

## Opening Their Treasures, They Offered Him Gifts

The broken and unopened gifts of relationship in residential childcare

Carey Morning, BSc. M.A.

*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 King Lear*

### Introduction

This article is about the initial phase of a continuing development project at a residential school for boys in Scotland. It asks, <sup>3</sup>What can we do to offer our young people the possibility of real growth and healing and not just containment and rhetoric? <sup>2</sup> It asks us to consider the inner life of the child and of those who work with them, and to find ways to create a community which will engender a holistic evolution in all its members. But I will begin with an image.

It is Twelfth Night, when Christians celebrate the arrival of the three mysterious kings at that humble stable in Bethlehem. No one knows how far they travelled across the deserts to reach the baby. A star, something beyond this world, showed them which way to go. What a breath-taking sight those kings must have been, appearing unexpectedly out of the darkness, bending their crowned heads beneath the lintel to enter the lamp-lit, straw-strewn place, dressed in their gorgeous robes.

As the story goes, they fell before him in worship, and then, <sup>3</sup>opening their treasures, they offered him gifts<sup>2</sup>. Bright gold was laid on the earthen floor. They honoured him in this way, recognising him as most precious by giving what was most precious. Not misled by appearances, they saw in their wisdom right through the surface poverty of the situation, to the golden light of love within the child, and they gave him the very best they had.

The story of the kings has a lot to tell us about our work in residential childcare, if we believe, as we should, that our work is fundamentally to help our wounded children find, believe in and follow what is the very best in them and the world. The story tells us that if we are to honour any child in his true nature, as capable of love, we must make a long and arduous journey across uncharted territory. There is no quick fix. There is no cheap remedy. In our case there are deserts of desolation and mountains of grief and rage to be crossed, and they must be crossed on foot. We will have dangerous and harrowing encounters, and there is always the threat of losing our way, so we will need a source of light, a sustaining faith, some bright star to steer by, to be supported and inspired by.

And we are asked to bring the child the very best we have, our treasure, so that he can look at our gifts as in a mirror and see that he himself is a treasure, and know that he is a precious gift to the world. The story also tells us that there is a kind of astonishing and utterly unconventional quality to the business of honouring the child. Social norms, class and cultural distinctions must be transcended if we are to acknowledge and welcome the holy child who lies swaddled within every child. Simple shepherds must be helped to realize that the angels are calling to them too, and kings need to show up in the lowliest places, and they need to bring gold.

There's another piece. All this questing and beauty, generosity and tenderness, humility and devotion unfold in the domain of a fourth king, a king who is so in love with power that he sacrifices children in order to keep a hold of it. In our business we need to wonder about that sort of king too.

\*The original reads <sup>3</sup>The oldest hath borne most: we that are young<sup>2</sup>... but I believe that in these sad times the Bard would forgive my alteration.

## **A Need for Growth and Change**

The school's senior management recognised a need to invest in development, as the school had been through a number of years of difficulties resulting in loss of staff, loss of morale and loss of certain standards of care to which they aspire. Over the years the culture had slid down more toward one of behaviour management and away from creative and therapeutic interaction. We might say that they were looking to bring metaphoric gold into the community, to feed a depleted membership and to create a learning culture which could more truly reflect their ethos of excellence of care. They also recognized the inherent difficulties of attempting culture change from within, and hired me as an external consultant psychotherapist with a background in other child-centred contexts to assess provision of care and to design and oversee a program of development.

My brief was to focus on working with one of the residential units, housing 9-13 boys between the ages of 11 and 16, to nurture and educate the staff team in ways which could redress the perceived short-comings, but more than that, to create and explore innovative ways of defining and addressing the needs of the young people and enriching their lives. The work is based in developmental psychotherapeutic and anthroposophical ideas and has been experimental to a certain extent. This project differed widely from those in two other residential units where staff received training in one specific model of therapeutic intervention. My remit was much freer, more creative and inclusive, and involved at times training for the entire organization.

This article will share some of our vision and experiences, our successes, difficulties and findings, and above all our hope, for the real improvement of childcare services, our hope that one day we will know what the word <sup>3</sup>care<sup>2</sup> means, and be truly justified in using it to describe what we offer to our children.

