

THE IMPACT OF ONE POLITICAL MEDIA MESSAGE ON CHILDREN IN ONE SHELTER

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Gliding through the summer air, secure in her swing, the child was bathed in sunlight. Her countenance conveyed a serenity acquired through a lifetime of comfort and care. Blissfully the child swung back and forth smiling a smile that radiated from within. Her dress, gleaming white, harmonized with the exterior of her home. And everywhere there was landscaped greenery. Security, safety, and contentment whispered the scene—all is well for the children in our nation was the media message of the 1988 Bush campaign. As the message faded from the screen, Blaise ran from the room. Angel closed her eyes and held her ears. Alex questioned indignantly the reason for subjecting him to this, while David and Victoria stared silently at the screen turning their anger inward. The news commentator returned to the screen, and his formal professional voice related national and international developments to eyes and ears that would not, could not, see nor hear.

Once outside of the youth shelter, Blaise leaned against the wall by the walk. He watched the newly arrived child carry his trash-bag luggage, while the social worker smiled wearily as she spoke words of reassurance to the apprehensive youth. When the shelter counselor found Blaise, she asked him to return to the room. Blaise refused, and only the recital of shelter rules and regulations prompted him to comply. Once he entered the living room where the others were, he requested "time out" and it was granted with the stipulation that he meet with a counselor privately afterwards. But he remained in a state of rage, pacing silently before the counselor. His dark expressive eyes exuded a multitude of unspeakable emotions. And Blaise worked at coping, labored at coping, utilizing all of the coping mechanisms he had acquired during the myriad of counseling sessions and life experiences of his seventeen years. But the media message continued to make its impact—taxing Blaise, tormenting Blaise. He was acutely vulnerable. In time his pace slowed until he stood still, and then he sank into a chair. Silence filled the room, and gradually his face muscles began to relax. The fury in his eyes was replaced by a profound melancholy that seemed to spring from the depths of his being. His eyes met the counselor's, and he began to speak in a quiet, controlled voice.

"That child on the screen has had a life nothing like mine. As far as I'm concerned, it's a lie! I've been in 16 placements—what security did the government provide for me? I know there are kids like her out there, but what about kids like me—and there are a lot of us! They give us as little as

possible, and now we are to support them and believe that every kid in America lives that fantasy they created to get votes. If their message had stated that their candidate would work so that all kids had a better chance at a life like that, I could deal with it better. But their message clearly said that all American kids have it great, and now lets keep it that way. I really can't stand to think about it!"

Blaise was a seventeen-year-old aging out in the system. He possessed a maturity and nobility that was not characteristic of his chronological age. Rejection, neglect, emotional and physical suffering had punctuated his young life. Instability and uncertainty permeated his frequently changing environment. Negotiation for basic needs was as routine to Blaise as breathing. But now those skills had to be honed to near perfection since his 18th birthday was only a month away. Eighteenth birthdays for American youths are typically anticipated with a sense of celebration—it signifies another benchmark. It is not uncommon, however, to experience some concern with respect to expected assumption of responsibility. But when Blaise thought of his 18th birthday, he was filled with apprehension that bordered on terror. In this shelter, he could not legally stay beyond age seventeen. Outside of the shelter, there was no one waiting for him. The nearest person to him was his caseworker. But the caseworker was confined by funding restrictions, state and federal guidelines, and a bureaucracy that moved slowly. Blaise aspired to earn a college degree. He excelled in creative writing and art, but would he be able to demonstrate his potential in the required SATs? He was acutely aware of the numerous educational interruptions he had endured as a result of the 16 different addresses. While the government recently has provided homeless children with improved measures for educational continuity, it came too late for Blaise. It was astounding that he had completed his GED program with a good record since Blaise has been in numerous schools and had missed much time in classrooms. When his placement was in a foster home, he could attend school in the district. When it was in a shelter, workpackets from his former school were his means of continued education. Then, there were delays in the arrival of materials. When that occurred, facility staff members attempted to provide him with appropriate work. Often Blaise spent time on inappropriate work that would not earn him credit. Then, his frustration increased since he feared that as a result he would not be promoted to his next grade. Yet, he strove to perfect his creative writing skills and his art. Blaise's poetry and short stories were remarkable. His talent was unmistakable. Life's drama was intricately, artistically, and skillfully sketched. Through personal trauma Blaise had gained insights and the expression of those insights were profound. His writing and art were reflective of roads not voluntarily chosen, but forced upon him by circumstances not in his control. By writing, Blaise tried to conquer the pain, enhance the illusionary joy, harness his fear, and embellish the fleeting moments of optimism. His pen gave Blaise a sense of control—on paper he could order his life, define his feelings, make sense of his experiences, and, most of all, create a world that he hoped for and cried for.

