DREAMING OF A NEW REALITY FOR TROUBLED YOUTH IN HUNGARY

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I am very pleased to participate in this conference and to have the opportunity to meet and exchange ideas with so many people who have dreams about a better world. I have long dreamed about a new reality for delinquent and troubled young people in Hungary. However, it wasn't until I came to visit the United States two years ago and spent a year at a school in Bethlehem, Pa., that I realized how I might make my dream a reality.

I grew up in Romania under the rule of Ceausescu, the communist dictator. As a child I believed what I was taught, that the socialist system would create a better life for us all. I nurtured my own dream of helping to bring about that better life. As a student I remember how proud I was when teachers recognized my academic achievements. I did not realize at the time that it was largely an imitative kind of learning, reproducing what was told to me, not a creative kind of learning that encouraged me to produce new ideas. But being a good student, I felt hopeful and had a positive experience all the way through my years at the university.

Nonetheless, I remember noticing the discrepancy between what I heard in school or in the media and what I heard from the adults in my family. The official government message directed at children like myself was, "You are a part of a big family that takes care of you. If you learn

and work hard you will be a part of the new generation who will realize a better world for everybody." On the other hand, the grownups around me whispered about the lies, unfair treatment, corruption and spies. I was warned never to share with anybody what I heard at home. I think my dream of a new reality grew from the tension produced by these conflicting views.

I graduated from university and became a social science teacher in the last few years before the collapse of socialism in Eastern Europe. It was only as a young practitioner that I began to sense, on a rational level, the difference between the promise of socialism and the reality. The system promoted a high level of academic education, but it discouraged honest questions and exploration of ideas. In the centralized and highly controlled environment, teachers were frightened to do anything but teach in a politically proper way. They were afraid to respond honestly to the curiosity of students about new ideas that had filtered in from the West or to answer questions students raised about problems within our system or to encourage young learners' interest in new possibilities.

I developed an uncomfortable feeling of frustration and disillusionment because my experience as a new teacher clashed with the optimism and hopeful feelings I had during all my years as a student. It became clear that to be a good professional teacher, all you had to do was follow the plan worked out by the authorities based on strict rules and regulations.

For people who had doubts and questions about the system, the most obvious way to survive was to keep your thoughts to yourself. People tended to divide into different social groups based on similarity of views and trust levels. In certain circles you might talk more candidly about the shortcomings of the system and about your ideas and opinions. However, when you took a risk and shared your dreams about new possibilities with a supervisor, the visions were often criticized as being naïve or too optimistic or too utopian.

Some of us met this challenge and were able to create a safe environment that nurtured creativity, humor and real expression of feelings in our classrooms. We allowed students to reflect about what could be different in our society. As a newly graduated teacher I found myself learning right along with my pupils during our trips to the museum, the market or a factory to learn about and listen to other people's experiences. I enjoyed the novelty of genuine learning. I was also fascinated to see pupils who were labeled with learning disabilities or who were considered bad students change their attitude toward school as a result of our practical approach to learning.

However, things got worse for me when socialism collapsed because there was a surge of Romanian nationalism. My mother was Hun-

garian, so I experienced the prejudice that many Romanians felt toward people of Hungarian ethnicity. I was even confronted on the street for speaking the Hungarian language to my two-year-old daughter. So my mother, sister, daughter and I fled, starting a new life in Hungary.

In Hungary I changed my occupation by becoming a psychologist in the country's biggest boy's reform school, but my interest in helping young people remained the same. I also took an extra part-time job working at the National Institute for Family and Children where I learned about the changing trends in the governmental child care system. New legislation placed an emphasis on the rights of children. Where children were having problems, intervention strategies were now to be guided by treatment and social support principles rather than by control and punishment. A statewide investigation helped legislators recognize that the traditional, centralized system of institutions should be replaced with more family-like environments and innovative approaches.

For me this period was the perfect time to work, explore new possibilities and implement them in practice. When my colleagues and I noticed the growing number of delinquent youth and the increasing complexity of their problems, we worked on improving the methods used in the process of re-socialization. Our aim was to offer both theoretical and practical support based on research and practice for those who worked with juvenile delinquents and those who wanted to prevent delinquency.

At the beginning we tried to analyze the interaction between offenders and the staff at the institution, defining personality traits and their impact on each other. We also wanted to know which of the educational elements provided by our institution helped the youngster refrain from re-offending in the future. We found that the process of education based on strict rules, schedules, punishment of bad behavior and rewards for compliance did not produce positive results. Staff found the process difficult and exhausting and the students found it frustrating and unrelated to the reality of the world outside the institution.

