

More than Service-Learning: What I Learned About Me, and You, and Them. Relationships Matter.

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Here I was, a 48-year-old, recently divorced woman, returning to school to finally finish a college degree. As part of my Ethics requirement for an undergraduate degree in Psychology, I enrolled in the course *Self, Community, and Service: Thinking and Action for Ethical Being*. I teamed up with a community partner, Marin YMCA Youth Court as a Case Manager. My role as Case Manager was to help troubled teens who had broken the law. The Marin County Youth Court is an innovative restorative justice alternative to the traditional juvenile justice system. It is an early intervention program for first-time misdemeanor offenders. The program is designed to give youth between the ages of ten and seventeen, who have broken the law and admitted their guilt, a second chance. If the offender completes his/her sanctions within three months, his/her juvenile record is cleared. The Case Manager's responsibilities include attending the youth's hearing and meeting with the youth and his/her family immediately following the hearing. The Case Manager helps the youth find a non-punitive community service opportunity, ensures the youth attends all sanctioned youth court meetings, and makes weekly contact with the youth (usually via telephone) until completion of the sanctions, including community service hours. I had no idea what I was getting myself into. I assumed this would be just another hurdle to jump over in my efforts to finish my college degree. It turned out to be so much more.

I am convinced that before working with the Marin Youth Court I had the sort of brain Jonah Lehrer (2009) warns us about – one “that’s intolerant of uncertainty [and] often tricks itself into thinking the wrong thing” (203). Like many middle-class, white Americans, I had little previous personal exposure to the criminal justice system. Leading into my work with Marin Youth Court, I assumed the teens I would be helping bore little, if any, resemblance to those I’d known best – my own children, for example, two of them teenagers themselves. My oldest, 27, now has a family of her own, but I remember her rocky teen years well. But she never ended up in Youth Court. I thought the teens in Marin Youth Court would be dangerous kids from dysfunctional families. I wasn’t sure I could really make a difference. I worried about the time commitment, concerned that my working with other teens would take too much time away from my own children. But the time came, and I was assigned my first case. It is in this capacity that I met Alex and his family. It is here where my thinking changed forever.

Everyone is entitled to have his/her basic needs met (health, food, shelter, education), to exercise certain human capabilities, and to be protected from certain harms (Appiah 2006, 165). All states should respect the rights and meet the needs of their citizens. All of us share in this collective obligation (Appiah 2006, 164). But how much can I really do without derailing my own life, which sometimes borders on a fragile balance? I used to teach an American Red Cross lifeguarding class. A main rule I tried to instill in my students as potential lifeguards was: Never put yourself in danger. You cannot help others if you put yourself at risk. I think this rule applies to our obligations to strangers as well.

After meeting Alex and his family, I realized we could not have been more different. Alex’s parents spoke Spanish with very limited English. I spoke English with very limited Spanish. Alex’s parents were hardworking people, each holding down multiple jobs to make ends meet, working long hours including evenings and weekends, all while trying to raise Alex

and his two brothers. For years I had been a stay-at-home mom, living in white suburbia, raising my three children. I was immediately out of my comfort zone. How could I possibly help this family navigate through a system I knew little about? The language barrier, I knew, would not be helpful. Even so, I felt it was important to get out of my bubble. I needed to educate myself on what's really going on in our country. I needed to develop more compassion. I needed to re-evaluate where I spent my time. I needed to at least try to make a difference. In the process, I learned as much about myself as I did about Alex. Indeed, nearly every one of my preconceptions would be challenged.

"Alex" was a 16-year-old boy who was caught with drug paraphernalia in his backpack at school. Alex was a quiet kid from a traditional Hispanic family, but when asked on the stand at the Marin Youth Court if he had any regrets, he simply said, "I regret getting caught." This really annoyed me. I was convinced that I couldn't help this kid if he wasn't taking responsibility for the crime he had committed. In talking with Alex, I told him I wished this program were around when I was raising my oldest daughter. He quietly asked, "Did she turn out okay?" This was the first time I saw that maybe Alex really did want to "turn out okay." Why was I so surprised? It was obvious I had already convinced myself that Alex had no remorse. Ignoring what's happening around us because it goes against what we already believe is delusional. When we pay attention to only those things that confirm our beliefs, we become ignorant fools. "We all silence the cognitive dissonance through self-imposed ignorance" (Lehrer 2009, 207).

