THE GREAT ESCAPE: BREAKING AWAY FROM THE CULTURE OF VIOLENCE

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ABSTRACT: This keynote address was given to the Maine Association of Group Care Providers on May 9, 2002 at their 3rd annual statewide youth worker conference, "Violence: Challenges for Youth Care Practice". The address combines the authors' personal and professional experiences living in and working with a culture of violence. The author's life experience and academic research lead us to consider the influence of family cultures that create and perpetuate violence. The author also offers suggestions for youth workers in identifying their own experiences, emotions and coping strategies in working through the transition away from violence – for themselves and for the youth they work with.

Key words: family culture, violence, youthwork, child and youth care work

Violent behaviors, including threats, intimidation and perceived violence, are integral to the way some of us live our lives. For many of us, our personal identity and family culture is permeated with violent tendencies. In many instances, it is this violent behavior that binds the family together, as strange as that may seem.

This discussion is about some of the challenges violence poses for us – whether we work as direct-service youth care workers, as administrators, educators or researchers. I will share bits of myself, some of my work and some of what others and I have found in our experiences and research with youth caught up in family cycles of violence. Over the next several minutes I'll challenge us all to consider the role violence has played in our lives, the place it resides within us today and the potential it has for manipulating and shaping our future and the future of the youth we work with. I hope to help you consider your views, the views of the youth you work with, how you play a vital role in the culture in-which they live, and how you can perhaps be their necessary catalyst for making a change.

When I was first collecting my thoughts on what I would like to discuss with you regarding this topic, I kept coming back to the young man I'm spending most of my time with. He is an interesting and complex case for me and I think his young life and family history will be a good study for us as we consider making the great escape from a culture of violence.

Most of the time he is a great kid – he's fun to be around, easygoing, and basically very enjoyable. But he occasionally loses control. He can be fine one moment, laughing and playing around, and then out of nowhere

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it seems, he'll become explosively aggressive and just snap. He'll scream and yell and throw anything within his reach and pound his hands into tables or walls, or me, and anything else nearby. After his outbursts, there is never an apology or even a glimpse of regret for his behavior. And he never seems to feel bad about the way he is acting. I'm talking about a young man with no care in the world for what he is doing – for the way he is sometimes misbehaving and disrupting me and others around him. He is someone who has no regard for the stress he can sometimes bring to an event.

This child has surely tested my patience, and continues to do so. I have used all of the psychological tricks I know – more for me than for him, just to keep myself calm and collected and in some sort of control. You may know what I mean. Those moments when you wonder where the situation is going and you ask yourself, "What is his problem? Why can't he just communicate to me what he wants or what is making him freak out?"

I remind myself constantly to keep in mind while I work with him where he is coming from, who his family is, their long cycle of violence and aggression and poor decision making. You see, like some of us, he was born into a family culture fashioned by violence, generation after generation. His family has a long history of poverty and violence that includes everything from your basic, standard order domestic abuse to assault and battery, and more. It includes extreme poverty, bouts of homelessness, drug and alcohol addictions and a litany of other undesirable events. His father was raised in a culture steeped in poverty and violence. Abuse was a common occurrence and dysfunction was the family norm. Then, of course, there was his grandfather who was raised in perhaps even worse conditions, as a migrant worker moving from shanty to shanty and scavenging, and stealing food for survival. He lived in extremely violent conditions, receiving multiple broken bones and countless other injuries at the hands of his parents and others along the way, receiving no formal education and serving a few stints in jail. I consider his great-grandfather, and his lifestyle of beating and being beaten, and making it through life through brute force and mastery of violence. I could of course go on into much more detail for each generation and the stories would only get more desperate – more gruesome and incomprehensible.

I spend a lot of time thinking about how to work with him, to make sure he doesn't make some of the same mistakes his father did when he was young or his father's father, and so on. I think about where he falls in his family's cycle of violence. Will he be yet another link in the chain of hardship and suffering, or will he break the cycle? Does he have what it will take to escape once and for all; to alter his family's history and catapult his own family culture into a world it has never fully known? Will he create a pleasant world of hope and health, where education and nutrition and empowerment and peaceful resolution are the norm? Might he

grow up in a world where a bright and fulfilling future looms like the prized carrot at the end of the stick that he is chasing, as opposed to only the stick that his family before him have known and that they have conversely been chased by? His life and his story is a guiding theme for me lately. In fact, it is through him that I sort of envision this "great escape" that I am talking about today.

