

The Warp & Weft of Helping Teens



By Shelley A.W. Roy

When I was in college, I took a weaving course in which I learned how separate threads of many colors are woven together into an intricate pattern of extreme beauty. In weaving there are two types of threads, those that are placed on the loom that become the warp, traveling from one end of the weaving to the other. The weft are the shorter threads that create the delicate variable pattern going across the weaving. Like the warp threads, my life has always been about teaching, about igniting the potential within others to learn, to grow, to thrive. The weft has been represented by the many ways I have done this: through writing, through teaching in public elementary schools, through teaching middle school mathematics, through coaching, through supervising pre-service teacher, through working with public health nurses, through inviting teenage boys to live with me and my sons, and now through working with individuals who are incarcerated. Just as my life has become a strong woven pattern held together by my purpose, events of the past week have woven together to create an emerging pattern in my thinking.

This week I received a call from a friend who is a counselor and a middle school teacher. He works in a district in which a group of us has been working trying to change how people view behavior and how they manage themselves, especially when they work with others. He shared with me a conversation he had been involved with during his lunch break. He was sitting with several individuals who had been through the workshops over the past two summers, and he was listening to them share their views about the content of the training and the programs and support structure that have been put into place. Those sitting with him had no idea that for more than four years, he has studied these same ideas and has worked to integrate them into his interactions with his students and clients. The gist of the conversation was that what we were working to accomplish was never going to work because the practices we were recommending weren't being 'hard enough' on these kids. They needed to be disciplined more severely.

Then two days ago, as I was leaving the class I was teaching the men in the transition pod at the jail, a young man who was celebrating his 20th birthday while an inmate greeted me. I have always had a soft spot for young men who struggle to negotiate the transition from childhood to adulthood. I feel a strong connection to this young man because he is just a year younger than one of my sons and has much the same disposition as my son. He reminds me of those who my friends and family call Shelley's Lost Boys, the young men who have lived with me for short periods as they struggle to find their way. He is also a young man who has been institutionalized for most of his teenage years. Incarcerated from ages fourteen to nineteen, he has spent much of his time in solitary confinement on lock down for "misbehavior." In March of 2009 he was released on parole, and he was returned to jail fifteen days later.

And then yesterday, a woman in my class at the jail asked me to read what she had written so far about her life story. In some ways it is a story I hear often at the jail, however along with the other events of the week, it became the final thread that wove the pattern of my thinking. From the time she was age five, she watched her step-father repeatedly beat her mother, and she experienced abuse that started as a game in which he would lift her onto his shoulders and spin around. This “game” turned to the nightmare of his licking and fondling her in “my private parts,” raping her when she was twelve, and later sodomizing her. Her biological father had taken her two older brothers away to live with him. He told her that because she was a girl, she needed her mother. During this period in her life, she had tried several times to run away, always worrying about what was happening to her mother. She was told she was a bad girl and was threatened that her mother would receive more beatings if she didn’t allow her stepfather to have his way with her. When I read her account about how, as a six- or seven-year-old, she was given the opportunity to play with a neighbor girl who taught her about birthdays, I was so deeply touched my heart physically ached. She said that the girl had asked her what she had gotten for her birthday and that she didn’t understand the question because she had never celebrated a birthday or any other holiday. The neighbor girl proceeded to create a birthday celebration for her by putting a candle in a cupcake, serving Kool-Aid and explaining the ritual of making a wish before blowing out the candle. She said that they were too young to play with matches, so the candle remained unlit. She said that she had wished that her mother would love her and see her as a good girl, that her mother would stop calling her a bad girl. She said that she will never forget the feeling that she experienced when the neighbor girl gave her the birthday gift of one of her dolls.

Here in the span of seven days the thoughts in my head had been woven together leaving me with the question, **“How would more adults being harder on these two young people have helped them create a life that did not lead to drugs, violence and incarceration?”** I have been working on a curriculum and a companion book for helping teens, and a question I frequently encounter is, “How do we have an impact on teens when the conditions they live with each and every day are those that these two individuals survived?” I’m not sure I have all the answers, but one thing I am certain of is that “being harder” on young people isn’t the solution. Each day as I work with people, I recognize that within each of them there is a spark of compassion and that when we show them repeatedly through our behavior that there is another way to treat others and to be treated, they begin to shift and change. We shift people by modeling what we want. If we want them to become abusive, we abuse them. If we want them to be kind, we treat them with kindness. We recognize that the answers are not inside of us but inside of them, and we help them to find the answers to their questions. We help them sort out the person they want to be and the principles they want to live, and we expose them to an environment that helps them learn to value and respect themselves enough to value and show respect for others.

For more than two hundred years, we have, in the U. S., attempted to punish those who punish others. We need to be the change we want to see in them in every interaction we have with them and others. We need to be that little neighbor girl who through her actions showed that everyone can be “the good

girl,” the friend who brings hope that life can be different. The young man I spoke of recently wrote to the program staff at the jail about what he has learned in the classes we teach. He wrote, “I’ve discovered the potential that lies within me, and I am devoted to building a future better than my past. I have a bright future ahead of me and goals that continue to move forward in a positive way. I have a foundation now, a foundation that reflects my values, my principles, and my true purpose in life. For me, this class has been the beauty of sight after a lifetime of darkness.” We need to find ways to help all teens find the light within them.

The question I have been asking people, as I work on this new book is, “If you could have one wish for the youth of today what would it be.” My answer is simple; I wish we would recognize that children are our greatest resource and I wish that EVERY CHILD IN THIS WORLD WOULD GROW UP FEELING CHERISHED.