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LEARNING VIGNETTES

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In the early 1970s I worked in a child psychiatric unit as a Child Care Worker, and in the mid-1980s I worked as a family counselor in an adolescent group home. The stories that follow are based on experiences with children and youth in these settings. They taught me important lessons that I've used in teaching and parenting ever since. Often the meanings I now ascribe to them emerged slowly over a period of time. I attach significance to these children as some of my teachers, and write about them as a tribute and with fond memories.

- When I first saw Mary, she looked like a caricature of a hooker with her short skirt, nylons, high heels, lipstick and a hard set expression on her face that defied anyone to get close to her. I got to know her as a scared and lonely 9-year-old girl who believed she had to be tough to survive. Considering that she lived in a housing project in downtown St. Paul, that her parents physically abused her under the guise of discipline, and that her parents were too overwhelmed with their own needs to adequately meet hers, she may have been right.

Beyond her physical appearance, the most striking characteristics Mary demonstrated were an inability to play, to have fun, and her bossiness. Parallel play or playing with toys did not appear to be in Mary's repertoire. Her toughness was so extreme that she was seldom seen laughing, was totally unresponsive to tickling and was unwilling to hug. Mary ordered others around, even though they didn't comply. This further pushed others away from her and reinforced her social isolation and unhappiness.

Mary's treatment plan was simple and uncomplicated. She was treated as a young girl, encouraged to interact with peers on an equal level, encouraged to relax and play, and was reassured that she was cared for and safe. As she relaxed and let others in, the veneers and defenses dropped away of their own accord. She emerged as a delightful child who openly sought and responded to affection. As her mood lightened and her need to defend herself declined, a warm smile frequently shone on her face. Her body relaxed and she became responsive to both hugs and tickling. Character and body armor both fell away. For me it was my first recognition of the interconnection between body, psyche and emotions.

The four-year-old boy climbed into my lap, put his arms around

me and said, "I love you." Since this was the first day I had met him and since he did this with every other CCW, I immediately began to doubt and label: inappropriate, phony, indiscriminant, boundary problems, etc. Before long I started to avoid him.

Several years later our son, age four, would come home from playing and when given directions that he didn't like, would say to my wife or myself some of the following: "I hate you; I wish you were dead; I wish someone else was my mom or dad." We were wise enough to stay quiet and within five minutes he'd come back, crawl into one of our laps, hug and kiss us and tell us he loved us. For some reason I neither doubted or labelled, I accepted.

Several more years passed before these two events became juxtaposed in my mind. Why did one seem phony and one not? My son didn't really mean those things, did he? If so, did he mean the anger or the love? What do I believe? Slowly the possibility dawned on me that perhaps he felt and meant both feelings. If true, the new question that emerged was how could he change so quickly? The answer soon followed that he felt the anger, expressed it fully and directly and it was accepted (without being shamed, punished or having his feelings minimized). Something new could then take its place and he was free to express the love within. It seems like a natural process to me.

Oh yes, the first child. I have no idea why he crawled into peoples' laps and so freely expressed his love to them. Was it symptomatic of disturbed behavior? I don't know. The more I've expanded my encounters with people, the less I label them. When I don't understand what's going on with them, I try to ask them to explain how they feel and perceive things. I believe that feelings are a medium for communication and connection. In this process I believe I am more open and less judgmental of others. Perhaps those are the greatest gifts I can give anyone.

- When Greg and I put on the boxing gloves, it would hurt when he hit me. At 14, he was my match in strength and his temper was explosive. Over a period of weeks I found myself becoming afraid of how I'd react if he hit me in anger. Would I strike back? What if I lost control? Without even realizing it, my fear started to control me. I backed off from confronting Greg and also from getting involved with him.

One morning Greg was sent from the classroom back to the ward and told to sit on a chair in his room until he was ready to work. The teacher returned to the classroom and I was left to "get" Greg to the chair. By this time I was so afraid of confronting him that I went to a fellow CCW and asked him to back me up in dealing with Greg. He agreed but, rather than supporting me, he took over, gave Greg a list

of possible consequences for not sitting and, reluctantly, Greg complied.

