

The story of being ‘looked after’

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Context 94 December 2007 pp 21 – 23 (AFT Publishing)

Just after Easter I got a phone call out of the blue from a William Gilroy. He reminded me we had had therapy sessions together a few years ago which he had remembered when going through his social services file. He was due to become a father shortly and wanted to have a clearer sense of his past and his identity from those who knew him as a child. He hoped and I didn't mind the approach, but he thought I might have some helpful remembrances and clues about his story. I was astounded and delighted with his phone call. Few children's and families workers ever get a chance to get feedback for work often done under the stress of the immediate. You are in truth 'flying blind' with less of a clear sense than can be acknowledged that what you are attempting is going to be helpful in the long run.

After William rang, I stretched back into my own memory 16 years on, recalling a nine year old lively, defiant boy with a lot of resilient charm and impudence often concealing sorrow and rejection. I provide child and family therapeutic consultancy to ISP the first of the independent child care agencies in the UK, established in Kent 20 years ago. The work is both to the professional foster carers – a new type of foster carer which Kent County Council social services pioneered in the mid 70's (and from where ISP was formed) – the child and the child's network.

We arranged to meet up to talk either side of lunch at ISP Sittingbourne where we used to meet for sessions of therapy. I checked back over my weekly notes I had made of our sessions between 1991 and 1993 to see how far my recollections of William fitted with what he might want to know from me. He was early so we met by chance in the High Street where I was completing an errand. I could still pick out the child's face I remembered beaming through in the sturdy adult presentation of a young man.

As we talked, the past seemed to merge with the present for both of us. Listening to Will, I soon realised he had given me a privilege granted to children's workers of glimpsing into a whole life for which, in childhood, we only have a highly partial and undeveloped snapshot. He readily agreed to put part of our conversation 'on the record' and this is his story of being 'looked after' in the child care system.

at the end of the day you know, it's the memories...

I remember coming here [to ISP] and it was quite a scary and daunting place to find myself in.

The meetings with you I enjoyed and looked forward to. I'd get up and go and talk to John because you sometimes feel that someone's on that understanding level. That's how it was and that's why the memories I have of you are enjoyable. It helped me out and later on, 'cos I had all this stuff going on'.

John: *Can you say just briefly what happened after you came out of care?*

leaving care

Will: It's sometimes hard when you first leave care because you feel like you've just been dumped. It feels like no-one wants to know anymore; they've wiped their hands of you. It's quite hard because it's you and 'the big wide world'. When it gets to that situation there is no-one to turn to. There are ways around that, instead ... you know ... I personally turned to drugs and crime. I didn't have to because there were so many more opportunities to take. I guess they were the opportunities I chose to take because they were the easy way out.

I always refer to it as 'the easy way out' because you don't have to work when you're on drugs and drink; you don't have to worry anymore. When you finally come round you find yourself with a criminal record and it's hard to get a job. If you do, you have to tell them every single thing that you've done in your life. It gets quite embarrassing because, although it was long ago, you have to tell these people this and that about yourself, which is quite personal.

'facing up'

From what I am now – I'm at University – I kind of wish now more than anything that I had some kind of tardis that could go back; and I could pick up that pencil, stop pissing around and start doing some work. I could have saved myself from doing all that. Eventually there will come a time when you get into so much trouble you end up sitting in a cell somewhere and have to face up to life and how you are. You might realise it or you won't. I think most people have got half a brain in their head or have some kind of sense realise it before it gets to that stage in their life where they experience prison, drugs and crime.

I was going to go in the army but it turned out I had asthma which was when I was 17. After that I was on self destruct. Now I've got so many goals that I've set myself. I'm gonna have a degree and a family. To see where I've come from to where I am now I kind of think it is impossible. I suppose it would never have happened to me 'cos I'm not like that them normal kids who went to mainstream school. I'm not like those kids that have families and everything is great. How was it possible that I end up with what they have?

I guess the answer to that is that you help yourself, you set yourself goals and you succeed, you try and if you fail or fall you pick yourself up and start again. Many people tell me the stronger it makes you.

I think you can learn two ways, you can learn the easy way or the hard way. I learnt the hard way because of my rebelliousness. I didn't think anyone cared or understood. I could have been exactly where I am now a lot sooner with a lot less hassle.

John: ...*what do you think foster carers, therapists and teachers should remember when they're working with 'looked after' kids? I think sometimes we just judge on the outside and don't really know what's going on inside the person.*

Will: They have to remember something that is very obvious – the kid is always thinking and feeling the same as an adult. They are always second guessing – 'shall I trust these people?' Once you've gained some kind of trust you know. I think someone will like you or they won't, therefore they will trust you or they won't.

So, when you're working with someone, listen more to what they've got to say. That might be hard 'cos sometimes they probably talk some rubbish. But just listen to their personality and the way they come across. Sometimes when you're younger, you can be quite grown up at the same time.

