

TAPESTRIES

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INTRODUCTION

Over the 30 years of my practice in child and youth work, I have often imagined myself as a weaver. Stretched before me, a loom of living experience. The warp and weft represent the merging of my life with that of the many youth and others that weave themselves through my daily experience. Over and under, under and over, the crisscrossing of thread on thread, each embracing the other. Sometimes there emerges a fabric of constructed patterns as delicate and varied as flowers; sometimes a mish-mash of wildly contrasting colors and textures with no apparent form or theme.

As a weaver, I know that great strength can be created by the combining of simple threads. Each thread too weak to sustain a load; but woven together more than adequate for the task.

As a child and youth work practitioner I have come to believe that this weaving is the 'soul' of my practice. In the moments where the threads of my life cross the threads of others, there is a fleeting opportunity. A time when all that I have become as a practitioner and person finds expression in an interaction with someone who needs what I have. These moments speak to the intimate nature of our work. These moments speak of the interconnectedness where each of us brings out the best in the other.

These points of connection are special moments where our understanding, sensitivity and helping potential release us. Drawn by the other person's developmental readiness and the demands of the moment, an opportunity emerges for heightened relationship and communication. This is when we are at our best. This is the cloth that we weave- the coat of many colors, the tapestry of living experience.

Tapestries is dedicated to the telling and retelling of these stories that describe the soul of child and youth work practice. Stories that exemplify the merging of CYC art, technique . . . and soul. Readers are encouraged to contribute stories for publication by contacting Varda Mann-Feder at the address listed inside the front cover.

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THE DARK PATH

It was the second day of our camping trip. We had rolled out yesterday, van overflowing, bound for the Davy Crockett National Forest on a three day hiking adventure. As the sun set, the sixteen adventurers, five adults and eleven youth found themselves sitting around a campfire. The smell of fresh pine and roasting marshmallows filled the humid evening air. Soft talking was punctuated by guffaws of delight as the exploits of the day were told and retold. Several campers were experimenting with various combinations of sticks that might, just might, solve the age-old problem of heating graham crackers, marshmallows, and chocolate all together, at the same time, without gushing apart and dropping into the fire below. The smoldering remains of several unsuccessful attempts bubbled and smoked at the edge of the coals.

As the evening wore on, one at a time, rubbing sleepy eyes, the group slowly dispersed to their tents. By 10:00 several of the staff were propped in various stages of repose. All the kids were safely and securely in their tents...except Dillon. Dillon was still busy, tending the fire, playing with small crawling creatures in the dirt, trying to keep the dwindling conversation alive, periodically complaining about how hungry he was (hard to believe after all those marshmallows and crackers), and aiming his flashlight into the darkness to seek out the source of any unrecognized rustle or snap. Doing just about anything possible to avoid the subject of going to his tent and giving up the day to sleep's seductive call.

As I sat watching him I began wondering where all that energy was coming from. It had been a long day and we hadn't gotten to sleep the night before until past 4:30am. He must really be worrying about something to be able to stay mobile all this time on three hours sleep. As I thought back I realized that I had asked Dillon to turn off his flashlight this morning when I got up. He left it on the night before as he was falling asleep. His tent had looked like a big blue throat lozenge in the middle of the campsite glowing with an eerie inner light all night. Come to think of it, on the trail the night before I could remember Dillon with his flashlight like a lighthouse at oceans edge searching out the darkness, ever in motion, looking for undiscovered dangers, wolves, coons, and who knows what else. Actually, this was Dillon's first camping trip.

"Dillon," I queried, "You up for an adventure?"

"What?" he replied hesitantly.

"A walk in the woods," I replied, "I want to show you something."

Flashlights in hand we walked away from the camp up to the paved road. When we got a little ways down the road I stopped.

"Dillon, you trust me?" I asked.

"Yeah, sure, I guess." he replied.

"You've never been camping in the woods before have you?"

"No."

"You know I've been camping lots of times. I'm at home here. This is my place and I'm comfortable here. I know these woods. Will you trust me to keep it safe for us?"

"I guess so," he replied tentatively.

"You think your light is making it safe for you, don't you?"