## **Initial Assessment**

An initial assessment was based on a model of seven spheres of relationship considered essential to a holistic human development. They are:

1. the 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 religious dimension)

it was evident that in the life of the residential unit, and throughout the organization, the need for development stretched right across the seven spheres. None of them were developed enough and some had no expression at all in the shared life of residents and staff. Insufficient space and time were given for individual reflection. Not nearly enough importance was given to supporting and working on peer relationships. Staff had only one meeting a week which was taken up with practice and domestic concerns. Between staff and young people there was a lack of consistent interpersonal practice which could provide the calm and sensitive stability which children, especially these children, need from adults. There was no appropriate physical space for children to spend time with their families and no organized unit-based experiences which could be shared with family members. Although there are extensive grounds to the campus, trees, fields, meadows and streams, they were put to very little use for the benefit of the young people and their sense of membership and participation in a living world. The cultural world was very limited, mass media, computers, football, cars and the like. There were not enough efforts to widen the boys' experience of the creativity of mankind and of their own possibilities, and no real importance was placed on beauty or graciousness in the home. The spiritual dimension needed awakening.

Our long term goals are to find appropriate ways of consistently addressing and enriching each of these seven spheres within the rhythm of life in the unit, creating reliable and protected spaces and times where these relationships can be tended. We are seeking to offer the young people in our care a rich field of relationship opportunities which reflect the inherent richness and potential of their own humanity, however damaged or deprived. And we are working 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, in addition, the considerable wounds to their souls can be acknowledged and looked after.

### **The Relationship is the Gold**

It is well understood now that 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, and are consistently and sensitively engaged with, is the real gold which ought to be laid before every baby. Only from the foundation of a loving relationship can a human baby get directly onto the path of healthy physical, emotional, intellectual and moral development. If we aren't blessed with that kind of start in life we will, through no fault of our own, need a lot of help finding and staying on that path later. [Bowlby 1979; Lewis, et.al. 2002; Hughes 2006]

Good relationship in infancy and early childhood gives us the security and resilience and morality to eventually reach out and form more mature and complex relationships with other people and things in our world. The richer and better our field of relationships, the richer and better we become in our thinking and feeling and doing, and the more moral our activity will be. It is in response to whom and what we meet and engage with in the world that our identity and capacities emerge and develop.

If a wise king never leans over the crib to smile at baby, baby may never be able to locate something great and noble inside himself as a man. And if a shepherd never reaches out to stroke baby with a bit of fleece, or if a gentle mother never takes him up into her loving arms, then the grown man may forever feel an emptiness or hardness in his heart where something warm and tender ought to be. Out of the wealth of their own beings, parents make these offerings for the child to identify with and form himself from. If the child goes looking through the straw for gold and finds only dung, that will be what he feels he is made of.

We have to put a lot of gold, a lot of goodness, in front of those kids, for them to be able to identify with a different kind of substance. This is what our project is fundamentally about, wondering about goodness and good relationship, seeing what kinds of gold we can put in front of the young people in our care, what goodness in ourselves we can develop and offer. We are exploring the education of the heart in as many ways as we can.

## A Blindness to the Soul

On arrival at the school two things stood out. The first was the bleak environment, which had clearly deteriorated over time, both indoors and outdoors. There was little evidence of anything warming, welcoming or beautiful. The indoor spaces were institutional, colourless, quite comfortless, and without anything real or alive to engage with, only televisions, computers, video games and a pool table. The boys were living in physical surroundings which seemed to mirror the desolation and brokenness of their inner worlds.

The second, more shocking aspect was the way in which the terrible pain and trauma of those inner worlds seemed to go unacknowledged and unaddressed. It continues to be a source of distress and bewilderment to me how the pain these young people are in seems to somehow be minimised, denied or otherwise unrecognized. They are so much more hurt than anyone seems to want to say or see, or to be able 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 <sup>3</sup>graduate<sup>2</sup>. 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 and contactlessness. 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, far away behind those deadened eyes.*

Lots of the boys have eyes like that. It is 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 crazy, like I was split in two. My body was calmly descending the stair, but the rest of me was shattered, wanting to scream out, <sup>3</sup>What about the boy?! What will happen to that boy we've left behind, so confused and unseen? Who will see to his suffering, his brokenness and fragility?!<sup>2</sup> Perhaps I entered a space similar to the one that boy was in, where I was somehow, for the sake of convention, able to concoct a presentable exterior, while inside someone was silently screaming, cut off from a world which walked right past.

But this boy was a graduate. He had met his <sup>3</sup>targets<sup>2</sup>. Was there something wrong with me? How must it have affected him to be applauded by the <sup>3</sup>care<sup>2</sup>system for having successfully erected a false self to conceal the unaddressed trauma, so obvious in his eyes, the trauma which should have informed everything about his <sup>3</sup>care<sup>2</sup> plan? Are we afraid of how much he needs from us? But what he needs will not go away.

