

NEXUS: MOTION, STILLNESS, WAITING, ANTICIPATING

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Almost ten years ago, I chose the title and focus of this column, Nexus, from a book I wrote in 1995 in response to a challenge from my good friend and mentor Henry Maier who had said something like: "Mark, why don't you write a story that shows how youth work works." The original Nexus was based on one day at a fictitious multifaceted program for youth including a group home, as well as transitional, community, and family-based services. At the end of the description of the day, I presented several passages from the literature and themes that were instrumental in constructing the story.

Since then, I have attempted in this column to present additional examples under the title Nexus, a term which means a series (a spaghetti bowl) of interconnected thoughts, ideas, and actions. I have also continued my investigation of youth work (a.k.a. child and youth care work) with the goal, as my colleague Jerome Beker (1992) once said (and I have repeated many times because I think it is a key phrase in our work), to "hear it deep and look to the questions that do so much to determine the soul of our work" (p. 179).

Recently, I presented a paper at the University of Victoria Conference titled "Child and Youth Care in Action". The title I chose for my paper was "Hesitation, Motion, Waiting, Light, Dark, and Other Themes in Work with Youth." At the beginning of the paper, I described the method of research I have been working on for several years called sketching in which I juxtapose short vignettes from my own youth with vignettes from my work with youth and interpret what I see, such as in the following sketches which I have used in other articles.

Daniel pulls on his shorts and leaves the tent. Six other boys from the treatment center are asleep. I wait, and then follow him, out of his line of sight. It's a warm August evening in the Door Peninsula, a finger that sticks into Lake Michigan in Wisconsin.

Once he reaches the bluffs, he stands a moment and looks across the water in awe, like perhaps the first Potawatomi to discover its vastness, with the moonlight reflecting off the water across his chest. I duck behind a clump of tall grass and watch as he runs down the bluff and glides along the shore on his misty seaside

stage. He runs for one hundred yards or so, then he charges up another dune and races back down. He repeats these glides and charges until he collapses, exhausted, at the water's edge with the small waves washing over him.

Caught up in the mood, I run down the dune hollering at the top of my lungs. Daniel stands and faces me. At the last moment I veer off and dive face first into the water. We splash each other and sit on the beach with our chins on our knees. "Do you think I'll be fucked up like my ol' man?" Daniel asks, his voice shivering.

I hesitate, say, "No."

* * *

(Years earlier.) I can hear them talking.

"How did you feel when our father died?" my uncle asks my father.

"Like the boy in James Joyce's story about the dead priest, sad and relieved."

"It was different when mother died, wasn't it?" my uncle asks.

"Yes, God forgive us if we ever lose the benignity she tried to instill in us," my father says.

"Yes, God forgive them, Verona," my mother sighs to my aunt.

They, my aunt, uncle, father, and mother, are in the kitchen of our second story flat on Milwaukee's Northwest Side, drinking cocktails. I'm in my bedroom-fourteen going on fifteen. It's about 11:00 p.m. My older brother is asleep in his bed across the room.

After the company is gone and the house is dark, I get dressed and go in the kitchen. Something moves. My father is dancing in the moonlight in the living room. Hidden from view, I watch as he moves in and out of the shadows cast by the elm branches that cathedral the narrow street in front of the house. He's wearing the shirt and tie he wore to the life insurance company he's worked at all his adult life. With his hands in his pockets and his pant legs raised, he shuffles his feet to the music in his head. When he turns toward the window, the moon shines on his face. He's smiling, but his eyes seem far away.

"I do not know what the spirit of a philosopher could more wish to be than a good dancer. For the dance is his ideal, also his art, finally also the only kind of piety he knows, his divine spirit," I remember a quote I cannot find from Nietzsche and use it in the adolescent development class I teach to describe the importance of presence, history, culture, and rhythm in interactions with youth.

INTERPRETATION

Daniel and I had been through hell together. More than once he had run away. He had tried to hit me several times. He had spit at me and said some things I would not repeat. Yet, we had endured and our relationship had grown stronger. At this point, I trusted him and myself in this moment. I let him go that night whereas in the past I would have made

an effort to stop him. I was curious about where he was going. I watched in admiration of how he unleashed his raw energy. It was almost as if he had created a stage to temporarily exorcise the demons that haunted him. An act of great beauty and sadness, the lead actor collapsed at the water's edge. This was not familiar turf for him. He had not been out of the city. His world, like that of many of our youth, was limited to the hood, the center of the city, and that was it. For some reason, he disclosed how he was feeling in that moment, something that he had not done before.

I wanted to be part of the drama, to place myself in it with the same intensity, to scream at the top of my lungs. I did. We played and splashed together revealing something more in both of us, a desire to express, to be what we did together. He was there and I was there in the moment.