People should listen more and may be talk about how they are feeling in general. Are they happy or are they sad? Obviously in care there's going to be reasons why they're in care. Sometimes to dive straight in directly as to why they're in care ...? People wanted to get directly straight into why problems were occurring. When you get to know someone, like myself and you, we spoke and got to know each other. From that point on, once you trust someone and get to know them, you feel more open to talk to them because you feel that you could confide.

I believe people have to take a step back a little, let that person talk and just listen. That's my personal belief from when I was growing up. I believe that a lot of people didn't listen to me, a lot of people didn't believe me, because I told one lie. It's the boy who cried wolf. You tell a few lies, so everything you say must be a lie! Sometimes you need someone to believe in you, just because that's how you feel, you need someone to talk to.

John: *William, you were telling me you are soon to be a father aren't you?*

Will: I am yeah and I think it's going to be the proudest day in my life! I think everyone has worries. For me personally, I wish I had done it at a later age but you know it's just another exciting thing in life.

You might not have the best upbringing but when we get to bring up our own child, then we're gonna be a 100% times better fathers and mothers than what other people are! You're gonna be much more willing to make sure it works for your family! When your family breaks down, and you have a family of your own it's something to look forward to. Your original family is something from the past. When you're about to have a family of your own it's still family, it's still that family environment.

John: *William, I've felt it a real privilege to listen to you today and I hope you'll come here again and may be speak to others. Maybe bring your family?*

Will: Care might not work for everybody but I think – well I would hope – the majority it does work for, because it worked for me. I have been brought up in the care system until the age of 18, since the age of 4 or 5. I've been through children's homes and foster homes through my life, finding love and being rejected.

the person is not just their actions

You have got to remember it's not always necessarily the person that they're rejecting but the person's actions. Some people take it personally when they're younger. When you're older you may realise it's not you they're rejecting, it's just the stage of your life you're at that they're rejecting. So you should never really blame yourself.

There is social conditioning, which is not a thing you can blame. Social conditioning is where you're brought up and turn out to be what you see, hear and what you're conditioned to be like. If you're with a very religious family the chances are you will grow up to be quite religious.

You can change yourself. That only happens when you're of an age to make your own mind up. I think that people shouldn't give themselves too much blame for stuff.

When you've done a bad thing in your life – the majority of us have done silly and bad things – you get a conscience. A conscience is something that eats away at you when you've done something wrong. Well I found a conscience, and that's what it's been like for me. I've done some silly things and I wish I hadn't done them. It eats away at you. You really do think about it. You can only run away from it for a certain amount of time.

re-enacting the drama of rejection

When it comes to foster parents, I've been in a lot of foster families. They tried to show love but as they weren't my parents, I didn't feel they had any connection to me. They were just people who 'looked after' me. So, I used to push them away because they had no ruling over me. They weren't my parents so why should I do as they say? Sometimes you can push too many people you push away and end up with nobody.

The more people you push away the easier you find to keep doing it. Why try and love someone when it is much easier to push them away? You grow up in care, move around a lot and you're not happy. Foster families break down, sometimes because of your behaviour.

There are other circumstances I was in a foster family where my foster mother got very ill, which was nothing to do with me. I was with that lady – her name was Wendy – for about two years.

She was such a lovely lady and when she got ill it felt like she was getting rid of us, she didn't love us anymore. You shouldn't think like that because you know it's not always

the case. You tend to blame yourself and shouldn't because it's not always your fault – even if, like me, it's your behaviour, you rebel.

I used to test. I used to test throughout my life. I'd keep testing and testing and testing and seeing if they would push me away. If they didn't, then it just proved to me every time I tested them they loved me more. If they didn't get rid of me, I'd think well the next thing I do they must get rid of me. I would keep testing and testing until finally they'd have enough and did get rid of you. Then I'd think well I told you so. It's a silly thing you do.

Some of the foster families I have lived with, I probably could have lived with for many years. But you push people away because they are not your family or you think they don't love you. That's what you do. Anyone that's not your immediate family – your mother, your uncles, your aunts – you just take this accusation, this belief that they're just doing it for the money, they are not doing it for the right reasons.

I always felt like second best, especially when you live in foster families with their own children. You never feel like you've quite made the mark. You always feel that you are separate. I don't think that's always the case. Maybe with some foster families it is. It all depends on where you are and what the person's been trained to be like.

Most of the time I think there is love there. Obviously you don't just turn up at a placement and they love you. It's like a respect thing. Talking is a big thing. You talk to people and tell them how you feel instead of bottling it up, hoping it will go away. As I found out, it doesn't always go away. Sometimes it comes back and bites you in the butt many years later. I was told it is unhealthy to bottle things up because you put it down somewhere and these little thoughts come back. Don't ever be ashamed of your past. I don't think you should ever be ashamed of your past because there is nothing to be ashamed of in who you are.

You don't have to worry about things from the past. You just get on again. Accept love, I suppose, that's what you've got to do.