

Opening the gifts and treasures of relationship in residential child care

Carey Morning

Abstract

This paper is about the initial phase of a development project at a residential school in Scotland. It asks us to consider the inner lives of children and those who work with them, and to find ways to create a community which will engender a holistic evolution in all its members. Our work is a journey to help wounded children encounter, believe in, and develop what is the very best in them. We are asked to bring children the very best we have, our treasure, so that they can look at our gifts as in a mirror, and see that they are a precious gift to the world.

Keywords

Residential child care, relationships, staff development

Corresponding author:

Carey Morning, BSc., MA. Independent consultant psychotherapist,

*The weight of this sad time we must obey;
Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say.
The youngest hath borne most: we that are old
Shall never see so much nor live so long.*

(Shakespeare [1963 edition], King Lear, Act V, iii, p. 324-28).

Introduction

This paper is about the initial phase of a development project at a residential school in Scotland. It asks us to consider the inner lives of children and those who work with them, and to find ways to create a community which will engender a holistic evolution in all its members. Our work is a journey to help wounded children encounter, believe in, and develop what is the very best in them. We are asked to bring children the very best we have, our treasure, so that they can look at our gifts as in a mirror, and see that they are a precious gift to the world.

The residential school in question recognised a need to invest in development, as it had experienced several years of difficulty resulting in loss of staff, poor morale and reduced standards of care. The culture had shifted from one of therapeutic interaction and moved toward behaviour management. The school wished to create a culture which would reflect

their ethos of excellence of care. They also recognised the inherent difficulties of attempting culture change from within. The author became involved as an external consultant psychotherapist to assess provision of care, and to design and oversee a programme of development.

The brief was to focus on working with one of the residential units, for boys aged between 11 and 16 years, to nurture and educate the staff team in ways which could address perceived shortcomings, and to explore innovative ways of addressing the needs of the young people. This paper seeks to share some of the experiences and findings which emerged from this consultancy process.

Initial assessment of the organisation

The initial assessment of the school was based on the author's model of seven spheres of relationship considered essential to holistic human development. Drawing on ideas from developmental psychotherapy and Steiner education (1988), they are:

1. Relationship with oneself;
2. Relationships with one's peers;
3. Relationships between staff and young people;
4. Relationships with families and the wider community;
5. Relationship with the natural environment;
6. Relationship with the cultural sphere;
7. Relationship with the sacred or spiritual dimension (which is understood as innately human and not confined to the purely religious dimension).

It was evident that in the life of the unit, and throughout the organisation, all of the seven spheres required development. Insufficient time was given for individual reflection. Little importance was attached to supporting peer relationships. Staff had only one meeting a week, which was taken up with practical and domestic concerns. Between staff and young people, there was a lack of consistent interpersonal practice. There was no appropriate space for children to spend time with their families and no organised unit-based experiences which could be shared with family members. Although there were extensive natural grounds adjacent to the campus, they were not well-used. Activities consisted of mass media, computers, football and cars. There were insufficient efforts to widen the boys' experience of human creativity and aspiration, and no importance was placed on beauty or graciousness in the unit. The spiritual dimension needed awakening.

The goals were to find appropriate ways of addressing and enriching each of these seven spheres within the unit, and creating protected spaces and times where relationships could be tended. The work sought to offer the young people a rich field of relationship opportunities which reflected the potential of their own humanity. The staff were encouraged to work from the premise that what our children need and deserve from us is

what they have been denied by others, namely a safe, humane and wholesome place where they can grow, and where their considerable wounds can be acknowledged and helped.

The relationship as treasure

What every human being needs and seeks from the very first moments of life is good relationship. Good relationship, in which we feel secure, cared for and understood, is the treasure which ought to be laid before every baby. Only from the foundation of a loving relationship can a human baby move onto the path of healthy physical, emotional, intellectual and moral development (Bowlby, 1979; Lewis et al., 2002; Hughes, 2006).

As practitioners, we have to develop depth of relationship, holding the complex inner world of the child and expressing our care in simple, kind, clear and adult ways. These aspects of relationship form our treasure. We have to be able to lay much treasure in front of the children with whom we work, so that they will be able to identify with it and grow as individuals. The project at the residential school is based on exploring goodness and good relationship, seeing what kinds of treasure we can put in front of the young people in our care, and what goodness in ourselves we can develop.