*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<sup>11</sup> who tries to live up to others<sup>1</sup> requirements to act maturely. [Gerhardt 2004]*

It has become a familiar experience in this place, where a part of me tunes into the hurt parts of these boys, the parts too young to speak, or too hopeless, ashamed or afraid, and where the system grinds on with all its busyness and all its paperwork, and all its good will, somehow deafened to the buried cries .

*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 <sup>3</sup>cover-up<sup>2</sup> was an intentional strategy of avoidance. From time to time, what staff variously called <sup>3</sup>outbursts, <sup>23</sup>explosions, <sup>2</sup> or <sup>3</sup>acting out<sup>2</sup> 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 careworkers acknowledge or respond sensitively to the inner world of the child. [Anglin 2002]*

It is far easier to write about them than to look into the eyes of the young people in our care, and to attempt to make real contact with them. It is a frightening view. If we expect anyone to meet the unvoiced pain in the bottomless wells of those eyes, the deadness there, and the dark despair, we must be willing to equip them properly and support them resolutely. We are asking our carers to face the dreadful things those eyes have seen, and the untold damage done. If we do not stay awake to what is in those eyes, and the terrible feelings they evoke in us, we will only create a charade which will ultimately do harm to us all. It is no wonder that we don't feel trustworthy enough or patient or brave or loving enough to help these children begin to recover from what they have somehow survived. It is so frightening to look into those eyes. But perhaps we should be more afraid of what will inevitably happen if we don't.

Even as I write this I am plagued by a sense of anxiety. Am I breaking a taboo in naming these thoughts and feelings? Am I making too much of this? But these children are landing on our doorstep bleeding. If we don't diagnose and treat their real wounds they will flail about doing damage to themselves and others and many of them will bleed slowly to death in prisons we haven't built yet. Why do we not want to see?

There is a well-known fairy tale by Hans Christian Andersen called The Emperor's New Clothes. In it, the vanity of the emperor enables a couple of swindlers to convince him that they have a marvellous new fabric, one which can only be seen by people deserving of the post they hold. In fact they have nothing on their loom and make no actual clothing, but all the ministers pretend to see it, and of course the emperor pretends to see it too. Not only do they all pretend to see it, in order to keep their jobs and not reveal themselves as fools, but they fawn about, admiring excessively this non-existent cloth and the non-existent garments being made for the emperor, who decides to hold a grand public procession to show them off. And so he does, marching stark naked through the streets, with all and sundry proclaiming the radiant beauty of his new clothes. The tale concludes like this:

*<sup>3</sup>But he has nothing on, <sup>2</sup> said a little child.*

*<sup>3</sup>Oh, listen to the innocent, <sup>2</sup> said its father. And one person whispered to the other what the child had said. <sup>3</sup>He has nothing on - a child says he has nothing on! <sup>2</sup>*

*<sup>3</sup>But he has nothing on! <sup>2</sup> at last cried all the people.*

*The emperor writhed, for he knew it was true. But he thought: <sup>3</sup>The procession must go on now.<sup>2</sup> So he held himself stiffer than ever, and the chamberlain held up the invisible train.*

Perhaps in our profession we deceive ourselves into seeing healing when it isn't really there, and we deceive ourselves into not seeing the wounded soul which is. If we are afraid of our own heart-break, maybe we all need to speak about it more, tell the terrible truths and how very feeble we feel in the face of them. Perhaps then we will be able to more realistically assess and offer the different supports needed to anyone involved in this heart-breaking work.

## The Lost Garden

Every child who enters the care system does so because of serious relationship failures which are not his fault. These failures, across a wide spectrum of neglect and abuse, have left these young people with deep psychological damage and developmental wounds. With what they have suffered, and often continue to suffer, it is difficult for them to contend with the world. And the <sup>3</sup>pain-based behaviours<sup>2</sup> [Anglin 2002] which arise out of their wounds make it difficult for the world to contend with them.

In the life stories of the children in our care, the garden of childhood is a missing or torn-up chapter. A garden is a protected place of devotion and rhythmic care, of nourishment, enrichment and support, attention to detail, responsiveness to individual needs and a deep respect for the unseen forces of life. Our childhood should be a garden like that. It needs to be for us to become fully human. {Steiner 1923}

The children who are given into our care are suffering, and causing suffering, because they haven't been in the garden long enough, or they have never had a chance to even enter the garden. They have been born in the wilderness, or the walls of the gardens of their childhoods have been torn down, by addiction, by mental illness, by poverty, by ignorance, by bad luck. They have been set upon by wolves, or they've been tossed over the wall and left to the wolves, or their own parents are the wolves and they've been trapped with predatory beasts in a garden where escape is impossible and nothing good can grow. The <sup>3</sup>difficult<sup>2</sup> behaviour they bring to us is only a reflection of their tragic legacy of trauma and pain. If a child hasn't had enough time in a good abundant garden he will carry a lot of grief and rage that is difficult for him and everyone else to handle.

