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Why the Village is so Hard to Find: Challenging Ourselves, Transforming our Helping Systems

Roger Friedman

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Looking at Language and Concepts

Looking closely at certain language that we use helps us understand how we think about our work and our world---and ultimately, it helps us understand ourselves better. The term "village" as used in the title of the paper and in many of our professional conversations is worthy of such an inquiry.

The modern use of the term comes from an old African proverb that is almost a cliché in the culture (i.e., "It takes a Village to raise a child"). This proverb and the imagery of a village where children are truly cared for by all were first introduced in America by African-American poets and professionals during the 1970s and 80s in an effort to create a positive narrative about their life history. The use of the term quickly caught on as a code word for a whole set of family-centered and community-based assumptions about human services. It is good to remind ourselves, however, that "village" is not really a place—it refers to a quality of relationship, a way of being with each other, a set of values about caring for each other, and an intuitive understanding that children in society belong to us all. It's a strident metaphor, a flag that we wave to remind ourselves that the most important things in life are not things at all but relationships, and that we all yearn for a village in which we and our children can thrive.

When we use the word "village" today, we are not referring to thatched roof communes in Africa, or Eastern Europe, or in a Southeast Asian mountainous jungle. We are referring to how Africans created villages in their slave world and in the underground railroads in the early 1800s to survive, how Jews created villages of support inside the Concentration Camps of World War II to find a reason to live, how Latinos find connection in the barrio, how Chinese families affiliate to protect their livelihoods, how every tribe and ethnic group must create a village at times of survival or perish. So it is a timeless and cross-cultural concept, and it is a warning to us that without the village, something very dear to us as people and as a society is lost.

Two important early 20th century sociologists gave us valuable, prescient lessons about the importance of social connection. It is good to recall their contributions as we think today about redefining and recreating modern villages. Emile Durkheim conducted a famous study in 1930 where he tried to find out why, during the long dark winter, similar villages in France had such different suicide rates. What he discovered is that villages with high suicide rates also reported a high degree of social isolation among people. In communities with lower suicide rates, there was much more evidence of social connection and organization among families and individual citizens. His conclusion was obvious—the more people were involved with each other during the long darkness of a bitter winter, the less likely they would become deeply depressed and commit suicide. He coined the term "anomie," which described the social state of isolation and lack of common norms and values.

In 1933, a German sociologist, Max Weber, did seminal work on the dramatic transformation in relationships and culture that he saw taking place as industrialization pushed European communal life from folk villages to congested urban cities. Weber described the informal folk society as "Gemeinschaft," and the complex, urban society as "Gesellschaft." Weber saw "Gemeinschaft" society as communally based; affiliation was more important than achievement; agreements were made with a handshake; and helpers in the community were generous, wise friends or family members.

In "Gesellschaft" society, relationships and business were conducted formally; personal advancement was celebrated; agreements were made by legal contracts; and helpers became paid, trained professionals. Weber noticed how the physical, medical, and material comforts that came to many with industrialization also brought about a cultural change in patterns of relationships and values that was very costly. We are still struggling with the total shift to Gesellschaft culture that has accompanied the explosion of technology and material wealth in America.

So how do we find a village in this modern world? Individual success is celebrated; communication is electronic; voicemail and email speak for us—family connection is renamed "collateral contact" or "home visiting"—helpers are seen as highly specialized, credentialed professionals, who belong to disciplines who often don't speak to each other. Families become "cases" and life problems are almost always labeled "symptoms." Formal releases of liability are the norm before letting anyone care for our children, and the nature of family relationships is defined more by professional mental health elites than by the experience of generations of family life. Many would argue that all of this enlightenment brought a science of human life that is more functional and healthier than in the primitive past.

But most of us realize that modernity is full of mixed blessings—our clients search for a village to help them face life's challenges, and we too yearn for human connection that makes life whole and gives us strength in the face of tragedy. We know village life when we see it—we know what Gemeinschaft culture feels like—once

you've been a part of it, with your family, with team mates, with friends at work, in the community, in a real partnership with clients, you will always remember. Nevertheless, even when we find a village, we soon notice that it is like sculpture in the sand, very hard to sustain in a rushing modern world.

Analyzing Forces that Block Real Partnership

In addition to these societal and historical trends that undermine functional villages in America, there are specific forces that keep human service organizations and families from forming real partnerships and building villages together.

First, when families enter our helping systems, particularly child welfare and out of home placement, they experience a "Big Bang"—an explosion that sends the adults and children in very different directions. Like the "Big Bang" that created our universe and flung stars and galaxies into distant space, it is almost impossible to bring the family members back together again.

