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A question pondered

Helen Buggle

Smyly Trust Services

A question that is continually asked of me, why have you worked in the one job for so long? Where do I start? It was a long time ago now when I first set foot in Glensilva. I had never worked in a residential children's home before and I had no idea what to expect. Well I got more than I bargained for that's for sure; but hey 27 years later I am still here! Why Smyly Trust? Why did it capture me so? Why through all the up's and downs of this task, called social care have I remained? Believe it or not, I ask myself these questions on a regular basis, maybe more frequently now than before, is that my age? Am I just getting more philosophical? Or is it because the task over the last number of years has got more difficult, I guess the best answer would be, it's a combination of all the above and more.

I am clear of the 'why' Smyly Trust. When I first arrived I encountered a small group of very creative and dedicated people. There was a way of thinking and living alongside the children that felt natural to me. The physical space was shared without anxiety; children were seen, heard and responded too in a loving manner. We did not have to have all the answers but we did have all the time and an eye for detail. This suited me well, due to my own dyslexia I had become very good at collecting details and understanding their worth in the enormity of a young life. The small things were important and life's ordinariness was valued as something extraordinary especially after such devastation in some of the young lives I was now getting to know. This understanding of the importance of one's very beginnings appealed to me and I entered a conversation that has lasted over 27 years. As I grew and developed into a care worker, my own story of having been loved and having lost allowed me to connect with and at the same time resourced me to withstand the children's hurts and anger and afforded me an ability to 'hold' both myself and others in the pain.

Smyly Trust was and remains a small organisation of quality. The trustees and the board strive for survival with the hope for more, just like the children in their care. The ethics and principles of care and concern, along with offering a service for the good of others, while recognising in the doing we are also served and changed, has rung true for me so many times. When I think of all I have learned from the children I have cared for it amounts to a life time of movement, growth and immense depth. Smyly Trust Services is a charity. It does not work for profit; it's funding is for the betterment of the lives of the children in its care. It is careful

with the public money and it demands a high level of ethical behaviour from each employee, all of which appeals to my own work ethic and principles.

To return to my original question; why did I stay around for so long? Why do I remain? And; why do I ask myself these questions on a frequent basis? I stayed because I found myself growing and developing as a social care worker. Smyly Trust allowed me to flourish and to progress at my own pace. I was afforded the privilege to return to education as an adult, supported and encouraged all the way by the organisation. My opinion was valued, many ideas I shared were acted on and I saw I could make a difference in the lives of people I cared for. That may sound selfish and egotistical but then if we are all honest with ourselves don't we all want to contribute something to this world we live in? I count myself among the lucky few to see the difference take shape and because I have stayed around so long I have seen seeds planted bear fruit. I have indeed been privileged.

There were other privileges bestowed on me through my work. There was a presence that pushed and prodded me to do things and take up challenges that I never thought I would. When it came time to lead from behind I was pushed forward and then looked on as a peer, an equal, a leader and all the time 'held' by a body of theory, principles and the generosity of another. For a number of years my relationship with Smyly Trust became a living experience of the therapeutic alliance. Good people were introduced into my working life who had a profound effect on me, my thinking was expanded by theirs, and my resilience was supported by their belief in me. Again I know myself to be privileged.

So why am I questioning myself and my decision to remain at the task more and more? It is not the difficulties the children bring, it is because of children in difficulties I entered in to this work. Is it the continuous obstacles placed in our way to check and recheck ourselves, the mountains of paper work needed to evidence our practice that it is difficult to understand its purpose in the lives of the children? Is it the lack of control over ones working environment; when outside agencies or external stakeholders far removed from the child make decisions that create difficulties? Is it the mixed messages we get on a weekly basis? 'Love the children like your own' was one I remember. Well if I did that I might be reported to social services when I took away their computer privileges or did not allow them to have a mobile phone or did not give them pocket money one week. The other message more recently given was to 'take risks, we will stand behind you'. I wonder how far behind me will they stand, so far they will have seen nothing and therefore be of no support. I talk not of my organisation but of our corporate bodies that dive for cover when the spotlight is shone on them. I guess one has to remember they are also vying for survival.

I feel we are paying for the sins of the past and fear of its repetition. The abuse children suffered at the hands of people who did not understand the meaning of care at its most basic was horrific and should never be forgotten. However I now struggle with the very real experience of prescribed abuse in the form of over institutionalisation of care and the total abuse of power and lack of forward and long term planning which affects the daily lives of children. I struggle with bureaucratic tick box exercises that go nowhere, that lead to no improvements. I struggle with the lack of acknowledgement in the increase of mental health and addiction issues in children lives and the total lack of appropriate placements for violent children which leave both child and adult vulnerable. I question decisions made with no consultation; is this not another form of abuse with just as far reaching consequences?

While I do not want to be party to this system I am compelled to remain, to lend my voice to the vulnerable, be that child or staff member. I am motivated to keep trying to make a difference no matter how small. If and when given an opportunity I will personalise, humanise and try to make sense of this world the child finds themselves in and when I am questioned, hope that I will be in a position of knowledge and understanding in order to do better it for this that I am bound to remain. When I stop questioning, when the conversation ends, then it will be time for me to leave.