

A LYRIC REFLECTION
YEAR END 2008/YEAR BEGINNING 2009

I'd like to begin with a preface, an explanation if you will. Originally, I planned to skip my usual practice of putting together an essay around the holidays. The combination of several factors; the lawsuit, funding cuts, program eliminations and the bleak prognosis for the upcoming year; were conspiring to suffocate my creative inspiration with a wet blanket.

Several weeks ago, I found myself struggling with an appropriate agenda for our December Board meeting. The November meeting had been a long one, centered on the agency's financials and the lawsuit. Frankly, for the past eighteen months, the Board meetings consisted mainly of difficult news and equally difficult decisions. The Board handled these issues with grace and integrity. But the inescapable fact was that there was an ongoing assault on our mission by a small group of individuals whose only intent seemed to be to put us and our mission out of business. What can only be conjectured is the belief that if they got rid of us, all of the disadvantaged and disabled people would also disappear from the local landscape. I didn't really want to make those topics the focus of our December Board meeting agenda, just like I didn't want to write anything for year's end.

I guess all this was playing out right below the surface, because a couple of weeks before the Board Meeting, I woke in the middle of the night with an "Aha, I've got it." The December Board Meeting would consist of a truncated business meeting, followed by a program during which 15 or so of our core staff would speak for 3-5 minutes each. Their topic - the impact of their work on individuals and families, what they were grateful for, and what they gave thanks to. To enhance the difference of the experience, we would redesign the Board meeting room in order that senior staff, Board members and speakers would sit together and share a meal. After the meal, speakers would rise from their seats and give their short talk.

I admit to feeling a little anxious about this. I was concerned about whether we could pull it off, a different format, a different way to do things. Would something like this resonate with the Board? You know, all those usual questions emanating from doubt. It was something that I thought, if it would work, would be very meaningful for the Board. My concerns diminished and disappeared as our staff rose and spoke from their hearts. Their stories were powerful, their words connected with those present. "Hit home" would be an apt description.

Near the end of the program, one of our Program Directors brought the stories together by articulating their common theme of transformation. She then linked her work and the agency's work to a literary reference from a short story by Robert Louis Stevenson, "The Lamplighter," referring to "the lighting of lamps at night to punching holes in the darkness." As I listened to her words, I realized that what we were doing wasn't just important for the Board, it wasn't just important for Senior Management, and it wasn't just important for the staff present, it was also important for me. I needed this as much as anyone else in that room.

That got me to thinking about how we as individuals take things from outside ourselves - literature, poetry, music - and relate them to connect with others, find common threads of meaning and establish the linkages between our inner processing and the outer reality. Signposts on the path that we travel, a way to help us understand ourselves better, to help us understand our experiences better, and as a way to guide us in our mission of helping others.

What I have used over the years to connect, to inform and to understand my work, is music. Specifically, the lyrics of contemporary music. Tone, genre, rhythm, etc. are all important, but for me, it is the written lyric or song fragment that I find most helpful. Over the years, I have made sometimes vague and sometimes specific references to a book that I was writing about my experiences as a therapist/case worker at a public institution for children early in my professional career. The "book" currently consists of 30-35 "chapters/essays" stored in a Rubbermaid container somewhere in my basement. Each essay is titled with a lyric or lyric fragment taken from the early works of either Bob Dylan or Bruce Springsteen.

I want to speak to one essay in particular that's never far from my mind. It focuses on my work with a 6 year old boy named Albert. This short describes my third play therapy session with Albert. The essay is titled with a Bruce Springsteen lyric.

"Albert, let me in. I want to be your friend. I want to guard your dreams and visions."*

Albert was the central figure in my Children's Center experience. Taken from his birth mother at the hospital, he had been placed in a series of foster homes before winding up as one of the youngest residents at the center which then had a census of about 225 abused and neglected children. At 6, he had blown through his third foster home placement due to behaviors such as punching holes in the walls and smearing his feces all over the place. I first met him in the

parking lot next to my office on the grounds of the Children's Center on a late summer day, playing with some newly fallen leaves. I greeted him with a "Hey, man." He looked up at me, gave me a shy smile and continued playing in the leaves. He was a big kid for his age with brown hair, big saucer shaped brown eyes and a gap where his new permanent front teeth had come in. The lyric aptly described my aim, my goal, my purpose and my intent. The institution failed Albert, and while I haven't seen him in more than 30 years, that particular child, that particular lyric and those particular experiences are never really far from my consciousness.

