the young people you work with? I invite you to join with me in following Alec's lead in slowing down to add the fun essential to enjoying life - both in the lives of those we care for and in our own.

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Of Haka and Hugs: Displays of Threat and Love

John Digney and Maxwell Smart

In this cry of pain, the inner consciousness of the people seems to lay itself bare for an instant, and to reveal the mood of beings who feel their isolation in the face of a universe that wars on them with winds and seas.
J.M. Synge, Irish poet and Playwright

Love rules the court, the camp, the grove, and men below, and saints above: For love is heaven, and heaven is love.
Sir Walter Scott, Scottish Novelist

With the passing of another 'Rugby weekend' here in the wet and green Celtic lands of Ireland and Scotland and the adjournment of a weeklong gathering of likeminded colleagues and subsequent dispersal of our global colleagues, as they leave for their own homelands, we are embraced with emotion.

The CYC Gathering, Unity in Relationship and SPDN conferences and 'Relational Training programmes' have left an indelible mark on many that attended, reinforcing the importance of connection and sharing. For us that remain we are immediately bombarded by extensive media coverage (TV, newspapers and live stream-

ing) with all the trappings of the impending epic international sporting events that are the International Rugby Tests.

These gladiatorial encounters see the bringing together of finely tuned athletes from their separate clubs to emerge as National teams and engage in team driven and respectful adrenalin fuelled entertainment, with Wales having the unenviable task of facing the 'All Blacks' – the New Zealand international team.

As all rugby fans know it is customary for the All Blacks to engage in the traditional Maori display of threat and dominance known as the 'haka', prior to the game commencing. This is a tradi-

tional ancestral war cry (as well as a dance) that is often used as a challenge. Historically the 'War haka' was performed by warriors prior to engaging in battle, with the intent to proclaim strength and prowess and therefore intimidate the opponent – haka are a loud and visual display, just like ancient Celtic warriors displays, where they would bang on their shields with swords and spears to the playing of the *Uilleann Pipes (Irish) or* Bagpipes (Scottish), as they head for battle, these displays have the intent of intimidating the onlooker. As with the haka, such a display can be very effective in making the watcher back off or at least unsettling them.

So, as we come to consider this observation as it occurs in our work and the 'displays' we witness, can we recognise that the same basis often exists for the 'threat displays' exhibited by children, youth and families? Can we come to understand that these performances are often nothing more than posturing; setting out a defensive display and preparing to do battle with a perceive opponent?

More Heat than Light

Threat displays are common in troubled youth, often made at times of crisis, sometimes as a means of intimidation or manipulation and mostly to put us 'off-guard'. Demands and volatile behaviour such as direct threats and threats to property often evoke unsophisticated crisis responses from helping adults. Yet, even during these moments and displays we must ask, how much of this is real? If we don't react and seek to uncover the pain 'at back of the behaviour', we often realise that there is no intention of carrying out all that is 'promised'.

This observation does not seek to excuse poor behaviour nor does it seek to apportion blame for poor responses to the behaviour by adult carers in what are very difficult and stressful situations. Indeed, we are setting out the fact that our charges often use their own 'haka' to intimidate or defend against a perceived threat and that it is our responsibility to decode behaviours and discern what real risk exist and what are 'smoke and mirrors'.

Often these 'threat displays' can produce more heat than light for both the youth and for staff. The heat for the youth

is the underlying stress causing the event and the manifesting behaviour as it boils into crisis. The heat for staff is manifest in mirrored behaviour, defensive positioning and coercive and dominating behaviours that often result in perpetuating the crisis.

So what of the Light? Often very little light is shone on the situation for either the youth or the helping adult. For instance, it can be the case that little effective 'debrief' is given to events by staff groups or with the youth, despite the knowledge we posses that the 'debriefing' is not only considered to be good practice but it is known that through debriefing enlightenment can happen – there is learning in every crisis! Little may be illuminated in these situations about the patterns of self-defeating behaviours displayed by the youth because our focus is drawn to the behaviour itself rather than the motivations driving the behaviour. Likewise adult reactions can become focused on controlling the behaviour rather than determining what was going on, 'on the inside'. We can be quick to respond with our own 'haka', our own display of posturing and positioning

Thoughts, Feelings and Behaviour

Often our training or practice can lack a sophisticated understanding of human behaviour; we are occasionally taught that we should only focus on *antecedents*, *behaviour* and *consequences*, and whilst these functional analyses can be helpful in some ways, they usually miss out fundamental connecting and relevant issues in making sense of threatening behaviour.

