

Who's Responsible for the Welfare of Children?

Recently, I listened to a presentation of an exemplary model program that created an integrated web of services for families at risk for child maltreatment. These colleagues from another State inspired us with the story of how, over ten years, they pieced together almost all of the professional providers and public agencies in their community who might have contact with at risk children and families. These included assessment professionals as well as representatives of the various agencies that address the protective, therapeutic, educational, legal and economic needs of those whose life stress placed them in contact with the child protection system. Very few communities in the United States have created so extensive a network of collaboration. As a result, children and families move quickly from identification to support, guidance and/or penalty. In addition, criminal justice officers work hand-in-hand with social workers, psychologists and other clinicians. As perspectives get shared, specialists learn to include a wider spectrum of responses than they would reflexively bring from their specialized disciplinary training.

While I and the others in the audience felt wowed by the complex yet integrated system of care (actually, I prefer to use the more realistic term "system of services" since I believe that only people, not systems, can care) this community had woven, the magical spell suddenly broke for me. One of the presenters was describing the first time he joined a police officer who had been called to the house of a woman suspected of neglecting her young children. He painted a bleak portrait of dank, dark desolation, a place hopelessly unfit as a home for young children. My own natural emotional response to finding a mother and children subsisting in such extreme distress generally takes three directions:

- to want to protect the family from further suffering,
- to call for help to piece together an immediate alternative as well as an enduring strategy for recovery and humane treatment,
- and to hold up a mirror of shame to a society that claims all people to have equal rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness yet tolerates, and by tolerating promotes, a widening gulf between the free and the forlorn.

To my surprise, the gentleman telling the story exposed a different emotional perspective. This dedicated public servant, this champion of integrated support services, paused in mid-sentence and sighed. From inside the deep reaches of his sigh came the voice of frustration, hardened by years of supporting incessant waves of the chronically needy. "DRUG ADDICT," he crowed. "I knew instantly that we'd be removing the kids and that her prospects were hopeless." This good man had erected programs to serve every affliction. He had brought caring professionals together to coordinate services to hapless individuals and families. Yet his own deeply held concern for the just desserts of all succumbed to the maddening reality that the system cannot keep up with an epidemic rooted in despair. Our guest unwittingly reinforced the fruitless tradition of blaming the victim. I honestly believe that he did not recognize how his heart had hardened in trying to help himself cope with the recurrent ache of responsibility for the salvation of dispirited souls. At the same time, this is the easiest and most dangerous mistake to make for it prevents us from addressing the root causes of the problems people face.

Sure this woman's drug habit diverted her attention and drained her capacity to care for her dependent children. Certainly, her kids deserve to be reared in a safe, loving and inspiring

home. But just as surely, the chemical haze that stole the mother's reasoning also dulled her existential anguish. No doubt, in spirit, she died long before she ever became a parent. Chances are, this woman never enjoyed the necessary prerequisites for healthy development that we wish for her children. More than likely, as a child, her family suffered the indignity and immobility of underemployment and poverty. You can bet that her neighborhood was neither green nor safe nor rich with diverse interest. Her teachers were probably underpaid, her classmates underfed, her school's library under-stocked. Hopefully, somebody believed in her well enough and long enough for her to imagine how to care for herself, her future and her future loved ones. Sadly, it seems, not enough to overcome the destructive forces of inequity, indignity, hopelessness and loneliness.

So how can we try to help this woman and her children? And how can we try to spare other families from ever needing to come in contact with the child welfare system? The first question can be answered more easily yet less satisfyingly. In addition to the urgent protection of the children and treatment of the parent's illness, service providers must identify and promote the strengths that exist within the mother and her relationships. What skills does she possess? What dreams does she hold? Whom does she trust? What non-professional positive support systems in her community could be mobilized to augment and sustain therapeutic interventions?

This sad story actually refreshed and strengthened three convictions I hold dear. One is that lasting solutions to most of the challenges we face in life rest more in the caring relationships and behavior of friends and neighbors who give freely from their hearts, and less in the hands of professionals who are paid handsomely for their services. When it comes to treating the long entrenched scars of human debilitation, professional services are generally more useful in helping us to manage rather than to resolve our problems. Social, medical, psychological and other effective forms of therapeutic intervention rarely cure dis-ease that long ago etched its hold on a person, family or community.

Relatedly, I believe that all of us share responsibility for the health and welfare of children. The woman in the story I heard, just like every human being, deserved to develop a sense of hope, wonder, faith, will and industry that gets instilled early in life by people who teach us the most valuable lessons – that we are loved, lovable, valued, respected, admired and capable. When these messages are communicated sincerely and regularly over the years, we come to believe in ourselves. We also begin to trust that we can turn to others for support and that we have something of value to offer to others. In sum, our relationships become the source of our resilience and determination to prevail in the face of hardship.

This essential foundation can shine a beacon of hope to get us started on the journey of life and to remind us on dark nights that the struggle is worth while. However, it is rarely enough. Whether we know it or not, each of us gets help or hindrance from the conditions that rear us along with the people who care for us. Every child and family need a society that cares to reward work with livable wages, that takes public responsibility for insuring that everyone has decent shelter in a non-toxic community, that children have good schools to learn in and natural parks to play in. To grow up strong, we all need to live in a society that protects and promotes our human rights in two ways - through a system of law and justice that honors the essential dignity of every person and through a culture that opens its doors to housing, education, healthcare, and social and economic advancement equally to all. When the military becomes but one of many less

dangerous avenues out of poverty, we will know that we are on the road to fulfilling the dream of freedom and prosperity that inspired America's founding.

In the end, I find hope for our children and our civilization simply in the knowledge that everyone has inherited the grace of existence. Each infant comes to life endowed with certain unique qualities, styles and abilities. It is all of our jobs to nurture those diverse strengths within children that enable them to develop their potential and adapt to their challenges. We can choose to see the various faults we all possess and enable those to limit our growth and contributions. Or we can choose to see the assets that create each person's richness and potential. I hope we will decide to cultivate this wisest expression of kindness. In so doing, we may help our children flourish in a nation truly free from fear, securely at peace, generous with its abundance and serious about providing the necessary components of child welfare.

Peter A. Gorski, M.D., M.P.A.

Peter A. Gorski, M.D., M.P.A. is the Director of Program Impact and Innovation at the Children's Board of Hillsborough County and Professor of Pediatrics, Public Health, and Psychiatry at the University of South Florida.