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# Learning to Cry Out Loud

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**Introduction**

When I was asked to write this piece on my experiences of fostering I had to resist the urge to reach for the research books, for it is far easier to present the opinions and arguments of others rather than to lay bare the bones of your own life. The task I was charged with was to relate my experiences as a birth child of a fostering family in the 1960's and 70's, and to look at how these lessons from the past shaped my own practice as a carer in later life.

According to Morton (1995;1), *...foster family care has been practised since antiquity...* though usually on an informal level, and while in *....almost every country, in every culture people are willing to raise children from other families...'* (Robbroeckx:1995;2), institutional care for various reasons, became the primary provider of substitute care for those children who needed it. This was especially true of Ireland where children were cared for in large institutions which were mainly run by the Religious Orders (Raftery & O'Sullivan:1999;25-70). Fostering, or Boarding Out as it was then called, prior to the Kennedy Report and the formation of the Health Boards in 1970, was on an ad hoc basis with little or no assessment of prospective carers. Many families such as my own fell into fostering more or less by chance, as they had been used to looking after children informally and it was an easy transition to fostering children from the institutions for holidays or weekends.

For instance, like many other rural families, my mother was raised with a myriad of relations in the house - as indeed was her father. In her home in West Cork where I now live, seven people left for America one morning in the early days of the last century. Four of them were children who were reared by my great grandmother while their own mother worked in the US, until such time as she could afford to have them with her. They were accompanied by three of my grand-uncles who were also emigrating. I can

only guess at the pain experienced by this woman who was losing not only her three sons but her four foster children as well. She lived well into her nineties but never saw any of them again.

Another factor that greatly influenced my own mother to care for other people's children was her experience of growing up in rural Ireland during the 1930's and 40's. This was an Ireland where children in the care of the State were often used as a cheap supply of manual labourers. Baltimore Industrial School, which used to stand just across the bay, supplied a steady stream of young boys to work the land hereabouts. The misery of these children's lives was no secret to the local population although very little was done to improve their lot. My mother told me of how as a teenager she was working at a meitheal and saw these 'schoolboys' as they were called, stuffing cold potatoes into their pockets. She felt that the local people were afraid to take on the administrators of these institutions and to challenge them about the treatment of the children. Some of them tried instead to make life easier for those boys who worked for them. Others of course had no compunction of further exploiting the kids for their own ends and worked them harder than they did their farm animals. The State is reeling from the disclosures of how these children in care were treated in the past, (see for report Sunday Tribune, 10/1/99;4), and I am sad to note the current controversy regarding retribution and compensation to survivors (Magill; Sep.2001). Denying how the State failed these children will not help us to heal or to learn any lessons from this time.

Unfortunately this abuse of children in institutions was not confined to pre 1950's Ireland. This I know from my own experiences as a foster sister to children we cared for from the children's Homes in the 1960's and 70's. The children who stayed with us hated going back to the Children's Home and the only time I ever remember them crying was when they were being taken back there. I don't know why they couldn't have stayed with us permanently but this never seemed to be an option. One of the children called Teresa was aged about ten, when she fell down a full flight of stairs in our house. The fall, which would have left myself, or my brothers, screaming in pain, just caused her to whimper.. When my mother picked her up and tried to comfort her, the child resisted. It seemed as if she didn't know how to accept this kind of attention. To children like us who would have stayed on the couch for the day and demanded all sorts of treats after such an ordeal, her behaviour was baffling. The thing was that these children didn't cry - not to mind screech and roar like the rest of us. Sometimes they would sob silently at night but they never cried out loud like regular children.

They were absolutely terrified of wetting the bed and I remember one child trying to hide a wet night-dress one morning. My mother explained to her that all that was

expected when such a situation occurred was to let one of the adults know so that the bed could be changed.. This child told my sister and myself that they were beaten for bed-wetting in the Home. One of the things that most upset me as a child was to hear how these kids had brothers or sisters in the same Home but were allowed very little time together. As the eldest of six I found it very distressing to think of my younger siblings being kept in a place like this and not being able to look after them. Having seen the emotional devastation caused to these children by the loss of their families I have always endeavoured as a foster carer to make every opportunity available to my own foster kids to see their families. Caring for the children from those Homes was quite disruptive to our family, especially returning them to their orphanage after the holidays, which caused us great upset and eventually my mother discontinued short term fostering.

