CYC-Online

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A Journal for those who live or work with Children and Young People

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So, February, eh?
For those of us in a cold Northern climate (okay, call it Canada), this is exciting — it means only a few months until the first harbinger of Spring. (Even though it means the cold will continue for a while.)

Hey, when you are overwhelmed by circumstances over which you have no control, any sign of hope is welcome. Hints, threats, nudges — anything that suggests something ‘better’ is welcome. And why not — It gives us hope.

Okay, you all know where I am going with this, right? But before we all get to where we know I am going, let me say a few words.

My mother, bless her soul and love her forever, was a cliché machine: “If you don’t believe in yourself, why should anyone else? If you don’t blow your horn, who will? Very moment is an opportunity to make things better! Your life, your choices!”

Damn, gotta love that woman for all the hope, promise and responsibility she preached — even if it did drive me nuts when I was little. But she is still ringing in my ears, isn’t she? All these years later, I find myself in agreement with her, in a way I could not be when I was an adolescent.

Now, trust me, I grew up in a fairly dysfunctional family (I have written about this elsewhere and will now repeat it here) yet — and this is an important ‘yet’ - my mother managed to nurture in me a sense that I am responsible for whatever happens to me.

Whew! Pretty heady. And not something I was interested in hearing as an adolescent. What adolescent — embedded in the ‘it is their fault’ view of the world — would be?

So? What does that teach me? Maybe... old messages linger? What I heard then has relevance now? What I thought I closed out was actually heard? Many things!

Yes, Yes, I am getting there. Hang on. My message is a one-liner but I am required by protocol to take 500 words to get there. 😊 Okay maybe that is my rule (Responsibility, Thom. Responsibility).

I was thinking today (okay, here we go) about Maxwell Smart’s message in the upcoming issue of RCYCP (I know you have not seen it. But I have) about how we might help to nurture hopefulness in those with whom we work. Hopefulness and a belief in self. And an ‘I can do it’ attitude.

Max’s argument (Sorry Max for the summary) is that we can, as CYCs nurture...
an optimistic attitude in those with whom we work. It is a question of how we choose to approach our day to day interactions. Max’s message is actually quite simple and profound.

We choose how to be with people, and our choices impact others. Simple and profound.

So how do you choose to be with the young people in your care? As I have said elsewhere, CYC practice is about ‘how you are who you are while you do what you do’. It is about self-in-relationship. And how we are in relationship with other in-fluences – really it does – how they act in (and on) the world.

While I have often said that ‘we are less powerful than we think’ we also need to remember that ‘we are more powerful than we imagine’.

So, now that I am up to my 500 words, let me only say this:

“Why not be hopeful in our interactions with children and others?”

What’s to lose?
What’s to gain?

— Thom

NEW RELEASE

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One of my favourite things about writing my columns is coming up with a title. This is always an opportunity to think creatively about how to capture the core message of what I want to say accurately and meaningfully. At the same time, titles are designed to peak the curiosity of a potential reader. It has been said many times in pop culture circles that what really sells is sex. Therefore, I am enormously happy to be able to write my column this month with a title that legitimately, meaning for good reason, includes the word ‘sex’. Here it goes.

At some point, I was engaged in a process in a North American jurisdiction that involved providing feedback to the governing authority of that jurisdiction about their residential services. As part of this process, I, along with some colleagues, developed a one page vision statement that included a sentence suggesting that all young people living in out of home care ought to feel cared for, safe, respected and loved. In discussing the draft report we had submitted to the governing authority, a very highly placed official in charge of the custody side of residential services in that jurisdiction, made the following statement (this is very close to a quote, but more accurately, I am paraphrasing):

“Cared for, safe and respected — sure. But you cannot say that youth in custody should be loved.”

Now, given this statement in and of itself, I found myself reacting internally to the vehemence of rejection of the idea that young people in custody ought to feel loved. Perhaps I was especially conscious of my reaction because I had just read a special issue on the topic of love in residential care that had been published in the Scottish Journal of Residential Care, and I was very impressed by what I had read. Or maybe it was because one of my favourite writers in the field, Mark Smith, convinced me many years ago that love is the way forward, and our fear of love is what must be conquered. At any rate, I also found it somewhat offensive to suggest that young people in custody ought not to be loved because they are in custody. The official

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Love and Sex

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had clarified before making the statement that there was not necessarily a problem with the term love in other residential service contexts - just not in custody settings. This line of argument simply makes no sense to me.

But, this is not really the story I want to tell. Far more entertaining and tragic at the same time is the rationale that followed after I gently inquired about why

the official felt that way. Here it is:

“Because if you say that young people in custody should be loved, the staff will have sex with them and then argue that the experts who wrote this report said that this was ok. Remember that the age difference between some of the youth and some of the staff is not very great in custody settings.”
I am not joking; this was the response. Love and sex in custody; we really need a reality TV show for this.

I am struggling to recover from this conversation. I must admit that I have been known to be a little cynical from time to time, and my expectations of thought and action at the highest levels of decision making are not particularly high. But to have this line of thinking be articulated so clearly and concretely by a government official with considerable power and authority over shaping the everyday experience, and therefore the life prospects, of generations of youth, has me quite upset. Let’s think about what the possible messages could be:

1. Don’t say, do or think anything that might suggest young people who have committed crimes are to be embraced like my children or yours.
2. Love is reserved for those living in privileged and safe contexts, not for edgy youth.
3. The withholding of love is a reasonable form of accountability
4. Even if it requires the dehumanization of young people, avoid anything that could create issues of liability.

I could go on with what the message is. But the message that really kills me is the most obvious one, and the one that affects all of us in child and youth care and other fields preparing people to be with young people, because it speaks to what the boss really thinks of us. Here it is (my words):

Staff in custody settings are so incredibly stupid, mentally unfit, and outrageously incompetent that they might mistake a value statement about how we are with youth as a license to have sex with them.

From that, this logically follows:

However, it is not a problem that we staff our facilities with such sub-human, monkey-like idiots; we just can’t provide incentives or justifications for them to become sexual predators by planting such inflammatory, hippie-like, Janis Joplin-inspired language as ‘love’.

Well, there you have it. Of all the things I expected in the process I have been engaged in, I really did not expect such an incredibly absurd position from someone with so much power over the lives of very vulnerable youth (even if these young people have committed serious crimes). But the longer I hang around, the more absurdity becomes apparent. And the more that happens, the more I admire the strength and courage of young people everywhere who survive these love-less systems.

I would like to end my column this month by offering lots of love to all my friends, colleagues and readers, but I won’t; I worry it might incite a global sexual orgy with considerable consequence. So I just wave to you from a distance, and care for you in loveless ways. Who needs a heart when you can play with monkeys?
## Seminar Schedule

**SESSION 1** (choose one)

April 20-24 (5-day)
- **Life Space Crisis Intervention** with Mark Freado

April 22-24 (3-day)
- **Rap2Grow** with Lesley du Toit & Erik Laursen

**SESSION 2**

April 25 (1-day)
- **Growing Resilient Kids**
  with Martin Brokenleg, Larry Brendtro, & Steve Van Bockern

**SESSION 3** (choose one)

April 26-27 (2-day)
- **The Art of Kid Whispering**
  with Mark Freado
- **Schools that Matter**
  with Steve Van Bockern
- **Cultures of Respect**
  with Erik Laursen
- **The Drive to Thrive**
  with Larry Brendtro, Michelle Maihoetter, & Mark Strother

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### April 2016

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Held at the [Harbour Towers Hotel and Suites](#) in beautiful Victoria, British Columbia.
In Child and Youth Care we work on the edge of trouble each and every day. And with that trouble comes loss. For some of us, working in high intensity conflict areas across the world, it would not be too far fetched to say that we work in a war zone. Indeed, for those of us working in geographies saturated with civil or ethnic strife, battles over the control and flow of drugs, and/or the simple brutality of severe poverty marginalization or disenfranchisement, each day is a battleground in which we wait to see who will survive.

CYC/youth workers who choose this way of working and living appear to be called to this kind of work, in the face of its obvious risks, by a sense of accountability to their community, the legacy of their own survivorship or an irrevocable commitment to a kind of radical ethics of care. Others of us who work in what appear to be more controlled environments, in safer spaces, still suffer loss, and witness violence and trauma with disturbing frequency. For myself, in the quarter century that I worked in the field, I lost young people I cared about deeply, colleagues who had become family, as well as programs and agencies that I thought had great worth.

I vividly remember the young Vietnam veteran that I worked with very early in my career. I worked with him in a day treatment program for young people experiencing their first encounter with psychosis. We were not too far apart in age and had similar interests. He came to the program every day and I truly enjoyed our time together. We had high intensity encounters when he slipped off the edge into madness, but each time we worked together to bring him back onto a more solid footing. Without a doubt he was experiencing severe PTSD, but we didn’t have that understanding of things when the
boys started coming back from the horrors of the Vietnam war.

One day he didn’t come into the program. We learned later, that in a fugue state, he had stabbed to death the person who answered the door at his group home. We knew them both because they had been in our program that day. It was devastating, because we had lost both of them in different ways, but also because we felt we had failed them the two of them. We processed what had happened as a staff and tried to manage it emotionally, but at the end of the day the demands of those surviving took precedence over our grief and sense of loss. We were professionals, after all, working in what I came to call over the years, the emergency room of the streets.

My friend/client, the Vietnam veteran, was just the first in a long string of losses over the years. There were others I worked with who killed other people or were killed by other people in gang related violence, domestic disputes, psychotic episodes or street fights. There were those who took their lives, were lost to addiction, overdosed, or died in accidents of one sort or another.

For me, somehow, it was the death of a young man I had known throughout his teen years that I hold in my mind as the icon for all the others. He was the member of a group of young people I had known for a number of years. He was a particularly wild and rebellious young man who pushed everyone he knew to the limits of their patience and caring. On the other hand, he was smart, funny, caring and ethical in his own way. I had lost track of him when I heard he had fallen under a moving train and been killed. His death was one of many for that group of young people. By the time that particular group reached their thirties, over half of them were gone.

