

By Way of Thanks for Warm Recognition: Some Personal and Professional Reflections on the Field and Its Prospects for the Future

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ABSTRACT: The author responds to the recent *Child and Youth Care Forum* Festschrift and the current special issue that were published in his honor, acknowledging the contributors, offering a few personal reminiscences, assessing the current status of the child and youth care field, and drawing implications for its continuing development.

KEY WORDS: child and youth care work; residential child and youth care; professional youthwork.

Your Editors have been kind enough to invite me to respond to the Festschrift they developed in my honor, which appeared as the June 2000 issue of the *Forum*, as well as to the current special issue in which they have chosen to include letters from colleagues that were not included in the Festschrift along with selections from my earlier writings. I think they were seeking both a personal and a professional response, and I will try to meet this dual expectation.

But how does one respond adequately to such an honor and recognition? Perhaps that can best be done in the way that I have always tried to work, that is, by focusing on and seeking to draw out the contribution I might be able to make to our readers and to the field. In any event, I shall try.

Looking Back

There was no grand plan when I began, or as my life and work have unfolded, beyond the conviction based in long summer camp experience that positive group care environments can provide powerful develop-

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mental influences on young people, and an overriding commitment to the growth of our field. I did what I did as opportunities arose that seemed to serve that overall objective. It should be fun now to look back and see whether and how things fall into place in some retrospectively organized way, and thus to help decide what to do next.¹

Colleagues

I would certainly be remiss, however, were I not to begin with words of appreciation to *Forum* Co-Editors Sibylle Artz and Doug Magnuson for having chosen to honor me with these two special issues, for developing the approach, and for undertaking the hard work required to see it through to fruition—as well as for contributing their own tributes to the *Festschrift*. They are wonderful friends and colleagues, and it is good to see how the Forum is developing under their leadership.

Thanks are due also to the other colleagues—who, along with Sibylle and Doug, are cherished friends as well—who contributed the articles included in the *Festschrift* and the letters in the current issue. They represent the gamut of my experience in the field over the years, ranging from Jack Phelan, who was there at the beginning, to Craig Shealy, who very quickly established himself as a valued associate after we first became acquainted in the late 1990s. Jack and I go back more than 30 years together, from the early days of the Association of Child Care Workers in New York, when both the field and the Association were just beginning to emerge as visible entities on the professional horizon. In the midst of all the difficulties and frustrations we encountered—and there were many—Jack never lost the ability to make us laugh and so to give us the strength to stay on task. He is still doing it! Craig represents a new generation, those dedicated younger colleagues who renew our faith in the future and in the promise of increasing rigor in our thinking, our research, and our practice.

Other contributors, particularly Herb Barnes, Henry Maier, Karen VanderVen, and Jim Whittaker, have been there almost from the beginning and our careers have remained intertwined across the miles until the present day. Mike Baizerman and Mary Burnison have had an active, virtually daily presence in my life through most of my years at the University of Minnesota, from 1978 until today. Others with whom I have been closely associated over the years, most of whom have contributed heavily in various ways to the development and evolution of the *Forum*, include Buell Goocher, Don Peters, Mark Krueger, Jim Anglin, Penny Parry, and Rod Durkin. Mordecai Arieli personifies the relationship I have had and treasured with a goodly number of Israeli colleagues, whose perspectives have done so much to enrich my own and the field in North America.

That all of these colleagues, each of whom well deserves a Festschrift of his or her own, have participated in these special issues of the *Forum* has been a great honor, and I will always be grateful for their interest, affection, and esteem—all of which I reciprocate in full measure. I also wish to acknowledge my debt to the many others, most of whom Mary Burnison has so kindly listed in her letter that appears in this issue, whose work has contributed to mine in more ways than I can say. I have been fortunate to have had so many close and meaningful relationships over the years and look forward to continuing our work together in the future, if at a somewhat reduced pace.

Looking Ahead

The Festschrift and the articles reprinted below not only impel us to look back over the years but also provide a good opportunity to assess what all of this has meant for the field and, even more to the point, where we are now, where we are going, where we *should* be going, and what we can and should be doing about it. These are the kinds of questions that I will try to address here, necessarily too briefly, and I hope that the articles that the editors have chosen to reprint below will provide some useful additional perspectives. In sum, I hope that the contribution of this special issue will be to highlight some of our most important unfinished business and to stimulate the intellectual and emotional energy we will need as we continue to move ahead.

The pioneers in our field started with a dream. We dreamt that we could build a profession rooted in idealism and service and focused on the care and development of young people, particularly troubled young people in out-of-home group care settings whatever the causes and manifestations of their problems. We recognized an ongoing crisis, and we felt called to undertake the task of creating a solution. Many of us still do!

It has been observed that, in order to thrive, a child needs both roots and wings; the same could be said of an emerging professional group such as ours. Over the years, however, we have tended to focus primarily on the dream, the wings, but it is important that we look carefully at the reality as well if we are to be able to root ourselves in a firm foundation. Perhaps at this juncture, we need to turn up the volume on the latter as we examine where we have come from and where we are now.

The dream that has done so much to sustain us was born in the observation that the most important adults in the lives of children in out-of-home group care are those who live and interact with them during “the other 23 hours”—child and youth care workers—and that

these people were usually the least trained and qualified, lowest paid, least carefully selected—and hardest working—members of the care and treatment team. It was clear that the recognized “professionals” in such settings—psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, and the like—not only failed to accord these workers the appropriate respect, but most did not even understand the centrality and importance of their role.