As our profession and professional practice has evolved and a greater understanding of troubled behaviour has emerged, we are now aware that the '*thinking' of the person* and *the 'feelings' of the person* significantly determine their behaviour. Practice wisdom has evolved to the point that we now understand that there can be no simple 'ABC' to understanding behaviour and yet we have such an adverse reaction to the 'haka' of the children, youth and families we seek to assist.

Embracing the embrace

In the opening paragraph we mention how we were 'embraced with emotion' as the dispersal of outward bound international colleagues (and friends) came to pass as the Unity conference ended. There were days filled with farewells and farewell hugs a simple and universal human 'display' of caring and love. This display (hugging) is

seen in most cultures as being at the heart of displaying connectedness and relationship – in fact the debate on 'hugging' was discussed many times during this 'gathering', just as it can be discussed at team meetings, during college tutorials and even at policy reviews. But even with all the debate, there still does not seem to be a place for this 'display' within our work.

As we are entertained by the 'haka' performed by the All Blacks we come to reflect and understand better how to decode the haka that are displayed to us by the children and youth with whom we work. Yet, as we embrace and hug our family members, friends and colleagues, we are challenged with practicing this display in our professional life. This display that can possess the most healing of powers, one which can truly demonstrate we mean what we say (when we say, 'I care about you'); the display that everyone longs for, is all but forbidden.

Here we are reminded about a story shared by a colleague from the other side of 'The Pond', a story about his son. Santana (a 15 year student) was 'disciplined' by his school for challenging their 'no physical contact' policy – a policy stating, 'hugging between students is forbidden'. Santana (being his fathers' son) came to school the following day wearing a tee-shirt with the slogan, 'Free Hugz' emblazoned across the front. For this 'offering' he was given the privilege of picking his own punishment – to choose either (i) an 'in-school suspension' OR (ii) 'a paddling'. This school policy not only actively condemned positive human connection and displays of caring, it actually sought to inflict on one of its students a display of rancor, threat and rejection.

Love / Hate

As we draw this article to a close we respectfully suggest that there is now a need to rethink how we view the daily 'haka' we encounter in working with youth in difficulty. Rethinking the 'haka' display gives workers the opportunity of linking the 'threat displays' to the thoughts and feelings of those who engage in them. What can be most visible during pain and crisis is the 'problematic behaviour' of crisis, the shouting; verbal display of threat; and destruction of property. However, viewed through a different lens we may reconsider what need the threat display is meeting and disentangle what it is actually all about.

We must continue to reflect on and discuss what we think of caring – for is it really enough to talk the talk but less frequently, walk the walk – showing true caring? So think a lot and hug a lot more; for if the threat display is no more than a safety dance, let caring adults dance a different dance.

Maxie & Digs

The Light Side of Christmas

Nils Ling

They always talk about how the world will beat a path to the door of the person who builds a better mousetrap, and maybe that's true. But where I live, mice aren't a huge problem. You know who's going to wind up getting a well-beaten path? The person who builds a better set of outdoor Christmas lights.

This past week I had to put up the lights again. Weird. It seems like they just came down. Well, okay, it was August, but that's not the point. The point is, every year I have to put them up, and every year I go through the same grief to do it.

It starts in late October, when my wife reminds me that Christmas is only two months away and I should start thinking about the Christmas lights instead of leaving it to the last minute like I always do. So I make a mental note to check out the Christmas lights real soon.

The problem with my mental notes is I'm always misplacing them. So usually I have to borrow somebody else's mental notes. Which I do around late November, early December. Or at least, I mean to. Finally, my wife announces that once again I've indeed left it to the last minute - that in fact, the last minute is today - and " ... would I please get the bloody Christmas lights up???" Nice way to start the season. "Bah, humbug!" to you, too.

