



“Light Bulb Moments” in Child and Youth Care

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I have always thought of Kiaras Gharabaghi’s article “*Three Profoundly Stupid Ideas*” (Gharabaghi, 2010) as brilliant from a number of different angles. I often use the articles for discussion in trainings I facilitate with direct practice Child and Youth Care workers and even use them in activities with senior agency leaders, challenging them to analyze where some of these ideas might be structured into their programs. A recent discussion thread in cyc-net inspired me to do more thinking

about it a different way. I thought of how many times in my career I was guilty of participating in, or even developing, profoundly stupid ideas in my practice. I was thinking how easy that can be for all of us since in many ways the entire framework of residential care of children is based on them. For instance, I think of how much focus is placed on the importance of “consistency” for children to be able to grow in a healthy way. Yet, so many programs have “shift changes” 20 to 30 times in a

week. Many also have a different person wake a child up in the morning than the one that put them to bed. I also thought about how very few would disagree with the idea that the most crucial component of residential care would be the relationships a child develops while there. Yet, when we agree a child is “getting better” (whatever that means) the first thing we start thinking of doing is to move the child to a lower level of care, effectively severing many of the relationships that were a big part of the reason for the growth. I acknowledge the practicality of these practices given no CYC worker can work a seven day, 24 hour a day week and ideally a child would be reunited with their family or primary home caregivers, but it doesn’t make them any less profoundly stupid conceptually.

Garfat (2001) and Phelan have talked about the developmental stages of a Child and Youth Care worker. I started to think about my own developmental progress as a CYC practitioner and how that fit in with hopefully lessening the amount of times I got trapped into joining in with, or practicing, these profoundly stupid ideas. I came up with a series of what I would call “light bulb moments” for me when the core of what excellent practice should be started to appear so much clearly in my mind. It would be important for all Child and Youth Care practitioners to focus on these moments through the developmental process to validate our instincts about how the work should be done when there are so many other factors around us discouraging what seems so logical to us.

One I would like to share goes back to much earlier days when I was the Recreation Director at a very large residential treatment center near New York City. I developed a “student work program” for kids that was very different conceptually than anything the program had seen before. I was beginning to realize that tradition there said that kids became eligible for most recreation/activities programs only if their behavior allowed them to “earn it”. I had never framed it in my mind as eloquently as Kiaras did in his article, but it instinctively felt like a profoundly stupid process to me. It would seem that positive and ego-building activities were exactly the formula to help improve those behaviors. I was not in a position of enough authority to change the concept of the whole program, but I did manage to convince senior administration to let me try a work program that was built entirely on the experience being a successful one for the child. Of course, the idea that a child was able to get and keep a job without regard to behavior in other areas of the program was seen as profoundly stupid by many others there. I countered that perhaps the most prevalent thing missing in many of the kids’ lives were experiences that “worked”. I would review applications for a job for a child based on the ability of the person advocating for it being able to convince me the experience would work successfully. For instance, a child might have an already established positive relationship with the Unit Secretary, so a job as an assistant with that secretary seemed perfect. I weathered the storm of those



who felt the process was unfair and stuck to the core value of the program. Of course, the Recreation Department was fertile ground for jobs and one of them was given to a girl named Chrissy. Chrissy was quite a handful in the living unit and was often limit testing when at recreation. But, I did see a strong work ethic in her when asked to help out with tasks at recreation. She was given a job as an activities assistant and I was to be her supervisor.

She was doing very well in the job but the concept of the program was not very popular with the “just punish away the bad behavior” ones there. I was constantly intervening to be sure they let her come to work despite a bad day in school, or the day after cursing out one of the unit staff. One day at work she was given permission to make a phone call to her mother on the office phone. The conversation got hot and ultimately Chrissy ripped the phone out of the wall. When I entered the office to see if she was ok she began yelling at me to get away from her. She looked frantic and tossed the phone toward me (but clearly not at me) and ran out of the door back to the living unit. The phone did not hit me and crashed into the wall a few feet away.

The next day she was scheduled to work at 3pm but did not show up. I waited until 3:15 and called the living unit to talk with her. She would not come to the phone. At 3:30 I asked a worker there to send her to my office. When she came in I asked her if she had any idea why I called her to the office. She growled and said “No” in a sarcastic tone. I said “Well, you

were scheduled to work today at 3 o'clock and didn't show up. There is a lot of work to do so what time are you planning to start work today?” She looked startled and said “You're kidding, right?” I said I was not, and she replied incredulously “I am not fired?, You're crazy!” I assured her she was not fired and said “Please get to work young lady. There is a lot to do and you are an important part of this program”. Still not believing her ears she said “Why am I not fired? I threw the phone at you”. I said “If I fired you after yesterday, what would it have taught you...that you might lose your job if throw a phone at your supervisor?” She said “Well, yes!”. I replied “Did you not already know that before yesterday?” She said “Of course I knew that, this is stupid”. I said “Case closed, now get to work”.

The look on her face at that moment was precious and memorable. She was struggling to comprehend it all and when she realized I was serious she just sobbed quietly and went over to her desk and started working. As she left work that day she looked down and said “I still think you are crazy, but thank you” and quickly walked out. I initially thought of it as a very big deposit in the “Money in the Bank” philosophy that guided my practice throughout my career. The concept being that in these special moments we deposit “relational money” with a child that can be drawn out by the CYC worker in a crisis, or by the child as they grow to feel trusting relationships are more possible in their lives. She did very well in two more years of work in the program and we never

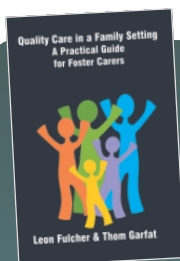
talked about the phone meeting again. Looking back, I definitely see it as one of those “light bulb moments” for me that accelerated my development and helped me avoid some of the “profoundly stupid idea traps” along the road in the future. It validated the simple thinking that if “successful experiences” are primarily missing in a child’s life then we should avoid the “But, you are reinforcing bad behavior” thinking favored by so many and stay the course on what we know is a profoundly good idea...providing the successful experiences that are missing.

Unfortunately, in those days, we did not place emphasis on formal follow up studies but much anecdotal evidence pointed to a very large percentage of children who participated in this program doing very well in later work experiences in the larger community. The moment was made even more memorable because about two years ago I received a call from Chrissy, now in her 30’s. She told me she struggled for about 10 years after leaving the program but then life began to turn in a better direc-

tion for her. The reason for her call was to tell me she had just achieved her Registered Nurse license. You might guess that in the course of our conversation she asked if I remembered that day in the office when she threw the telephone at me. Was achieving her RN license connected to that meeting after the phone incident? Hard to prove, but it is probably a “profoundly stupid idea” to think it was not.

References

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QUALITY CARE IN A FAMILY SETTING (2008) by Leon Fulcher & Thom Garfat, offers theory, practice tips and everyday advice for helping young people in Foster Care develop the strengths and skills necessary to navigate life’s challenges. Training and practice standards are now frequently used to enhance, monitor and evaluate the quality of care for children and young people in out-of-home care, yet Foster Carers are often expected to perform miracles without practical assistance. This book helps to bridge that gap.

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