As a result, as child and youth care workers began to organize, our relationship to the established professions involved was somewhat competitive and even contentious. We also recognized and rejected some of the “establishment” or vested interest commitments of those groups. This idealism in the service of our young clients was soon compromised, however, as we began to acquire vested interests of our own. We need to practice what we preach, to live by our principles, and we have not always succeeded in doing so. This is not an easy task, of course; if it were, almost everyone would be doing it and the service orientation—the calling—that we have tried to carve out for ourselves and our work would not have required such a struggle, a struggle that is still in progress. So it is time—past time—for us to assess where we are in the context of our original objectives, to see where we have fallen short, and to undertake needed repairs.

By focusing on the dream, we have also not always been realistic in assessing our progress toward professionalization, frequently placing ourselves much further along that continuum than the facts justified. In truth, we often speak of ourselves as constituting a profession without having achieved the attributes generally accepted as comprising that status.² One is reminded of a Hollywood movie set where there is nothing behind the cardboard Main Street façade, or a Third World country where there is little or no societal infrastructure available to help meet human needs.

This problem is compounded by the fact that the very concept of professionalism is being assaulted in today’s society, which often recognizes participation, self-determination, and “common sense” above expertise in its hierarchy of values, particularly in an area like child-rearing. Paradoxically, the challenge of our society to the professional model has contributed to our relative credibility and progress as well: To the extent that the established professions have lost status and stature, the social distance between “them” and “us” has been reduced. This is, to be sure, progress only in a relative sense, but it needs to be taken into account as we assess our current position and plan for the future.

The professional ideal has been challenged from within our field as well, on the somewhat romantically overgeneralized grounds that professions tend to dehumanize their clientele and that only through

down-to-earth, grass roots involvement in our clients' lives can we hope to realize our service aspirations. In this view, the established professions have gone astray by emphasizing keeping their hands "clean" and avoiding down-and-dirty involvement in their clients' (or "patients'") lives. Thus, considerable numbers of our colleagues have rejected a professional model for the field, with specified training, credentialing, etc., which many of them equate with the established "medical model."

Others, myself among them, have proposed a "craft" conceptualization, usually not as an alternative to but in concert with a professional orientation. In my view, this can harness the advantages of professional stature and expertise while maintaining the opportunity for individual creativity and interpersonal accessibility in child and youth care work.³

How the field will evolve along the continuum defined by the formal criteria of a profession remains an open—and important—question, partly linked to developments in the broader society but partly under our control as well. What should not be in question, however, is the need to maintain a professional perspective on our work and how we approach it, that is, a serious, responsible, self-reflective stance that places the interests of clients at its core. The noun—"profession"—we can continue to debate ("Is we is or is we ain't?" in Buell Goocher's classic formulation); the adjective—"professional"—should be beyond question.

It would also suit us well not to be so glib about all of this; we often hear one another refer to the field as a profession, as if we had already reached that goal. This may reflect a perhaps barely conscious public relations ploy, but we need to avoid being taken in by our own propaganda. The fact is that, for all of our progress, we still have a long way to go to be and to be seen as a true profession even if we were agreed on that as the objective. This problem is aggravated as our literature becomes increasingly international, because in some languages the expression for "occupation" overlaps that for "profession," so the distinction becomes garbled in translation. We can and should do our work professionally, but we are not now a profession. Words matter, and it is important that we not kid ourselves about where or who we are.

From time to time, we also need to remind ourselves that oppression is not an excuse. We can certainly make the case that we—not unlike many of the young people in our care—have been unfairly used, inadequately compensated, and disrespected by more powerful people and groups, by the "system," if you will. But the notion that we have been (and are) oppressed, true or untrue, does not excuse our failure to assess our situation and to do what we need to do to enhance it in the service of young people and ourselves.

We do indeed have a glorious and inspiring tradition. Those of us

who remember the work of Eva Burmeister, Fritz Redl, Al Trieschman, and so many others often flinch when we discover how many workers and students who have entered the field in recent years have never heard of them! We need to rediscover their contributions. We also need to open ourselves more fully to the insights and practices that have been developed by our colleagues abroad, such as Janusz Korczak in years past and others on the contemporary scene.⁴ There is also a whole family of developmentally oriented, normalizing approaches that have been utilized here and there in North America but have not been broadly integrated into a core body of knowledge that informs our thinking and our work.⁵

This brings us back to the idea of roots and wings, the dream and the reality, and the importance of being clear about which domain we are addressing at any given time. Without the dream, why would we continue? But without being grounded in reality and without looking at ourselves as realistically as we can, how can we hope to progress? We have accomplished a great deal indeed, but we still have a long way to go.

Conclusion

It has been a tremendous pleasure and source of satisfaction—as well as a great deal of hard work—for me to be a part of this noble effort for so many years, and I look forward to continuing that into the future together with all of you who share the dream. We have a lot to do!

Endnotes

1. Readers interested in knowing more about my background in the field and my aspirations for it may want to look at the “Interviews with Leaders” column from the *Journal of Child and Youth Care Work* that the editors selected to be reprinted in this issue of the *Forum*.
2. Several of the articles reprinted below address various aspects of the professional evolution of the field in the early years.
3. See the article by Eisikovits and Beker, the Maier response, and the Beker and Eisikovits rejoinder reprinted below.
4. The experience of the ILEX Program in this kind of technology transfer is documented in the article by Beker and Barnes that is reprinted in this issue of the *Forum*.
5. See, for example, the article by Arieli, Beker, and Kashti, reprinted below.

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