

MANNNA *in the wilderness*

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FOSTERING HOPE: A NEW CHANCE AT LIFE

by Julia Occhiogrosso

Even with the insights and empirical knowledge I acquired from twenty-five years of working with the homeless mentally ill, I felt unprepared and ill-equipped to respond effectively to the steady escalation of dangerous and disturbing “acting-out” behaviors manifesting in my twelve and thirteen-year-old sons. They came into our lives

nonviolent love, imperative to the recovery of my two sons. I am reminded of the famous quote from Dostoevsky’s *Brothers Karamazov*, “love in action is a harsh and dreadful thing compared to love in dreams and books.” It is suddenly clear to me that my work with the homeless and my call to be a mother are intimately entwined. Both require me to never give up on those whom society

an adaptation for survival. One of many serious consequences of this is that their capacity to trust adults is severely damaged. Psychologically they have learned that in order to survive (not die), they must be in complete control. So they manifest behaviors that are subsequently defiant and oppositional. In turn the adults who they already do not trust: parents, teachers, police, etc. react with fear, anger or punishment, which in turn fuels the defiance and reinforces their psychological reality that adults are indeed unsafe and cannot be trusted.

There is also a high correlation between parents who neglect or abuse their children and mental illness, increasing the proclivity for mood disturbance in the children as well.

We learned that when children with a history of early trauma reach adolescence, they begin to psychologically relive the trauma suffered during those first two years of life. Often they manifest the symptoms of post traumatic stress disorder. They begin to experience anxiety, depression and rage.

We pieced all these factors together to begin to understand why our children were self-destructing, why they were not coming home at night, getting into fights at school, and not going to school. At twelve and thirteen they were taking drugs and alcohol. They had no regard for our parental authority and would be thrown into a violent rage when we set very reasonable limits.

After many months of living through this and more, we finally found a therapist who had personal experience with attachment disorder: he had foster-adopted seven children. He helped us to understand what was happening and what we could do about it. At about the same time our research lead us to the Institute for Attachment and Child Development, a therapeutic program in Colorado specifically effective in treating children with disrupted attachment issues.

It was Holy Week when Gary and I were back in Colorado at the Institute for Attachment and Child Development. Our oldest son had been here for a month in a therapeutic foster home. Here, he was, with the help of highly skilled



PHOTO BY JULIA OCCHIOGROSSO

at two and three years of age through the Nevada State Foster Care program. There were no serious signs of effects of the neglect they had endured before coming to us. They were animated happy children who brought joy into our lives. By the time they were four and five the adoption was finalized.

My personal journey into the suffering of my dear sons has informed my heart yet again in a new way of the urgent and essential life task of learning to love unconditionally. Through the tragic and terrifying turn of events that have shaken our family, I have been awakened to a deeper understanding of why so many that we see on the streets are so broken and seem to be caught in a never-ending cycle of self-destruction.

I have also realized that every fiber of experience and wisdom that has been woven into my heart over these years has prepared me for the unsentimental

would deem undeserving. Whether that be the homeless man on the street or the delinquent, “problem” child, both experiences have shown me how to find and mend the heart of the dejected outcast. Indeed, in both instances, I have learned what is possible when compassion and empathy replace punishment and rejection.

Both sons were placed in treatment. Their placement was in response to their steadily escalating, dangerous, delinquent behaviors. At twelve and thirteen, they were showing signs that something was terribly wrong. We were well into crisis management before we found a therapist who actually understood what was happening. Hence, Gary and I have been living a crash course in the effects of disrupted attachment, sometimes known as Attachment Disorder. We have learned that children who suffer abuse or neglect during the first two years of life, develop

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treatment parents, put into a developmental box, reverting him to a younger psychological age. This process along with medications for mood disorder would prepare him for a long-anticipated, two-week intensive aimed at healing the wounds of his original trauma of early neglect as well as his relationship to Gary and I as his parents. The therapist warns that it will be a roller coaster ride of emotions especially for him, and that we as parents need to stay on the platform, comforting him through it all.

By day three my son is laying across my lap. He is weeping the tears of grief and disappointment that have been buried under layers of anger, confusion and pain. Together my husband and I hold him securely, rocking and soothing the deep sobbing that was finally being released. This went on for about an hour before he became calm and the crying ceased. Then the therapist spoke with him to help him understand what just occurred and when he asked how this all felt, he smiled like a happy child and replied, "satisfying."

