

# Relational Child & Youth Care Practice

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(formerly *The Journal of Child & Youth Care*, established 1982) is committed to promoting and supporting the profession of Child and Youth Care through disseminating the knowledge and experience of individuals involved in the day-to-day lives of young people.

This commitment is founded upon the belief that all human issues, including personal growth and development, are essentially “relational”.

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# Of Leaders, Emperors and Us

*Heather Snell*

**L**eadership. The business and financial news giant Forbes (2012) suggests the qualities that make a great leader begin with honesty. Interesting. Next Forbes suggests leaders must know how to delegate, communicate and inspire confidence. They must have positive attitudes, be creative, intuitive and be able to meet others “where they are at”. Sound familiar?

At the recent Canadian Child and Youth Care (CYC) National Conference held in Halifax the most oversubscribed workshop of the conference was a session entitled “The Emperor Has No Clothes: Leaders in the Field of Child and Youth Care” (Gaitens, Snow 2016). The session promised to explore how leaders were recognized, confirmed, defined and celebrated in our field. What ensued was a conversation engaging over 70 CYC practitioners, academics, students and allies. When participants were asked to discuss what they wanted from leaders in the field the responses were far ranging, everything from new ideas to professional advocacy, collaboration, and creativity. When these same participants were tasked to consider how CYC leaders were recognized, defined and celebrated, and then asked if they were content with these ways responses were more revealing. The overwhelming consensus was that the current who, what, how and why of CYC leadership was less than ideal. No ... the group was not content with the ‘status quo’.

And yes – I chose the final phrase in that last sentence deliberately. Themes raised by the participants in the Canadian workshop voiced discontent with what one participant identified as “nonsense from people who know nothing about CYC.” In the group discussions shared that morning in Halifax there were calls for voices ‘from the floor’ and repeated demands for diversity. Gender, and racial bias, position and celebrity

were identified as sources of discontent. Amongst this group, who represented a significant sample of Canadian CYC, culture leadership is clearly associated with privilege. It seems there are 'disconnects' of sorts, separating those working in the field from those leading the field; 'disconnects' between those doing the work, and those writing about the work, and perhaps even 'disconnects' between practitioners and the young people with whom we work. The room in which this conversation took place was filled with women, but I heard repeated observations about CYC leadership as being male dominated. I noted that despite our professional commitment to equity and anti-oppression, despite our stated position as allies who work alongside people who are often marginalized, there was an absence of persons of colour in the room in which this conversation took place. Despite Bracey's (2007, p.25) observation that "youth services are full of accidental leaders", our male dominated white leadership seems to be more a factor of systemic outcomes rather than accident.

How do we respond? The description of the Halifax workshop suggested we need to beware of the "I's", celebrate the "We's" and seek out the "Not me's". Perhaps another response would be to ask why we need to be led at all? Leadership, as it is traditionally defined, might not be a good fit with our evolving CYC identity? Perhaps we should aspire to fostering interdisciplinary communicators rather than leaders; after all, the nature of CYC practice has us journeying to multiple destinations, often with disparate horizons. Our current search for professional credibility seems to have created a unilateral and disproportionate reliance on academic reference as a substitute for leadership. Time and time again in Halifax I heard that leadership was not a credential. Despite the authority of Forbes, what I also heard in Halifax were comments suggesting that there is no set formula for leadership or qualities that can prescribe a leader. In the Halifax conversations the characteristics most sought after in a leader seemed to be the qualities we have come to believe define our own professional practice. In Halifax I heard an expressed a desire to work alongside others who were relevant to practice, acutely aware of the impact of power, anti-oppressive, adventurous, and ... relational.

So where are we?

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vintage baby boomer

# *Traditions and Transitions*

*Christine Pope and Jenny McGrath*

Keywords

*closure, activity, celebration, relational*

It's the end of another school year and instructors and students are completing final assignments while excitedly looking forward to warmer weather and a well-earned break from academia. This is an exhausting time for all but, as a matter of tradition, we once again organized year-end gatherings to celebrate the achievements of students completing their diploma or degree in child and youth care (CYC). This year, however, we found ourselves contemplating the value of these celebrations.