Now, each August when I take the Christmas lights down, I carefully wrap them up in a neat coil, pack them gently in a well-marked box, and store them overhead in the garage. And every year, through some mysterious process, they work themselves to the back of the over-

head shelf, behind the lawn furniture, the bicycles, the gardening stuff, and what I believe to be the remains of Jimmy Hoffa although I've never actually opened the box. So all that stuff has to come down - except for Jimmy, who I just shove to one side - so that I can get the lights out.

Then I plug the set in to see which lights need replacing. It never ceases to amaze me that Christmas lights which have weathered wind, rain, sleet, and snow, which have worked perfectly while dangling off the edge of a roof in minus thirty temperatures, which have withstood the worst a Canadian winter can throw at them, don't seem to be able to handle being carefully stored for a season in a warm garage.

The best way to check the bulbs is to unravel the whole string, which takes several hours, because the same phenomena that carried the box of lights to the back of the shelf also turned them into a jumbled mass of wires, bulbs, and sharp pointy staples from last year.

But in time, I get the string stretched out and find that sure enough, ten or twelve bulbs have shuffled off this electrical coil over the summer. With one quick, expert flick of the wrist, I'm able to break

off the top of each bulb, leaving shards of wickedly sharp glass surrounding a cheap tin base, which has rusted firmly into the socket. In only a few hours, I wrestle all the jagged nubs out, replace the bulbs, and have a working string of lights.

All that's left is a quick jaunt up the ladder and several hours of dangling over the icy eaves in a howling wind, and - faster than you can dial 911 and say "Come quick, my Dad fell off the roof!" - the job is done.

Then I just run warm water over my hands till I can feel my fingertips, flick the indoor switch, and watch in joy and wonder as … nothing happens, because somewhere on that string of seventy-four lights, one of them isn't working.

Eventually, I do manage to get the house looking suitably festive, but the point is, putting up the lights isn't my favourite part of the season. There has to be a better way.

So if you're an inventor, forget the better mousetrap. The ones on the market right now work just fine. Get on that Christmas light project.

Not only will folks like me beat a path to your door … we'll pave it.

twitter 🐦

@CYCareworkers

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Postcard from
Leon Fulcher

DECEMBER 2014

Greetings child and youth care workers! Southern Hemisphere Summer has now started (with rain for some)! Spare a thought for those North Americans who received a huge dump of snow last week. Glad we missed it! Remember those baggage claim moments? Will it? Won't it? Finally, the last suitcase!

Where is my suitcase?

Youth Work Fellowship Journey Leader, Janet Wakefield, welcomed me to Indianap-

olis and kindly took me for an introductory tour of the downtown city. I'd always wondered about the 'Indian' in Indianapolis, and it isn't really easy to find out who these aboriginal peoples were. A sign discovered in the gardens at the Native American Museum along our canal walk helped identify the 'Miami' – perhaps more accurately – "Myaami" as being those people!

Myaamionki – Perhaps The Indian in Indianapolis

As a first-time visitor, it was interesting to see all the sculpture that had been created and mounted all around the city of Indianapolis. There were *avant garde* sculptures along with more traditional pieces. Some were just confusing.

See whether you can 'see' the Indiana State Bird in the sculpture image below! I had to look from a whole lot of angles before I could see anything even close.

Returning to the main thoroughfare through the old city of Indianapolis, we came across a gaggle of young girls who were lined up all along the front of the Indiana Repertory Theatre and for another block up the side of that venue. When enquiring what they were waiting for, we

Indianapolis is a Sculpture City

learned that Blogger Taylor Kniff had tweeted, saying he 'may' turn up at the Theatre, so they all turned up in anticipation. Google this guy for a quick geriatric self-assessment!

Can you see the State Bird of Indiana – The Cardinal?

This experience got me to thinking about a Western world that revolves around young digital natives who follow bloggers, people who write stuff and tweet short messages to their followers. Few people know who Taylor Kniff is, but thousands of young women were lined up in Indianapolis hoping to see him!

Young adolescent girls were line up 2 blocks long for Blogger Taylor Kniff

I doubt if these young women had any interest in the replica totem we discovered at a stairwell in the First Nations Museum. This replica replaced one of three original carvings presented by Aboriginal Peoples from Western Canada to a public event, and one ended up in Indianapolis.