And there were other kinds of losses. The kinds of loss that comes when the young people you are caring for are raped, beaten or betrayed and you feel them slipping away into a place where you can’t follow them. Those young people you really connect with and then who disappear one day and you never know what happened. Those lost to incarceration in systems that will change them in irrevocable ways. And finally there is the witness that we bear to losses of hope, optimism, childish wonder, and so on when the young people we care for engage the brutality that faces them as they move towards adulthood.

All of this calls for a certain kind of relentless optimism in order to keep care alive in us as we work. Of course the majority of what we do encompasses a far less emotionally challenging set of circumstances. We do get to see a great deal of courageous and remarkable activity and growth in both the young people we encounter and ourselves. To some degree this is why we continue to do what we do. But what do we do with the sadness, the loss and grief of our work?

In our contemporary environment there are a great many resources in the emerging field of self-care. There is an attention being paid to burn out and
compassion fatigue. However, for me these neo-liberal advances in affect management fall short of accounting for the depth of loss and grief experienced by many of us as CYC/youth workers. Part of this is because these approaches manage pain without fully acknowledging its need for expression. By expression, I don’t mean processing in order to let go and move on. I am talking about the necessity for a deeper acknowledgement and expression, an older form that accounts for, not only our personal losses, but also our collective and historical sense of loss.

I would argue that while each loss is deeply personal, it also reflects on a collective history of loss and social failure that we all know, but few of us can articulate. At some level, we know that each of these losses would be preventable if we would organize our societies in a different manner. Franco Basaglia, the father of deinstitutionalization, was once asked if he thought there was such a thing as schizophrenia. He is reputed to have responded that there might be a biological disorder we could call schizophrenia. However, he went on, it is impossible to know in a world we might reasonably assume could drive someone mad. Similarly, we know at some level that the pain and suffering we encounter every day in our work is linked to a broader historical field of madness and brutality.

It is this that operates as a deep and sometimes repressed shame that is difficult to acknowledge. I would argue that, at some level, we are ashamed or perhaps we should be. After all we can’t help but fail collectively, and therefore individually, to care for young people. While there may be movements in CYC/youth work to engage and transform our shame, grief and sadness into the kind of force that can change the world, I haven’t seen it yet.

In her remarkable collection of poems *Appalachian Elegy*, bell hooks reminds us of the importance and force of lamentation, as a vehicle for coming to terms with grief and loss. Lamentation is specifically the cry of loss linked to collective historical grief as in the Book of Lamentations in Judaism that mourns the destruction of Jerusalem. In the writing of bell hooks, she uses lamentation to express the ravages of slavery and racism, while simultaneously linking these events to the effects on the land where they occurred. This entanglement of contemporary individual reflection linked to the collective historical losses of a people, then linked again to the contemporaneous destruction of an ecosystem elucidates the complexity of a full crying out of sorrow and pain. She writes:

> My cries of lamentation faintly echo the cries of freedom fighter Sojourner Truth, who often journeyed deep into the forest to loudly lament the pain of slavery, the pain of having no voice. Truth spoke to the trees, telling them, “when I cried out with a mother’s grief none but Jesus heard.” When I first walked on the hills belonging to me I felt an overwhelming sense of triumph. I felt that I could reclaim a place in this Kentucky landscape in the name of all the displaced Native Americans, African


Americans, and all the black Indians (who cannot “prove” on paper that they are who they really are). Chanting with a diverse group of ecofeminist friends, we called forth the ancestors, urging them to celebrate return migration with us. We spread sage, planted trees, and dug holes for blossoming rose bushes in the name of our mother Rosa Bell. I wanted to give her a place to rest in these hills, a place where I can commune with her spirit.

I wonder what such a lamentation would look like if we were to undertake such a crying out and calling forth in our work. How many ghosts do we carry in our programming through the current and past losses that have occurred to us during our time in the field, and the legacy of past events in our field that set the stage for the inequities and unjust conditions that occur daily in large and small ways in our work today. Is there room for an acknowledgment, a re-claiming of our work in the names of those disenfranchised and brutalized young people whose restless spirits haunt our work? Can we own the pain, the shame and sorrow of our work in concert with the young people who are the inheritors of the historical events shaping their world and ours?

In her discussion of the place of lamentation, hooks talks about the silenced stories of desire deferred or denied in the machinations of racism and the human condition of ongoing warfare of all types overt and covert. She proposes –
Psychohistory and the power of ways of knowing beyond human will and human reason allow us to re-create, to reimagine. Poems of lamentation allow the melancholic loss that never truly disappears to be given voice. Like a slow solemn musical refrain played again and again, they call us to remember and mourn, to know again that as we work for change our struggle is also a struggle of memory against forgetting.

I would argue that as people invested in caring for others, we cannot afford to forget or deny the inherent collective history we all share and to which we are accountable. To grieve fully our losses is to entangle them together by crying out our individual pain entwined with our collective loss and the residues of historical trauma. This is not a call to live in sorrow. It is not to indulge in what Spinoza calls the sad passions. It is a call to open our pain and cry out together so as to open avenues to build the new, as bell hooks points out, by “calling forth the ancestors, urging them to celebrate return migration with us.” In this crying out through lamentation there is a beauty and a kind of surrender that offers a reentry into the living force of life that holds the possibility of a new set of relations not premised in a forgetting, but in a dutiful remembrance and accountability to the pain we share in various degrees and in radically distinct ways. As hooks puts it,

such then is beauty surrendered against all hope
you are here again turning slowly
nature as chameleon all life change
and changing again awakening hearts
steady moving from unnamed loss
into fierce
deep grief
that can bear all burdens
even the long passage
into a shadowy dark
where no light enters

In the end, perhaps, it all comes down to acts of memory. It is what we dare to remember, to memorialize, to take accounting of, that shapes our grieving and our lamentations. In that spirit I dedicate this column to all those who have come before in hopes of those that will come next.
RESIDENTIAL CHILD AND YOUTH CARE IN A DEVELOPING WORLD

Tuhinul Islam & Leon Fulcher

Residential Child and Youth Care in a Developing World builds from a critique of Courtney, M. E. & Iwaniec, D. (Eds). (2009). Residential Care of Children: Comparative Perspectives (Oxford University Press) which evaluated de-institutionalisation policies in the residential care of children in 11 countries. It also builds on the comparative efforts of Whittaker, del Valle & Holmes (2015) Therapeutic Residential Care for Children and Youth: Developing Evidence-Based International Practice. We started from an intellectual claim that residential child and youth care “places” exist everywhere – whether called homes, orphanages, schools, centres or institutions. Unlike Courtney & Iwaniec or Whittaker et al, we include private boarding schools, madrassas and other religious learning centres in our definition of residential child and youth care. Residential establishments involve any building(s) (and sometimes tents) where children or young people are brought together to live in shared community life spaces for given periods of time, whether as refugees of war, poverty, disease, abuse, famine or natural disaster.

Residential Child and Youth Care in a Developing World represents a unique comparative research effort in its time and place with 69 contributors already submitted from 62 countries where care has received limited attention in the literature. FIFA world regions have been used to group contributions for publication purposes. Each contribution builds on an historic legacy of story-telling about child and youth care practices in different places, by different peoples. An overwhelming response has already yielded a diverse and unique range of stories about triumph and turbulence in the provision of residential care and education for children world-wide.

Volume 1 – Residential Child and Youth Care in a Developing World: Global Perspectives (December 2015)
Volume 2 – Residential Child and Youth Care in a Developing World: Asian and Middle East Perspectives (February 2016)
Volume 3 – Residential Child and Youth Care in a Developing World: African Perspectives (April 2016)
Volume 4 – Residential Child and Youth Care in a Developing World: European Perspectives June 2016

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A child rights-based approach in child and youth care practice at the community level

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Why and how are children’s rights pertinent to serving children, their families and your community-based work? This article provides some answers to these questions, identifies how child rights can support your work and suggests how you can promote and protect these rights in your child and youth care work at the community level.

Children’s Rights: What Are They?

Children’s rights are not just about meeting children’s needs nor are they only a legal concern that preoccupies lawyers. Children’s rights are outlined in international human rights law and are central to influencing not only the political, economic, social and inter-personal spheres in society but also understanding, attitudes, and behaviour and advancing respect of children.1 As three twelve year-olds articulate, children’s rights are necessary because “Adults have power over children. Children aren’t as respected.”2

Children’s rights focus on relationships between individuals.3 Through your dedication to people in the community, children’s rights can and should inform and guide your efforts with the young people and families you serve. Human (including


child) rights have inspired actors, as one academic explains, to: “set priorities, define meaning, make rights demands, and bargain from a place of greater strength than would have been the case in the absence of their government’s treaty commitments.” It is important to dispel myths about children’s rights, such as:

- **MYTH:** Children’s rights are “not my responsibility”, “not my job” and are not relevant
- **REALITY:** If you are concerned about children and families, they are significant.
- **MYTH:** Children’s rights are too complicated or are legal concerns
- **REALITY:** Children’s rights relate to all of our efforts with children and their families.
- **MYTH:** Community workers have no control over families’ situations
- **REALITY:** Children’s rights challenge this conclusion about roles and responsibilities. We all have roles to play.

Therefore, children’s rights can inform the goals of community-based work whether, as examples, you are working to ensure adequate nutrition of children or develop to their full potential in the school classroom or residential program.

**The Child Rights-Based Approach (CRBA)**

Children’s rights can inform your work through a child rights-based approach (CRBA). This approach is founded on international human rights treaties that outline that there are rights holders and duty-bearers; and human rights involve three types of obligations: they should be respected, protected and fulfilled. This distinction is important because one young person highlighted that: “It teaches us about what we should be receiving, but not necessarily what we are receiving.”

In essence, a CRBA means that child rights should be implemented and the status of these rights should be regularly monitored in order to assess the situation and ensure progress of child rights.