A couple of days after the Board meeting, SMOC held our third annual Single Adult Lunch at the Greater Framingham Community Church, bringing together folks from our housing, our shelters and our residential programs for a meal. We provide warm food, fellowship and a small gift. This year, more than 150 folks showed up. When I looked around the tables at the lunch, I was struck by how quiet, how resigned to their fate, to their destiny, most of the folks were. Our guests sat at the tables waiting patiently for the food to be served. I guessed the average age was mid-40's, and, as I said hello, I saw how the lights that had burned in their eyes as children were dimmed, ground down by their disability and their poverty.

I couldn't help, as I looked over the faces, looking for Albert. He would be in about his early 40's now. I found myself wondering, as I walked around greeting people and thanking them for being there, what he would look like, what the shy, innocent smile of a 6 year old had become more than 35 years later. I learned enough about Albert during my work with him to know that one of the ways he coped with an absolutely miserable existence was to construct his own world, a world that over the period of time that we worked together, he guardedly let me into. I could not prevent the Children's Center from harming Albert, exacerbating his pain. So the focus of my work there switched from trying to change the institution to trying to close it. So, the question that begs itself is, if dreams are gone, if vision is diminished, what is the role of the helping organization? What is the role of a helping process? A question I often struggle to answer. There is one thing I do know, though, and it is as follows.

I've been doing this helping stuff for nearly 40 years. It doesn't matter whether you call the helping assistance, case management, psych/social, med eval, etc. It doesn't matter whether you've got a degree or you don't have a degree. It doesn't matter whether you've got tons of experience or little experience. It doesn't matter whether all your training is from books or from the street. If you're going to be a helper, you need to find common links, common bridges, common threads between not only yourself and others, but also between

yourself and the life experience and the culture around you. A narrative bridge, as you will. A lyrical bridge. A poetic connection. A bridge across the emptiness that exists between ourselves and others. It is the ability to build bridges that connects someone in need of help through transformative experience, and, you know, it really doesn't matter whether the transformation is partial, complete, short-term, long-term, momentary, whatever. What's important is that it happens, and it evolves out of the connection between yourself and the others. So, it's certainly the way we all need mechanisms to find something outside of ourselves which allows us to build those bridges, a lyrical, a poetic or a narrative bridge, as you will.

In my use of the lyric in the essay that I wrote about my work with Albert, that's what I was attempting to do. That's what I was attempting to communicate in the rest of those long-forgotten, mostly unedited essays. That's what each of our staff, when they rose from their meal and spoke from their heart, were attempting to do at the Board meeting. Bravo!

Since this essay began with a preface, it needs an epilogue. I'll try to be brief.

The day before the Christmas holiday, I make it a practice to walk through the building, shaking everyone's hand and wishing them a happy holiday. It's sort of a ritual that always makes me feel good. So, at about noon, I finished my walk around, gathered my stuff, locked my office door and headed down the corridor, out the building when I chanced upon one of our Ready, Willing & Able workers doing maintenance. He was a new guy. I hadn't seen him before. He appeared to be in his early 40's and looked like life had gotten the better of him. I said "hello". He stopped me and said, "Are you Jim Cuddy?" I said, "Yeah." He said, "Listen, Mr. Cuddy, I just wanted to thank you. You saved my life." When people say those things to me, although they make me feel good, they also make me feel very uncomfortable. What do you say? How do you respond? I also admit to trying not to take the praise any more to heart than I do when I read stuff about how I've personally ruined the community, though I must admit that the former is much easier to bask in than the latter.

I smiled and asked him his name and said, "I'm delighted that we are able to help you and delighted that our organization has been there for you. Did you just start here at RWA?" The gentleman, in a somewhat disjointed and difficult to follow, sort of choppy narrative, told me a little bit about his history. I did catch that he had a place to live, was living independently, and had just started with

RWA. It seemed very important to him to tell me how much he had been given. As he talked, I searched his face.

It was weather-beaten.

He looked older than I guessed he was.

His eyes were blue-gray, not brown.

They were oval shaped, not saucer shaped.

There was no gap between his two front teeth.

As I walked down the corridor to my car, out of the building, a thought passed through my mind.

Perhaps, I thought, he started to dream again.

* Bruce Springsteen, "Born to Run" 1976