Some of our young people have seen their mothers murdered or imprisoned, they have seen their fathers violent, addicted, broken, abusive, or they haven't seen their fathers at all. Some have been used emotionally, used sexually, witnessed crime and cruelty. They have hidden under the floorboards to escape abuse. They may have been offered up for rent by their own mothers, to whom they remain devoted. They've been discarded, neglected, dismissed, screamed at, shaken, beaten, shamed and then blamed by the adults they depend on. The extent of their suffering and the damage to their development, emotionally, intellectually and morally cannot be over-stated. The name for it is trauma.

*There are few better examples of trauma-related problems than what I saw in those boys at the residential centre. The impact of trauma - and the frequent misinterpretation of its symptoms - revealed itself in the fact that nearly every one of them had some kind of diagnosis related to attention and conduct problems. In a classroom setting, unfortunately, both dissociation and hyper-arousal responses [trauma reactions] look remarkably like attention deficit disorder. Dissociated children quite obviously are not paying attention: they seem to be daydreaming or <sup>3</sup>spacing out<sup>2</sup>, rather than focusing on schoolwork, and indeed, they have tuned out the world around them. Hyper-aroused youth can look hyperactive or inattentive because what they are attending to is the teacher's tone of voice or the other children's body language, not the content of their lessons.*

*The aggression and impulsivity that the fight or flight response provokes can also appear as defiance or opposition, when in fact it is the remnants of a response to some prior traumatic situation that the child has somehow been prompted to recall. The <sup>3</sup>freezing<sup>2</sup> response that the body makes when stressed - sudden immobility, like a deer caught in the headlights - is also often misinterpreted as defiant refusal by teachers because, when it occurs, the child literally cannot respond to commands. While not all ADD, hyperactivity and oppositional-defiant disorder are trauma-related, it is likely that the symptoms that lead to these diagnoses are trauma-related more often than anyone has begun to suspect. [Perry 2006]*

## The Human Ascent, step by step

It was evident that despite the hard work and heartfelt commitment of staff members, the system was not promoting, enabling or supporting a depth of understanding and relatedness in the life of the community which could begin to address the developmental needs of the young people. So 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 of life, decision-making, interacting. Obviously this is a large and long-term, hopefully not impossible, project, fraught with difficulties of many kinds. This is where we take strength from those desert-crossing kings, the ones who believed that Christ would be found, even in this world.

Our plans included eventually structuring in regular times for reflection and sharing for both staff and young people, designing a regular schedule of crafts activities in and around the unit, re-developing the walled garden and growing food and flowers, developing a relationship with a local organic farm, particularly for working with animals, milking cows, etc., building outdoor dwellings, tree-houses, tepees, etc., creating seasonal festival celebrations which could include family members, and ongoing training for staff. In sometimes small but significant ways, we have been able to get all these projects underway at least in their initial phase, with very good results. Sustaining them, however, has proved difficult for a number of reasons I will discuss later on.

The most important work is necessarily the slowest, namely helping staff to develop their understanding of the deeper needs of the young people, and how they interpret and respond to their behaviour. This work is slow for all of us because it demands not only intellectual growth, but emotional, psychological growth, which must unfold in its own rhythm. And it is also slow because there has been such wide-spread neglect in the field, there is a lot of catching-up to do, tremendous input is needed, to give carers what they need to be equal to the daunting task they are given. Although training is regularly offered it tends to be competence-based training rather than work involving personal process which can actually help heighten awareness and deepen understanding of the inner life and the effects of trauma.

*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 <sup>3</sup>river of pain<sup>2</sup> 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]*

If mountains must be crossed on foot for the sake of the children, the same must be done for the staff, who need ongoing support to deepen their connection to the content of their own inner worlds, and how that gets played out in their relating with children. It is only if we create an ethos of real personal development for all members of the community, a moral development in compassionate understanding, that we can hold that pathway open for our young people. [Henderson 2006]

Staffs needs 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 they are being asked to handle levels of damage they have neither the emotional understanding nor emotional support to contend with successfully. A generous, loving heart and willing soul are not enough in our contexts. The wisdom of the heart must be refined, so that we can love effectively, appropriately and skilfully and provide the consistency of safe supportive relationship which is the only thing which can begin to heal the devastating effects of the trauma which we are facing. Not to do that continuous work of refining the heart and developing the soul is unfair and costly to everyone, especially of course to the children in our care.