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CRBAs, Children and Community Level Work

Children’s rights provide a useful framework through a CRBA to inform why we are concerned with young people and how we address issues in communities. Children’s rights are important, as some young people described: “I think that young people in Canada do not have enough rights because everything seems to be spoken for us and not having anything to do with us”;

“Childhood is a big step in a person’s life. If they don’t feel important, that’s what they will carry with them for the rest of their life.”; and “I have the right ... to be treated like a human.”

So whether you run or support a mentoring or mental health program, contribute to a residential or treatment facility, or support young people in a school, hospital or criminal justice institution, children’s rights are relevant to the field of Child and Youth Care.

How to practice a CRBA at community level

There are several ways that you can practice a CRBA at the community level. Some areas include:

Personal orientation: The rationale and commitment required of a CRBA inform the why and how of what you are doing in the community.

Inter-personal communications: In your words and attitudes, how do you relate to others about young people? Do you use child rights-based language in practice?

Writing Funding Proposals: When identifying your priorities and requests, how do children’s rights guide your efforts? For instance, while it is common to write “children are our future” in proposal rationales, using this language may result in your proposed activity being passed over in preference for projects that explicitly address the more urgent demands of the present. Using child rights-based language

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will emphasize that children are human beings whose requirements for development and support cannot and should not be postponed by government or others. In addition, do your proposals highlight the role and importance of monitoring and evaluating efforts to ensure progress not only of your specific project or program but also for the rights of children, with consideration to various groups and individuals who may be marginalized, over time in the community?

**Programming:** A CRBA influences not only project objectives but the process of developing, implementing and assessing work. For instance, do young people have a role in program dimensions such as project administrative structure, processes and results?

**Awareness-raising efforts:** How do your efforts highlight your work in relation to the importance of children’s rights?

In relation to these and other community-based efforts, it is important to give attention to the children, their families, systemic issues and the context, rights-holders and duty-bearers.

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**Some Considerations for Practicing a CRBA in Community-Based Work**

The general principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)\(^\text{12}\), namely non-discrimination, best interests of the child, maximum survival and development, and view of the child (articles 2, 3, 6, and 12 respectively), can provide a valuable framework to support a CRBA approach. In addition to other child rights instruments at regional and international levels, as described below, other CRC provisions can also be useful to community work.

**Non-discrimination:** Community work must address the needs of marginalized and vulnerable individuals and groups. When consulted, young people outline: “Inclusivity is about recognizing that each individual is a person, no less, no more than anyone else”; and “You can’t be engaged when you are excluded.”\(^\text{13}\) For instance, how do your community-based efforts concern indigenous children or new immigrant or refugee families or young people who are deaf or hard of hearing?\(^\text{14}\)

It is important that we critically examine how we define program success. From a rights-based perspective, we can only

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\(^{13}\) cited in Landon Pearson Resource Centre, *Shaking the Movers III*, 16, 19 respectively.

have true success when 100% of the population can benefit from our community efforts. We should not be satisfied with less. Narrow program outcomes are not the only markers of success, nor should they be viewed in isolation.

You can rely on other CRC provisions to support your understanding, demands for support and your CRBA work. For example, articles 22 and 23 on the rights of refugee children and children with disabilities respectively can be helpful to elaborate how and why we should respond to the particular issues faced by these populations of children and their families.

**Best Interests of the Child:** The principle of the best interests in a CRBA does not mean that adults only decide what is best for a child. Rather it means that our community-based efforts should focus on the child rather than the problem or issue of concern. For instance, it is all too common in policy and program efforts to focus on the problem of obesity, on the “poor” or poverty, or on illiteracy. But this approach is limited, disguising who should be the focus of our efforts. The person or people who are affected by the particular issue and their human rights should inform our understanding of their realities and their priorities. Children and their families should be understood and referred to as participants not “victims”, “recipients” or file numbers. Young people who were consulted are very clear:

“We are focusing too much on the wrongs, on punishments and consequences, and not enough on the rights.”

“Childhood is a big step in a person’s life. If they don’t feel important, that’s what they will carry with them for the rest of their life.”

**Maximum Survival and Development:** The principle of maximum survival and development requires duty-bearers to foster development over time and not view young people as static. For example, mentoring programs including Big Brothers, Big Sisters can be very important in the lives of young people and their adult supports.

**Child Participation:** Child participation requires respect for child and youth participation/engagement in community work. For example, youth can be involved in project management and evaluation by being trained to be peer mentors or project implementers. There are numerous ways that young people can and should be meaningfully involved in community-based work.

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15 cited in Landon Pearson Resource Centre, *Shaking the Movers III*, 20 and 24 respectively
Conclusion

When considering the essential question – what relationship does the community and its members want with children? – it is important to remember, as one young person expressed, “The way a child is treated by a society is an indication of what that society is all about.”

It is essential to realize that we all have a part to play! Child rights and a CRBA are relevant to child and youth care and to your efforts because, as one young person explained, “When you learn about rights, you learn that they apply outside of school as well, in the home or on the street.”

Therefore, a CRBA should be explored, developed and advanced by us all in order to influence all child and youth care work in the community.


This article is based on the author’s presentation in March 2015 to the Family Resource Programs of Canada 2015 conference in Hamilton, Canada.

Many thanks to Rebecca Balcerzak for her valued editorial support.


At a recent staff and foster carer consultation day, one of the workers from a residential programme stated, ‘I am so exasperated with the whole system I think I might just pack it in ... I don’t know if I have much left in the tank’. This comment was picked up by one of the foster carers, ‘I’ve been there for years, I think I’m burnt-out’.

As facilitator of this group the author was somewhat taken-aback; here is a representative group of carers from both residential and foster care and the direction of the conversation became one of frustration and loss of hope. The group was asked (by a show of hands) how many had experienced similar feelings over recent times and the response was about 80% of the group had had similar experiences and shared similar feelings. The group were then asked for other words to describe these feelings.

The list noted over the page, we are sure, described feelings that many carers experience from time to time. However the difficulties here seemed more complex and messy for the group, so further exploration was undertaken and the group helped pin-point a few themes.

• Dealing with challenging behaviour of young people seemed perpetual and consequently felt to many as “draining and exhausting” as it used up their energy and inner-resources
• Despite really ‘wanting to be caring’, a sense of despondency filled their interactions and as carers they had lots of...
self doubt, based on perceived ‘lack of progress’ by the young people

- The demands of agency and ‘society’ with regards to their roles felt unrealistic and seemed too ‘far-reaching’, a feeling that they carried the responsibility to make things better, without the power or resources to make a real difference

- They were personally affected (emotionally) by children’s trauma; the horror stories that these young people had to tell about their lives (the abuse, neglect and rejection they had suffered).

Of course the information gathered in this session was impromptu; it was not official research and was done without any ethic approval or as part of any particular study. It was really information that ‘fell out’ of an organic discussion, and therefore comes with many ‘health warning’ about the drawing of widespread conclusions. However what this Vox Pop did was to open the authors eyes to the level of ‘exasperation’ that existed within the caring profession and that how when a conversation like this ignites, that many begin to feel safe enough to share their own concerns, worries and anxieties.

What’s in a word?

When the authors came to discuss this ‘happening’ with each other, the question was asked, ‘but what did that first person mean by exasperated, ‘did you explore this with them’, the other asked. Good point! The answer was that this term was not interrogated, and that would have been helpful. Taking to the books and on-line dictionaries we find that a definition for this word is set out as something along the lines of, ‘the state of being very annoyed or upset’. Both authors thought were of the opinion that to them a definition of this word should also include some element of FRUSTRATION. Of course some folks may agree with this and others may not. It does though open the door to setting out a common understanding of the words we use to articulate concern. When talked through a little more, the authors came quickly to the conclusion (not surprisingly) that the issues to which these words, terms and emotions most likely referred were the concepts of Vicarious Trauma and Compassion Fatigue – all too often intruding into the reality of truly empathic and loving carers.

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1 Merriam-Webster Online. Retrieved on 19th January 2015 from (n/d)
http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/exasperation
I'm all done caring

Figley (1995) described the concept of Compassion Fatigue as the cost of caring, characterised by a deep physical and emotional exhaustion, where there was a significant disruption to the carers ability to be and remain, empathic. Later, in 2009, Austin et. al. (examining this concept within the nursing profession) believed it occurred where nurses felt they were distancing themselves from their patients; they also described having a pessimistic view of the future, as it related to their patients. Loss of empathy or the ability to be empathic was seen to be at the core. Various factors that can impact on ones’ ability to be and remain empathic have been categorised into three groups, thus showing the complex nature of this concept:

• Caring
• Systems
• and own person issues (Yoder, 2010).

Portnoy (2011) went a step further, saying, ‘Compassion fatigue is actually caused by empathy itself ... it being the natural consequence of stress resulting from caring for and helping traumatized or suffering people’. In this comment it is almost suggested that it may be inevitable that we will all suffer from it from time to time. This may be a stretch, but the authors can certainly both report occasions that they were most certainly dipping their toes into this realm.

What's yours is mine!

There are some writers who refer to compassion fatigue and vicarious trauma as the same thing. The authors believe that these terms certainly “talk to each other” but that compassion fatigue is more about the principles associated with ‘burn-out’ and a manifestation of cynicism that percolates interactions, interventions and engagement with the pain of others. However, where many factors come together to create compassion fatigue, vicarious trauma seems a much more specific problem.

Vicarious trauma refers more to how a carer can actually become traumatised themselves when they are exposed to the trauma that has been inflicted on the youngsters for whom they care. Exposure to pain comes through reading case reports; discussion with the youngster; at times when the young person discloses some new or as yet unrecorded trauma event; or any other occasion when one is exposed to the emotionally concerning events the youngster was exposed to or had inflicted on them.

It also comes about as carers are exposed to how a youngster’s trauma is acted out.

Bell (1998) for example quoted a carer as stating, ‘Sometimes after a session, I will be traumatized ... I will feel overwhelmed ... I remember just feeling almost contaminated, like, you know, like I was abused’. Vicarious trauma therefore can become a contributing factor to compassion fatigue, and it seems the more one is predisposed
to care for others (the more empathic one is), the more susceptible they are suffering from vicarious trauma.