Each child in the shelter living room had known a different world than that of the smiling child in white on the screen, and each one wished for a life that idyllic. She epitomized all of their longing and, at the same time, cruelly reminded them of their inner pain. Unconditional parental love, security, a home, and harmony have never been theirs. Yet, the Bush message echoed in their minds—it did say that American children had all of this. Were they not American children? Each one could state with certainty that America was the country of their birth. Then why was their life dramatically different from the carefree child in the swing? Through counseling, it was reaffirmed that the adults in their lives—parents, step-parents, uncles, aunts, grandparents—had behaved irresponsibly and/or criminally towards them, and that through their actions they were cast adrift into the human service agencies. It was stressed that their caseworkers worked diligently to have their needs met through shelters, residential care, foster care and, at times, through reunification with their family of origin whenever it was possible after intensive parental counseling. Acceptance, adaptation, and patience was asked and required of the sheltered children. Institutionalized children generally lead lives that are more taxing than the general population, but today's political message made their situation seem much more unbearable.

Why did this particular message strike such an emotional chord within the youths of this shelter? It is not that they have been unaware of their deprivation prior to the message. All had experienced poverty to varying degrees, and all had come in contact with children of other economic classes through association in classrooms and in the community. Moreover, literature and the electronic media exposed them to other life styles. They certainly were cognizant that there were stable families in which children were loved and protected—relative deprivation was not new to them. Then what was so different in this political message? What was so agonizing for the homeless youths? Blaise had identified several issues when he had expressed that he believed the message to be a lie—that while some children in America were secure and cared for, others were not this fortunate. He had also expressed outrage in being asked to support a government that provided the least for him. However, Blaise also focused on a factor that may have been most offensive to him and the children in the shelter. Since the campaign message only depicted the life of a child who was secure as representative of all American children, and by omitting any reference to those that were poor and homeless, it designated them as insignificant or nonexistent. Had the Bush political message of 1988 reflected the goal to maintain security for the children who were experiencing it, and at the same time addressed the needs of a population of neglected and abused children who were increasing in number, the negative impact would have been softened. However, the image makers were more concerned with projecting a candidate who would continue to perpetuate the pseudo-prosperity of the Reagan Administration. And it was effective.

Political messages historically have earned the reputation of lacking integrity. Yet, they remain powerful tools in persuading voters. As the 1992 presidential campaign emerges, the media image makers have begun their work. Since the economy has relegated more Americans to a state of poverty or marginal poverty, and increasingly social service agencies are challenged in serving children who have been neglected and abused, presidential candidates have a great responsibility in addressing the actual conditions of all Americans. If the status of the "at-risk" populations are not taken into consideration or are ignored, it is conceivable that the state of relative deprivation will become enhanced. Children are particularly vulnerable since they are powerless. While they theoretically have certain rights, adults in their lives can render them vulnerable. When their rights have been violated and their basic needs are not being met, and when change comes slowly or not at all, their discontent increases. They have been taught that our democratic system provides means for change through the electoral process, and that through this process representatives will work for goals that are important to them. But the children recognize that they are dependent on adults to speak for them. When adults create media messages using children to obtain adult votes, they must consider that they will attract the attention of children in the viewing audience.

The 1991 political messages will be strategically placed in an increasing pace as the election draws nearer. The impact of the messages will be carefully gauged and directed at specific populations. With sophisticated calculation the audience will be targeted, weighing such factors as socioeconomic class, ethnicity, and gender. But what happens to the by-product of the message—that latent element—those for whom the message was not intended but who were nevertheless affected by it. Who, for example, assumes responsibility for the profound impact on the homeless and abused children discussed herein who perceived that they did not exist or did not matter in the eyes of the 1988 presidential candidate. Blaise, Alex, Victoria, Angel, and David were visibly affected by the media message, but how many children were subjected to it and internalized their pain?

Children who are homeless often demonstrate remarkable strength, resourcefulness, and resiliency in the face of enormous adversity. But they need support and recognition. Those who run for government office do them a great disservice when they ignore or exploit the children's plight in order to further their personal cause. It is particularly vital that when children are employed to depict a politician's message, that the message is a truthful and representative one. It is anticipated that since children tend to identify with other children, they would be more likely to focus on presentations that include children. Although it would be nearly impossible to predict all of the intended, as well as the unintended effects of general political messages that children routinely see, it may be in their interest to research their responses to particular messages that focus on children. Unfulfilled promises, injustice, and misrepresentations are disillusioning for adults—how much more so for disadvantaged children.

This is an election year, and as we approach November, we can expect sophisticated acceleration of political media messages. They will have the capacity to persuade, inform, misrepresent, and arouse human emotion on all levels. Institutionalized children will be subjected to the political presentations, and their reactions may range from indifference to heightened involvement. It may be in their best interest to address the phenomenon of political campaigns in an educational setting where the actual purpose of the message may be explored, and the political process in general could be discussed. In such a format, children will be encouraged to express their thoughts and feelings, and learn how to become active participants in the democratic process. Additionally, they can discover what is legitimate in running a campaign and what are distortions. This may be done formally or informally with groups or individuals. If the agency setting or the clientele is not appropriate for this type of exploration, then an awareness by supportive staff of the potential effect of political messages becomes necessary. Those of us who work with institutionalized children monitor their environments carefully in order to have their physical, emotional, and psychological needs met. Preferably, we interact in a proactive manner rather than reactive. To anticipate that children may also become alerted to and affected by messages intended for adult consumption is in the spirit of proactive counseling.