## Small Steps on the Journey and Learning by Example

I made three initial visits to the unit over a two-week period to make some offerings and see how they would be received. 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. It was November 1st, the Old Celtic New year. All nine boys and some of the staff earnestly took part and a wonderful mood was created. Then 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, <sup>3</sup>That sounds just like my girlfriend! <sup>2</sup> At the end of the tale there was a long silence, and then a hubbub of voices praising the story and commenting on different moments. Then up they went to bed.

On the second visit a friend and I 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 and gave wicks to everyone. Boys and staff moved around the table, dipping the wicks and gradually creating honey-scented candles. Some boys became very creative with double wicks, spiral candles and elaborate plasticine candle-holders. One or two boys sat out and had others make theirs. It was fun, and especially good that some staff joined in the process, 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, <sup>3</sup>I'm giving this to my Mum.<sup>2</sup>

On the third visit a friend brought hammers and saws and axes and we took the boys for a nature walk in the adjoining wood, tasting hazelnuts and digging clay from the river-bank. Then we got the tools and cut down a few birch saplings and together 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 based in the home which the young people could rely on. With an array of engaging things going on in the home it becomes a real living space and not just a containing space where everyone is bored and frustrated, waiting to be able to escape to an outside activity.

Bed-time stories offer the possibility of giving the young people positive and ennobling images to take with them into sleep. Carefully chosen stories can speak to their souls and help them to feel from within what they could become, what they might aspire to. Our story told of a young Scottish prince who was banished from his home until he could bring back a magical blue falcon. During his exile he went through many seemingly impossible trials, but received assistance from unexpected places and triumphed in the end. Our young people need to hear stories like this that give dignity to their human struggle. Their lives are awash with images of human degradation.

The candle-making experiment opened the way for purposeful shared activity within the home, where young people and adults can work together with real, rather than virtual, materials to make beautiful and useful objects. The making brought forth the wish to give. The bird-table experiment opened the way for engaging with the natural world, learning about the life surrounding us, using natural materials for building, and again, working together to create something of use and something connected to the home which can provide a continuing participation in the natural world.

But far more important than the making of candles and bird-tables and the telling of stories is the opportunity which all these things give for adults and young people to be in good, reparative relationship with one another.

## **Belonging to and Working with the Living World**

A gardening project, overseen by a colleague, was begun in the old overgrown walled garden. A few of the young people, out of their own choice, and strangely enough, three of the most traumatized and <sup>3</sup>difficult<sup>2</sup>, engaged on a more or less weekly basis in clearing and digging a corner of the garden, designing and laying out beds and stone pathways, and planting vegetables. Although that by the time harvest had arrived these boys had all moved on to other settings, leeks and potatoes were gathered, cooked and eaten by others in the <sup>3</sup>unit<sup>2</sup>.

We also made a trip to a local organic farm with which we have been building a relationship. All the boys and three staff members came for half a day and participated in hand-milking and grooming the seven heifers, making butter, starting a fire from flints and lighting an outdoor clay oven for baking home-grown potatoes, cleaning the milking parlour, seeing the workings of the dairy, bedding down the animals and exploring the land. After all our hard work on a cold and wet December evening, we ate hot tatties with our freshly made butter. Some of the boys said they wanted to go to MacDonald's on the way home. All of the boys engaged in a lively and courageous way with the work. In fact the farm residents commented on their being more open and interested than other more privileged pupils whom they have regularly worked with. Especially meaningful were the expressions of tenderness toward the animals from boys whose hearts are otherwise much defended, and the willingness to get down to hard, mucky work from boys who are quite institutionalised and resistant to applying themselves to manual labour.

These experiences with the land, plants and animals are invaluable in eliciting these capacities, especially from young people who have been so hurt and betrayed by human beings. They also offer the young person a sense of belonging to, and being able to participate constructively in, the living world. All the boys were enthusiastic about returning to the farm, and we have kept that relationship going, however it is our hope that through that relationship we will manage to bring agricultural projects into the school grounds, and that the rhythm of care for living things will eventually become an essential part of every boy's life at the school.

## **Caring for the Carers and Evolving a Therapeutic Culture**

Early on in the project a weekend residential training group 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 would hope to create in the unit, and which would visit all seven spheres of relationship in our model, in some form or other. 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 impact of the weekend was tremendous, and it still serves as a kind of beacon for our project which has suffered so many set-backs.