Whether this ‘emotional contagion’ is related to the number or quality of Mirror Neurons and Spindle Neurons individual carers have, or something about hormones and brain chemistry, we expect that only time (and loads of neurological research) will discover. But the authors certainly believe that there is some ‘pre-programming’ of the caring brain OR some ‘inclination’ at play. This ability to feel the emotion of others must be welcomed because it speaks to the predisposition to be a kind and kindred soul. However, it seems that we can become overload and any internal ‘trip switch’ may become ineffective.

**What’s to do?**

If we can recognise that the driving forces behind many of the comments and articulation of feeling by the group of carers mentioned in the opening paragraphs may relate to Compassion Fatigue and Vicarious Trauma, what can be offered by way of help, support, mitigation or remedy? Well, Abu-Bader (2000) put forward a list of protective factors against such ‘burn-out’. These included:

(i) ensuring good relationships among colleagues,
(ii) seeking & receiving additional ‘supervision’, and support, and
(iii) finding opportunities to be recognised and valued (such as promotion).

Mathieu (2007) proposed a two-pronged approach; (i) the organisational strategy and (ii) the personal strategy. Mathieu believed that by openly discussing and recognizing such ‘burn-out’ possibilities as occurring within the workplace (or foster or residential environments, as in this case), this can assist helpers come to understanding that this is common and reasonable and with proper support can prevent people feeling over-whelmed and impotent in their interventions.

Supports within the work or care ecology can include developing a supportive environment that encourages debriefing, breaks and peer support. From a personal standpoint, improving self-care is one of the primary factors each author uses in preventing compassion fatigue. Where this may seem obvious it is also the case that many carers put their own needs behind those of others and actually feel guilty for thinking about minding themselves.

Mathieu (ibid) proposes that carers should:

- Take time out of their busy schedules (to exercise, meditate or have a massage)
- Carefully and honestly assess their life

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situation and ensure a balance between nourishing and depleting activities in their lives

• Have other interests
• Recognise that care work is highly specialised and their personal lives must reflect this by having some avenue for switch off and emotional re-nourishment.

In essence, we need to have inbuilt systems to care for the carers.

In Closing
As the consultation session (above) with the workers and foster carers drew to a close, having taken this considerable tangent, the author who had been facilitating asked each participant to make a closing remark on the session. It was astounding and amazing to hear many of the responses, which spoke to the importance of recognising their own value, of having more information on the prevalence of such feeling and on the value of taking time out. Responses included:

• ‘you know what, just talking with you all about how I feel has given me a bit of hope, I was worried this was all about me being a bad person ... now I know that it’s normal I actually feel energised’,
• ‘it was great to chat about this, I actually think that this was just what I needed – crazy how such a short few hours can undo all the uselessness I have felt’,
• ‘thanks everyone, any chance we can make this a regular thing ... like a sort of support group’.

Having been heard and more importantly acknowledged it seemed like some form of emotional replenishment had begun and the task seemed for many to be not so insurmountable. Perhaps by listening and acknowledging we can all move forward from exasperation and inclination to a place of ‘exasperation and inspiration’!

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What have I been missing?

Thirteen years of Relational Child & Youth Care Practice have passed since the change from the Journal of Child and Youth Care in Volume 16.

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History was the first song recorded live in space. Canadian astronaut Chris Hadfield performed Space Oddity by David Bowie from the International Space Station. As the world learned of the passing of David Bowie over the past few days, tributes sprung from around the globe.

What is it that is meaningful about the passing of someone from this life? There is the loss. It is so final. There is also a sense of the person’s message, contribution and life work now marked complete. Nothing more to be added or detracted. Just there for the world to appreciate and interpret. Bowie’s life ended too soon with horrible cancer at age 69. Hadfield describes it with these words:

*It leaves me and, I suspect, millions around the world, with an instant feeling of loss and emptiness — and yet also a wistful joy, a sense of how creative and inspirational just one of us can be. His art defined an image of outer space, inner self, and a rapidly changing world for a generation finding themselves at the confluence.* (Lyengar, 2016)
Bowie liked to think of himself foremost as a writer and a performer. He was an innovative leader and influencer. Watch any of the interviews with him and it’s clear that he had a talent to listen to people. He seemed to authentically care about others. He was, as many of us, unsure of himself in his early career, but became more and more comfortable being himself over time. He had a strong poise and authenticity. His career was full of human creativity and talent.

There is something about Bowie’s contribution to the world that resonates with effective child and youth care practice. Follow along with me through a few thoughts and see if you agree.

In a 1983 interview with MTV Bowie, with tact and humility, challenges a head of the corporation about their lack of inclusion of black musicians in the station programming. He skillfully guides the interview to a startling moment where the interviewee describes that black artists are not what middle America wants to hear and that black artists create fear in others. It is scary to see such racism and unfounded fear in a land that should be one of the most diverse and welcoming in the world. (If you haven’t seen it, watch the interview at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XZGiVzl8Qg.)

Backing up his advocacy in the interview is his work alongside Gail Ann Dorsey. She started playing guitar at age nine and bass at age fourteen (quite a reminder that trying out different talents in adolescent years can shape a child’s future). She became a session artist and member of Bowie’s band playing the bass and backup vocals. My favorite performance of the two together is the 2003 tour in Dublin (watch it at https://vimeo.com/63826209). Bowie gracefully shares the spotlight with a talented colleague and enjoys letting her skill and strength be seen by the world.

The world is not always the way we would hope nor is reality always the way we interpret it. Bowie’s Under Pressure looks for “something better, something grander, something that transcends what it is. And you can hear it in their vocals [and in the] plea and a surrender…the world becomes a little clearer, a little less lonely. And you’re a little less afraid to be yourself.” (Alex Abad-Santos, 2016).

The working title of this collaboration between Bowie and Queen was People on Streets (May, 2016). They were hanging out together each writing various pieces and music, lyrics, and connecting them together. Here’s how the moment came
together in Bowie’s words:

The song was written from the ground up on the night I visited their studio. I believe the riff had already been written by Freddie and the others so then we jointly put together the different chord sections to make it a cohesive piece of music. Then Freddie and I came up with our individual top line melodies. So when you hear Freddie sing, that’s what he wrote and when you hear me sing, that was mine. Then we worked on the lyrics together. I still cannot believe that we had the whole thing written and recorded in one evening flat. Quite a feat for what is actually a fairly complicated song.

(Bowie talks about Under Pressure, 2004)

This collaboration mirrors how creativity takes shape through the exchange of connections and relationships in child and youth care. You create something, I respond with something else, and together we create a new way of being, interpreting, or doing. When I hear the scat lines in the song it reminds me of the improvisation and collaboration inherent in our work. Empathy for others facing difficulty and the stressors of life is also clear in the song:

Pressure pushing down on me
Pressing down on you
No man ask for
Under pressure
That burns a building down
Splits a family in two
Puts people on streets

In child and youth care we see the outcomes of those under pressure. Troubled neighborhoods, suicides, torn families, young people with no hope. The song laments the truth that no one asks for the struggles that cause these things. There is also a deeper empathy and shared feelings we have when others suffer:

It’s the terror of knowing
What this world is about
Watching some good friends
Screaming let me out!
Pray tomorrow takes me higher
Pressure on people
People on streets

I think of the many long days and late nights with others as they suffered through losses of physical pains. Some we know scream loudly and others scream quietly inside. The first step toward helping is noticing their pain and reaching out to connect with empathy.

But many in the world look away from...
those in pain with denial. In a way that’s partly why child and youth care will always exist - there will always be people in the world struggling and in pain. Some communities and systems fail to acknowledge that people in pain live among them. The song echoes the voice of those holding on to their stance of indifference:

> Turned away from it all  
> Like a blind man  
> Sat on a fence but it don’t work  
> Keep coming up with love  
> But it’s so slashed and torn

And love emerges in a flower of hope. Love is essential for those working with today’s young people. It has been described as a characteristic of relational care (Garfat & Fulcher, 2012), as an anchor in our way of being with others (Freeman & Garfat, 2014) and as a pre-requisite for healthy development (Smith, 2006). It is something difficult to measure, yet essential to quality care.

> ... love dares you to care  
> For people on the edge of the night  
> And love dares you to change our way  
> Of caring about ourselves  
> This is our last dance  
> This is ourselves under pressure

This is our calling. To share the pressure of young people suffering under the weight of our world and its demands. To love them daringly even when they are difficult to love. To change the way we care about ourselves. And we must do it as if it is our last dance. This is us under pressure.

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The New Year is beginning to unfold and many of us may have thought about, or chosen, goals or resolutions to address throughout this evolving year. As this is the case, I want to spend some time on the topic of self-care as these goals may be linked to this area of personal and professional practice. So what is effective self-care? I tell students each year that self-care means much more than just bubble baths and candles. Effective self-care requires the development of a keen sense of self-awareness so that we are attuned to our needs, as they occur in our daily experience.

Just as the word suggests, self-care is about looking after ourselves. However if we do not know ourselves (who we are both inside and out, our needs, priorities, etc.), and how we relate to others and the world, then taking care of ourselves may prove to be difficult. Whitehead (1984) addresses many factors practitioners should consider when thinking about how to take care of self, one of which is self-awareness. When we incorporate self-awareness as a core component of self-care, it supports reflexivity within our whole lives beyond our specific practice situations.

So then how might we increase self-awareness? Some of us may find it hard to identify when we are struggling with something and how to address it even after we have noticed it. A rule of thumb for myself is that if something continues to pop up in my mind, then it is something that I need to address. Or on the other side, if there is a feeling that has been coming up time and time again, then it begs me to spend some time processing this feeling. For example, if I have been thinking about a relationship time and time again, then I know that I have to take some time on that particular relationship to identify the concern, and then how to address the concern. This is useful both for personal and professional experiences.