Some of you, I am sure, work with youth who have similar or comparable family cultures as this young man. I would bet that many of you do, and don't know it yet. In fact some of the kids probably don't even know it or understand it, and certainly don't comprehend the significance of it. Some of you can perhaps relate to his life because you yourself have shared or experienced this culture of violence.

The young man that I am talking about is of particular concern to me as he is my son, Gabriel, and we just celebrated his first birthday last month. I am beginning this discussion with talk of Gabriel because he is so fresh in my mind and my concern for his wellbeing and future is so great. I find it interesting that the way I describe this adorable child and some of his behaviors is not all that far from the way I could describe many of the 14, 15 and 16-year old youth I have worked with - he just doesn't swear as much yet.

Of course, the outbursts of frustration and aggression I was referring to don't really concern me. In fact, he is doing exactly what he is supposed to be doing. He is learning how to communicate, how to navigate through life, how to deal with stress and take on challenges and deal with failures and successes and get what he needs or wants. Not all too different from the teen-aged youth you may be working with. I'm not using the life of a toddler to insinuate any lack of maturity of the teenagers we are working with, but simply in an effort to keep this discussion real for me. I encourage you to visualize your own version of Gabriel for this discussion– no matter what age he or she may be. Mentally bring that youth into this room with you for this important discussion, keep him or her in mind as we figure out ways to deal with a culture of violence.

I spent most of Gabriel's first birthday at a conference for the National Association of Social Workers in Wisconsin about violence titled, "The Other Ground Zero." It was a day of discussing the state of Wisconsin's youth and analyzing the violence that surrounds so many of them. I left the conference after hearing of the dozens of youth murdered each year in my state and the hundreds who are injured and the countless thousands who are affected by violence in their homes and in their neighborhoods, and I went home and kissed my boy to wish him a happy birthday wondering if that will be the only year of his life in which he will not have been personally affected by violence.

While I was being facetious about my concern for his behavior and aggression, I was not joking about my concern as to whether or not he will be able to break the chain of violence once and for all. I watch him grow and consider what I can do to ensure that he makes the escape. My hope

is that he will become the first generation in his family's known history to fully resist violence. I made a decision several years ago to break away from the culture and all of the associations that came with it. I have been actively working on my own great escape for many years. Most of the time I do pretty well with it, but for those of you who have made a personal transformation before, you know what I mean when I say that there is always potential to slip back to the old ways.

I have been working at it for several years, but I started my break from violence as an adult. I couldn't do it as an adolescent. Sometimes I would actually try, I mean I knew it wasn't right to commit the acts of violence I committed as a teenager and young adult. I was a relatively bright kid and I knew right from wrong but you sure wouldn't have known it by some of my actions. It is nothing short of a miracle that I stand here today to talk to you – that I have not been killed or seriously injured, or locked up in prison somewhere. I am reminded of this whenever I meet or work with young people who have been adjudicated by the courts after being arrested for a crime committed during a moment of poor judgment. I am reminded of it every time I read of a youngster being murdered as the result of what began as a relatively simple or minor altercation.

On the average, violent behavior peaks at ages 16-17 and 80% of young people who behave violently during adolescence cease doing so by the age of 21 (Hamburg, 1998). I happen to fit this statistic fairly well. After being arrested when I was 18, I started to seriously consider making the escape from the culture that ultimately landed me there. And by the time I was 21, I was well on my way to separating myself from violence – at least from being a perpetrator of violence. It was right around that time in fact when I began working with youth and was "hooked" by the satisfaction, dignity and fun that came along with the occupation.