The staff were very apprehensive and somewhat negative in anticipation of the weekend away, and quite convinced, they later shared, that it would be <sup>3</sup>just another useless training<sup>2</sup>. We met at a small, welcoming, family-run retreat and small-holding at an old mill in the Scottish Borders. On arrival we shared a delicious and gracious home-grown 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. All our senses were touched. The group relaxed immediately, commenting on how safe and nurtured they felt, how warm and friendly and unthreatening it all was.

Although the work of the weekend was very deep, the process flowed quite 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 in the good and difficult work that they do, in how heart-breaking it is for them and how well they do it. Then we took time to each light a candle and speak about one particular boy we had known whose memory still grieved or troubled us. People shared deeply. It was a very poignant time. It was as if a dam had opened, as if we could have gone round and round the circle all night. They were carrying so many stories of loss and tragedy and so many reflections and wonderings. <sup>3</sup>Does anyone know what happened to...?<sup>2</sup>

This outpouring of emotional meaning enabled all the work that followed, the learning, the sharing, the creativity and the ultimate renewal of purpose and enthusiasm in the work. It represents a quality of meeting which needs to happen regularly, a space where the hearts and souls of staff are recognized and given voice, where their efforts are recognized and also the emotional costs they necessarily incur. Being able to speak these truths enables us to come out of whatever survival posture we have needed in order to manage our feelings about what we are encountering. As we become less defended we can be more sensitive and attuned to our feelings and the feeling lives of others. This is of course crucial to our work with such hurt children. A culture of defendedness can only breed misunderstanding and aggression. Learning to share more openly with one another prepares staff to be more able and willing to help the young people do the same. And they have so much they need to share with us.

The second day of the weekend focussed on deepening our sharing with one another 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 were all to some extent holding back their creative ideas out of the fear of being put-down or ridiculed. They also owned that they had been negative and unsupportive about one another's initiatives. The pervasiveness of this stultifying shaming and fear of shame throughout the organization is one of the factors which have made our work move so slowly. The damage it causes and the insidious ways it works in relation to the young people is an important focus.

As staff were able to take ownership of their own vulnerabilities, they were able to consider more deeply the unseen vulnerabilities of the young people. Through lively conversation, reflection and powerful feelings we experienced a kind of awakening into a deeper appreciation of them as children, as if that fact had somehow gone missing. The young people became children, hurt children who need a good home that can provide 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 the unit the <sup>3</sup>unit<sup>2</sup>, but to refer to it as the <sup>3</sup>house<sup>2</sup> or the <sup>3</sup>home<sup>2</sup>.

Throughout the day there was more comment on how good it was to be together in this way and how much healing it was enabling. We worked to articulate exactly what we thought the factors were, so that we could attempt to re-create them back at the school. The group realized 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. Even their feelings on arrival were seen to mirror the experience of the young people arriving in residential care, apprehensive, negative, expecting the worst. How good it would be to be able to help allay their fears and put them at their ease as readily as we had done for the staff. The list of enabling factors included the following:

welcoming, comfortable and nurturing environment  
atmosphere of calm and acceptance  
good wholesome food, shared together  
my openness, willingness to apologize and to show my vulnerability  
beautiful, well cared-for surroundings indoors and outdoors

nature, the river, the animals  
no judgment, freedom to express feelings  
mutual support  
long-term support  
new ideas, freedom to learn, inspiration

Out of our work on the second day a kind of 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<sup>1</sup>, and to 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 well-being and the well-being 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 behaviours 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 \_\_\_\_\_ 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.

Our meetings were punctuated by walks on the land, time with animals, wonderful meals and reflection supported by music. On the third day we focussed on practical ideas we could take back with us. There was a real flood of enthusiasm and ideas, mutual encouragement to try new things, 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, building, and all kinds of things. 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, the painful and difficult, unspoken and unacknowledged things, as a way of re-opening the channels of creativity and positive feeling, of finding the buried gold.

## Reaching Our Higher Nature through Good Relationship

What is it that we are really doing when we are in attuned relationship? Why is it so important? Here a picture from neuro-science is helpful. The human brain has gone through three successive stages of evolution, known chronologically as the reptilian, the limbic or mammalian, and the neocortical. The earlier layers are still active and nested within the most recent stage, the <sup>3</sup>thinking<sup>2</sup> mind, the neocortex. The reptile brain is the survival brain, the <sup>3</sup>me<sup>2</sup> brain, where basic instincts and our fight-flight-or freeze responses originate. For the reptile, the <sup>3</sup>other<sup>2</sup> represents something to eat or mate with, briefly. The reptile's survival depends on looking after this separate<sup>3</sup>me<sup>2</sup>, and not on establishing bonds with others. And though there is much about our reptilian inheritance to be grateful for, there is also much to fear. The reptile is cold-blooded in more ways than one. (Lewis et.al. 2000; Levine 1997)