Then, as we sat together in one of those unforgettable moments, with the moon running across the water to our feet, he shared for the first time his fear that he would end up like the father that had so terribly abused his sister and him. And I hesitated before I said no.

Why did I hesitate? Did I know on some level that I did not need to make things better, yet tried anyway? Did the mood of the moment make it impossible to resist even though I knew deep down that it might not be? Was I assuring myself once again that I would not end up like my father, a company man? Was I anxious and uncertain like him, not just shivering from the cold?

There is still something from this moment that haunts me--something more to be learned. Even though my response was not the response I would give today, it was a moment of human connection; I'm sure of that, but I'm not sure exactly why. The conditions were perfect. It was just him and I alone on the beach, vulnerable, open to discovering something about ourselves. He must have known, like I did, that there were no guarantees about the future and that my hesitation reflected my true feelings. He probably wanted the assurance anyway. But I'm not sure if that's the whole story.

The Nietzsche quote seemed to fit. There is something about rhythm, the dance, and so forth in both fragments. And thinking of Nietzsche, and then philosophers like Foucault, who wrote about the care of self as the ethos of civilized societies, brought to the sketch another, and perhaps deeper, element of interpretation.

For a detailed description of the research process see Krueger (2004). Anyway, I explained in the paper and at the conference that after having written literally hundreds of sketches, I have been musing on themes that emerged from my sketches. What follows is some of that musing, which I believe might be of interest to people who work in places like Nexus. Snippets of these musings have also been presented in my online column, "Moments with Youth" on www.cyc-net.org.

MOTION AND STILLNESS

As a youth and youth worker I was constantly in motion. I was moving, doing something. Motion was always there at the edge of my consciousness--something I did, heard, and flowed between us that I could not quite understand, yet vital to knowing my experience and the experience of others. The titles of my novels were *In Motion* and *Floating* because this emphasized the meaning and importance of motion in work with youth.

Sometimes I think of motion as the existential hum or a rumble beneath the surface that we often feel and hear--a life force, perhaps? Motion is also, as Aristotle said, the mode in which the future and present are one (cited in Nabokov, 1981, p. 27), or perhaps a state in which we can be totally in the moment. And then, motion is just plain movement, or getting from here to there or nowhere; the movement without which it is impossible to act or imagine being alive.

I run everyday because I enjoy moving. Frequently, after the initial pain subsides and the endorphins kick in, I get the runners' high. My activity and I are one. Time is lost and everything is in synch. I can go for several blocks and not remember the distance in between. It is my flow or optimal experience (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), and an example of how struggle in life leads to fulfillment. Similarly in youth work, I often felt most at one with what I was doing when I was moving or doing something. We were running together, or sitting quietly talking, or engaged in some sort of physical struggle.

"You have to like to move around, act, be engaged," I tell youth work students. "Knowing how to move and where to be in relation to the youth is a major skill in the work." Then I go into comparisons with modern dance, basketball, jazz, hockey, and other metaphors that help show how our movements and positions influence the outcomes of our interactions.

Rhythm, motion, and stillness are closely related--the rhythms of our motions as we seek resolution/stillness. Rhythmic interactions forge human connections (Maier, 1992) and let us know when a struggle is ending--the tension in the arms, back, and neck eases and subsides. As in modern dance, we line up and pass through, close or far, boundaries and human connections formed by our positioning, our mirroring back, our pauses, and our ability to freeze ourselves in the timelessness of the moment. We are in and out of synch with youth and their developmental rhythms.

When I feel connected to others, motion is usually involved; for example, the shared rhythm of a conversation. We are doing something *with* each other: talking, working walking, dancing, or running. I was often connected to the troubled boys when we were running, swimming, or playing one-on-one basketball. For example, I used to get a small group of them up early in the morning for a run. At first, the pain made it difficult. Then as they got in shape, often we experienced a feeling of harmony in the middle of the run when we shared a common pace.

As a child I was always in motion. I felt a need to move. I ran from or to something. The murmur and hum always seemed to be there, just beneath the surface. Moving made me feel free, at least for the moment. I often moved from one place or thing to another, one dream or fantasy to another, childhood to youth to adulthood and back. Usually this went smoothly, but sometimes I did not want something to change or end, so I moved away, or avoided the transition. I went somewhere else or did not show up--or I sped up the transition by moving ahead or away from what I was doing.

Many of the boys I worked with stayed in constant motion. They ran to or from somewhere or nowhere to keep busy as thoughts and feelings raced through and riddled their bodies and minds. They did not want to put their heads on their pillows at night and be alone with these thoughts and feelings. They ran up and down the halls, onto the streets, into the woods, or walked away from our activity because they could not wait around to fail again. They were not used to smooth transitions. Things usually went badly when they moved from one place or activity to another. Their histories of movement and transition had been filled with failure and rejection. They had moved from one home to another, from waking to sleep, sleep to waking, and crafts to dinner with some difficulty and fear. They did not have a normal sense of moving from one thing or place to another with relative ease and success, much less of moving from one activity to a more challenging one. Learning to experience and master transitions was a big part of their care. Getting from here to there successfully without rejection, fights, abuse, failure, or neglect helped them deal with change and separation.