It is unfortunate that there are so many who are born, through no fault of their own, into dangerous and compromised circumstances and never find relief. Often they are inheriting a legacy of mental illness, drug and alcohol

addictions, neglect and abuse. Nationally one in four former foster youth will be incarcerated two years after leaving foster care. Across the country, for many reasons, there has been a call to reform the foster care system. Part of this reformation should include efforts to provide effective treatment for these children. Perhaps it is time we do more for the future of these children than just building more prisons.

Comprehensive structural changes in adoption/foster care systems will not only alleviate the suffering of families, it will sow the seeds for social transformation putting to rest legacies of abuse and neglect. Certainly this kind of structural change can and will, over time, yield a decline in the number of homeless mentally ill.

Our sons are finally both at home. They both successfully went through the treatment program at the Institute for Attachment and Child Development. They now have a new understanding of family. They were helped to face the truth of their original traumas. They were prescribed effective medications. They have a desire to be part of our family and have tools and insight to continue the work of healing. My husband and I have also been given the parenting tools and support to help the boys navigate through

their struggles. With continued therapy and medication management the prognosis is good. We are on the road to a brighter, healthier future for our family. We are full of gratitude to our family and friends for their prayers and generous support in our efforts to obtain this specialized treatment for our boys. We only hope that someday this type of treatment will be accessible for all families who are raising children with disrupted attachment so these children can have a chance at life. We are heartened to see that there are local efforts being made to bring in experts on the subject to educate and work with local parents and clinicians in the field of foster care and adoption.

On September 11 & 12, 2008 at the West Charleston Library there will be an Attachment Disorder Training: Theory, Treatment and Parenting presented by Forrest Lien, LCSW and Konnie Stoltz (Therapeutic Foster Parent and Parent Trainer) from the Institute for Attachment and Child Development. Contact information: (702) 375-2171.

An edited version of this article appeared in Tim O'Callaghan's column, One Man's View, in the Aug. 21-28 edition of The Summerlin, Henderson, & Green Valley Home News: tocomv.blogspot.com.

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**PRAY FOR
 PEACE
 IN OUR
 WORLD!** (FOR
 TAB)

***Thanks to all our
 Donors who make this
 ministry possible!***

A Typical Morning Soupline Facts:

Thursday, August 21, 2008

- 50 gallons of Macaroni & Cheese**
 50 pounds of elbow noodles (\$53.95)
- 8 #10 cans cheese sauce (\$47.92)
- 25 pounds ground beef (\$41.45)
- 5 pounds margarine (\$7.59)
- Spices: salt & pepper
 milk and half and half (donated)
- 48 gallons of iced tea**
 10 pounds of sugar (\$4.40)

- 12 1-gallon tea bags (\$2.25)
- 2 trays fruit salad (donated)**
- 12 trays pastries and pies (donated)**
- 16 loaves of bread (donated)**
- 500 12-ounce paper bowls (\$23.16)
- 250 plastic spoons & 250 cups (\$8.00)
- 6 hot sauce, 12 salt & pepper shakers
- 1 #10 can of jalapeños (\$3.99)
- Total cost:** \$192.71, Mac & Cheese:
 \$150.91 or 28 cents per 12 oz. serving.

BOB KOENIG, R.I.P.

Bob Koenig, long-time activist, volunteer, friend and supporter, and member of Veterans For Peace, died on Saturday evening, August 2, after suffering with a long illness. He died at home with his wife, Terri (Tess). A memorial will not be held until sometime in September when Bob & Terri's son, Paul, a Carmelite priest, can return home from his assignment in remote Kyengeza, Uganda.

PLEASE JOIN US:

- Wednesday-Saturday, 6:00 a.m.:**
 Morning prayer at Catholic Worker.
 - Wednesday-Saturday, 6:30 a.m.:**
 Breakfast served at G & McWilliams streets to the poor and homeless.
 - Last Saturday of month, 8:00 a.m.:**
 Deliver food to homes in need.
 - Wednesday, 8:00 a.m. - noon:**
 Hospitality Day, we invite 15 homeless men & women home for showers, to wash clothes, & lunch.
 - Thursday, 8:30 a.m. - 9:30 a.m.:**
 Vigil for Peace in front of Federal Court-house, 333 S. Las Vegas Blvd.
 - Thursday, 11:30 a.m.:**
 100 Bag lunches delivered to homeless.
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