The mammal brain on the other hand is the interpersonal brain, the <sup>3</sup>us<sup>2</sup> brain. The more complex nervous system of the mammal demands regulation through relationship. Mammals need one another to become and be who they are. The four things we all learn in primary school that distinguish mammals are all related to the evolutionary achievement of interpersonal relatedness. Being warm-blooded, having body hair, giving birth to live young and suckling them are all about warmth and closeness. All mammals need a warm, present, milk-producing mother to hold them and form a secure attuned relationship with them as a foundation for successful adulthood. There is nothing sentimental about this view. Mammal brains develop in relationship, our neurophysiology depends on it, our capacity to care for others depends on it.

*Children who get minimal care can grow up to menace a negligent society. Because the primate's brain's intricate, interlocking neural barriers to violence do not self-assemble, a limbically damaged human is deadly. If the neglect is sufficiently profound, the result is a functionally reptilian organism armed with the cunning of the neocortical brain. Such an animal experiences no compunctions about harming others of its kind. [Amini, et. al. 2000]*

Mammals begin life in close relationship and form close relationships throughout their lives. It is how we maintain our equilibrium, regulating the tumultuous sea of our inner world as we travel through the tumult of the outer world. [Gerhardt 2004] Good relationship feeds our becoming and sustains our being. We mammals *want* and *need* relationship.

Lewis, Amini and Lannon [2000] give the wonderful 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 isn't 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.

Care staff don't realize their important role and the immeasurable potential value their <sup>3</sup>doing and being with<sup>2</sup> holds. We need to understand the role of the adult in terms of the developing child and what a delicate and impressionable person that child is. We need to be seeing that he is still trying unconsciously to complete some developmental tasks essential to his maturation. He is needing us to play the other part in that development. We need to pick up all the shoes he brings us and tug and tug and tug. And we need to provide him with lots of shoes.

What often happens instead 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 isn't what they need and it isn't really what they want. The young people have been so consistently disappointed that they often don't know to bring the shoe back and ask us to engage. Or 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. This will most likely earn them another label and all that goes with it. What begins as a reasonable need for appropriate adult engagement can end up with a kid destroying something and having to take all the consequences himself.

\*\*\*\*\*

All these activities which we engage in, or are attempting to, are valuable in themselves. They are wholesome and enrich the child's inner and outer worlds, allowing him to use his imagination, his hands, his body and mind, they open possibilities for work and play, and possibilities for the future. [Steiner 1923, Nobel 1991]. But they will not really help him if we are not engaging with him, helping him to handle his frustrations, celebrating his successes, acknowledging his losses and encouraging him to persevere. We are helping him to form a relationship not only with the material, but with us, and through that 'ness' with new emerging parts of himself. The 'shaping physiologic force of love'[Amini, et.al.] does not come in the form of the occasionally thrown shoe or bone 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 our moral sense can develop, that the uniquely human potential for spiritual activity, moral undertakings and compassionate relating can grow.

\*\*\*\*\*

One of my favourite descriptions of what is involved in establishing that ground of possibility comes from St. Exupery's The Little Prince. The little prince has fallen to Earth from another world and everything here is new to him. He encounters a fox who is fed up with his life of running after chickens and away from hunters. The little prince asks the fox to play with him.

*'I cannot play with you', the fox said. 'I am not tamed.'*

*...What does that mean - 'tame'?*

*...It is an act too often neglected, said the fox. 'It means to establish ties... To me, you are still nothing more than a little boy who is just like a hundred thousand other little boys. And I have no need of you. And you, on your part, have no need of me. To you, I am nothing more than a fox like a hundred thousand other foxes. But if you tame me, then we shall need each other. To me, you will be unique in all the world. To you, I shall be unique in all the world...'*

*'I am beginning to understand, said the little prince...*

*The fox gazed at the little prince for a long time. 'Please - tame me!' he said.*

*'I want very much', the little prince replied. 'But I have not much time...and a great many things to understand.'*

*'One only understands the things that one tames, said the fox. 'Men have no more time to understand anything. They buy things all ready made at the shops. But there is no shop anywhere where one can buy*

*friendship, and so men have no friends anymore. If you want a friend, tame me...<sup>2</sup>*

*<sup>3</sup>What must I do, to tame you? <sup>2</sup> asked the little prince.*

*<sup>3</sup>You must be very patient, <sup>3</sup> replied the fox.<sup>2</sup>First you will sit down at a little distance from me - like that - in the grass. I shall look at you out of the corner of my eye, and you will say nothing...But you will sit a little closer to me, every day...<sup>2</sup>*

In our work we may need to sit outside the burrow of the child's inner life for a long long time, while he hides himself or shouts abuse or flings his rubbish at us. But if we can know that the child through all this is saying <sup>3</sup>Please - tame me! <sup>2</sup> then we may have the patience to stay where he needs us to be, and in the way that he needs us to be there.