There are also many ways that we can ‘think’ about and interpret our internal experiences. I am not sure about you, but I can sometimes find myself stuck on a couch thinking for an hour or more about something! And then, all of a sudden, I realize I am hungry and I still have to make dinner! Never fear, combining a ‘doing’ activity and ‘thinking’ is actually beneficial. Many writers, scientists and philosophers through the ages have used walking as a tool to help them work through problems. A 2010 study found improved cognitive functioning when participants walked at a preferred pace (Schaefer, Lovden,
Wieckhorst & Lindenberger). We can assume that combining cognitive & sensorimotor tasks (at a pace that is manageable and controlled by yourself) may actually improve cognitive functioning. So by engaging in an enjoyable activity as we process a particular issue or topic we support not only our own self-awareness and problem-solving, but also holistic wellbeing!

As we begin to paint our own pictures of 2016, let’s be sure we are noticing our needs and responding to them as they come up. To promote self-awareness we begin by noting enjoyable activities and use these activities as tools to help us process thoughts and feelings. So with that, I am off for a walk!

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I’ve been thinking about the relationship between assessment, uncertainty and confidence lately. This has been prompted by presentations last week in which students used developmental theory to deepen their understanding and inform their assessment of a child or young person with whom they work. For some, this was experienced as a tall order. To do this presentation well, students had to demonstrate not only an understanding of at least some key aspects of two theories of child development, they also had to apply them to the child in a way that yielded potential insights, deeper understanding and identification of possible need. Finally, they needed to engage critically with the limitations of developmental theories and their sometimes oppressive application.

At the same time, developmentally informed understandings and assessments should be a part of practitioners’ everyday thinking. If we are to meet children where they’re at, we need to understand where they’re at. Knowing a bit about development and the impact of abuse, neglect, deprivation and other forms of trauma are key ingredients in such understanding.

It has been a long journey in developing this module (class) in such a way that most students emerge with an expanded and more nuanced understanding of developmentally informed assessment. When I first started teaching it, many of the students struggled to have the confidence to own their own assessment. For some, assessments were something that the experts did: the educational psychologists, the field social workers, the psychiatrists or the other mental health experts that sometimes briefly touched down into the life-spaces of the children and young people they cared for. It wasn’t that they weren’t doing their own assessments, but for many, these assessments remained tacit and what informed them was unarticulated and often obscure. It is also the case that professionals from other disciplines don’t always value the assessments made by front-line practitioners. This is further exacerbated when practitioners are less confident or clear about what those assessments are and what has informed them. Yet the amount of time front-line practitioners have to observe their young charges and elicit their involvement in the process of assessment is unparalleled by
any other professional. This is why it is so important that they have a firm knowledge base and skill set to confidently articulate their contribution to the assessment process.

And yet, one of the things we stress on this module is an appreciation of uncertainty. No one wants to feel pinned down by another's assessment of them, and this can happen as a result of too much certainty. Our own impressions, gut feelings, theoretically informed assessments and even factual information about a young person can sometimes simply be wrong. Background reports can (and often do) contain inaccuracies and biases that present a misleading account of a child's or family's history. Much of our application of developmental theory requires consideration of the impact of early childhood experiences, and we can never be absolutely sure of exactly what happened in the past, what the impacts were and how are influencing a child currently. There are too many unknowns and other variables. Just as important is that people change. If our assessments are not living, growing things (just like the children and young people we work with), they will quickly become inaccurate (assuming they were accurate to begin with).

So students are strongly encouraged to be open and tentative in their use of language when considering what may or may not have happened in the past, possible related impacts, or how a child may be experiencing the world currently. Nevertheless, absolute language still slips in despite their and our best efforts. Jonny's needs in early childhood weren’t met; his mum chose drugs and a chaotic lifestyle over him; Jonny sees himself as worthless; Jonny now has an anxious-ambivalent attachment organisation. While this is a simplified version, it offers illustration of the types of language, and therefore thinking, that can interfere with rather than improve genuine understanding of the child, his family and his world. And this is most importantly about thinking. The language we use reflects the way we think and it reinforces the way we think. So taking the time to notice and reflect on how we speak about the kids and families we work with, and to make adjustments, is not an exercise in pedantry. It’s an exercise in attentive open-mindedness.

This, then, brings me back to what a tall order we have made of our students. We are encouraging them to become more informed and confident in articulating their assessments, while at the same time asking them to stay grounded in relevant uncertainties and use language in a way that reflects them. Perhaps what makes this es-
pecially difficult is that uncertainty is often association with weakness; to be confident and uncertain, then, will seem like a contradiction.

Yet not knowing is not only okay, it is unavoidable. An inability to tolerate not knowing (and its counterpart, uncertainty) leads to false certainty, which limits or even distorts our perception and understanding. I propose that it takes strength be clear about what one knows, remain open to what one doesn’t know, and still offer an informed assessment of what is needed. To do this well requires confidence. It also requires a good deal of reflection, both on one’s self and on one’s wider environment. And it takes practice, which is why we asked this of our students.

Anyway, until next time…

* I found Ricks and Bellefeuille’s exploration of knowing is interesting and helpful, and I’m sure it shaped my thinking in developing this module. You can read an excerpt on CYC-Net here.

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In the end, Vera always comes back to the same topic: her children. There are three girls and three boys in her SOS family at present; four of them are natural siblings. These four have an older sister, who is already married and the mother of one child. So, as Vera proudly tells us, she is already a grandmother.

Vera would like to continue working as an SOS mother for many years. She has already informed the village administration that she would like to take in two more children, because her eldest, Sascha, will also soon be standing on his own two feet. What does Vera worry about when she thinks about her future? “How to manage the transition from the extreme-profession of an SOS mother to the life of a pensioner?” she replies thoughtfully. Now she is busy with her children around the clock - then suddenly a life of retirement,
with none of the commotion? But maybe things will turn out differently. “Who knows, perhaps I’ll marry a nice old man, so that I don’t get bored!” she laughs. About one thing she is sure, and that is that she wants to remain in touch with all her children, and her “grandchildren” too, of course.

The Story of Her Life

“If somebody asks for my help, I help them.”

I was born in Moscow on the 28th of April 1958. My father was a car mechanic and my mother worked in a drawing office. My father’s mother had a big family. There were at least ten children. They weren’t rich, but the atmosphere in this huge family was always warm, and that was the most important thing.

After primary school I went to a technical school and afterwards studied applied mathematics. After that I worked in various drawing offices. My mother fell ill in the early 1990’s, and that was a difficult time. I had a second job, working for the underground, often at nights, to earn some extra money. Thank God my mother recovered. She’s now eighty-six years old. I have a brother who lives with my mother and helps her. Then came the reforms and I, like many others, lost my job. After that I sold computers for a private company.

I was married for nine years. My hus-
band was the first man in my life. I was his so-called “girl” and waited for him to come out of the army. We got divorced twelve years ago, because he drank. I tried to stop him from drinking, but he lacked the strength of character. He’s a good man, but he’s weak. He calls me now and again, on my birthday for instance, but we don’t have a close relationship. He has a wonderful family. I still get on well with his parents. They bring us fruit from their garden and presents for the children. We visit them too, and I call them mum and dad.

Is your father still alive?
My father died in 1980. I do have a lot of relations, though. They know my children and visit me here. A lot of them work in the educational field. I originally wanted to work in a primary school. Even when I was still quite little, I loved children. I used to play with them and organised a sort of school in our backyard. I always played the teacher and I really enjoyed that. However, my teacher recommended that I study mathematics, so I became a mathematician.

Do you have a good friend that you can talk to?
Yes, there’s another SOS mother with whom I’m very friendly. I have another friend and we have been friends for twenty years. I tell her my problems and we support each other. She has her own family and we relax together every summer. Sometimes they visit us here in the village and other times they invite us to their house.

Whom do you include in your family?
My mother, my brother and my children here in the SOS Children’s Village; and my father. Even though he has been dead for a long time, I still feel very close to him. I talk to him in my thoughts and I take the children to visit his grave. They know that their grandfather is buried there.

Is there a person who you consider to be a role-model?
I had an aunt who was a paragon of virtue. She was patient and never lost heart, despite all the difficulties she had in her marriage. She was also very warm towards other people. I try to be like her. My mother was also a role-model for me. She was patient, tolerant and forbearing. She always looked after everybody and was always there when she was needed. She never thought about herself and never went on holiday. We had a hard life. First we lived in a communal flat, everybody in one room. That was how it was in those days: because there were too few flats, seven or eight families would live together in one flat. Each family would have one or two rooms. We lived almost down in the cellar. Despite all that, my mother always found time for everybody. I see that as being selfless and a real way of life.

What do you consider to be your own greatest strengths?
I would like to be capable of being patient, so that I can help as many people as possible. I don’t know if it always works, but I try to live like that. My deepest wish is to be able to help these children, so that
they can have a normal family and find their feet in our society. Sometimes it happens to me that I lend somebody some money and never get it back, but that doesn’t worry me. I could never say no, if somebody asked me for something. There are, of course, some people who take advantage of you, but if somebody asks for my help, I help them. How can anybody say no, if somebody is begging you? I can’t.

*Has there been a particularly good moment and a particularly hard one in your life?*

The worst thing that happened to me in my life was the death of my father. And the best thing has been that I can live here, in this house with these children. I thank fate, God and also Hermann Gmeiner that women like me can find themselves here. I think the greatest joy in life, for me, is seeing how our children develop. To begin with they are totally withdrawn, afraid and can’t believe that anything good is going to happen to them here. They think that they are totally lost in this world. But the children begin slowly, step by step, to open up like flowers. They blossom from the warmth, the mother, the love, the house, the surroundings and the brothers and sisters. They become entirely different people. Of course, it doesn’t always run that smoothly, because each child has its good and bad characteristics, but the positive side outweighs the rest.
What do you like to do in your free time?