It was sad to see my colleagues' disappointment when they heard about the re-offending of boys who had shown good behavior during the time spent in the institution. The result of our evaluation was unexpected: 70 to 75 percent of the juveniles re-offended within a few months after their release from the institution. Strangely, those who were viewed as model students got into trouble sooner than others and committed more serious offenses than they had before, despite the intense residential treatment.

The reasons for this failure were too complex to be fully examined within the limits of our research. Nonetheless we discovered some interesting facts through our interviews with former students. We found that the long absence from home increased a boy's sense of isolation

and reduced the emotional support from his family group. Because of changes in family circumstances during the boy's institutionalization, his reintegration was very difficult when he returned home. Also we found that little that the predominantly Gypsy population learned during their stay at the institution was seen as positive by their Gypsy culture. Further, the young person was still labeled an offender in his home community. Even if he had demonstrated good behavior while a student at the institution, that fact was unknown to those in the community where he returned.

In studying the development of empathy and altruistic feelings (Hoffman, 1991; Davies, 1994; and Kulcsar, 1998) we began to experiment with what I later learned might be called "restorative practices." We asked students to share their feelings about their offense by writing an imaginary letter to the victim of their crime. In almost all of the letters students expressed that they were sorry, and often they also expressed the wish that the victim forgive them. A great many of the letters included a request to meet with the victim, although at the same time offenders found the idea intimidating. Nonetheless they viewed the meeting as a chance to express their regret to their victims. I would later realize that our results were consistent with the restorative paradigm, that the students wanted to shed their offender label and be accepted as good people whose behavior had been unacceptable (Braithwaite, 1989).

We also assessed the need for improvement to meet the standards of new child care legislation. Given that children who are 14 or older are dealt with by the justice system in Hungary, we asked child care institutions to send their statistical data to share their experience or thoughts about working with children under the age of 14 with special needs. We also sent an informal letter to every municipality in the country to find out how many children they were dealing with under the age of 14 who were at risk of becoming delinquents and how they are meeting their special needs.

The magnitude of the response, from almost every municipality in Hungary, surprised us. It soon became clear that the number of children and the needs for services was greater than anyone imagined. The data showed an increasing number of children with behavioral problems, usually manifested at school, starting at the age of 8.

The survey also found that the typical response to problem behavior was to expel the children from the school and define them as "private" students. If their negative behavior continued, the most common reaction was to remove them from their families and institutionalize them for a while. This intervention was a punishment for both the children and their parents. Even if the institution made some progress with the child,

there was little or nothing done to intervene and help improve the child's home environment.

In 1999 Maria Herczog, the director of the National Institute for Family and Children, a successful dreamer who has brought significant reforms to Hungary's child care system, invited Ted Wachtel to Budapest to make presentations about restorative practices. A few months later I participated in a Real Justice conference facilitator training given by Ted's colleagues, Beth Rodman and Paul McCold. When Beth talked about CSF (Community Service Foundation) and its six school sites (also called Buxmont Academy) and 12 group homes and other programs for delinquent and troubled youth in Pennsylvania, all based on restorative practices, I was extremely interested. When she mentioned the possibility of an internship to work at one of the schools, I felt like dreams could come true, miracles were possible and all my questions would be answered.

When I arrived in Pennsylvania in August 2000 (along with a colleague and my teenage daughter) I was ready for an academic learning program. I expected to read lots of articles about restorative practices (with my English-Hungarian dictionary by my side), observe the program and receive practical hints from experts in this field. But my dream was confronted with a different reality. Instead, I was going to learn by doing.

On the opening day of the CSF school in Bethlehem, Pa., I found myself with a caseload of ten challenging teenage boys and girls. My new colleagues offered to help me with any questions and any problems anytime. They repeated their offers in our daily staff meetings. I also participated in a professional learning group and various trainings. But I was still overwhelmed. In addition to the obvious struggles with improving my English and adjusting to a new culture, my greatest challenge was to accept a completely different way of learning and working.

In contrast to my previous workplace, where specialists of different professions held meetings to discuss problems or issues that arose with students, at CSF a counselor seemed to do it all. I was expected to do individual and group therapy, child and family counseling, crisis intervention, drug treatment, casework and whatever else was needed, without wasting time, keeping a very tight schedule throughout the school day.

It was quite shocking for somebody like me who had worked in just one field supported by my formal education. How could I possibly do all these things without all the diplomas and certificates? I had grave doubts whether this internship was going to work out. I kept expecting recipes to respond correctly to every situation so that I could be sure that what I was doing was consistent with restorative methodology.