Blindness to the soul: a process reflection

On arrival at the school two things stood out. The first was the bleak environment, both indoors and outdoors. There was little evidence of anything warming, welcoming or beautiful. The indoor spaces were institutional and colourless, without anything real or alive to engage with. The second, more shocking aspect was the way in which the pain and trauma of the children's inner worlds seemed to go unacknowledged and largely unaddressed. They were more hurt than anyone seemed to want to say or see.

On one of my first visits to the school I am invited by staff to sit in on the review of a boy about to graduate. We are introduced and I ask him if it would be alright if I come along. He looks at me. His eyes are terrifying in their emptiness, their inability to make contact. He says it's fine. This is taken by all as permission, and yet I have the disturbing impression that I have not been given permission at all. Because the boy who said yes wasn't there, not truly there. He was somewhere else out of reach, far away behind those deadened eyes.

Many of the boys have eyes like that. It is still humbling and painful every time I look into them.

The review takes place, a room full of adults: parents, social workers, care-workers. They congratulate the boy who isn't there on his success. Plans for his future are made and agreed upon. His mother cries. People pat the boy who isn't there on his back and everyone leaves with their files tucked under their arms.

I felt like I was split in two. My body was calmly descending the stair, but the rest of me was shattered, wanting to scream out 'What about the boy? What will happen to that boy we've left behind, unseen?' Perhaps I entered an inner space similar to the boy's, where I

was somehow able to concoct a presentable exterior, while silently screaming inside, cut off from a world which walked right past. But this boy was a graduate. He had met his 'targets'. Was there something wrong with me? How must it have affected him to be applauded by the 'care' system for having successfully erected a false self to conceal the unaddressed trauma, so obvious in his eyes? Were we afraid of how much he needed from us? As Gerhardt commented:

The paradox is that people need to have a satisfying experience of dependency before they can become truly independent and self-regulating. Yet this feels counter-intuitive to many adults, who respond to the insecure with a punitive attitude, as if becoming more mature and self-regulating were a matter of will-power...But it is not simply a matter of will-power. Even if will-power is invoked to bring about better behaviour, often this comes in a form of a 'false self' who tries to live up to others' requirements to act maturely. (Gerhardt, 2004, p. 90).

It became a familiar experience in the school, where I tuned into the hurt parts of these boys, the parts too young or hopeless or afraid to speak, while the system seemed to grind on with all its busyness and its good will, somehow deafened to the buried cries. As Anglin writes:

The many activities of daily life seemed to disguise and cover over this ever-present and deep-seated pain to the point where one wondered if this 'cover-up' was an intentional strategy of avoidance. From time to time, what staff variously called 'outbursts', 'explosions', or 'acting out' on the part of residents would occur in the homes, and while it appeared to an observer that the reaction evidenced inner turmoil and pain, seldom did care workers acknowledge or respond sensitively to the inner world of the child. (Anglin, 2002, p. 108).

It is far easier for me to write about them than to look into the eyes of our young people and attempt to make real contact with them. Yet we ask staff to face the dreadful things those eyes have seen, and the untold damage done. It is clear to me that if we do not stay awake to what is in those eyes, and the terrible feelings they evoke, we only create a charade which does harm to staff and children alike. The question then becomes 'Why do we not want to see?' Perhaps in our profession we deceive ourselves into seeing healing when it is not really there because we may feel so unequipped, internally and externally, to deal with the painful and overwhelming feelings provoked by what we see.

The human ascent

In the unit, it was evident that despite the hard work and commitment of staff members, the system was not promoting or supporting a depth of understanding and relatedness which could begin to address the developmental needs of the young people. We needed to engage in a multi-levelled process to help the culture evolve in a way which would actively put those needs at the centre.

Our plans were developed around the seven spheres of relationship and included regular

times for reflection and sharing for staff and young people, a regular schedule of crafts activities in and around the unit, and the development of the old walled garden for growing food and flowers. A relationship was begun with a local organic farm, particularly for working with animals, and carrying out activities such as milking cows. Experiences with the land, plants and animals are invaluable for young people who have been so hurt by human beings. They offer the young person a sense of belonging to, and being able to participate in, the living world. All the boys were enthusiastic about returning to the farm. Young people and staff were encouraged to build outdoor dwellings and tree-houses, and to create seasonal festival celebrations which could include family members. In small but significant ways, we have been able to get all these projects underway with very good results.