I hardly have any free time, because I have a mother who is ill and I dedicate my spare time to her. I like to meet my friends in the few spare hours that I do have. I'm hardly ever on my own when I'm on holiday either. Last time little Wowa came with me, or I take three or four of the children to my friends who have a house on the Volga. To be quite honest, I never feel like going on my own. The children are totally different when they're on holiday. They have their family here with all their duties, such as school, cleaning-up, etc., but there they can really let off steam. We go for walks, go swimming, pick mushrooms, and we're happy there. It's not always like that at home, because the children have to do things they don't want to do, although they do make an effort to help me and are always happy if I'm smiling. They always want me to be in a good mood and try to make my life easier. I like to read occasionally, but not heavy literature. I like to read detective stories as a distraction.

Motivation for Her Choice of Profession

“My dream has always been to be surrounded by lots of children.”

One morning I was reading the newspaper on the underground. There was a short article with a brief questionnaire and the question: “Do you want to be an SOS mother?” I immediately bought an envelope, answered the questions and sent the form off. A few days later, I was invited to come in for an informative chat and was told all about Hermann Gmeiner and the SOS Children’s Village model. Everything I heard there was new to me. I couldn’t believe that such wonderful conditions were going to be created for our poor children, because I knew how badly-off our orphans were in the state-run orphanages. I thought it was probably all just advertising and far too good to be true. But my dream has always been to be surrounded by lots of children. That gave me the momentum I needed and it didn’t matter whether I believed it or not. I wanted to fulfil myself as a mother.

How did the people around you, your family and your friends, react to that?

To start with, everybody was restrained and careful. A lot of them thought, “You are going to give up your private life, and you want to live like a nun!” They thought I was going to live a typical life of sacrifice, and they felt sorry for me. But when my friends and relations saw me doing my training and then working the first year, they understood that it wasn’t the end of my private life, but a continuation of it. They see how I live, because our house is always open to them.

Experiences as an SOS Mother

“I really have become a mother.”

There were no children here at the very beginning. The houses had been com-
pleted, and we bought all the crockery, cutlery, curtains, sheets and carpets ourselves. All the SOS mothers made a great effort to furnish the children's rooms so that they would really like them. I had to wait a long time. After six months, all the other SOS mothers had children, but I still didn't. Their grandmother was in a quandary as to whether she really had to give up the children. I knew that this family ought to be coming to me, and I saw the children’s faces in my dreams. I nearly went out of my mind waiting for them.

Then the big moment came. The children were there. All five at once! The door opened and there they stood. The social worker introduced us, “Children, this is your mother. Mother, these are your children.” In the first instant, everything was new and everybody was scared. I can still remember how everything was reflected in those children’s eyes: fear and uncertainty, but most of all hope and willingness to love me. I could feel that. Yes, it’s a wonderful thing to be called “mother” or “mum”. It makes you so happy. The little ones called me mum right from the start. They wanted that and so did I. As soon as they had uttered that word, the healing process began. In the beginning, the children were afraid that they wouldn’t be allowed to stay very long. They tried hard to behave themselves and smiled all the time. We often sit together and look at the photos we took then, on the first day. They can remember exactly
how they called me mother that day. It was a big moment for them. In the early days, they never asked me what my expectations had been. It was only years later that they asked, “Mother, had you been waiting for us? Tell us what it was like!”

I have never asked them about their experiences and relationships within their natural families. I always thought that they would tell me if they wanted to, and if they didn’t, what was the point in asking them?

*How would you describe your tasks as an SOS mother to our readers?*

It is a profession where the prerequisite is a great love of children. It demands a lot of hard work and patience. In the early years, when the children are still too young to really be of much help, you have to do a lot of hard physical work. There’s the washing, the cooking and the housework to do. It does get easier with time, though. The children grow up and take the strain off the mother. All I did was iron for the first two years. In the last four years, though, I’ve forgotten what the ironing board looks like, because the children do it all themselves.

The children arrive without any positive experiences. You have to teach them the most basic rules, such as how to wash themselves. You have to do it all step by step, over the years, until they really can do everything. An SOS mother has to be a good practical teacher. She has to be able to do a lot of things well herself, because the children don’t have any other example to learn from. They come from institutions where everything was done for them and so they spend the first days and months just sitting there, waiting. Even a thirteen-year-old girl will just sit there and wait until the bread’s been cut and the plate arrives.

We also need to have a certain amount of psychological knowledge and ability, so that you can comprehend each child’s character and know how best to deal with them all. It is a profession where you constantly have to learn new things. The children get older and that creates more and more new tasks for the SOS mother.

I was afraid that my children might not accept me, because not all children can get used to the women in the role of their SOS mother. But it turned out differently, thank God. We were lucky.

*What have been the most important phases in your life as an SOS mother?*

One very important stage was when my eldest daughter, Lena, first called me mummy. I knew that she had been very close to her dead mother, so I had suggested that she call me Vera. I did hope, though, that she would start to call me mother at some stage. After four years, Sascha also called me mother for the first time. That moved me very deeply.

*Have you changed since you’ve been an SOS mother?*

The biggest change has been that I really have become a mother. That’s quite an adjustment. You live with the children and are there for them. My life has gained in value now. I know I need these children and that they need me. I miss them when...
we’re not together and they miss me. I can say, without a doubt, that I’m more self-confident now. It is important to be able to believe in your own strength and abilities, because bringing up children is an important matter. Before I was here, I’d sometimes be ill. Now I don’t have any time for that. If I have backache, I do some exercises for a couple of days and then the pain is gone. The children help you when you’re a little bit ill. They say, “Mother, please don’t be ill! What would you like? Some tea or honey? We’ll bring you some straight away.” And then, naturally, there’s the big question of the modern world: people’s loneliness. Loneliness is widespread in our society today, but here you can forget all that, once and for all. You are always in demand and there’s always somebody waiting for you. Loneliness, what’s that?

What is your working-relationship with the village director and the educational co-workers like?

I have got on well with the village director since the first day. He deals with every problem I have, or my children have, straight away. Of course, he has much wider horizons from his position and a lot of responsibility. We have seven or eight children in each family and have enough problems, but he has more than eighty children for whom he’s responsible. He has to give every child and every woman a piece of his heart, otherwise the whole
thing doesn’t work. I’m also very satisfied with the educational co-workers. They do a lot of things with our children, such as sport, taking them on walks and trips. They also offer extra lessons, which the children need, especially in the beginning, because the children are often under-developed when they arrive and a lot of hard work has to be done.

Everybody pulls together, especially the SOS aunts. I’m very close to the SOS aunt who helps our family. We see her as a sort of member of our family. She can sense when she can help, and I appreciate that very much. Sometimes I’m not entirely satisfied: if, for example, I come back from holiday and I see that she’s done something that I would have done differently. But it’s obvious that she’s a different person and doesn’t live in our house all the time. She’s probably not entirely happy with me all the time either, but we’ve never had a conflict. An SOS aunt here works in two family houses and so she gets to know the children. In the beginning, the SOS aunts weren’t given specific houses and it was a disaster. They didn’t take the individual situations in each family into account. There were a lot of misunderstandings and confusion, and they couldn’t get to know the children properly. The results are entirely different if an SOS aunt works with the same family for four or five years. It also means that the SOS mother is calm when she’s away, because she knows that the children are in good hands.

The individual work we do with the psychologists is another form of support. Some of the psychologists, those who have been here a long time, offer counselling for families or us women. I get on very well with one of the psychologists and, amongst other things, she has been showing me what I can do to save my energy. That’s a big help.

Tell us a little bit about your training to become an SOS mother.

It was very interesting and we learned a lot of new things. We weren’t educationalists and were supposed to learn everything about education, children’s health, psychology, running a household and many other subjects. I particularly enjoyed developmental psychology. We also played a lot of games, drew pictures and made Plasticine models. There was also a religious group. We met some interesting people and these meetings meant a lot to us. Of course, it was also an opportunity for us to get to know one another. We opened up during the psychology sessions and talked a lot about our own problems and histories.

The training lasted for about three months. At that time, there were no SOS Children’s Villages in Russia, so we had to do our practical training in the existing children’s homes. That was a great strain, because the children all hoped that one of us would take them with us. Their eyes beseeched us, “Will you take me with you?” It was a hard test.

What sort of in-service training do you get?

We call them round table discussions,
but they’re really educational lessons. Experts are invited to come and give us lectures on topics such as sexuality or healthy diets. The women say what would interest them, and the village director does his best to find the best specialists in those fields. We also pick up practical abilities, because we also do role-playing games, for example. First of all you think, “I have got more important things to do. One of the children is ill, there’s the housework to be done,” but after the session, you’re convinced that you’ve done something important for the family; you have increased your skills.

*Do you know what the four principles are?*

They are my life! Brothers and sisters, the house, the mother, the village, they are the be all and end all of our model and my existence, even the existence of all SOS mothers. I’m always telling my children, “You’re so lucky to be growing up here as brothers and sisters, because you’ll never be lonely. You will always have your SOS family.” It doesn’t matter whether they are natural brothers and sisters or not; here in the SOS Children’s Village, they have grown together. And, one day, after I’m long gone, what they have learned here will still continue for them.

*What do you associate with Hermann Gmeiner?*

I associate a love of children with his name. He is a great personality. Just realising his idea… he more or less started on his own. Now the organisation has been around for over fifty years. How many women and how many children have found joy in a family during this time? It’s quite amazing. I have great respect for this man.

*What do you like best about being an SOS mother and what do you like least about it?*

What I like best is that I’m not alone. I’m with the children. That fascinates me, even if I can’t always do what I’d like to. The most difficult thing is that some of the children don’t want to accept what I can give them. That is always disappointing, even though I understand that it isn’t a
question of their not wanting to, but more a question of them not being able to. That sometimes leaves a nasty taste behind, even though my reason shows me quite clearly: These children’s possibilities have been limited from the start by their backgrounds. We have to recognise that each of them has limits and not expect the same achievements from them all.

If you could change anything in the SOS Children’s Village, what would that be?

That’s difficult to say, because I have already changed anything that was in my power to change. Perhaps I would hope for an educator to be responsible for taking the children on walks, fishing or on trips. It would also be good if there were somebody here to teach the so-called men’s jobs. We have a village caretaker, but he doesn’t have enough time to teach all the children these skills, for example, how to repair things. It would be nice to have a small teaching workshop where these repairs could be made.

