

WELCOME HOME! SOME REFLECTIONS FROM THE CLEVELAND CONFERENCE ON THE FUTURE OF OUR FIELD

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Some of our colleagues who know me may have noticed and wondered about my absence from our child and youth care conferences over a period of several years. Others knew that serious family illnesses followed by my own extended bout with cancer had kept me away. Last June, however, I was fortunate enough to be able to get to the conference in Cleveland, and it was quite an experience for me indeed!

I was a little tentative at the beginning. The rhythm had been broken; would I be able to get back in step? Had I become marginalized? Would people assume that my interest had wavered? Maybe it had! I was coming back after several years away, after serious personal crises that had certainly changed some of my life priorities in ways that were (and are) only gradually becoming clear. I was also no longer the Editor of *Child and Youth Care Forum* and *Child and Youth Services*, having opted after 28 years to assume a much more limited role, and I had taken a phased retirement at the University. Maybe I was "over the hill"! What was I doing here, anyway?

That uncertainty lasted all of about ten seconds, if that, dissolving immediately in the excitement of meeting and greeting so many respected colleagues and old friends from the triumphs and the (temporary, always temporary) defeats of the preceding 30 and more years that so many of us had been through together. Then there was the joy of meeting new friends and colleagues—like your editor, Varda Mann-Feder—who obviously share the excitement and the dream that have kept us going over the decades. For me, the conference was a time of renewal, a genuine festival of relationships restored—actually, they had never been broken, but I did not know that for sure until I got there.

That is not all, of course; it is only the latent agenda. The manifest purpose of our conferences is to learn from and to teach each other, to share information about emerging trends and practices, to enhance our understanding and our effectiveness, to retool our work and to refresh our motivation, and all of this happened in Cleveland. But just as effective child and youth care work is about relationship and personal commitment along with technique—all are integral parts of the work—so has the professional development and advancement of the field been a story of interpersonal caring and commitment along with the hard work of building a new professional identity in the best sense of the term. We could not have accomplished what we have without skills and knowledge, but neither could we have done so without the dedication and

excitement that mark our efforts. And we still have a long way to go, along a path that will require the same combination of attributes.

To me, one of the most striking things at the conference was Karen VanderVen's observation that we are now approaching the time when the pioneers, the first generation, will be stepping aside, and that we need to inspire and develop new blood, the people who are prepared to take their place as this process continues. That comment profoundly affected my perspective on the remainder of the conference: I found myself looking at the various people whom I met or whose presentations I heard as potential new leaders and, seeing Varda and others, I was not disappointed. I thought also of Doug Magnuson in this connection; he was not at the conference due to his attendance at a similar gathering in the Netherlands, which promises to bring a new group of colleagues with somewhat different perspectives into dialogue with the field in North America. It is heartening to know how many of our colleagues—those who were in Cleveland as well as others—are poised to pick up the challenge and move the field ahead.

I also met the usual numbers of young, relative newcomers, people like Patti Ranahan and Lenke Sifkowits, whose excitement at discovering this field that encapsulates the work to which they are so committed—and whose enthusiasm for the work and for young people—is always restorative for those of us who may from time to time begin to wonder and to wander from the task. We need to keep faith with them as well as with the children and youth in our care as we pass the baton to new generations of professional leadership.

When I first arrived at the conference, in my enthusiasm to greet some old and new colleagues/friends, I managed to make a grand entrance by knocking over a cup of coffee that totally soaked Carol Kelly! As always, she was as gracious as could be—more so than I deserved—and I felt less troubled about it than I might have expected. For me, it confirmed that I was back, and that we together were family. We *are* family, and that is one of the open secrets of why this field has such a hold on those of us who love it. We are a pretty sophisticated group, child and youth care workers; we have the uncommon skill of being able to weave routine, everyday experiences into crucial growth-inducing opportunities for young people. But interpersonal connectedness is at the heart of our work and what keeps us going as well. I felt welcome. I was home!