I made three initial visits to the unit over a two-week period. The first day I hung around with everyone, feeling and being part of the life of the unit. After supper I offered to tell a bed-time story. The boys agreed. I turned off most of the lights and placed a large shallow bowl of water and some floating candles on the floor by the sofas. The boys gathered with curiosity and care. I lit one candle and set it afloat in the bowl and suggested that we each light a candle and make a wish. All nine boys and some of the staff took part and a wonderful mood was created. They all lay around on the sofas or beside me on the floor and I read them an old Scottish folktale. It took about forty minutes, and there was complete quiet and stillness throughout, except at one point, when I read the description of the beautiful princess, and a boy called out, 'That sounds just like my girlfriend!' At the end of the tale there was a long silence, and then a hubbub of voices appreciating and commenting on the story.

On the second visit, we set up a beeswax candle-making workshop on the dining table. We melted the wax in the kitchen, filled two casks and set them at each end of the table. We gave all participants some candle wicks. Boys and staff moved around the table, dipping the wicks and gradually creating honey-scented candles. It was fun, and especially good that some staff joined in, walking round and round and keeping at it, because the candle does not appear instantaneously. There was a great variety of candles, and many proclamations of, 'I'm giving this to my Mum'.

On the third visit we brought hammers, saws and axes and took the boys for a walk in the adjoining wood, tasting hazelnuts and digging clay from the river-bank. We cut down a few birch saplings and fashioned a very rustic but functional bird-table, dug a hole outside the unit window and set it up. There were no mishaps with the tools, only an over-enthusiasm about felling trees. We put suet and seed out for the birds. These few experiences modelled activities which staff could repeat in their own ways, developing a regular rhythm of creative activities. With an array of engaging activities, the unit becomes a living space and not just a containing space where everyone is bored and frustrated.

Bed-time stories offer the possibility of giving young people positive and ennobling images to take with them into sleep. Carefully chosen stories can speak to their souls and help them to imagine what they could become. The candle-making experiment opened the way

for purposeful shared activity within the unit, where young people and adults can work together with real, rather than virtual, materials to make beautiful and useful objects. The bird-table opened the way for engaging with the natural world, learning about the life surrounding us, and working together to create something connected to the unit which can provide a continuing participation with nature. Far more important than the making of candles and bird-tables and the telling of stories, however, are the opportunities created for adults and young people to be in good relationship with one another, sharing and refining their treasure.

Caring for carers: evolving a therapeutic culture

The most important work within the school is the slowest, namely helping staff to develop their understanding of the deeper needs of the young people, and their own responses to their behaviour. This work is slow because it demands not only intellectual growth, but emotional and psychological growth, which must unfold in its own rhythm. It is also slow because training for residential child care staff has been poor in the past. It is only recently with the advent of SSSC registration requirements that staff training and qualifications in residential child care have begun to receive the attention they deserve. It should go without saying that tremendous input is needed to give carers what they need to be equal to the daunting task they are given. As Anglin said,

It is a disturbing fact that those who have the most complex and demanding role in the care and treatment of traumatized children have the least, and in many cases, no specific training for the work. This means that many workers are being hired to work in the midst of this 'river of pain' without having engaged in a process to identify, understand and come to terms with the unresolved trauma and pain in their own backgrounds, leaving them vulnerable to defensive reactions towards the youth when the youth's pain emerges in a variety of often challenging ways (Anglin, 2002, p. 113).

Staff need ongoing support to deepen their connection to their own inner worlds, and to understand how this impacts upon their relationships with children. It is only if we create an ethos of personal development for all staff, and a moral development in compassionate understanding, that we can hold that pathway open for our young people (Henderson, 2006).

Staff need to be given tools of understanding and the time to deepen their practice. In my experience they are very generous, committed and courageous individuals but are often asked to handle levels of damage that they may have neither the understanding nor emotional support to contend with successfully. A generous, loving heart and willing soul are not enough in our contexts.

Early on in the project, a weekend residential training session was held for the unit staff. The main purpose of the training was to give them a lived rather than a theoretical experience of the kind of home we hope to create, and which would visit all seven spheres of relationship. Every detail of the weekend was considered in terms of what staff needed

and what they could do to meet the needs of the young people. The staff were very apprehensive and somewhat negative in anticipation of the weekend. We met in a welcoming smallholding at an old mill in the Borders. On arrival we shared a delicious and gracious meal served by our hosts, and then went across the garden, scattering ducks and hens, to our work-room in the mill itself. The space was beautiful and the atmosphere serene, an open wood fire blazing, candles lit, a warm carpet and a circle of cushions and bean-bags, gentle music playing and an aromatic cauldron of tea scenting the room. The group relaxed immediately, commenting on how safe and nurtured they felt.