Many things had us questioning whether we should continue to devote the extra time and effort needed to coordinate these events, such as non-committal responses from students on whether or not they would attend, university cut-backs, scheduling, and finding space on campus that is always in high demand. We are one of the last programs at our university to offer such celebrations and as such we sometimes receive questioning looks from students and faculty from different programs as we wheel our carts of food and supplies through the hallways. We have always sent students off with a small memento of their time with us, but now requests for money to purchase small parting gifts, such as a pen with the program name or university logo, are now denied due to tighter budgets. We still thought it important to acknowledge the moment, so this year we decided on handmade cards with beautiful artwork created by the program chair and a small box of candy. We have dedicated much time, effort and creativity to this process but could not help but wonder: Has this year-end celebration outlived its purpose? Do we keep doing it because it is what we have always done? Are they still important to students? Or have the gatherings lost their significance in relation to saying goodbye?

In true relational fashion, the answer to our questions came from the students that seemingly had some sixth sense that we needed to be reminded that a tradition that was becoming routine and somewhat mundane to us was very special for them. Students typically show up to a room that is decorated, and a potluck array of food is shared while we spend time reminiscing together. The faculty facilitates a circle activity that provides everyone the opportunity to convey significant moments and memories that are often heartfelt and personal. Many students also talk about the learning they will take with them as they prepare to graduate and move on to other endeavours. This year students leaving the program with their diploma also introduced other ways to celebrate! Soon upon arriving at the event, they organized a “DJ booth” at the front podium of the classroom with a laptop and slips of paper taking “requests”. Before long there was music piping through the sound system with songs that spanned across generations of student and staff alike. Goodbye messages, quotes and symbols were scribbled on the white boards around the room and dancing, eating, laughter, and sharing about summer plans ensued. Two hours later tears, hugs, and promises to stay in touch travelled through the group.

The students leaving with their degree were not to be outdone. This celebration had the same set up of food, decorations and a sharing circle activity. However, to add to the festivities a small group of students put together a slide show capturing the experiences of their cohort. Pictures of projects, activities, trips, and classroom antics were set to music and revealed as we shared a potluck spread. The thought and detail put into the slide show was impressive but little did we know that it was all a ruse to distract the faculty. A few students slipped out of the celebration to resourcefully gain access to the CYC offices and proceeded to fill every possible space high and low with streamers and balloons as “payback” for four years of assignments and group projects, along with a thank you card containing signatures and kind words of the memories they were taking with them. Students taking initiative to collaborate and create meaningful ways to say goodbye to us and to one another was the wake-up call we needed to remind us that what can seem repetitive for us, is a once in a lifetime experience for them.

Celebrating an event such as graduation is often exciting and surreal and, along with the gains, there can also be a sense of loss. Good-byes are not always easy, but they can signify new opportunities for change and provide a sense of discovery. By acknowledging the many moments of connection that led us to the place of having to say good-bye, we can recognize the resiliency and effort it took to get there. Earning a professional credential can be an arduous process. Students talked about how personal growth achieved in the program, often through overcoming challenges, anxieties, or

uncertainties, helped them feel better prepared to make a difference in their practice. These achievements should be acknowledged and celebrated!

Leaving post-secondary is a significant time of transition from being a student to becoming a practitioner. This change of professional identity, along with moving back home for some or moving out for others, and no longer having daily contact with a supportive group of peers that share common values, knowledge, and skills, are all losses that go along with graduation and need acknowledgement as well. We stress the importance of meaningful closure throughout many courses and encourage students to prepare themselves and all those they work with in practicum for when their time together will end. In reflecting back on the exchanges we had questioning the value of our annual celebration it seems we were a bit one-sided; we were stressing the importance of closure with students yet we were considering letting go of this custom ourselves. We lost track of the value and purpose of commending our students' commitment and sacrifices toward becoming CYC practitioners. We forgot that these celebrations also provide space for us to say good-bye. We appreciate the reminder from our students and we will happily plan for and celebrate our graduates next year and for many years to come! Are our good-bye celebrations important? You bet they are.