After pleading guilty to possession of drug paraphernalia, Alex's sanctions recommended by the jurors of the Marin Youth Court were 25 hours of community service, sitting on the Tuesday night jury for four Marin Youth Court cases, and attending one Saturday DUI (Decisions Under the Influence) training session with his parents. Alex agreed to the sanctions. My role as Case Manager was to see that Alex fulfilled this obligation.

Alex had had troubles before. He had been seeing a counselor, but Alex stopped going and his parents didn't have the money to keep paying. Without outside resources, his parents were left to deal with Alex on their own. As punishment for the possession of drug paraphernalia, Alex's parents took away his cell phone (which they were having trouble affording anyway). This made my job very difficult. My only means of communicating with Alex was through his parents, mainly his mother. This was not an ideal situation. It became very clear to me that the kids who have the latest technology, i.e. their own cell phones, usually the more affluent kids, are in better contact with their Case Managers and therefore receive better case management. Also, there was the language barrier between Alex's parents and myself. A lot of the information I wanted to communicate could have been forwarded via email in Spanish materials already available through the Marin Youth Court. But Alex's parents didn't have an email account, or access to a computer for that matter. This made it very difficult to convey information. I knew they would be in a better position to understand and make decisions if they could get the information in a language they knew well. Again, the wealthier families with computer access get better case management.

The next couple of months were difficult for everyone. I would wait for Alex each Tuesday evening, but eventually he stopped showing up. I would get a call from his mother saying Alex was in bed and didn't feel well. Out of frustration, his father would threaten to call the police to drag Alex to Youth Court. I knew involving the police would not get Alex to Youth Court. Marin Youth Court is supposed to be an alternative to the traditional justice system. I didn't understand why they would want to involve the police. I asked if they felt they were

being physically threatened. They did not. They were frustrated, angry, and losing control of their son. I remembered being a parent trying to navigate the turbulent seas of raising my own teen. It was rough on everyone, yet somehow we managed to protect our relationship. Parent coaching was not my responsibility, but I had to try something. I could see the more Alex's parents pushed, the less likely he was to respond. I encouraged them not to react out of frustration or anger. The parents were frustrated. Alex was frustrated. Alex felt he wasn't learning anything from the program, and his parents were threatening to call the police if he didn't show up for Youth Court. Along with Alex's unwillingness to attend Youth Court meetings, his parents were unable to attend the DUI (Decisions Under the Influence) training they were scheduled to attend with Alex on a Saturday because both parents worked on weekends.

In my workings with Marin Youth Court, I had to search for those places where I could connect with Alex and his family. Most Case Managers, assisting typically white teens, were interacting almost exclusively with the at risk teen individually. My client was part of a different culture. Most of my interactions were with the parents. In the Hispanic community a problem *within* the family is a problem of the *entire* family. My role was to support *all* of them. I was struggling with our different parenting styles, thinking "my way" was better, but our thin values, those values that are universal across cultures, were the same. We both wanted our children to succeed in life. Our think values, those actions that are specific to certain cultures, are somewhat different. I wanted Alex to take responsibility for completing his sanctions, allowing him to fail and regroup as we go along. His parents were demanding that he do exactly what he was being told to do, to obey without question. Alex's defiance of his parents' authority led to calls to me, on more than one occasion, from an angry, frustrated father saying he was going to call the police. I had to respectfully ask them to take a step back, explain that no good decision comes out of anger. I needed to try to unite myself with the Hispanic culture in order to be able to understand and accept where the parents were coming from.

"Cultures are made of continuities and change. Cosmopolitans believe that human variety matters because people are entitled to the options they need to shape their lives in partnership with others" (Appiah 2006, 104). Alex's life was being shaped by outside influences that were "contaminating" the culture of his family. Alex belongs to two different cultures, and is picking values from each as he sees fit. "A bit of this and a bit of that is how newness enters the world. It is the great possibility that mass migration gives the world" (Rushdie 1991). Cosmopolitans temper a respect for differences with a respect for actual human beings (Appiah 2006, 113).

But what about the outside influences that Alex is bringing into his home? How his parents approach this problem depends on the way they perceive it. Traditionally, when someone is "acting out," we focus on the behavior. If the behavior is bad, we try to stop the behavior by punishing the kid. Alex's parents grounded him, took away his phone, and took away his time with friends. Youth Court attempts to look at the entire circumstances surrounding the incident without the use of punishment. Our job as adults is to understand what is being "acted out" and respond to the message. We must try to understand the circumstances around a child's behavior, not just the behavior itself.