Most of us can probably agree that violence is a learned behavior, and I have to tell you we are pretty good learners in this country. In fact, nearly 5,500 Americans are intentionally injured each day (Commission for the Prevention of Youth Violence, 2000). According to the Task Force on Violence, American Academy of Pediatrics (1999), the United States has the highest youth homicide and suicide rates among the 26 wealthiest nations. Exposure to violence and victimization are strongly associated with subsequent acts of violence by victims. The National Association of Attorneys General reported that when asked about the causes of youth violence, youth invariably put violence in the home as #1 and bullying at school #2 (Horn, 2000). I would bet that bullying, intimidation, threats and perceived violence happens everyday in every one of our country's schools and in every one of our cities.

Contrary to popular media persuasion, however, in many accounts this is perhaps the safest and best time in recent history to be a child.

There is a lot of media hype about the string of school killings in the past several years– in fact it has reached such a point that even the term "school violence" has become a cliché that is often followed up by a line of Socratic stories of gloom & doom that today's youth are in worse shape and more violent than youth of yesterday. However, between 1993 and 1997, the risk of serious violence at school actually declined 29% overall (Brooks, 2000; Snyder, 1999). The 26 violent deaths associated with schools that took place in 1998-99 – including the 12 at Columbine – represented a 40% drop from the previous year (Brooks, 2000).

Don't get me wrong – there is entirely too much violence influencing the way our children live their lives. There is today, there was 20 years ago and there was 70 years ago. In 1933, 75% of deaths among youth aged 15-19 years were from natural causes, but by 1993 – 60 years later - 80% were the result of homicide and unintentional injury (Mann- Reinhart, Borowsky, Stolz, Latts, Cart, Brindis, 1998). During the past 60 years violence has become a leading killer of our adolescents. For the most part, though, this violence is not happening at our schools – that's the good news. But the bad news is that it is happening in their own homes, in their neighborhoods and in other seemingly safe public places. About 40 children and adolescents are killed by violence each week in this country (Snyder, 1999). That is almost 6 per day. That is to say that by the time we are through here today 5 or 6 kids in this country will die in the shadow of unnecessary violence. Of these more than 2000 deaths each year, less than 1% are associated with schools (Kachur, et al., 1996).

For the most part, schools and youth centers are safe places to be – at least they are fairly good places to not be killed. I get a bit concerned, however, when we are basing our level of success on our ability to not allow someone to be killed today. Clearly, our roles as youth workers extend far beyond this, and thankfully, in most instances our work does not center on something as profound as immediate life and death. Depending on where you work, and with whom, and under what circumstances, there is a relative likelihood that your primary objective is beyond seeing to it that no one is killed on your shift. That does not mean to imply that the potential for violence does not exist. Indeed, in virtually all youth work settings the potential for violent behavior is something to be reckoned with, and in some situations the likelihood of such behavior is much greater than in others.

I spent about 10 years working in a number of community based centers, with some residential centers, within the juvenile justice system, as a teacher and a program director and foster parent and mentor, and in all of these capacities there was both perceived and real violence. I was not afraid most of the time, and anytime that fear did sink in, it was usually after the fact. (Perhaps minutes or hours or even days after an exchange of gun-fire between rival gang members, or after having a pistol pointed in my chest or being told I was going to be jumped or beat down or any number of violent threats or actions.) During those ten years there were

only a handful of times when I actually was hit. I believe I used force on an adolescent on three occasions. That is not to say that there weren't some times – particularly when I was just starting out, when I really wanted to say "to hell with it" and go "toe to toe" with some of the young men. I was not all that much older than them, and I surely would have taken them on when I was younger.

Now some days I look at my son as he plays on the floor and I hope he will never feel this sort of instinctual need to fight someone if they aren't acting the way he thinks they should. I think about the young people I see in the shelters or group homes or in foster care or in the community centers and I marvel at their reserve. The vast majority of them are not violent. They are great kids, great sons and daughters and neighbors and nieces and loved ones and strangers on the street. Lets not forget that.

As for those who are living in a culture of violence, let's try to remember who they are, where they are coming from, what their culture is all about. They may very well be trying to make the great escape we are talking about today, and it is hard to imagine what it must be like for an adolescent who is trying to break away from violence. It can't be easy. It's not even easy for an adult. Yet, most of us won't hesitate to come down hard on a youth in care who blows up, punches a hole in the wall or tells us to go screw ourselves or threatens to kill us if we touch him.