Long term fostering was far easier on us children than short term, although I can never remember the decision actually being made to concentrate on long term fostering. Come to think of it I can never remember any decisions being made about fostering. Children seemed to appear and disappear from our lives with little or no explanation. Even when we were fostering long term there was very little information given to us kids as to why children moved on or went home. This was very hard for us and very often we were worried about the child and felt lonely after they had left. I was always terrified that our long term children would be sent back to their orphanage as I knew how much they hated it there.

I was particularly close to one of my foster sisters who came from a Children's Home in a different county. She was a few years older than me and I loved having a big sister. She hated being labelled as fostered and was delighted once when my father had to sign a form for her for school and he crossed out 'guardian' instead of 'parent' by mistake. She was moved back to her family when she was seventeen in 1975, and after sporadic contact we lost touch with her. She rang us out of the blue for Christmas in 1988, but unfortunately my mother had died fairly suddenly five weeks earlier. Of course this upset her as she had rang to thank my mother for looking after her for the four years she had lived with us. She said that those four years were among the most stable of her life and that it was a time when she could rely on having her needs met. What she described to me was what I heard June Thoburn classify many years later as 'social parenting'.. This social parenting according to Thoburn, ensures that the child is looked after adequately with the provision of clean clothes, lunch money etc.. Whether the child chooses then to tap into the other support and care offered by the foster home is up to them. Some kids prefer not to engage on any deeper level with their carers as they already are well attached to their own families and their parents remain what Thoburn

calls the *psychological parent*, but I feel that this does not lessen the role of the carer who must still provide what the child needs at that particular time, both emotionally and socially (Thoburn, J. 1997).

I missed this girl terribly when she left and felt so lonely and betrayed that she had forgotten about us so easily, or so it seemed at the time. In hindsight I realise that it was probably jus to difficult for her to maintain the contact in her particular circumstances. This didn't stop me getting close to other children however and the last child we fostered came as a fifteen year old and left when she was eighteen. This placement was a difficult one and for various reasons ended badly in 1976. This girl found it very hard to trust anyone, and caused a lot of tension between the other children and foster children in the house. My mother was very hurt by this and couldn't believe when I told her a few years later that I wanted to foster myself. She remarked that what we were about to embark on would just store up a great deal of pain for ourselves. I realise now that she did not understand that fostering had already caused us a great deal of pain as children. Indeed it was years later that researchers first began to look into the enormous impact that fostering has on the birth children of the fostering family.

Kelly (2000;14), makes the point that '*...no-one can pretend to look at issues of child care with anything approaching a scientific objectivity...*' and the way I that approached fostering was on a purely emotional level: I wanted to help! All my life I had been involved with children who were suffering and I felt practically powerless to do anything about it. As an adult I saw fostering as a way to do something positive for them. This was twenty years ago and with the foolish optimism of youth I felt that I would be a far more effective carer than my parents! Of course I soon learned that to be truly effective you need to be equipped with more than just the desire to help - but it is a good start. There is a great deal of intellectualising of practice in social work, but all the scientific knowledge in the world won't make you a good carer or social worker without a genuine wish to improve people's life-chances. I have worked with over forty social workers in my adult life, and the ones who have made a difference to the children in my care, were not necessarily equipped with years of a university education, but rather were blessed with the gift of understanding the enormous grief, loss and fear experienced by children in care. They were also able to understand how challenging fostering is and showed a genuine respect to me and to my family for our work. In return we offered honesty and a willingness to work alongside them for the good of the child; welcoming birth parents into our home - even when this left us open to all sorts of criticism from some of these parents, and facilitating access as best we could, including helping with transport etc..