### **Christine Pope**

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around and about with Garth Goodwin

# Random Impressions

The twentieth National Child and Youth Care Conference held on International Child and Youth Care Week in Halifax, Nova Scotia was also the 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Council of Canadian Child and Youth Care Associations. This was duly noted with an 80s themed opening reception. The representative from the CYCABC, Janet Westcott hit a dollar store and spun paper plates into record albums, coloured tissue into center pieces and was joined by a contingent of delegates glammed up in the day glow colours of the era. One fellow came in an outfit recalling ET's moonlighted ride which was brilliant. It was all great fun and kicked off a vibrant three days of workshops and keynotes expressing the best of Child and Youth Care (CYC) topics. For this columnist, the experience was also a coming to terms with being yesterday's fellow, now retired from active participation on the front lines, doing his best to represent the CYC association movement online, contemplating the advantages and disadvantages of thirty years of baggage and being thankful that the markers of this movement have been honoured and that the future is in capable hands. Being freed of the agenda of this movement was liberating, replaced by impressions. This column explores some of those impressions triggered by this conference experience.

Standing outside the hotel at the center of a daffodil lined square was a statue of Edward Cornwallis, founder of the city, governor in his day and military builder of the British Empire back in those days. On reading the plaque I was impressed by his travels from England through Nova Scotia and on to Gibraltar where he died as governor. The British navy literally opened up the world and today, even CYC professionals can travel the world and share in their professional development. A week after the conference this statue was splashed with red paint protesting Cornwallis's attacks on the local First Nation, the Mi'kmaq. Halifax is blessed with statuary which hopefully will be accepted for what it is; a physical reference to a historical person, event or natural being worth having for just that reason. I did note that Cornwallis did not quite look out over the city he created so much as on to the garden shop of the local supermarket.

I had to smile when I learned CYC shares its week with the health and safety movement. If there is a bane to the existence of many agencies and unit spaces, it has to be the pronouncements and requirements of health and safety departments of the nation. While their mandate is essential, their power to implement directives could be open to review. It is tricky to be offering a home like space to youth and having to clutter it up with fire extinguishers, hand sanitisers, eye wash stations, all manner of signage and multiple sinks. For some, seeing resources that could have benefited young people more directly spent on items that often have no real use or ultimate purpose, is aggravating. At one of my working tables at a workshop an example of this over-concern was brought up. The ladies of a team explained how they lost one of their essential tools with the young ladies they work with, the nail party. They spoke about an especially violent and disruptive youth who calmed and communicated over a nail party. I recalled similar such sessions, a staple of working with female youth and the concern of the day being the polish remover and its potential as a sniffing agent. The polish remover was locked up between sessions, safe for the polish and a nice dig at those who use inhalants to dull their pain. I was surprised the issue was no longer a concern over being an inhalant but rather a source of fungi. The table was in firm agreement that they have never seen an incident of such contamination in both personal and professional nail polish sharing. Now, this writer is a firm believer in safety and safety audits. The most innocuous physical or household item on the face of it can be turned into a potentially lethal assist in determined hands. Break away closet rods, toxic or harmful item lock up zones, and enclosing overhead pipes or weight bearing structures all have their place. It is essential to remove the potential for harm in a silent and non-disturbing manner, and knowing the youth in your care and building up the relationship with a youth that values safety and life itself, does more than any edict. The potential for self-harm, even lethal harm is all around us in everyday objects, however much you safety proof the life space. It is more an issue of being attentive and safety sensitive at all times.