Around another corner we encountered the sculpture of a young Abraham Lincoln who had travelled to Indiana from Kentucky before moving on to Illinois and what became his route to the Presidency. Much has been said recently about the powers of the US President to take execu-

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**Replica Totem of one of 3 original carved pieces from Western Canada**

Young Abraham Lincoln moved to Indiana from Kentucky

tive action in matters concerning immigration. Many forget that Lincoln exercised these same powers to free slaves around the time of the US Civil War.

Therapeutic Use of Daily Life Events Training – Indianapolis Graduates

DLE Training with local Youth Workers at the Peace Learning Center was great fun!
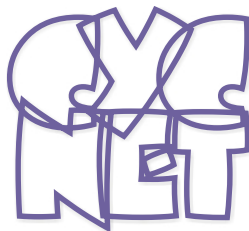
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EndNotes

"It takes a very long time to become young." — Pablo Picasso

"When you're young, you think everything you do is disposable. You move from now to now, crumpling time up in your hands, tossing it away. You're your own speeding car. You think you can get rid of things, and people too—leave them behind. You don't yet know about the habit they have, of coming back. Time in dreams is frozen. You can never get away from where you've been."
— **Margaret Atwood**, *The Blind Assassin*

 "Pan, who and what art thou?" he cried huskily. "I'm youth, I'm joy," Peter answered at a venture, "I'm a little bird that has broken out of the egg."
— **J.M. Barrie**, *Peter Pan*

"Enjoy your youth.
You'll never be younger than you are at this very moment."
— **Chad Sugg**

"A young outcast will often feel that there is something wrong with himself, but as he gets older, grows more confident in who he is, he will adapt, he will begin to feel that there is something wrong with everyone else."
— **Criss Jami**

"Our lives were just beginning, our favorite moment was right now, our favorite songs were unwritten."
— **Rob Sheffield**, *Love is a Mix Tape*

"I'd like to get away from earth awhile
And then come back to it and
  begin over.
May no fate wilfully misunderstand me
And half grant what I wish and snatch
  me away
Not to return. Earth's the right place
  for love:
I don't know where it's likely
  to go better."
— **Robert Frost,** *Birches*

"I'm fed up to the ears with old men dreaming up wars for young men to die in."
— **George S. McGovern**

"I may not have gone where I intended to go, but I think I have ended up where I needed to be."
— **Douglas Adams,**
The Long Dark Tea-Time of the Soul

"Never put off till tomorrow what may be done day after tomorrow just as well".
— **Mark Twain**

"You have brains in your head. You have feet in your shoes. You can steer yourself any direction you choose. You're on your own. And you know what you know. And YOU are the one who'll decide where to go…"
— **Dr. Seuss**, *Oh, The Places You'll Go!*

"For every minute you are angry you lose sixty seconds of happiness."
— **Ralph Waldo Emerson**

"Whenever I feel the need to exercise, I lie down until it goes away."
— **Paul Terry**

The smile on my face doesn't mean my life is perfect.

It means I appreciate what I have and what I have been blessed with.

I choose to be happy

www.DavesWordsofWisdom.com

"What a weary time those years were -- to have the desire and the need to live but not the ability."
— **Charles Bukowski**, *Ham on Rye*

Young people don't always do what they're told, but if they can pull it off and do something wonderful, sometimes they escape punishment. "
— **Rick Riordan**

"Remember, you cannot be both young and wise. Young people who pretend to be wise to the ways of the world are mostly just cynics. Cynicism masquerades as wisdom, but it is the farthest thing from it. Because cynics don't learn anything. Because cynicism is a self-imposed blindness, a rejection of the world because we are afraid it will hurt us or disappoint us. Cynics always say no. But saying "yes" begins things. Saying "yes" is how things grow. Saying "yes" leads to knowledge. "Yes" is for young people. So for as long as you have the strength to, say "yes'."
— **Stephen Colbert**

"What should young people do with their lives today? Many things, obviously. But the most daring thing is to create stable communities in which the terrible disease of loneliness can be cured."
— **Kurt Vonnegu**t, Palm Sunday: An Autobiographical Collage

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