

Tiny Chunks of Wisdom
Observations on Relational Work
with Children, Youth & Adults

John M Digney, PhD and Maxwell Smart, MSc

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It is important that we are a profession that helps in making positive memories, rather than one that merely assesses those in need and then writes of their behaviours in reports for others.

It is in positive memories that growth and learning take place, and it is on these foundations that the walls of adulthood are built.

Maxie & Digz

Preface

It was not long ago that we came across the tool bag belonging to a Joiner who was fixing fire doors in a residential setting. The bag was full of drills, wood chisels, screw drivers and all multitude of gadgets and gizmos to hang doors and support his many tasks.

A young person watching the Joiner at work asked him why he had so many tools for that job and commented that he seemed only to use a few. The Joiner, a gentle and patient man replied, 'you should always have many tools in your bag, you never know what problems you are going to come across.' The youth looked on intently, listening to the Joiner, who then took some time to show some of his tools and explain what each did. A teaching and learning moment had occurred and an interest spawned in the youth. A year later the same young person decided that he wished to enrol in a college course that could lead to a career as a joiner.

We share this story to demonstrate how small moments that occur in the context of an everyday conversation with someone that we are connected to or interested in are massive in their significance, and can become one of the events that alters their lifepath.

The mention of having many tools for many jobs is also relevant, because we too need to have the right tools in our tool bag if we are to do the very intricate and complex work with people who are vulnerable, challenged, and in many ways, lost. In addition to the 'tools' we also need to know how to use these tools effectively and meaningfully.

The tools we are referring to are understanding, kindness, compassion, forgiveness, love, curiosity, and humour. These tools are just as essential to us as is the screwdriver or wood glue to the Joiner. This book hopes to provide some insights into the tools we need, the tools we already have, and how to think about how and when to use them.

Foreword

Experienced, mature Child and Youth Care (CYC) practitioners are easy to spot, even in a crowded room. When you attend conferences regularly, smart people try to engage these folks in conversation, or just listen as they talk to each other about their practice experiences. Wisdom far beyond the info gleaned in keynotes and workshops is the usual result of this interaction, which is why coffee breaks can be more productive than the programmed events.

John Digney and Maxwell Smart are particularly good examples of this type of resource. They both have extensive experience and are quite articulate about how and why to use CYC approaches. This book is focused on relational practice and it approaches this complex idea from a wide angle. Using metaphor, humour, and affection for the people involved, they provide short, insightful advice and perspective to expand the understanding of CYC practice for both mature and new practitioners.

The authors hail from Ireland and Scotland respectively and both have a Gaelic worldview that informs the material. They are comfortable quoting poets and philosophers while describing practical strategies and life space events. The authors are also well versed in CYC literature and research, which sets them apart from academics as well as practitioners who just rely on personal experience. The blending of practical examples and useful theory described in these chapters is clear and complex at the same time.

Relational practice has been a hallmark of CYC work for over twenty years, yet it is still an evolving concept, and this book is an important contribution to the conversation. The authors do not shy away from building relationships through love, careful and respectful connections and letting go of the need to control people. Safe and functional boundary dynamics are described as well as how to build intimate connections in the life space.

Chapters are often followed by questions and topics for discussion, so this can be both a personal tool for reflection as well as a training resource for a CYC team. The authors provide interesting material for staff at every level of experience.

Reflective practice, which is the hallmark of most professions, can be difficult for practitioners who are not in a collegial environment, so this book will be a welcome resource for both enabling discussions with colleagues and self-examination. Supervisors can also utilize these chapters with individuals and teams to create helpful professional development.

I hope that this book becomes widely available and used by CYC programs and individual professionals to enable them to be exposed to the wisdom and practical advice of two very good examples of CYC practitioners who have reached a high level of complex practice built on CYC experience. We all need to stand on the shoulders of people like John and Max, who have broken the ground that makes our path to skilled practice more accessible.

Jack Phelan

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Be well everyone!

Introduction

Welcome one and all to the fruits of ‘Project Book’. It is as you can gather a book – but it is no ordinary book! What makes this book extraordinary? Nothing really. What is extraordinary however is that we have managed to get it this far ... a pair of numpty’s, who for much of our formative years were encouraged to believe that we were unworthy, different from everyone else and maybe even a bit undeserving. Schools can be harsh places, maybe not so much in today’s world (at least where the teachers are concerned), but peer bullying, social exclusion and inexperienced adults working under stressful conditions still exist. These, along with many other factors, can serve to erode self-belief and sense of future. Yet, for many years we have been collaborating in making contributions to the field of ‘relational practice’, through conference presentations, training programmes, journal articles and book chapters.