Although the work of the weekend was intense, the process flowed naturally and gently. There were three main parts to the work. The first was on Friday evening, when a very tender mood prevailed. The group were acknowledged and affirmed in their good and difficult work. We took time to each light a candle and speak about one particular boy we had known whose memory still troubled us. People shared deeply. It was as if a dam had given way. They were carrying so many stories of loss and tragedy. This sharing of emotional meaning enabled all the work that followed: the learning, the sharing and the ultimate renewal of purpose and enthusiasm in the work. It represented a quality of meeting which needs to happen regularly, a space where the hearts and souls of staff are recognised, as well as the emotional costs they incur. Being able to speak their deeper truths enabled staff to come - for a time - out of whatever survival posture they adopt in order to manage their feelings. As we become less defended we are more able to attune to our feelings and the feelings of others. This is crucial in work with children in residential care. A culture of defensiveness can only breed misunderstanding and aggression. Learning to share more openly prepares staff to be more able and willing to help the young people do the same, appreciating first-hand how threatening and transformative it can be.

The second day of the weekend focused on deepening our sharing and opening to new ways of thinking about the young people. There was so much that staff members wanted to tell one another. They discovered that they had unwittingly perpetuated a shame-based culture in which they held back their creative ideas out of the fear of being ridiculed. They also owned that they had been negative about one another's initiatives. As staff were able to take ownership of their own vulnerabilities, they were able to consider the unseen vulnerabilities of the young people. Through lively conversation and reflection, we experienced a kind of awakening into a deeper appreciation of them as children. The young people became hurt children who need a good home that provides them with the good things that children need. It was on that day that a kind of light-hearted but earnest vow was taken to no longer call their facility 'a unit', but to refer to it as their 'house' or 'home'.

Throughout the day, staff commented on how good it was to be together in this way. We worked to list exactly what we thought the positive factors were, so that we could attempt to re-create them back at the school. The group realised that the feeling of safety, trust and welcome, and the ability to share and take emotional risks were things they wanted to be able to give to the young people.

These factors include:

1. A welcoming, comfortable and nurturing environment.
2. An atmosphere of safety, calm and acceptance.
3. Good wholesome food, shared together.
4. My openness as an 'authority figure' to apologise and to show my vulnerability.
5. The healing effects of nature.
6. Mutual support.

Out of our work on the second day, a 'manifesto' of shared commitment was co-created by the team. It reads:

*To some of us
this is more
than just words.*

*We are creating a garden
where young people can grow and heal,
where they can feel safe, nurtured,
free to express themselves,
free to learn and to be inspired.*

*In order to create and tend this garden,
and to model good relationship
for the young people in our care,
and for the wider community,
we commit to the following:*

1. We will work together on engaging more deeply, with more honesty, sensitivity and compassion in our communications with others, keeping in mind who they are and what things might mean to them. We will listen more and share more with more respect, and if it is not possible to address something in the moment, we will address it later, not judging our concerns as trivial, even if others do not share them, trusting that the team is working to be open to our thoughts and feelings.
2. We will work together to be open to new ideas, both our own and others, and not give up if we fail. We will try and try again to bring our good ideas to fruition, and we will not be defeated by failure.
3. We will work together to look after our own wellbeing and the wellbeing of our fellow team members, making time for deep and honest sharing, relaxation, reflection, chilling and recharging.
4. We will work together to always keep in mind the causes behind the behaviour that we deal with, understanding that every expression, no matter how challenging or baffling, is an attempt to communicate something important, and that acting out is a last resort to try and get adults to hold and help us with inner things we can't manage on our own.

5. We will work together to keep alive the memory of the tranquil space where we have met, and of all that we have been able to discover and share by being safe together in a beautiful and nurturing place.

6. We will work together to think deeply into the deeper meaning of all we offer at our House, keeping in mind what parts of us are appropriate to bring to each situation, and continually questioning the goodness, beauty and truth of what we offer here.

