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New Beginnings

Dr Thom Garfat

Editor's Note:

I am delighted to introduce Dr. Thom Garfat from Canada who very kindly has agreed to contribute a regular article on various practice issues in social care drawing from his extensive experience. Thom has over seventy papers/publications and is one of the most well known CYC commentators in his capacity as co-editor of the CYC Net.

- C. Niall McElwee.

New Beginnings: Introduction

It seems appropriate at the beginning of what I trust will be an exciting association with this Journal, to introduce myself. So, let me begin by saying, first of all, that I am a child and youth care practitioner. I am committed to the values and beliefs of our field and am appreciative for what the field has given - to me, to others professionals, and to the troubled children, youth and families who are the focus of our work.

I began this work about 30 years ago as a child care worker in a reception and diagnostic home for adolescents in Victoria, British Columbia. Over time I have worked as the director of a community-based family treatment program, taught at the University of Victoria, been the director of treatment for one of Canada's largest youth care agencies and tried to share what I have learned through training, writing and consultation. At the age of 46 I decided to return to university and now hold a PhD in Child and Youth Care, as well as an MA in Applied Clinical Psychology. After teaching at the university, I moved to Montreal, Quebec to start a life with Sylviane, my life partner and greatest support. We are still there with our dogs and garden and I travel from Montreal to the other places that my private practice in consultation and training beckons. But that's enough of that. If you are interested you could find more information at the web site identified at the end of this paper.

Thinking about writing this introduction led me to consider the importance of 'beginnings' in our field, especially the beginning of new relationships; young people are admitted to a facility for the first time, family members come to visit, a new staff member joins the team or any other new relationship enters in to the world of the young people or ourselves. I have some beliefs about new beginnings and I thought that as a way of introducing myself, I might share some of these.

New beginnings are influenced by our previous experiences: we bring to each new encounter a way of thinking about 'what might happen' or 'how things might go' which is affected by the *meaning* that we give to this human experience. If our previous experiences have been positive we might approach a new beginning with anticipation and excitement about what this encounter might hold. On the other hand, if our most powerful experience of new beginnings is that they are typically a time of criticism, failure or pain, then we may approach any new beginning with anxiety or fear.

But the meaning of a new beginning is not only effected by our previous experiences. It is also, for example, effected by how we understand the encounter. If a young man moving in to care for the first time interprets this to mean that he is 'bad' or 'sick', he may enter in to the new relationship with anger and resentment. If a young woman thinks that moving in to the program will result in her never being able to go home again, then she may hold back on entering fully in to a relationship with staff because of a fear that the closer she gets to staff, the less likely it is that she will go home.

Thirty years in the CYC field has led me to a position where I feel that meaning, and meaning-making, is a complicated process which deserves much more attention than it currently receives in both the Canadian and Irish fields. What does it mean, for example, to a child or a parent that the child is placed in care? What does it mean to a staff member that a new supervisor is coming? What does it mean that we focus primarily on the problems of young people as opposed their strengths? What could it mean to a mother that the child wants to stay in the program rather than going home?

Jerome Bruner (1990) has argued forcefully that we all experience the world through our own personal lens of perception, and that one of the things which most influences how we act in any given situation is the meaning that we bring to any encounter. Our previous experiences, the culture of which we are a part, the values we hold, and our sense of our place in the world all play a part in of creating this personal lens of perception. And through this lens we structure our experiences, thereby giving meaning to any experiences we have.

A new beginning is therefore, much more than merely 'starting again'. It is a different experience for each of us. We each bring to it our own way of interpreting it - our own way of giving it meaning. And we act, or behave, according to how we interpret it. So, it is important when we enter in to any experience with a young person or family that we wonder what this experience might mean *to them as well as to ourselves*. For this work, while being based in the self of the practitioner is, ultimately, about the experience of the other.

Having said that I realize that everything I have just said reveals a great deal about myself and what I believe and value - as an individual, a man, a practitioner, a trainer, an academic. That's just the way it is - everything we do or say discloses a part of

ourselves to the other. That's another thing I believe about new beginnings: no matter what you do it will be a statement of who you are and what you believe. And all of this leads me to the point where I feel the need to talk about why I am pleased to be involved with the IJASS.

I think it is crucial that we talk about what we do, share what we know, and struggle together to find new solutions. We need, as a community of care-givers, to come together for the benefit of children, youth and families. It seems to me that we have for too long remained isolated from one another; staff from staff or programme from programme. We have even managed to protect our ideas from being influenced by others. The end result is that the average youth care/social care worker has learned to experience herself as an insignificant player in the life of the children and family who receive services from our programs. We have, unfortunately come to believe that being a social care/youth care worker means that we are unimportant. Nothing could be farther from the truth.

Social care/youth care workers have an important place in the *treatment* system for troubled youth and families. And I use the word 'treatment' intentionally. There was a time in the history of our field when the primary role of those who lived and worked with children on a day to day basis was to offer care, safety, and nurturing; when we were seen merely as a substitute for inadequate or unavailable parents. But such is no longer the case. Not only have we finally realized that this is a tremendous waste of human personnel, but our field has also evolved to the point where we are able to identify and explain a specific approach to working with children and families, *which is particular to our field*. Fritz Redl and David Wineman (1951, 1952) probably began this articulation for most of us. They were followed in North America by authors such as Henry Maier (see, for example, 1987), Albert Triesman (see, for example, Triesman, A, Whittaker, J & Brendtro, L., 1967) and others. The common feature of these writers was the idea that child and youth care work involves the utilization of daily life events, as they are occurring, for therapeutic purposes (Garfat, 1991).

Since then, the literature developing this specific approach has continued to grow (see, for example, Beker & Eisikovits (1991); Durrant (1993); Fewster (1990); Fulcher (1991); Garfat (1989, 1991); Guttman (1991); Jones (1985); Krueger (1991); Peterson (1994); VanderVen (1992). This evolution of a particular model continues today in the writings of numerous publications such as this journal and the last ten years has seen a virtual flood of literature specific to our field, our approach.

So, we have a reason to feel different today than we did 15 or 20 years ago. Our field has evolved and continues to evolve as we develop new models, engage in therapeutic work with families, and take a place in the range of treatment services available to youth and their families. We have, then, a field to be proud of, an approach that is particular to that field, and we need now, more than ever, to share and learn from our friends and colleagues throughout the world. I see my involvement with the IJASS as

an opportunity to make new connections and learn from others as I share some of what I believe about our field.

On another note, I am pleased that this also marks the beginning of a new relationship between the IJASS and CYC-NET, an international discussion group and on-line journal for child and youth care professionals worldwide (see www.cyc-net.org). With over 800 members to date in countries such as Ireland, England, Scotland, South Africa, Nigeria, Norway, the USA and Canada it is a fast growing support network for our field. This new partnership between IJASS and CYC-NET can only benefit all social care/youth care workers.

This is an opportunity. I hope through this journal to make new acquaintances, explore new territory and learn new ways. And I am grateful to offer whatever I can to others. As time goes on I will write about issues which I think are important to direct practice (such as the role of meaning making) and will continue to express my belief that this is a field in which we should all be proud to be members. I hope I have begun this new relationship in a manner that lets you know a little about me.

Thom Garfat
Nova Scotia, Canada,
February, 2001
www.cyc-net.org/transformation

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