Without an algorithm or prescription for each interaction with students, I felt incompetent and powerless. I was frightened by the responsibility. Searching for a cognitive approach, I wanted to have the rational knowledge to understand what to do. I also felt sorry for the young people on my caseload because I was certain that they were disadvantaged because of my weaknesses.

Although the other counselors were consistently friendly and helpful, I was reluctant to ask for help. Where I came from, in my culture, you never say, "I don't know" and ask for help, support or encouragement. A good professional has to be an expert in his or her field of study, have all the answers and know all the solutions, or risk being fired.

In the Hungarian institution where I worked we sometimes dealt with an unruly student by responding with unconditional acceptance, ignoring the harm that he did. Instead we provided an explanation for the misbehavior. An offender who had a drug or psychiatric history or who had been abused was viewed as a victim of unfortunate circumstances. We often treated him as someone who has to be rescued, rather than asking him to take responsibility for what he did. The attitude of the staff, especially women working with younger offenders, was to compensate with a warm parental style. This fostered passivity and emotional dependence. Alternatively we punished the child. This fostered resentment and allowed the offending students to see themselves as victims and blame the authorities. Neither approach produced enduring changes in behavior.

I learned a completely different approach working at CSF. I can best explain the contrast by telling the story of Brian, a student on my caseload at the beginning of the school year. He was sent to our program because of his poor school attendance and outrageous behavior. Fighting, foul language, mood-swings, and drug and alcohol abuse were commonplace problems with Brian. He was constantly confronted about his behavior by his fellow students and by teachers and counselors in groups and classes. I tried different techniques to keep him in school and convince him to improve his behavior but nothing worked for more than a few days. His name always came up at the daily staff meeting at the end of the school day. I also had trouble communicating with his parents who were always grumpy, even when I contacted them with an occasional positive comment.

Faced with Brian's persistent negativity, I thought back to my role as a psychologist in the Hungarian institution. After a positive individual 45-minute therapy session, I couldn't understand why staff who worked for many hours of the day with the same child complained about him. I wondered why they couldn't deal effectively with the child. When the staff asked for help again, my fellow psychologists and I gave the staff

professional advice, explaining to them that behavioral change is a long procedure and they would have to be patient. Eventually, if the child's behavior didn't improve, we'd send the child to a special environment with more professional experts. But at CSF there were no expert specialists and an alternative placement was not an option. I had to deal with Brian here and now.

Every day I felt powerless and frustrated. I desperately needed to find a solution for Brian's problem. Paying so much attention to one student also meant that I was neglecting the others on my caseload and my own daughter as well. After anxiously awaiting the end of each stressful and exhausting day, I spent my evening obsessively worrying about my problems at the school. I blamed myself or at times was jealous of my colleagues who seemed to be much more at ease and to have better students on their caseloads. Consistent with my previous experiences in life, I felt that it was my duty to fix things and prove that I could be as good as everyone else.

Finally one crazy day my self-image reached an all-time low. Brian needed extra attention again and the whole school seemed to be in a crisis. My other students were also in need of attention and the day seemed like it would never end. After the students left for the day, my supervisor took me aside and asked me how I felt about what was going on. For the first time since I had arrived at CSF I let down my defenses. Shame and guilt overcame me and I burst into tears.

Supervision at CSF was completely different than anything that I had experienced in my past. When you met with your supervisor it wasn't just a teaching lesson, where you ask your supervisor to tell you what to do because you feel helpless. It wasn't about feeling sorry for yourself and thankful that you had a supervisor to rescue you. Rather, the process of supervision was simultaneously supportive and challenging. With his question my supervisor showed his concern for my well-being, but he didn't offer to solve my problems. He didn't blame me for anything, but instead reminded me that I had the power to decide how things could be done differently.

He then asked me to share my real feelings with the others in the staff meeting that was about to begin. What a cruel demand, I thought. Again I was emotional and showed my weakness in the presence of the group, but there was no turning back. Soon it became clear that there was no reason to turn back. People gave me tissues for my tears. Others shared their own emotions, telling me stories about how they struggled as new counselors. Crying and sharing and listening to other people tell me about how they struggled and eventually grew to understand the system at CSF, I felt supported as a person. Everyone accepted my feelings without question and reassured me that what I was

experiencing as a new counselor was normal and that things would get better.