This little book sees the coming together of some of our diverse thoughts. We have structured these into chapters that reflect our personal and professional perspectives on a range of issues that are associated with caring, the caring professions and, in particular, relational practice.

Each chapter has a different genesis. Some were written as a response to what was going on in our everyday lives at a given time. Some chapters are from conversations between the authors about certain subject areas. Some are the result of conference presentations that we have delivered, and some are musings about how we might respond better to structural issues within the realm of caring. But the common focus is on finding some lesson to consider and pass along. We achieved this to a greater degree in some chapters, but we still think that there is something potentially useful in all that we have included. You can make up your own mind on this. :)

In some chapters we share stories and experiences from practice, but within these we do not self-identify. This is something we agreed to do many years ago as it helps preserve confidentiality (and adds a little bit of mystery).

When we first considered compiling this book, we had sixty years of combined direct practice of working with vulnerable people and groups

behind us, having practiced in various social care domains from psychology to social care and social work. Whilst influenced heavily by our professional experiences in child & youth care and social care, we have also ‘borrowed’ knowledge from other disciplines that we have either experiences or qualifications in, including psychology, education, social work, engineering, business, and systems theory, to name but a few.

We have encountered many concepts that are every bit as worthwhile across these disciplines and for that reasons we have written this book for anyone who works within or is associated with any of the many social care, education, justice, youth work, educational and social work disciplines. Engineers and mathematicians might even find it interesting.

One thing that challenged us greatly was finding a word or term that could universally be used within the book to signify the people that we work with and care for. This was because of our desire to share this book with anyone working with folks from the many different caring disciplines including youth work, elder care, intellectual disability, alternative care, and early years. We ended up settling on the term ‘service user’, but we need to say that this term does not do justice to the work of relational practitioners and carers. The people we work with and care for are so much more than ‘service users’ to us, so please feel free to substitute whatever term works best for you, be it ‘kids’, ‘family’, ‘pupil’, ‘clients’, ‘loved one’, etc.

As professionals we all spend significant time considering the questions posed to us by the nature of our work, often hoping to find the holy grail. What we can say for sure is that this book is NOT the holy grail, but it does offer some thoughts and insights from OUR perspective at the time when we completed each chapter. There is no holy grail, no panacea that will cure all our ills or answer all our questions. Within this volume there is only practice wisdom and personal perspective, all of which is offered in good faith.

We also recognise the pressures of modern life and consequently the unique, long-lasting vicarious effects brought on by dealing with hurt and trauma that have impacted others. We recognise how difficult it is to work with and in environments where sands can be ever shifting, chaos is frequently present and where loss and emotional pain are common currency. We recognise the need for ‘down-time’ and being exposed to

things that can 'lift us up a little' and support us in understanding what we do. We also know how it feels to read dense volumes in search of some answers and greater knowledge. In recognising all these factors we have deliberately made all the chapters accessible, balancing theory and practice but also using our experiences of practice (stories) to inform and guide the reader. We are presenting this book in a way that is accessible to anyone, regardless of years of experience or previous knowledge of working within the arena of caring. If you have an interest in comforting the hurt, supporting the confused and sheltering the lost, give this little book a read.

Tiny Chunks of Wisdom: Generating a Body of Knowledge

The well-bred contradict other people. The wise contradict themselves.

Oscar Wilde, Irish Playwright.

Prudent, cautious self-control is wisdom's root.

Robert Burns, Scottish Poet.

Developing a Body of Knowledge

Over the years, in all professions, tiny nuggets of wisdom have been ‘mined’ from the experience of pioneers in the fields and passed down to those who care to listen. These nuggets tend to be ‘smelted’, ‘refined’ and essentially ‘forged’ into the tools of the respective professions and when accepted, become synonymous with effective practice. Alongside the tools are the universal truths, which come to be embraced. Within the caring professions, these include the knowledge that:

- relationships are the vehicle of healing.
- constraint is better than restraint.
- adults need to recognise and leave conflict cycles.
- acts of kindness can often be the point for a youth to start rebuilding their lives.
- connection with a caring mentor often serves to release the potential within.