Fostering has never been easy but many carers feel that it is becoming harder. McCarthy (1996;123), puts forward the claim that the children coming into residential care are now generally *'...more damaged and disruptive as well as older.'* The experience of foster carers is that this is also true of children coming into long term foster care. This has been attributed to the fact that so much effort is now put by professionals into preserving families, and children are removed from their home only when there is a situation of irretrievable breakdown. The Kennedy Report was a watershed in Irish child care provision. One of its key recommendations was that families be preserved wherever possible and that children should only be admitted to residential care when there is no satisfactory alternative (Kennedy Report:1970;6). This was a totally new and revolutionary view of child care and as Curry says the underlined philosophy of the Report, and to some extent the Task Force Report of 1980 have been reflected in policy (1998;152), so much so that the vast number of Irish children in care are placed in foster care:

> *One way of breaking the cycle of disadvantage is by removing children from deleterious environments and placing them in homes which are likely to promote normal intellectual and social development, a procedure not lightly undertaken where parents, however unsuitable, are anxious to rear their own offspring (*
>
> *Triseliotis & Russell:1984;1).*

When parents are deemed unsuitable for whatever reason and are anxious to maintain a relationship with their children then long term foster care can provide a loving substitute. For the child who experiences the disruption of his birth family it is up to both carers and social workers to work together *'...with the overarching goal of reversing some of the negative impacts on their lives that have come with them'* (Kunstal:1999;1).

Involving the child's birth family as far as possible in the caring system, either by kinship foster care or involvement with the child on a regular basis according to (Ryburn;33) will usually contribute to a positive outcome in fostering. This, according to Gilligan (1995;15) helps prevent the child's place in the family closing over, and avoids isolating the child from social networks in adulthood. But such involvement of the birth family requires great commitment from the foster family as access and contact can cause grave disruption in the foster home. To make this work for the foster child we need to ensure that there is adequate support for all involved including the invisible carers - the foster carer's children. This is a tall order and involves a genuine wish for all involved to work together, be it the birth family, the social workers, the fostering family and of course the foster child.

Rarely will you come across such commitment, but in my experience when such a commitment is in place everybody, especially the child who is being fostered, benefits enormously see (Deady in this volume). The trouble with fostering as Kelly points out, is that: "....for separated children and families ...the best option for them has either temporarily or permanently been lost and what is second best will vary, literally from individual to individual," (Kelly: 2000;36).

If foster care is substitute care, then it must be the best that it can be. It must provide an accepting, empowering and most of all loving home for the child. It must ensure that the child's needs are met as far as possible and it must do this without marginalising the birth children in the home. One way we have tried to avoid this is in our home is by involving our children as best we can in the fostering process. Five of my teenagers, two of whom are fostered are all members of 'Youth Etc.,' which is a support group for young people in care and young people *who* care. They also belong to a group called the 'Circle of Friends,' which includes carers, their children, foster children and their parents as well as social workers. We have found that such an encounter group has served to increase our understanding of each other's fears and hopes. This group, however, is one of a kind and requires an openness and again that word *commitment* from its members that may be hard to generate in other situations. Each group of workers must find ways of supporting each other that works for them but, I feel that if adequate support and understanding are not in place in a long term fostering situation, then the service to the child is less than it could be.

Fostering challenges all who are involved, from the social worker to the foster carer, from the foster child to the birth child and perhaps most of all the birth parent. We have to put aside our hidden agendas and try to understand why we feel threatened in the situations that occur regularly in this kind of work. Kelly, citing Berlin gives sound advice when warning about how easily we can become entrenched in one view of a situation:

> *And yet it is impossible to pursue a single set of values or behavioural possibilities without running into contradictions. We simply have to struggle and debate, trading one value for another, weighing the strength of one set of facts against another - with compassion and humility (2000;35).*

The lessons from our past are clear; children suffered and their pain largely went unnoticed. It is up to us to strive for a system that will hear the cries of every child and that we reach a situation where we won't have to teach our children to cry out loud. I'll

leave the last words to Maya Angelou herself no stranger to pain:

*History despite its wrenching pain,*
*Cannot be unlived, and if faced*
*With courage, need not be lived again.*

(Maya Angelou, On the Pulse of the Morning, 1993)

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