*The next day the little prince came back.*

*<sup>3</sup>It would have been better to come back at the same hour, <sup>2</sup> said the fox...<sup>2</sup>One must observe the proper rites...<sup>2</sup>*

## **Conclusion**

The fox understands so well what it takes to establish ties, especially with someone who has been hunted, who feels threatened and is afraid of human beings. Patience, consistency, a slow approach, observation of the proper rites. To teach the <sup>3</sup>proper rites<sup>2</sup> demands the same things. The work of our project has been slow but deep, very exciting at times, very hopeful at times, and at times not at all. Everything we have undertaken has proved meaningful, often surprisingly so. The fact that adolescent boys for example were happy to listen to a folktale for 40 minutes was very surprising to the staff. Our work with the farm was eye-opening, how much openness, wonder, willingness to work hard and also tenderness was drawn forth from the young people. They have shown interest and pride in making all kinds of things, in gardening, in baking, in 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 has been well used 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, so to speak, and at times a sense of their relevance wanes as the embedded cultural values and habits regain 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 oversight or rescheduling, and this project has suffered the same kind of uprooting and insecurity which the young people do. We need to carry on to embed our practices much more firmly in the minds of staff and young people and in the structures and rhythms of life here. It is as important that good things happen regularly as it is that they happen at all. The physical and emotional and geographical buffeting that these young people receive especially demands a life in the home which is securely held by reliable rhythms of good things. In a fragmented society which values treats, excitement and entertainment over consistency, calm, community and creativity, it is also difficult to transmit their importance, especially to staff, who need to have the understanding and inner authority to maintain them.

The work has been hard to sustain for other reasons, too many young people in the home, too many extremely challenging young people, management difficulties. There is also a sense of a heavy downward pull, throughout the field, which drags everything down to a poverty-stricken norm of care-lessness. And the young people seem so sadly 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, just.

Although it is taking time for things to take root, there is positive feeling about what we have done, from staff, managers, senior management and inspectors. Some immeasurable golden something is starting to shine. There need to be committed torch-bearers, culture-carriers, who can keep alive the evolutionary vision on the ground, and in whatever way keep reminding us that we are heading for <sup>3</sup>Bethlehem<sup>2</sup>. We are in the process of lighting those torches, and preparing people to carry them. It is good, gradual work and we owe it to our young people to persevere. A final word from the fox:

<sup>3</sup>Goodbye, <sup>2</sup> said the fox. <sup>3</sup>And now here is my secret, a very simple secret: it is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye.<sup>2</sup>

(We hope to be able to follow-up this article in a later journal with a report on our progress over the next few months.)

## References

- Anglin, J. (2002), *Pain, Normality and the Struggle for Congruence: Reinterpreting Residential Childcare for Children and Youth*. New York: Haworth Press.
- Andersen, H.C. *Andersen's Fairy Tales*. Kingsport, Tennessee: Grosset & Dunlop, Inc. 1945.
- Bowlby, J. (1979). *The Making and Breaking of Affectional Bonds*. New York: Routledge.
- Gerhardt, S. (2004). *Why Love Matters: How affection shapes a baby's brain*. New York: Routledge.
- Henderson, P. (2006) A Community of Learning. In Jackson. R. (Ed.), *Holistic Special Education: Camphill Principles and Practice*. Edinburgh: Floris Books.
- Hughes, D.A. (2006). *Building the Bonds of Attachment: Awakening love in deeply troubled children*. Second edition. New York: Jason Aronson.
- Lewis, T., Amini F. & Lannon, R. (2000). *A General Theory of Love*. New York: Random House.
- Nobel, A. (1991). *Educating Through Art: The Steiner School Approach*. Edinburgh: Floris Books.
- Perry, B.D. (2006). *The Boy Who Was Raised as a Dog and other stories from a child psychiatrist's notebook*. New York: Basic Books
- de Saint-Exupery, A. (1945). *The Little Prince*. London: Heinemann.
- Shakespeare, W. (1608). *King Lear*. New York: Dover.
- Steiner, R. (1923). *The Child's Changing Consciousness and Waldorf Education*. Hudson, New York: The Anthroposophic Press.

*The Holy Bible*. Revised Standard Version. New York. Thomas Nelson, Inc., 1972.