Have you ever compared your situation to that of a single mother outside the SOS Children’s Village?

Of course, I’ve often made the comparison and always thought, “Poor woman, who has to do it all on her own!” She doesn’t just have to bring up the children, but must also provide the material basis. We get everything from the organisation and are only here to look after the children and to bring them up. I thought about adopting a child before I came to the SOS Children’s Village. I would have been able to care for it materially, but how would it have worked? In the mornings I would have dropped the child off at the kindergarten and picked him up again in the evening when he was tired and drained. Neither the mother nor the children are happy under these circumstances, because then the children grow up like wild grasses.

How does the general public view the profession of an SOS mother?

Not everybody knows about it, but those who do approach us with great admiration. Some of them even treat you as a national heroine: “Seven, eight children! How do you manage that on your own?!” We were in a sanatorium near Moscow recently. Children from various children’s homes were being treated there. The staff were very surprised and thought that the difference between our children and those from the homes was like chalk and cheese. Neither would I ever dream of calling the SOS Children’s Village an institution. A lot of people ask, “It’s an institution, isn’t it?” I don’t say anything then, because I can’t explain it to them. We don’t see it as an institution. It’s home for us.

How do you see your situation in ten years’ time?

This is my life and I don’t see it changing, not even in ten years. I have got two spare places in this family and have already asked to be given new children. Many women of my age are worn out by life. I don’t know any woman who would still like to have an infant when she’s forty-four,
but I would like to take a baby in, because it gives so much joy. Those children who have already left this house will always remain my children. We will phone and visit one another and keep in touch. Who knows, perhaps I’ll marry a nice old man so that I don’t get bored?! I do have a boyfriend. That means that my femininity doesn’t have to be suppressed. We meet up occasionally and spend some time together. I don’t need any more than that, because I have too many responsibilities with my family. I’ve known this man for six years and he’s a good friend. We have a lovely relationship. On the one hand, he doesn’t put any pressure on me, and on the other, I don’t owe him anything. The children also know him.

The Children in Her Care

“I give them warmth and they give me warmth in return.”

Lena is the eldest and she has always been an independent girl. She’s also a good housewife. She’d only completed three years at school, because something had happened in her family. When she was thirteen-and-a-half she could neither speak properly nor write properly, and she couldn’t tell the time. I tried to help her. We would read, write and learn together. She worked hard and made huge improvements. She was lucky, because there was a Russian sponsor who organised a hair-
dressing apprenticeship for her. Now she has a career, a child and a lovely husband. And she has a good personality, so she has the best requirements for a good life. I hope she’s found happiness.

The second-eldest is Alexander - Sascha - and he’s seventeen. He’s good with his hands and can repair things like clocks and household items. I don’t know who taught him that. He’s already earning a bit of money by doing repairs and can contribute a little to our family income.

Vladima - big Wowa - is fifteen today. He’s kind and gentle and also needs a lot of gentleness. Sometimes he gets aggressive and then has a crisis. He’s sensitive and easily hurt, so he won’t have an easy life. You have to work hard with him, be gentle to him, and then he manages to stay well-balanced.

Nadja is fourteen years old and comes from the same family as Lena, Sascha, Alina and Jana. They all have the same mother, but different fathers. Nadja is a little delayed in her development. She sometimes has speech problems and is in a special class at school. She works hard and can’t understand why she finds everything at school so difficult. I’m sure she’ll be a wonderful mother. Everything will be spick and span in her house and the food will be lovely. A lot of men dream of finding a woman like her. I’m sure she’ll find happiness.

Alina is twelve. She’s also a good housewife. Alina is interested in everything and does a lot of sport. Her coach has said that she could become a top gymnast. Alina is also good at organising things. She put on a play by herself and can get up in front of any audience. Alina is jealous. Then I tell her, “How do you think you’ll be able to live together with a man if you’re so jealous? You’ll have to change, or else you’ll find it very difficult.”

Jana is ten and the youngest in this family. She’s also good-hearted, loves animals and is very gentle. She’s also a bit reserved and insecure. She’s on regular medication, because she’s a little delayed in her development. She’s not very fond of housework,
personal hygiene or anything like that, and doesn’t seem to be interested in changing that. I hope that if anything happens to me, her older sisters will look after her. However, even Jana has made incredible progress over the last six years.

Edik-Eduard comes from a different family. He’s also reserved, introverted and not always honest. He often twists the facts to give somebody else the blame. But he is gentle too. If he does the housework, he cleans everything so that it shines. If he does the washing-up, he puts everything back differently; he enjoys improvisation and he has a vivid imagination.

Wowa is four-and-a-half. He’s the youngest and the family favourite. Everybody spoils him, and they all want to do things with him or play with him. He came to us when he was one year old and was very weak. He weighed seven kilos and could hardly lift his head. This metamorphosis from a terribly weak child happened in front of the children’s eyes and, of course, they are very happy that he’s developed so well. All the children were given a little brother and they all understand that he has nobody but us. Everybody has had a part in his development, and that’s what makes him so valuable for us all. Each of the children has had an influence on him, has taught him one thing or another, and that has developed their own importance and roles. It’s obvious that when Jana takes him for a walk on her arm, she feels responsible for him and that increases her self-esteem. She feels, “I’m older and I can take the responsibility.”

In general, all my children have health problems. They also have compassion for one another and share their troubles with me. Even if they argue occasionally, they are still a family. If they have been apart for a long time, they miss each other and look forward to seeing each other again. When visitors come and see how we live together, some say, “I’m going to send you my son or daughter, because they don’t do the things at home that your children do here.” We have a duty rota in our house, and whoever is on duty does all the main jobs in the house on that day. That means that each child has duty once a week. That’s how we’ve organised it.

**How do the children come to the SOS Children’s Village?**

Our village director shows us photographs of the child or children and tells us about their families. Their histories are practically always the same: they come from asocial or broken families. The children we take in are always badly traumatised; they have suffered a lot, even when they’re still very small. I’m given a bit of time to think about the information I’ve been given, and then I make the decision as to whether I’ll take the child or the children or not. As far as I know, no SOS mother has ever refused to take in a child.

**Are the children in touch with their families?**

Yes, they are in touch with their relatives. The grandmother of the five children used to visit them a lot when she was still fit. Now she’s had two strokes, and so the children visit her, help her with her house-
work and in the vegetable garden. The last time I saw their grandmother was last year. She trusts me and cried on my shoulder, thanking me for bringing up the children so well. I found that very moving.

Big Wowa also has a grandmother and an elder brother. His mother shows no interest in her son nor in our life. He was pushed into a home when he was just five years old. His grandmother visited him in the home, but she couldn’t take him in. She’s already seventy-five, but still comes here now and again. Otherwise we call her on the phone and Wowa visits her. I’m happy that there is contact and I’m also close to the grandmothers. They are simple people, but they are loving and take an interest in the children.

In Edik’s family only his grandmother is still alive. Both his parents died last year. His father used to visit him, but he was always drunk. I asked him not to come in that state. I also asked the administration not to let him into the village anymore if he was drunk. It was always a major drama for the poor boy. His mother came once in six years. She stopped at the entrance, took a photograph and that was all.

Little Wowa doesn’t have any relations. Three days after he was born, his mother fled the maternity ward in her dressing-gown and slippers. It was a so-called “express birth”. She came without her papers and gave a non-existent address.

How much contact is there with the neighbourhood of the SOS Children’s Village?

My children enjoy meeting people and they are members of various sport clubs. They go to different schools and have also made friends there. They visit their friends, or the friends come here. The children also see a lot of things outside the village. They see happy and unhappy marriages and they experience a lot too. Last year I did some repairs on my flat with some of my friends. The children helped. They also helped to renovate their grandmother’s room and learned how to lay tiles, do the plastering and hang wallpaper. These are all things they might need in life.

Do you have development planning?

Yes, we’ve had that programme since last year. Every SOS mother wrote a report about each of her children and this was discussed with everybody involved: the psychologists, the educators and the doctors. An evaluation was made to ascer-
tain the starting point, and then a plan was laid down as to what expectations could be made for the coming year as far as the child’s development is concerned. I think that it could be a valuable tool, because we now have clear goals to achieve.

**What would you like to give your children on their way?**

I hope that my girls will be good wives and mothers. They already practice for that in their games and when they are around small children. What specific things does a woman need to know for her family? That the house must be kept clean, that the child is looked after, and how to cook. If she can do all these things, then I’m happy, because I know she will achieve something in life. Of course, I also find it important that they learn a trade, even if it’s a very simple one. Our children aren’t very intellectual, as they don’t have the resources. I always say to them, “Let’s make plans for the future together. What do you want to do later in life?”

The boys should learn a trade, so that they can support their families. But, of course, it does no harm if they can do the basic things around the house either. All my boys can cook and they enjoy it. Some of them are more interested in technical things, though, like Sascha with his motor mechanics. He was always in the garage with the driver, looking at the engines. If he gets good at this, I’ll be happy, because you can earn good money as a motor mechanic here. I’ll also give him help with his maths, because I’m a qualified mathematician. Most of our SOS mothers come from technical trades. We have engineers, aero-plane engineers, etc. If one of the children really has the desire to learn more, then help will come from all the other SOS mothers.

If you think back over the years you have spent living with the children, has anything particularly good happened, or anything particularly hard?

There was one situation that I found difficult to cope with: Lena was thirteen-and-a-half when she came to us. Her older sister came to visit after about a year. I’d just gone on holiday for two days and only the SOS aunt was here. Neither sister came home all night. I was told about it, came back immediately and couldn’t sleep all night, because I was so worried. We eventually found them with the help of their elder brother. I was really cross with her and almost lost my mind with fear for her. So, we sat in her room. She was in one corner and I was in another. She didn’t know what to say and then we both started crying. We apologised to each other and cried again. That was a real moment of truth. Our relationship changed after that and we became much closer.