Think about it. Here I am, an educated, relatively calm, wanna-be pacifist, SUV driving thirty-something who changes diapers everyday and actually enjoys public television and home decorating shows. I have more in common right now with your made for TV "soccer mom" than a streetwise kid and it's been a while since I have been in a teenager's shoes. But that's not to say that I can't empathize and somehow connect.

Oddly enough, there are parts of a violent culture still brewing inside of me that I'm afraid will never go away. To this day, I walk into a crowded room like this one and immediately, almost subconsciously scan the audience for any formidable foe. Is there anyone in this room who I should watch out for? Sometimes I realize I am sort of day-dreaming, imagining which people in the room I will take out first if a brawl breaks out or if I get jumped – as if its going to happen in this hotel, or in a mall, or in a movie theatre. This sounds crazy and I feel ridiculous even admitting it, but it's the truth. It is a part of me, and I am certain it's a part of some of you and many of the youth we work with.

I have been weaving together stories of my personal past and my family, and the stories of my son and the kids I have worked with to keep the discussion close to my heart, to keep it personal, as youth work is. Perhaps more than any other career, youth work is based on personal interconnectedness. Most other human service professions have thicker boundaries drawn for them. Social workers are taught to depersonalize their caseloads, counselors are taught about counter-transference and not to let the patient or client's life experience effect their day-to-day life – to leave the client's file at the office and tune them out when the 50-minute

therapeutic clock stops ticking. Teachers are taught to stay focused on the lessons at hand and to guide youth with problems to the counselor's office. Nurses and doctors are taught about mandated reporting, about what to watch out for – warning signs to blow the whistle on, and how to treat particular physiological problems, and so on.

In short, many of these other related professions got an earlier start at professionalizing their field. With this, they have had a head start on coming up with ways to safeguard themselves from personal harm, unnecessary hardship and stress in the workplace. The nature of their jobs also allows them to paint broader boundaries that may often keep them emotionally distant from their clients or students.

Youth workers often learn that the best way, in fact, perhaps the only way to effectively do their jobs, is to build relationships with youth, and it is extremely difficult to fully separate ourselves from the work we do. We are caught up in the environment – we are a part of the culture of the youth we work with and they are a part of ours. The exposure we have as youth workers to the trauma a lot of our youth-in-care have dealt with, and are still working through, can really take its toll on our well-being. This is particularly so when we are involved with a young person for whom we are trying to assist in breaking a chain of violence. This is sometimes referred to as "work-related secondary traumatic stress". The term is usually reserved for crisis counselors and therapists, and sometimes police and prison guards, but I would argue that it could be said for many youth workers as well. There has been significant research done regarding people who work with violent youth and in violent situations, but little has been written or researched about the impact such work has on the direct-care youth worker's personal well being and mental health.

Progress is being made in the diagnosis, treatment and prevention of secondary stress though, and I think we will hear a lot more about it in our field in the very near future. I already mentioned the concept of counter-transference – which has been widely used since the mid 70's to discuss how patients effect the way therapists work with them. This counter- transference is something that happens to all of us. The way a youth is, behaves, and the stories that they tell and what we learn about their lives has an effect on the way we work with them. This is not new to the youth worker.

Perhaps some of you have worked with a young person for a while whose culture and history has affected you in significant ways. This goes beyond thinking about this person when we are at home or away from work. In some instances our work with a particular youth will literally change the way we view ourselves, the way we view the world around us and the people associated with it. This has recently been referred to as "vicarious traumatization," and while this term is typically reserved for people who serve as trauma counselors or therapists, I again think an argument can be made that it applies for the youth work professional.

The concept of vicarious traumatization in simple terms is based on a constructivist self-development theory that describes the aspects of the self that are affected by traumatic events (Pearlman & Saakvitne, 1995). It basically says that in the face of trauma people will adapt and cope given their current frame of reference and early experiences with trauma – namely their family culture and history. Vicarious transformation is a process, not an event – it is something that happens over time and it is permanently transformative. It represents changes in the self – changes in how we view the world and in our self-identity (Pearlman, Saakvitne, 1995). When I reflect back over the past 15 years I can see how my work experiences have affected me. I can see that together with my worldview and frame of reference, my experience has changed the way I operate, think and view the youth around me. In other words, I can see how this combination of my own lived experience, and my vicariously living through the youth I have developed relationships with, has transformed who I am.