I am often most present, or open and available, when I am moving. Like the actor Wilhem Dafoe said in an Actor's Studio interview on TV, "I am out of my head and into my body when I am in motion (acting)." "I continue, lost in the rhythm of my gait," I write in the opening scene to my self-portrait. Or, as Simon Ortiz suggests in his poem about presence, I am comfortable with the space that is myself (Ortiz, 1992, p. 126). Sex and motion, of course, are inextricably linked. We move to please others and self.

There is smooth, jerky, continuous, discontinuous, in-and out-of-synch motion, each showing and telling something about an interaction or experience. Knowing these movements and motions and their relationship to what their authors/creators are thinking, feeling, and so forth, is a major part of sketching as well as of other forms of understanding lives and human interactions. It is body language. Watching others move their hands, feet, eyes, body, and so forth tells us what they mean if we know how to look.

On the other hand, I am often moving toward stillness. I move to find peace and quiet, or am drawn to moving toward a place of quiet and stillness such as the peace I find when I am exhausted after a run. I long to just be, or to search for just so-ness. Or I am moving toward death, or to return to the womb. I like to be in a still place, empty of thought and

worry--a place I find for which I have too little time. In the middle of a run, I lose all contact, sometimes, with time and space. I am suspended, still, yet moving, just being.

As a boy, I stared at my feet or the wall until there was nothing. When I hurt inside, I felt better just being totally still or numb. I stiffened my body on my bed until nothing moved. It was one way I had of coping.

Youth, I think, often run around, make noise, holler, and move to achieve similar states. They hear and try to rid themselves of the hum or rumble. Something moves inside them, and they move to get away from it. Their anxiety is uncontrollable, except when they run, fight, or lash out. Motion is a defense against the pain inside. Stillness, for them, is a dream, a state of nothing(ness), their heads and bodies rid of the thoughts and calls to action that drive them to move and act the way they do. When I was a young boy, my mother used to get concerned when I ran and hollered through the house for no apparent reason.

In one sketch, I am seeking, searching, running in place, always between and in states of light and dark, two themes which will be discussed in a moment. In this context, motion was first a precursor and later a tool for using self to understand boys who ran and hollered to rid themselves of despicable thoughts and fears beyond my imagination--a longing for a sense of stillness and just being, beyond anything I had experienced.

Like an Edward Hopper painting, my scenes are moving and still (Strand, 2001, p 4.) They are glimpsed in passing, still lives captured on my canvas as I move by. I am compelled to stay and leave, wait and anticipate, linger and move on. These are the rhythms of lives. Not always in synch or out of synch, but both--the in and out of synch-ness of how we seek resolution, the yin and yang of the constant move toward meaning or purpose, the never-ending journey, here, compelled to stay and leave.

WAITING AND ANTICIPATING

Much of youth is about waiting. I waited for someone to show up, to go someplace, or for something to happen. Sometimes I tried to make it happen; other times I just "hung out" waiting for it to happen. I would dream about and plan out the things I wanted to happen--a vacation up north, a trip someplace, a date, sex. Time passed so slowly when I waited for these things. I tired of waiting, stopped waiting, and tried to make it happen sooner, which never seemed to work. Or I counted the hours thinking that would move things faster. It never did. I waited in the dentist's office or for my father to come home on the bus. I wanted for him to come, but sometimes he didn't. I didn't want my turn with the dentist to come, but it always did. In the army reserves, I hurried up and waited. I waited to be an adult, to drive, to grow a mustache, for the "one," the girl who didn't come, but whom I finally met when I wasn't waiting. (Often the things that meant the most in my youth were not the things I waited

for). I waited at the new shopping mall; I waited bored out of my skull; I waited, waited, waited.

In Samuel Beckett's famous play, "Waiting for Godot", two men, Estragon and Vladimir, are waiting for someone named Godot, maybe to save them, maybe not. We do not know this person, or what he represents, or what he stands for. Much speculation has been made about the meaning of the play. But in the end these are probably just two men waiting, and that's the theme of the play as it is a theme in life.

The boys I worked with seemed to be constantly waiting, mainly for something to happen, mainly something good, I think. They had waited in fear based on a history of the things they waited for never really happening while something they weren't waiting for did--rejection, abuse, the police, a slap across the face, sexual abuse, and failure. Yet they still waited and believed something good would happen. They would be saved, cared for, liked, admired, or famous despite the odds against it. Daniel, the boy in several sketches who is a composite of two boys I knew, waited, wondering if he would be like his father while he waited for the chance to dance and show others his creativity. He tested and waited for me to hurt him. It took all my strength not to do what he was waiting for. His sense of waiting changed, slightly.