So, what is it that we gain from the chunks of wisdom that have been ‘mined’ within our profession? Is it just little hints or practical advice; or is it deeper knowledge and insight; or is it a different way of thinking or a set of values? Maybe it is more ethereal?

The tiny chunks of wisdom that have helped the authors become more introspective and change the lens with which they view troubled youngsters, are a set of universal truths and were effective as they (paraphrasing Abraham Lincoln) appealed to ‘the better angels of our nature’. This deepened our understanding, improved our own practices, and helped us see through the smokescreen of behaviour – enabling respectful alliances of trust and cooperation.

Defining Wisdom

Wisdom, like many other things (such as humour and love) is around us all the time. It is an essential ingredient to life and positive living. While it is all but impossible to define, we know it when we see (or feel) it. We have looked to our colleagues in Psychology and have borrowed the following observations:

- It can be difficult to define Wisdom.
- People generally recognize it when they encounter it.
- It is seen as an integration of knowledge, experience, and deep understanding that incorporates tolerance for the uncertainties of life as well as its ups and downs.
- Wise people generally share an optimism that life’s problems can be solved.
- They (wise people) experience a certain amount of calm in facing difficult decisions.
- Intelligence may be necessary for wisdom, but it is not enough.
- Wisdom is an ability to see the big picture and have a sense of proportion¹.

Wisdom begins in wonder.

Socrates

¹ These points distilled from: <http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/wisdom>

Wisdom in Child and Youth Care

In our own profession, we find increasing levels of information, research, reflections and practice knowledge. Yet, 'is any of this able to be considered wisdom?' Digney (2010) collated 'advice' given by Child and Youth Care personalities to those new in the profession. Below is a random list of 10 'Little Chunks of Wisdom' from this exercise:

- A good question to ask yourself as many times as you can is, 'What am I doing here?' and so long as you can answer that question, you will be fine.
- Always find at least one positive about every young person you are working with.
- Attend training and conferences, read, study – you will never know all that you need to know, but it is important to try.
- Cultivate curiosity – your own, your colleague's and young people's.
- Give up fear, hesitations, and excuses if you really desire effective practice.
- Learn how to manage your emotions so they do not manage you.
- Never get caught up in the behaviour – behaviour is the manifestation of the inner kid, a symptom.
- A sense of humour (not at the expense of the kids) is essential.
- These kids are not sick – fight the pharmaceutical bullshit.
- Whether you like it or not, you will become a surrogate parent.

Of course, this is not the first attempt at collating practical wisdom. Others such as Maier (1979) and Brokenleg (1998) have sought to 'knit' together a tapestry containing the wisdom of our field and set against possible intervention approaches, with some of this 'wisdom' being explicitly linked to traditional and cultural wisdom. Many of these types of writings speak from the position of 'adult as expert' – but what of the 'wisdom of youth'?

How Chastening in the hour of pride – how consoling in the hour of affliction.

Lincoln

Baizerman (1994) describes a basic tension between younger and older people concerned with the notion of wisdom – ‘adults know what’s best for kids’ and ‘kids know what’s best for themselves’. How often do we come across this point of conflict? Do we as the adults have a monopoly on wisdom? Sanders and Thompson (1994) made some excellent points in their discussion about wisdom:

- wisdom can be imposed on us by the science,
- there is a tremendous amount of client wisdom and knowledge held by the clients – they are the untapped experts on their own lives and logic,
- we wonder though that if conventional wisdom is inextricably linked to chronological age and lived experience, do we need to consider the use of our terms a little deeper?

Meade (n/d) states that wisdom ‘combines the spontaneous with the eternal, the personal with the universal, the practical with the symbolic, and unites soul with spirit. Inner wisdom fosters emotional intelligence, reveals unique visions, and keeps the soul lively at any age’. As he also states, ‘it is the genius of youth which reinvents culture and revitalizes the dance of life and the lived wisdom of elders which preserves meaning and serves our deepest values’ (np).

Practice Reflections

- Wisdom is subjective but requires consensus.
- Wisdom within a profession is ever evolving.
- Everyone (including you) can contribute to this evolving body of knowledge.
- Universal wisdoms exist, including the power of kindness, love and hope.
- Words of wisdom can come from the mouths of babes.