The other counselors explained that the group develops somewhat similarly each school year. We were now in a normal period of group process called "storming" and out of it would come growth and better relationships among the students and between students and staff. We were building a community and, as staff, we were all capable of playing an important role in that creative process, no matter how inexperienced we were.

From the stories they told about dealing with tough students and with each other, I began to realize how my desire to try to go it alone and take responsibility for Brian adversely affected the whole school community. Also, trying to solve things for Brian was not empowering him to take responsibility for himself and learn what he needed to learn in life. Nor was my focus on Brian allowing me the time to do my share as a member of the staff and the school community.

I had never before thought about how harmful it is when one of the counselors is not "on the same page" with the rest of the community. Being restorative is doing things with others, not to others or for others as I was doing. From this perspective it didn't matter whether a staff person was more competent or more experienced than others. Working together is not a game of competition to see who is working better or whose students are behaving the best. Yet if one were feeling competitive, which probably happens to all of us at times, we could deal with those envious feelings safely by expressing them honestly at a staff meeting.

How liberating it was when I began to understand this was a completely new way of working and thinking as a community. The very best part of it was the free expression of feelings and the very natural way of behaving — being real. Even if I initially viewed my supervisor's request as cruel when he asked me to share in the group what I had said privately in a one-to-one supervision, I now realized that this had been my most positive and important experience at CSF to date.

The next day of school when Brian came late and tried to get everyone's attention, I pulled him out into the hallway and just said what I felt, being as real as I could be. I talked about how frustrated and tired I was of trying to solve his problems, and how I had run out of ideas, and how difficult it was for me to work with him under such conditions. After a few minutes he said in a very honest way, "I'm sorry." Then I asked him a simple question: "What are you going to do, because this cannot continue?"

Through the following months Brian learned to develop his own plans and solve his own problems. Sometimes he failed and other times

he succeeded. What became clear to him was the same lesson I had learned about how to help people change their behavior. Change is each person's own responsibility. Brian doesn't have to do it alone, however. Staff and fellow students in the school community are willing to help each other. But ultimately our changes are up to each of us to achieve.

After a while Brian's mother stopped being rude and sometimes even thanked me for my phone calls. During classes teachers still had some minor problems with Brian, but he accepted confrontation, saying "Sorry, I forgot to think about my choices."

At the graduation ceremony at the end of the school year, I felt a little nervous when I saw Brian's mom arriving late. Afterward she came up to me with a pained smile and confided in me, saying that her son suggested to her that she start to go to a counselor because of her drinking problems. She said that she thought she might follow his advice. She said that Brian was always repeating the same thing to her, that she has a choice to make about whether she wanted to improve her life.

In the restorative milieu I began to see how individuals and groups could become their own experts and how it was far more effective to give them a significant say in what was going to happen. From the first day students enter the program, they begin to work with their own parents, foster parents, other family members, or sometimes a caseworker or counselor, to develop a plan for what they need to improve about themselves. Treatment is not imposed as a punishment for bad behavior or as a result of a diagnosis by some expert who hardly knows the youth. Instead the plan for action comes from a thoughtful self-examination of what the student needs to do to get his or her life back on a positive path, with assistance from people who have a relationship with the student.

Restorative practices are based on certain fundamental beliefs. At CSF they believe that free expression of emotion, minimizing the negative and maximizing the positive, produces the best environment for human beings (Nathanson, 1992). They also believe, as the social discipline window describes (see page 66) that whether you are working with students, colleagues or anyone else, it is better to do things *with* people, than to do things *to* them or *for* them (Wachtel, 1999).

Unlike my previous workplace, at CSF specialized professions would not produce a diagnosis of each problem. No one was going to give the staff the answers. Rather, it was my responsibility as a counselor to facilitate the kinds of processes that helped the students themselves find the solutions for their own problems. What resulted were meaningful behavior changes beyond anything I had ever seen at our institution in Hungary.

As the end of the school year drew closer, I realized that I could never go back to work in a traditional institution. Instead I talked to Ted and Susan Wachtel about how I would like to start a CSF school in Hungary based on restorative practices. They and the board of CSF agreed to provide me with a salary and expenses for a year, to see what I could accomplish toward that goal. At this point, a year later, I have established a charitable non-profit organization called the Community Service Foundation of Hungary, and we are on the verge of agreements with several municipal districts in Budapest to start a school for troubled youth.

As I look back on my life's journey so far, the kinds of idealistic dreams I had as a student in Romania have largely been actualized through the use of restorative practices at CSF and Buxmont Academy's schools and other programs in Pennsylvania. Now I would like to bring that new reality to Hungary.

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