"Well, yeah, that way I can see what's out there."

"What if I told you we could see better without our lights and that it's really safer. I want you to turn off your light and put it in your pocket. If you need it, it'll be right there."

We both turned off our lights and stood on the paved road.

"Listen and look," I whispered.

As our eyes slowly adjusted to the dim moonlight, the forest took on an entirely new dimension. The soft reflection of moon beams reflected off the sides of trees and leaves, the sparkling of rocks and spider webs as we turned our heads, the chirps and squeaks of unknown birds, the scurrying sounds of unseen animals on the thickly carpeted forest floor, the paved road dimly outlined.

We began walking down the road, silently, listening to the sounds and feeling the forest. Every hundred yards or so I would stop and ask Dillon what he could see around us. With each stop Dillon was able to distinguish more and more detail. At one point we stopped with pools of water on both sides of the path. He marveled at being able to see the black water and detect the bank where the stones defused the light in a pebbly pattern.

At one point I led us diagonally across the road and we began walking in the leaves and pine needles. Dillon immediately stopped.

"What's wrong?" I innocently asked.

"We're off the path," he replied.

"That's right and you knew it didn't you? Guide us back to the path," I directed.

He did. We continued down the road about a half-mile periodically stopping to talk and share our observations of what we could see and hear. We talked about the wolves howling across the lake and estimated their distance from us, we practiced walking silently so the animals wouldn't hear us as we crept through the night, we zeroed in on cicadas and hooting owls and drew pictures in our minds of the parts of the woods we couldn't make out in the dim light.

"Let's go back," I suggested, "This time you lead and I'll follow. I'll bet you can get us back without a light."

Hesitantly at first, but slowly gaining confidence, Dillon shuffled down the path, stopping as I had to listen and feel the forest. We had made several turns while I had led us down the road. Dillon was able to detect each turn and keep us on the correct path all the way back to camp.

The campfire had died down to embers without Dillon to tend it. When we arrived back in camp Dillon walked over to the campfire, stared at it briefly, said his good nights to the drowsing staff, and began walking

to his tent. About halfway to the tent he stopped and turned in my direction.

"Thanks," he said simply.

His light came on briefly as he unzipped the insect screen. I watched his silhouette on the side of the tent as he crawled into his sleeping bag. Unlike the night before, his light went out quickly, allowing him to be wrapped in a blanket of darkness. I imagined him lying there, listening, and savoring the few last moments with his newfound forest friend, before sleep gently carried him away.

THE BALLOON

Jerry came to our agency soon after his mother died. After a protracted bout with cancer, she finally died, leaving Jerry alone in the world to sort out his feelings and find his way. In his grief, his behavior deteriorated until there were few placements available that could deal with his anger and pain.

With Mother's Day only two days away, Jerry's group was busy making cards to send to their mothers. When the cards were completed, his child care worker showed me Jerry's card. I had tears in my eyes as I read. It was a long narrative describing for his mother his feelings of loss, and the many things he had done since her death to try to make her proud of him in her absence. I know when I read the card that it was a very special and important card. Jerry's child care worker and I talked for some time, perplexed as to how to mail the card to Jerry's dead mother.

The next day as I drove to work I stopped and bought a bright red helium balloon with a long yellow ribbon attached to it. When the late morning break from school came, I went and got Jerry and asked him if he would help me mail the card to his mother.

We took the card and the balloon outside. I asked Jerry to find a good spot for us to talk to his mother. He chose the middle of a large playing field adjacent to our agency. We carefully rolled the card and tied it to the balloon. As Jerry released the balloon I began talking to his mother, telling her how much we missed her and how proud I was of Jerry. Soon we were both standing there in the middle of the field, both of us talking to Jerry's mother. We watched the balloon slowly rising in the gentle breeze, both of us talking, both of us sensing his mother's presence. The balloon drifted high above us and dwindled to a small red speck in the hazy early afternoon sky. Eventually the balloon disappeared from my sight and I turned to Jerry.

"I can't see the balloon anymore," I said.

"She grabbed it," Jerry replied.

We both had tears in our eyes as we returned to the building, arm in arm.