The happiest thing is probably what has become of little Wowa. When he came here, he was so weak that it was hard to imagine he’d ever be able to walk or talk. Now he can’t talk enough! But, as I said, all the children played a part in that. I give them warmth and they give me warmth in return. It always makes me happy when there’s a big event and they try to catch
my eye in the crowd. That can move you to tears. Or on my birthday: I hear a “knock, knock, knock” on my door early in the morning. I open the door and all the children are there with a little present for me. They have notes for me, postcards and pictures they’ve drawn themselves. They all hug me and congratulate me. Those are moments of pure happiness.

To My Colleagues Around the World

My warmest greetings go out to all my distant friends who are so close. I’m happy to be one of you. Perhaps you are tired today or perhaps you have not done everything you wanted to do. You plan the next day before you fall asleep: who has to be woken and when, who needs an extra pair of socks for kindergarten, what do you have to cook tomorrow, who has to go to the doctor, whose homework do you have to check, what fairytale will you tell before they go to sleep? It hardly seems possible to do all these things in one day, but I know that you will manage it, because you are strong. You will find a way out of the most difficult situation.

When you say goodnight to your children and give them a kiss, you are the happiest person on earth. You know that sometimes the impossible is possible, that your children are healthy, happy and will one day become good citizens of your country. You can’t imagine a life without
them any more, because you are so tied to each other. These three things - “belief, hope and love” - are the most important things for your life. Your children need you, they love you and they believe you. I wish you health and much patience.

**Vera on the Situation of Women in Russia**

A lot depends on material circumstances and, at the moment, the economic situation is far from easy. Generally, the women bear the largest load in the families here. It’s the Russian troika: three horses, and the one in the middle, the main horse, is a woman. She works more than her husband and very often earns more too, because she’s harder-working. She will always find a way to earn a bit extra, so that the children have everything they need. Most men are not as committed as women. The mother is just closer to the children than the father, and she usually organises their lives. She shows the children the dangers in life, explains to them that they will one day be fathers or mothers themselves and that when they start families, they will have to be able to support them. This is what society expects of women, and I agree with that.

My greatest wish would be for the state to make more provisions for women’s health. If the mother is healthy, she has more potential and can give more. The state should also care more about children’s health, because a child’s health is its mother’s joy. Not every family can afford decent medical treatment these days. For example, Nadja was mentally deficient, but after four years of treatment, she is well again. If she had stayed with her grandmother, her condition would have remained the same, because the family could not afford the treatment. The national budget is ever-deteriorating and many cuts are being made in the social sector. There

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**SOS Children’s Village Work in Russia**

The decision to build an SOS Children’s Village in Russia was made in 1989. However, as the original site did not fulfil the expectations, the plans had to be changed and a new site found. This took place in 1992. Construction work on SOS Children’s Village Tomilino, to the south of Moscow, began shortly after and was completed in 1995. Five more SOS Children’s Villages were built in the following years. They include youth programmes as well as SOS Social Centres and a programme supporting foster families.

**Existing SOS Children’s Village Facilities**

4 SOS Children’s Villages, 2 SOS Youth Facilities
are drugs which cost an average monthly wage. The doctors, therefore, prescribe cheap drugs, which are not bad but don’t really help much. Previously, a lot of the drugs for treating childhood illnesses were free, but not anymore.

In my opinion, if all women pull together, that creates a lot of energy. But day-to-day problems, especially material ones, can wear you down. Then the women no longer have the energy to fight for anything.

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**RUSSIA**

Area 17,075,400 km²
Population 145,542,000
Population density 8.5 per km²
Average number of children per woman 1.2 *
Life expectancy for women 72 *
Life expectancy for men 59 *
Infant mortality 1.8%
Illiteracy rate amongst women Below 5%
Illiteracy rate amongst men Below 5%

Percentage of population living below the poverty line 7.1%
Religions (the two most common) 24% Russian Orthodox, 13.7% Muslim
Languages Russian

GNP per capita USD 1660

Sources: Der Fischer Weltalmanach 2003; * WDI Database

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From: WOMEN’S LIVES: SOS MOTHERS AROUND THE WORLD TELL THEIR STORIES

Elisabeth Ullmann, Karin Demuth and Astrid Brandl. ISBN 3-9500984-3-7

All photos: Fred Einkemmer
Along came a Spider

Nils Ling

Last night I was called upon to be the Man of the House. It doesn’t happen very often.

I was downstairs, happily watching TV, when I heard my wife calling me. There was an urgency in her tone – my first thought was that there must be something dreadfully wrong. So, as soon as a commercial came on, I rushed up the stairs.

She was standing in the hall, her face white. She pointed towards the bathroom.

“Kill it,” she said. There was ice in her voice.

I didn’t have to ask what “it” was. My wife is a gentle person when it comes to all living things ... except spiders. She’s never met a spider she hasn’t had whacked. And – as the Man of the House – I’m the Lord High Executioner. It’s right there in the job description. The Man of the House – at least in our house – has three functions. “Take out garbage”, “Anything that involves a ladder”, and “Whack spiders”.

Taking out the garbage, I can put off for awhile. Most jobs are like that – if the bases are loaded in the bottom of the ninth with the score tied, they can wait. But not whacking spiders. It’s a “right now” kind of thing. You can read about the game in the paper tomorrow. Right now, roll that paper up, get your butt in there, and commence to whacking.

I’ve long since given up arguing the point. Logic doesn’t work when it comes to spiders. So I girded my loins – I think we all know how painful that can be – and went in to do battle.

My wife was right on my heels. She used to leave me alone for the dirty work, until one time I couldn’t find any spider so I just made some whacking sounds, and came out dusting off my hands. Then she slipped into the bath, only to have Mr. Spi-
der make a surprise encore appearance. She now insists on witnessing every execution.

The kids were curious, so they crowded in behind her. The dog, sensing there was something going on and hopeful it might involve food, wriggled in along the wall. I closed for the kill. I raised the newspaper over my head and brought it down. That's when all hell broke loose.

The thing was, I missed on the first whack. I blame the pressure of having an audience, or maybe the newspaper wasn't rolled tight enough. Doesn't matter. He darted past me, right at my wife.

She screamed – somewhere in Europe, dogs cocked their heads. Then she went straight up – like she was going to hang from the ceiling by her fingernails the way the cat does in the Bugs Bunny cartoons. Her panic scared the kids, who fell all over each other and the dog trying to get away. I kept on whacking, my wife kept on screaming, the kids were crying, and the dog started barking at the toilet paper.

I finally lunged past the dog and got the spider with a vicious final swing. Pretty much doubled his diameter, if you know what I mean. I scraped him off the editorial page, got up, dusted myself off, and went back to my TV program.

Once again, the Man of the House came through. I can relax – at least till this weekend. Then I've got a job that involves a ladder. I have to climb up and fill in those fingernail marks on the bathroom ceiling. First, though – I'll have to get my wife down.
Kia Ora and Warm Greetings everyone! And a Happy New Year to you – in case I’ve not already shared those greetings! Those of us living in the Southern Hemisphere have been following the news stories about plenty of snow, rain, tornados and wildfires that have been impacting the lives of family and friends – as with everyone else living in across the Northern Hemisphere. Here in New Zealand it is Summer; and that usually means family time, at the seaside or a lake where we live!

This year our clan travelled for a day trip to Auckland City Harbour from where we boarded a ferry for the trip to Rangitoto Island. This ancient volcano has been cleared of all introduced rodents and is now a bird sanctuary. Where there were once many ‘batches’ or holiday cabins erected around the island, now only 30 remain, managed with the historic places trust.

Wikipedia reports that the Rangitoto volcano erupted within the historical memory of the local Maori iwi or (tribes) ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rangitoto_Island](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rangitoto_Island)). Human footprints have been found between layers of Rangitoto volcanic ash on the adjoining Motutapu Island. Several Maori myths exist surrounding the island, including that of children of the Fire Gods, who, after quarrelling and cursing Mahuika, the fire-goddess, lost their home on the mainland because it was destroyed by
Mataoho, god of earthquakes and eruptions, on Mahuika’s behalf.

As happened elsewhere, the European settlers brought significant changes to Rangitoto and Motutapu Islands. Goats were introduced in large numbers in the mid 19th century, before being eradicated in the 1880s. Fallow deer were introduced to Motutapu in 1862 and spread to Rangitoto, but disappeared by the 1980s. The brush-tailed rock-wallaby was introduced to Motutapu in 1873, and was common on Rangitoto by 1912. The brushtail possum was introduced in 1931 and again in 1946. Both were eradicated in a campaign from 1990 to 1996 using poisons and dogs. Stoats, rabbits, mice, rats, cats and hedgehogs remained a problem on the island, but the Department of Conservation sought to eradicate them beginning with the poisoning of black rats, brown rats and mice. In August 2011, both Rangitoto and neighbouring Motutapu Islands were officially declared pest-free.

On arrival at the Rangitoto Jetty, the options are to stay along the beach, walks to the top and around the hill, or ride on a tractor-pulled trailer most of the way up the hill with a guide explaining about the island and its habitats, and then another walk to the top from where the tractors stop. Just about everywhere there were children and young people engaged in recreational activities.

Most of the young people we saw were down near the water, engaged in water sports activities. Some younger kids were engaged in the walk to the summit. There was great interest in the old lava fields that surround the island summit. Without any running water on the island, all vegetation...
has to rely on rain water. In this ecosystem, the Pahutukawa trees have grown extensively. During our visit the trees were full of blossom and bees were in abundance amongst the flowers.

The children in our group were mesmerised by the extensive lava flows. And it wasn’t just the kids! Various adults engaged in piling rocks into cairn structures while others simply found walking on the flows of lava rock quite mind boggling.

If those of you from overseas ever manage a trip to Auckland, be sure and add Rangitoto Island to your list of ‘must do’ activities, especially if you like the sea, islands and pristine environments!

30 Historic Holiday Baches remain to look back at Auckland – out of 140 before 1937
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