This powerful, centripetal force of separation undermines whatever strengths and connections may be in the family, and often blinds helpers from seeing the possibilities for building or maintaining real partnerships. In public health, we talk about "iatrogenic" illnesses, or illnesses that patients catch while they are being treated for another illness. Examples are getting infections from blood transfusions, the terrible side effects of chemotherapy, or picking up pneumonia while in the hospital for surgery. The out-of-home placement of a child is an intervention to create safety for a temporary period while the birth family develops skills and resources to be more effective with the child. Yet, the placement along with the "Big Bang" creates iatrogenic problems for the family, distancing children from their siblings and relatives, disconnecting what family and home community supports were present, and introducing a new formal system of procedures and services, including foster care providers, case managers, and courts. The recent Children's Bureau report of Child and Family Service Review data from 52 states pointed out that the weakest performance area in child welfare systems is developing plans jointly with biological parents. What's more, the involvement of children and their parents in case planning is the variable that seems to most directly affect stability of placement. So here we have national data that support my view of how iatrogenic our efforts to help have become.

What a prime example of winning a battle but losing a war, of how Gesellschaft interventions are used when we need to really build villages to solve the complicated problems of child maltreatment. *Here is a parable to underscore how serious the ecological disaster child welfare has become for families.*

A PARABLE:
How "The Big Bang" turns into
An ecological disaster for families

Reader 1

In the beginning, our universe was formed by a great explosion that broke up the core and sent solid particles flying into space. This amazing explosion had such force that it was impossible for the particles to come back together again. We have come to call that explosion The Big Bang, and some say the universe is still expanding and eventually will fall apart in infinite space.

Reader 2

Something very similar can happen to families when they enter the Child Welfare System and children go into out-of-home placement. When a child enters placement, a whole new ecology is created around the child and his/her family. This new system of relationships, sometimes intentionally and often unintentionally, "explodes" the family, sending children and family members in different directions and with great force.

Reader 3

Children are separated and scattered from relatives and home communities to care providers across the state in a way that leaves professionals in complete charge of the child's treatment and daily care. Of course, professionals also are separated from each other because of their different approaches and programs, and this lack of coordination in the helping system increases the speed and force of the ecological family disaster.

Reader 4

Once this distancing takes place, often supported by the force of the mental health and legal systems, it is awfully hard for a child or professional to re-connect with family or community resources, and it becomes very difficult to ever bring the family back together again.

Reader 5:

This Big Bang is an ecological disaster for a family that can take place slowly over months and years or quickly in a few weeks. Services are provided, but a permanent, loving home and ongoing support from families, relatives, and local communities are often lost.

Reader 1

And so, our out-of-home placement system becomes a powerful force for division among families, communities, and agencies alike—in the process of trying to help children and

keep them safe, we can create more problems for everyone involved. Is it possible for us to do better? Can we turn the disaster of The Big Bang around, and make our ecological system a healing partnership between families and helpers? This may be the biggest challenge we ever face—and getting it right, may be the most important thing we can do to really help the families and children we are here to serve.

Structure not only determines function, but it can profoundly effect how we perceive reality. A second reason why the village is so hard to find in human services is the remarkably intransigent medical or individual paradigm that still predominates in most of the child welfare culture. Regardless of decades of social work education and writing about ecology and psychosocial models, the actual day-to-day practice in child welfare tends to remain focused on the deficits of individual child or parent and not on biological and foster families as living social systems.

We add or rename programs, but the behavior of workers and of our system is very hard to change. We tolerate families, which is incremental progress, but really serve individual children. We often assess the care taking relationship for deficits, but it is hard to find time to work with the parent and child together as our primary client. Individual therapies vastly outnumber resources for family or community network building. Parents or relatives are at times partners in our change efforts, but often only to the degree that they support the agency's agenda for change. Where are the family advisory boards? Where are the regular meetings that would bridge the gulf between biological and foster families? Where are the regular case planning meetings that bring together relatives, workers and care providers to set or review goals? When will parents and children get a chance to train or inform child welfare staff about their perceptions of what works and what doesn't to promote change? *Though many of us believe in this kind of practice, the working paradigm is reflected in behavior that continues to ignore or reject the family as the primary system to engage.*

A third factor that makes the village so hard to find, is that our efforts to promote innovation usually focus on changing people and not changing systems. Training sessions remain the primary intervention for moving helping systems to a more family-centered orientation. Most of us who have been in the field for many years, know that even excellent training does not change behavior in practice very much. What changes behavior is attention to the transfer of knowledge from the training context to the real world environment. Helping supervisors learn the new skills and coach their staff helps promote change. Reengineering caseload numbers and expectations of staff so workers have incentives and time to locate, engage, and work with families in the community would make change happen. Insisting from the executive levels on down that fragmented programs meet together regularly so that families can be served in a coordinated way would make a difference. Systemic change would be promoted if we recognized and

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rewarded staff who experiment with family-centered interventions and took seriously the challenge of bridging the gap between home and placement.

Challenging ourselves to work with churches, local schools, and parents to set up support networks in the community that could provide safety and respite for parents and foster homes would be a real change.