If *Nourishing Strength, Nurturing Beyond, Connecting Our Passions* had a highlight, it had to be Brendan McGuire, MLA for the riding of Halifax Atlantic who brought opening greetings. Usually, the Minister for Child and Family Services or the Mayor of the city does these honours. Sometimes, a Premier even, has shown up. Brendan wanted to do the opening and perhaps there never has been someone more appropriate. Brendan was an immigrant and a youth in care in Nova Scotia. He grew up knowing several foster placements and 'many parents'. He has worked at a number of careers and taken time out to explore his roots. He now has a family and calls Nova Scotia home. He also just told the audience of CYC professionals "I love you." Now, when you are quite used to

forgotten platitudes something like this will stick. This writer believes the more who know this work and its issues who go into politics, and ultimately power, the better. Far too often governments fall short on their treatment of crown wards for any number of reasons.

One of the better perks of conference attending has to be those few who make a point to thank this writer for his web work for the Council. Feedback is so rare in fact, it is almost non-existent. There has been a form online to post an anniversary memory and yet no one has found the link to it or used it. Still, the numbers are climbing with 200-300+ guests a week dropping by, who are often first time visitors, as 85 to 95% in any one week are. This indicates a real general interest in CYC work. Maintaining a Facebook page has been more informative. As the site uses 'likes' to monitor usage there is a clearer sense of what is popular. Housekeeping style items, like an upcoming conference, generate little buzz but if the post involves some aspect of a care system breakdown or deficiency, folks are right on it in impressive numbers and especially so if there is a lead in from a CYC perspective. The biannual pattern of these conferences allow for a form of feedback. I found myself recalling the last National here in Nova Scotia, *Investing in Care* in 1998. It was and remains one of the largest in history hitting a limit of 800 delegates with many having to be turned away. The fact that this was sold as a rare return to an eastern province was a definite draw. There were no smart phones then but there was hospitality and even committees for hospitality; people met folks and helped them situate. In those days, the local provincial association would take the Council Board out for supper, the Lower Deck on that instance. There was this shared sense of occasion and an inclusive tone as such gatherings were rare and the distances folks came over were appreciated. A comparative view between then and now would not be completely fair. A few observations could be allowed. The delegates are probably 90% or more different, with only a small handful having been there as well. The National has inspired the format, even to the point of competing with itself. Two provincial associations held workshop/conference events within weeks of this National. Being CYC week this writer noted some agencies sponsoring their own workshop/events across the country over the week. Finally, there was a sense of identity becoming an emerging consideration once again, with some presenters and certainly one keynote taking that on. Kiaras Gharabaghi right out asked "Do children matter any more?" and then went on to qualify that statement wonderfully, leading to a conclusion of maybe. Even more to the point, and popularly received he stated "As a profession, we need to stop whining". My sense of things is that CYC practitioners identify strongly with their caring and the extent of that care, experiencing levels of pain, isolation and anxiety few could even

believe exist, let alone view as part of a job description. Whining becomes a way to vent, to let some of it out yet, as Kiaras suggests that does nothing. Speaking up, writing up, networking, dialogue, the stuff of association in fact, can offer an alternative.

And now the venue shifts, clear across the country to the West Coast in a few years time and the next opportunity to speak up, speak with and hear from your peers in a workshop at a National. It would be great to get things to the point where nail parties could simply be viewed as an exception in group or collective settings, as a means of social experience, much like they are at sleepovers or sorority houses in the wider society. CYC professionals need to own their authority and work to have it recognized and respected.

### **Garth Goodwin**

*retired after a 41 year career in both practice and as a database designer and administrator. Over 30 years of frontline practice he worked for both public/board agencies and private agencies. He was the first recipient of the National Child and Youth Care Award in 1986. He nurtured the Child and Youth Care Workers Association of Manitoba through its formative decades and became its representative to the Council of Canadian Child and Youth Care Associations. He has been privileged to be the witness and participant in significant events in CYC history and remains active as the communications support to the Council.*



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