I was sitting out on the ward a few minutes later when I heard a crash. I turned in time to see a metal frame bed upturned and a chair flying across the room. By this time Greg was bursting out of the room and heading toward the classroom door. Even though the door was locked, I knew this time I had to act. Since Greg and I were the only ones in the area, this time there was no one else to call on. I knew I was the one to stop him.

I reached Greg just as he neared a large metal table. I put a bear hug on him and held on. We struggled there, I with my arms around him, he with his hands gripping the table as if he were trying to crush it like an empty aluminum can. Not once in the 15 — 20 minutes we struggled did he try to break my hold, scratch, butt, etc. We were both drenched with sweat when we finally started to talk. He assured me that he had regained control and I let him go. That was probably the shortest verbal resolution I ever had.

Two lessons were evident to me that day. First, there are appropriate times for physical intervention. Those are times, like this one, when the youth is out of control and needs an adult who is in control, who can keep him safe until he regains self control. Second, I can be that helpful CCW when I get out of my own way and respond to the needs of the youth and the situation.

- Steve, age 17, was an angry, sullen youth who found it difficult or was unwilling to follow through on assigned responsibilities at the group home. When I first met him he was sitting at his customary perch at a table. For the better part of July he had been instructed to sit there during all unscheduled time until he was willing to cooperate and follow directions. I had recently been hired to conduct a weekly family group at the group home. It was not very surprising when Steven's angry and resistant behavior carried over into the family group. He was usually uncommunicative unless he was forced to speak. He slouched in the chair and looked at the floor. Staff repeatedly confronted Steve with a sequence of directions as follows: "Steve, sit up. Steve, look at your mother when she's talking to you. Steve, speak up. Steve, how are you feeling? Steve, why didn't you _____?" Steve responded by sitting up for a short time, glaring at his mother, saying he was mad and eventually agreeing to comply with a plan that his mother and the staff concocted regarding how he was supposed to behave during his next home visit.

Steve's behavior followed the same basic pattern for the next nine months, when he was discharged as a successful program completer. He complied more, albeit reluctantly, as discharge approached. Within three months after discharge he had moved in with his alcoholic father

and dropped out of school. Although I've had no further contact with him, I doubt if much has changed. This was not a successful intervention.

- Jean, age 15, was referred to by some staff as a "dumb blonde" and she frequently acted the part. She generally complied with directions and acted responsibly, if not always wisely. In family group Jean would interact sociably until someone questioned what she said or didn't understand what she was saying. Then she would immediately become angry and close down. When asked at these points about how she was feeling, she'd say "I don't know." No matter how staff confronted her, her response was the same. Eventually we'd move on to the next family after staff set some consequences and told her how this was not positive change-oriented behavior. After seeing this scenario repeated a number of times, it dawned on me to respond differently. The next time Jean was questioned or not understood, I asked her if she was angry. She acknowledged that she was. I stated that I'd noticed that it looked like she went from angry to numb, a state in which she was detached from her feelings and was then unresponsive to interactions. I told her that rather than trying to break through her wall of anger, which didn't work anyway, I was going to let her decide whether to sit with her anger and try again next week, or to find some way to remove her wall. The choice was hers and I was OK with whatever she chose. At first cautiously, then quickly, Jean started to accept the responsibility for her feelings. Her anger, first acknowledged, then accepted, no longer blocked her. She started to identify and talk about her other feelings. She started to state what she did and didn't want. She began to decide what her goals were and to work toward them. After completing the program, Jean wasn't perfectly behaved. She broke curfew, drank sometimes with her boyfriend and once, after an argument with her mother, stayed away from home overnight (she did call home and let her mother know where she was). Now, at age 19, Jean has graduated from high school, is working, taking care of herself and making some sound decisions about how to conduct her life.

I learned a great deal from Steve and Jean – about feelings, about helpful and unhelpful interventions and, most importantly, about the ways I do and don't want to work with people.