The progressive family- and community-centered programs that do exist across the country are precisely the programs that are most vulnerable when there are conservative *political* and fiscal shifts in state legislatures, Congress, or the White House. When the economy turns down, when federal funding dries up, when policy priorities chance, when legislatures must make tough decisions with tighter budgets—the first services that get cut are the family- and community-centered so that legally mandated investigation and foster care can survive. In Maryland, Georgia, New Jersey, Delaware, and in Texas, major political changes in the culture in the past four or five years have made the policy and fiscal environment unfriendly for family-centered change.

Finally, we professionals still fail to fully grasp the reality that we are more like our clients than we are different. This leads us to avoid actively partnering with clients. We often ignore the fact that how we think about clients impacts how they think about themselves. Our personal needs to appear "in control" and be the expert are very powerful forces in most professional helpers. Our need to rescue rather than empower, to monopolize knowledge rather than to simplify and give access continues with few checks and balances. We fail to fully appreciate how violated many families feel when they are broken up by out-of-home placements. How hopeless it seems to the parents that they could ever get their children back given the impressive labyrinth of agencies, alphabet soup, and legal procedures we can set down. We often fail as professionals to really grasp what it is like to work with us from the client's perspective. Like a husband and wife who fear asking each other "What's it really like living with me?," we stay away from such a direct and risky question with families, and this blocks a real partnership.

Transforming Our Systems

So how do we make a difference then? What strategies and challenges can help us transform our systems and challenge ourselves toward a vision of villages for families and children?

First, we need Chief Courage Officers in county and state agencies who will take real risks in their executive leadership. They need to be constantly reminding elected officials, managers, and staff that professional and social agencies should not be raising children.

We can help children and families in temporary ways, but extended lengths of stay and long-term foster care are default positions that come from our lack of

commitment to families and communities. These executives must speak "truth to power" and remind boards and legislators and media we have all become comfortable with treating children in out-of-home placement like we do cattle. We have unintentionally dehumanized the very people we are trying to help.

Our standards of care require immunizations, food, and a warm place to sleep. This is not good enough. We need to worry about whether foster children are having fun, whether they get to go to summer camp, whether they are on sports teams or have the support to learn piano, dance, or paint or do make up or design some clothes. How do we normalize their lives as children who need all the things we try to provide for our own kids? Does this sound ridiculous? That is only because we're accustomed to thinking objectively about children and families.

Another challenge in humanizing our relationship to clients is to recognize that their spiritual and religious lives are important elements we must get more comfortable talking about. Trauma and extreme crisis shatter lives and hope, leaving families depending on a church community or a spiritual faith that God will provide as their only support. Times of tragedy are times of sacredness when we have to face our vulnerability and the basic unfairness of life—and then figure out how to survive and hopefully, how to return to life, changed, wounded but still human. We are more witnesses and supporters than expert practitioners during such moments in our client's lives.

Though senior leaders must be ready to challenge the status quo, *all of us* must be willing to support systems change, not just training. We know what needs to be done. We do not need models or research or pilots. Outcome and performance studies will refine our approaches and methods, but the basic design of services that can work has been known for some time. Whole families must be engaged and communities must be mobilized and staff need to learn through experience how to empower people and build villages where they no longer exist. *To establish this type of practice is an uphill battle against years of "anti-family" social policy and historical trends that erode "village" life everywhere. But what we should know as passionate professionals is that engaging in this effort to change, in fighting the good fight as we see it, we continue to restore our own energy and find real meaning in our careers.*

Ironically, to transform our systems, we in family preservation also must face the reality that along with remarkable strengths, there is also a potential for evil behavior in families. All families are not good at heart. We have avoided this grim reality in our advocacy for preserving families, or by using social theories that view all abuse as caused by stressors in the environment. Many of us speak in a medical language, sanitizing the horror of vicious maltreatment through the DSM labels of Axis III like anti-social personality or psychopathic. Families that engage in vicious intentional abuse, torture, and incest make up a small percentage of the clients of child welfare, but demand much of our human resources and destroy children.

Such intentionally abusive families do exist, and they can be found in all cultural or socio-economic groups. I believe they represent, on a micro level, what we see on a macro level in the genocide in Sudan, in Ruwanda, in Eastern Europe recently, and during the Holocaust of World War II. Whole societies, like families, have the capacity to irrationally dehumanize "the other" to such a degree that vicious destruction of the scapegoat is seen as a logical outcome by otherwise "normal" people. *To build a village that can protect children and families from such viciousness, we must begin by accepting that the potential for evil behavior exists in all of us.*

There is a wonderful parable about three bricklayers working alongside each other on the same brick project. When asked what they are doing, the first one says he's just getting in a day's work; the second one says that he's laying bricks; but the third announces, he's building a cathedral! This tale reminds us that each day in your office or agency, you aren't just punching a time clock, or helping a single child, or even empowering a family—you are building villages for families and for yourself. And if enough us remember that enough of the time, we can change the world.

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