Why was this case proving to be so difficult? One problem occurs when "people no longer have a sense of a higher purpose, of something worth dying for" (Taylor 1991, 4). Without such a purpose, our dignity is threatened. Alex's parents couldn't force him to do what he didn't want to do. I certainly couldn't force Alex to go where he didn't want to go. Alex felt

he didn't belong with this group and he was just going to do the minimal amount required to get through the program. Alex was not going to give in to someone else's demands and he couldn't see for himself the greater good that this program might offer. He certainly wasn't going to be forced to do anything. I found myself focusing on Alex's behavior and forgot to focus on the entire circumstances surrounding Alex and his family. "Everyone has a right to develop their own form of life, grounded on their own sense of what is really important or of value. People are called to be true to themselves and to seek their own self-fulfillment. No one else can or should try to dictate its content" (Taylor 1991, 14). Both Alex and I were guilty of a sense of individualism that was centering on our respective selves and shutting out, and not being aware of, the greater issues or concerns. To be fully developed beings, we must connect with our innermost selves. Each of us possesses within us our own unique potential. But these voices deep within are shaped by outside forces, and the forces that shape Alex could not have been any more different from the forces that shape me. I could not figure out how I was going to change Alex to see things my way. I realized, again, this was not what I was being asked to do. Our self-definitions come from "finding what is significant in our differences from others" (Taylor 1991, 35). Instead of focusing on our differences, I focused on our common bond: we are linked together by the common bond of humanity. We must reach beyond ourselves to find our unique worth.

I tried to get Alex to think beyond today and plan for the future: finish high school, participate in sports, go to college. He didn't seem to be able to focus on anything past today. How could two lives be so different? I couldn't understand where he was coming from. I knew some of the other teens in the program were worried about, if not planning for, their future. Is Alex a "bad apple," or is the system we were asking him to succeed in bad? We need to look at where we fit in the world and remind ourselves of what's important. We need to engage young people so they have a feeling of "responsibility to the present" (Kimmelman 2011). I see this happening in the Marin Youth Court, where young people see where they fit in society and what consequences their actions have on others in the world. As part of the restorative process, we see kids being "responsible to the present" and then actively helping each other along their similar journeys. Why couldn't Alex fit into this mold?

Why was this so hard for Alex to understand? Was it cultural? Was it socioeconomic? Was it simply his destiny to not succeed? In her book, Judith Butler asks, "What social conditions help to form the very ways that choice and deliberation proceed?" (2004, 16). How is it that somehow our system has not provided the same choices for Alex as for, let's say, a teen growing up in Tiburon, CA (a more affluent, mostly white community in Marin County)? Alex was falling through the cracks of our system. How was it that he was somehow not as valued? I was fortunate to be able to send my kids to private schools, but that does not make my children more valuable. When will *all* our teens be treated equally? When will we value the lives of the more affluent teens equally to those teens living in the Canal (a less affluent, mostly Hispanic community in Marin County), for example?

After working with Alex and his family I felt ashamed to be "fortunate" enough to live in one of the more affluent communities with others "just like me." Having relationships with "others," getting to know "the other," gives a different perspective on knowing "me." We should be asking ourselves, how does *my* culture fit in with *their* culture? We should not just notice the differences, but enjoy the many similarities we all share as part of the human race. We must embrace Cosmopolitanism.

What is Cosmopolitanism? “Cosmopolitanism begins with the simple idea that in the human community we need to develop habits of coexistence, of living together” (Appiah 2006, xiv). The world shapes who we become. I am who I am, in large part, because of how I was raised and my own life experiences. Alex is who he is, in large part, because of how *he* was raised and *his* life experiences. My differences do not separate me from Alex. We are in this world together and our relationship matters. Nothing should separate us so much that we cannot see our “oneness” in this universe. We can learn so much from each other, if we just take the time.

Why did Alex’s case draw me in? We have an obligation to each other and we must take seriously the value not just of human life, but of particular lives (Appiah 2006, xv), of Alex’s life. A sense of family and tribe that is inclusive and overlapping should be commonplace. It is vital that we not limit ourselves to our own culture, upbringing, and life experiences, that we not view the world simply through our own narrow looking glass. In looking through a shattered piece of mirror we will “find parts of the truth (along with much error) everywhere and the whole truth nowhere. The deepest mistake is to think that our little shard of mirror can reflect the whole” (Appiah 2006, 8).