Something else that has been discussed a lot in the last 10 years or so is the relationship to post-traumatic stress disorder. The specific strain that helping professionals experience in relation to their ability to remain in empathic connection with youth who have experienced trauma, is called "compassion fatigue". I am certain that I have suffered from some traumatization and fatigue throughout the past several years, and until recently I was unable to attach a name to it. It was simply something I saw as a sort of byproduct of the work I was doing. Now, however, I am more capable of identifying these potentially draining symptoms early on and am able to seek out assistance from colleagues and others if the need arises.

When I consider the counter-transference potential in my work, a couple of examples quickly come to mind. About five-and-a-half years ago, my wife and I took in a short-term foster child who came from an abusive and explosively violent home. He had been sexually assaulted by his mother's boyfriend on a number of occasions, and abused in multiple ways. Working with him, I found myself changing. My opinions about rehabilitation were changing, as the man who had abused him had supposedly been rehabilitated sufficiently and was considered safe; my views of the people around me were changing also, as no one around me seemed to care as much as I did about the violence and harm children were facing. He had been let down by woman after woman in his life and had been abused by most of the men. His mother and grandmother were addicted to gambling and would lose the money from their welfare checks within the first couple days of every month. I began to despise people who went to casinos. I was angry with all mothers. I was angry with all men. I was angry that I was running out of people to be angry with, and I felt more than once as though I was going crazy.

I remember working as a counselor with a 6 year-old girl who had been repeatedly raped by a family friend. She was living in her own private hell and I found myself getting very depressed every time I saw her. After I would say goodbye, I would need to close my door to cry where no one would see. I could, of course, list numerous other similar instances when I was personally affected by the youth whom I was working with, and I would bet that many of you here know my pain.

I am sharing with you a few of these more clinical terms as thought provokers. I want to encourage you to leave here today and explore these theories, to confirm that what you are going through is real, and to remind you that you are not in it alone. The fears and anger and pain and worry that you feel at times when things are going poorly or when a youth-in-care is getting to you, are shared by others in similar situations all over the world, in any number of youth work environments. Most of us have different words and descriptions for these emotions we often feel. The way many of us would like to deal with them is to leave, to change careers and get a "real job", like too many dynamic and wonderful youth workers before us. The fact that any of us are here today, and continuing to do this work, is amazing.

At the same time, I find it necessary for us to be reminded that while we suffer from stress (and distress) through our work with youth in crisis situations, we get to go home. We are in some sort of control of our presumably well-adjusted adult lives. This is not typically so, however, for our youth who are struggling to figure this all out. With this in mind, I urge you all to pay extreme attention to those youth who are close to your heart, to consider the greater family history that most definitely is shaping and influencing the way they behave and the decisions they make. They are vulnerable to the culture of violence that surrounds them in a way that we may never fully understand, but knowing you have made a decision to take a stand and make a positive change for them is encouraging to me and brings me a great deal of optimism for their future.

As it is critical for us to be curious about and learn from the family histories of the youngsters we work with, I suggest it is also of paramount importance for us to learn about ourselves, and our own history. As we develop our understanding of our own lives – our family histories that have helped shape who we are and how we do our jobs; our emotions that help tell us what we are feeling as we do our jobs; and our coping skills that help us survive our jobs - I am convinced that we will enhance our ability to do our jobs, working with youth who may be struggling to make significant change in their lives. In other words, we are helping to create the possibilities for countless youth to once and for all break away from a culture of violence, and the more we learn about ourselves and them, the more capable we will be to make this a reality for them.

I am hopeful that you will share in my optimism as we move forward with the day's discussions. I am optimistic for youth - for those we are working with today as well as for those to come in the future. And I am

optimistic about the power of our profession - that the power in this room today will open doors for countless youth in Maine and elsewhere. The positive influence you provide for the children and youth who motivate you is fuel for my optimism. With all of this having been said, I'm grateful to you for the work you are doing, because I know you are the people who are going to make the great escape possible for them, and for other people like myself, and most importantly to me at the moment, for people like Gabriel, my son.

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