7. We will work together to honour our undertaking as a sacred one.

On the third day we focused on practical ideas we could take back with us. There was a flood of enthusiasm and a commitment to encourage rather than undermine new initiatives. We left with our 'manifesto' and a long strip of lining paper covered with ideas and plans, from creating an art studio in the laundry room to doing 'circle time', personal hygiene groups, gardening, baking and building. It was a wonderful testament to the importance of meeting people where they are and giving them a chance to bring out what is inside them, as a way of awakening creativity and inviting buried treasure to be shared.

Reaching our higher nature through good relationship

Lewis, Amini and Lannon (2002) in their discussion about relationships, give an example of what happens when you hold out an old shoe to a dog. He will enthusiastically grab hold of it, tugging and thrashing. If you drop the shoe he will bring it back and hold it out to you, because it is not the shoe that he wants. What he wants is the feeling of you tugging away on the other side, doing it with him, making relationship.

Residential care staff often do not realise the immeasurable potential value of 'doing and being with'. We need to understand the role of the adult in terms of the developing child. We need to be seeing that the child is still trying unconsciously to complete some developmental tasks essential to maturation. The child needs us to play the other part in that development. We need to pick up all the shoes the child brings, and tug and tug. It is our responsibility to provide the child with lots of interesting, good 'shoes'.

What often happens is that the adult throws a shoe - in whatever form - to the child, then goes off to pursue something else. All the technological, screen-based entertainments are perfect for this: shoes they can chew on all by themselves. But it may be far from what they always need or want. The young people may have been so consistently disappointed that they do not know that they have a right to bring the shoe back and ask us to engage. Alternatively, if they still have that capacity and try to get our involvement, they can get labelled as manipulative and demanding. They may go off to a corner and try to soothe themselves with the 'shoe', but will probably end up chewing it to bits. What begins as a reasonable need for appropriate adult engagement can end up with a child destroying something, being labeled, and having to take all the consequences.

All of the activities we are experimenting with in this project are wholesome and enrich the child's inner and outer worlds, encouraging use of hands, body and mind. (Steiner 1988; Nobel 1991). We are helping the child to form a relationship not only with the

material, but with us. The 'shaping physiologic force of love' (Lewis et al., 2002, p. 25) does not come in the form of the occasionally-thrown shoe or latest computer game, but in consistent sensitive relatedness formed from an ever-deepening understanding of the child's needs. It is only from this solid, fertile common ground that the child's moral sense can develop and that the potential for spiritual activity, moral undertakings and compassionate relating can grow.

Conclusion

The work of our project has been slow but deep. At times it has been exciting and hopeful; at other times, frustrating. Everything we have undertaken has proved meaningful, often surprisingly so. The young people have shown interest and pride in activities like gardening, baking, storytelling and tending to plants in their rooms. Our changes in the interior space, transforming the pool room into a carpeted, lazure-painted sanctuary with cushions and swings have provided well-used opportunities for relaxation and quiet time. Staff members have exhibited an ongoing interest in pursuing these values, though it has at times been difficult to keep the seeds watered. At times, a sense of their relevance wanes as the embedded cultural values and habits fight for ascendancy.

We have had a hard time achieving consistency at each level. There is so much about the culture which seems to work against the establishment of new structures. There is always the next emergency or rescheduling, and this project has suffered the same kind of uprooting and insecurity which the young people do. Committed and consistent input is required to embed new practices in the minds of staff and young people and in the rhythms of the lifespace. It is crucial that good things happen regularly and reliably. The physical, emotional and geographical buffeting that these young people receive demands a life in the house which is securely held by reliable rhythms of good things. This is very challenging in a fragmented society which values excitement and entertainment over consistency, community and creativity.

The work has been hard to sustain for other reasons. The house itself has too many young people, and the challenges they present can be extreme at times. There have also been management difficulties. There is, at times, a sense of a heavy downward pull, which drags everything down to a norm of care-lessness. Sadly, the young people seem so used to that. But they need and deserve impeccable care, to be cherished and held in an environment which reflects who they can be, which is to say what a human being can be: creative, loving and just.

This is an ongoing project. Although it is taking time for things to take root, there are positive feelings about what we have done, from young people, staff, managers and inspectors. Some immeasurable golden 'something' is starting to shine. There need to be committed torch-bearers, culture-carriers, who can keep the 'manifesto' alive, and in whatever way keep reminding us of the vital treasure within staff and the children for whom they care. We are in the process of lighting those torches, and attempting to prepare people to carry them.

Endnotes

This article has been edited and shortened to appear in the journal. The original version can be viewed online at careymorning.blogspot.com.

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