I could have accepted the fact that Alex simply wasn’t going to succeed. But we must unite ourselves with each other, not just accept “the other.” This “live-and-let-live” attitude may at first seem accepting, but it can actually be what separates us from our fellow “cosmopolitans,” our fellow citizens of the universe. “There is no one shattered mirror; there are lots of mirrors, lots of moral truths, we can at best agree to differ” (Appiah 2006, 11). We must search for those places where we *can* agree, but not get bogged down with *how* we agree. “The idea behind the Golden Rule is that we should take other people’s interests seriously, take them into account. It suggests that we learn about other people’s situations, and then use our imaginations to walk a while in their moccasins” (Appiah 2006, 63).

A simple email or telephone call from a caring adult, “Hey! How are you? I can see that you’re having a hard time,” can go a long way. We need to make connections between one human being to another. Attachment is a human need, a life necessity, for both the one who is being taken care of and the caregiver. We are biologically wired to attach (Neufeld and Mate 2008). For generations, human beings have been raised within a village, a community, or extended family, within an Attachment Village. But what happens when the “attachment village” doesn’t exist? The human will attach to whoever is around. But what if these attachments have significantly different values than the family values?

Alex was attaching himself to his peers with few, if any, attachments to caring adults who share his family’s values. When attachments are established to peers, it is impossible to attach to anyone else. When kids are attached to adults, they want to be the same as them. This also holds true that when kids attach to peers, they want to be the same as *them*. They are learning their values from immature creatures. Adult attachments make kids want to model the adult. Instead of diagnosing kids, we need to diagnose their relationships (Neufeld and Mate 2008).

But what happens when families have to work multiple jobs in order to meet their basic needs? Who is in charge of ensuring proper attachments with our teens? If our children are spending most of their time at school, then the school system needs to meet their attachment needs.

Who is to raise our kids? The resounding answer, the only answer compatible with nature, is that we – the parents and other adults concerned with the care of

children – must be their mentors, their guides, their nurturers, and their models. We need to hold on to our children until our work is done. We need to hold on not for selfish purposes but so they can venture forth, not to hold them back but so they can fulfill their developmental destinies. We need to hold on to them until they can hold on to themselves” (Neufeld and Mate 2008).

So what happens to Alex and his parents’ relationship? What happens to my relationship with Alex? It is not enough to simply tolerate each other’s differences, even within our own families. We must intervene in places when what is going on deeply violates our fundamental principles (Appiah 2006, 144). Cosmopolitans believe in a universal truth, but this truth is hard to find. One truth we know is that every human being has obligations to every other human being. Everybody matters (Appiah 2006, 144).

Were Alex’s parents supposed to just tolerate his behavior without consequences? The Cosmopolitan understanding of toleration means interacting on terms of respect with those who see the world differently. There is not one right way for all human beings to live. We must engage in this conversation. The fear of this conversation is that exchanges with people with different values could lead us to abandon our own (Appiah 2006, 146).

It isn’t just that Alex’s values were being shaped by a predominantly white, teen culture. It’s that Alex was then being asked to succeed in this culture without the same benefits as those who are born into it. There are many reports pointing to the social injustices of minority communities, yet we do nothing to systemically change the status quo. I donate my expensive clothes to Goodwill or donate food to the Food Bank. I then go home and say, “This is so sad.” But, I return to my ordinary life. How can my “passive feelings” be so selfish while my “active principles” be so generous (Appiah 2006, 158)?

Cosmopolitanism is about intelligence and curiosity as well as engagement. It begins with caring to try to understand *why* (Appiah 2006, 168). What is needed is the exercise of reason, not just explosions of feelings (Appiah 2006, 170). There are still people living within our communities, going to school with our children, who do not have their basic needs met. Should we continue to donate our canned goods, or might it do more good to work to create opportunities for these teens and their parents, and in so doing raise their ability to meet their needs? If there are still people without their basic entitlements, then collectively, we are not meeting our obligations. These obligations are not unreasonable. They do not require us to abandon our lives (Appiah 2006, 173). The people of the richest nations can do better. The people of the richest communities can do better. This is a demand of simple morality. But it is one that will resonate more widely if we make our civilization more cosmopolitan (Appiah 2006, 174).

While we are naturally formed by many conditions beyond our control, we have the capacity to make new choices, to see the world in new ways. The fundamental contradiction that we experience as human beings lies in the fact that we are actually both unique individuals as well as part of a larger system or reality. We impact other human beings and they impact us. We are interconnected. We are obligated to question the social issues that run against the ethical grain of a society (i.e. poverty, racism). We must work to make a change at whatever level we can. We have an individual and a collective responsibility to others. It is important that we broaden our scope of connectedness to reach outside our neighborhood, our social groups, our church groups, our class in society, our colleagues, and our families (Van Der Ryn 2013).

Relationships matter.

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