Like I waited for my father at the bus stop to show up after work, they waited for their parents, who never showed up, while my father always did, later sometimes, but he always came home. My mother was always there when she was supposed to be. I did not have to wait for her. Their mothers were rarely there when they were supposed to be. Yet they waited for them to "show up." Even when their parents were there, they waited for them to show up. Physically present, their parents were often elsewhere--drunk, drugged, preoccupied, self-absorbed, unavailable. The youth waited to be in their presence, but no one was home. They were there, but not present, around but not available, at least not in the way they wanted them to be, with care and concern for them and their well-being. Thus, the boys waited for parents like the ones they thought other boys had--the parents who would never come because they did not exist. They made up parents so the other boys would think the parents they were waiting for were good parents.

These boys also waited for the system to help. Hour upon hour, day upon day, they waited for someone, something to acknowledge them. They waited in line for a placement with a good family or for medical care. All this waiting drove them nuts. And still they waited, and simultaneously anticipated, as did I.

Like most youth, I anticipated driving my father's car and having my own car, going up north, meeting a girl. I anticipated growing up, being free and on my own--the days when I could do what I wanted whenever I wanted, or so I thought. I would drive away, go up north at the drop of a hat, and have my own money to spend on the things I wanted. I anticipated

seeing a friend again, a girl I loved, having a cat, getting a bike, swimming, becoming a professional basketball player.

Gradually, and more frequently, the anticipation of the end of something took over from the beginning. For example, I would wait all year to go up north to spend time at a cabin on a warm inland lake with my family, then once I got there I would worry about (anticipate) the end. As I got older, I became less and less excited about going, until, eventually, I would rather stay home with my friends. As a young man, I drank and used drugs to stay in a place where the anticipation of the beginning merged with the anticipation of the end. Ultimately, I would be let down because nothing lasted. It took me a while to get out of this and to learn to enjoy the moment, to just be without waiting or anticipating, a lesson of youth learned through experience that shaped my happiness and fulfillment as an adult. Now I have a place up north I can go to almost any time I want and just be.

The youth I worked with, and try today to understand in hindsight, anticipated mostly bad things happening. Their dreams had been repeatedly unfulfilled. They had been disappointed time after time, got their hopes up only to be let down. So many of them began to anticipate these things happening and did anything they could to avoid the future. For many of them there was no future. Friends had been killed, parents jailed; the world had been witnessed and experienced as a violent short-lived place. Others wanted no future or past. They wanted now because that was, for the moment, the safest, least painful place. If they anticipated, something bad would surely happen, and often it did. Limbo was a better place.

These musings from my sketching experiences and readings will continue as they did in the past, spiraling forward and back through my mind as I try to understand the meaning of these and other themes as they appear in my future sketches. This is, in my opinion, the essence of knowing and being *in youth with youth*. It is the substance, the source of question and discovery that lets us do "real" youth work, our own and with others.

Too much discussion today in our field and in our society, I believe, is on the outcome of youth. It is as if adolescence is a phase to get teenagers through into a good job. We don't want them to linger in and experience youth to its fullest. We want them to get good grades and to get on with it so they can compete in the global and local economies and buy things. Camps, community centers, group homes, and schools are funded to get results, not to piddle around in the spaces and places of youth. Capitalism assesses them in relationship to the bottom line; youth has no use value (Krueger, 2004). Youth are used for the sake of profit; a potential workforce, a means to an end, rather than an end (Magnuson, Baizerman, & Stringer, 2001). They have no agency.

The attitude is that they should stop the navel-gazing and self-questioning. Figure it out, make decisions, get civically engaged, and get on with it. Choose your major, sooner rather than later, and be fulfilled with a good job, a nice family, and the trappings of the rich and the middle

class. If you have been abused and neglected, get over it and get on with your life. Take responsibility for your actions, earn points for good behavior, and forget about the past; you can't do anything about it anyways. So you had a bad story. So did others-- let go, move on, and take charge of your own life. The imaginary audience and life are calling.

Yet, fulfillment and productivity are not likely to be found unless they can fully experience their youth with caring adults. They have to be *in it with* others who care about them. We must understand this as we move, be still, wait, and anticipate with them in light and dark spaces and places that will change their stories and give them the hope that comes from being cared about in youth. We must bring *ourselves* to our interactions and share the journey with them with presence, curiosity, and understanding. Together, we must also try to create moments of connection, discovery, and empowerment as is written about in the stories and literature in youth work (Fewster, 1990; Krueger, 2004; Maier, 1987, 1995). These moments in the spaces and places of hesitation, motion, stillness, waiting, anticipation, light, dark, connection, discovery, empowerment will change their stories for the better, and when the time is right, help them be healthy adults.

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