

# The Earth is Dying: A Radical Child & Youth Care Perspective



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*As Child and Youth Care workers, what do we do when we acknowledge that, by our own hand, the Earth is dying – and all of us Earth children as well? What will be our new way of relating when we realize much of our work does no more than further the oppression of children and youth? Well, have you heard of ‘Radical Child and Youth Care’? Probably not. The Mayhem Collective, a group of radical Child and Youth Care workers who aim for change, praxis and revolution, have addressed these questions, but more importantly have asked themselves: What are the actions that address these issues? This article offers an overview of [our] deliberations.*

## Radical Child and Youth Care 201

Earth is dying. We’ve pushed her beyond her limits. Children are dying – even where wealth abounds, child poverty is rampant. In societies that claim to be advanced, girls are starving to fit in and cutting to fit out while boys are shooting one another and themselves with guns and needles. In the third world, slavery is abundant and children toil in sweatshops to produce what we, the privileged, thoughtlessly consume. We are subject to a new form of feudalism – one in which the multi-national corporations now rule our lives with one primary

objective – consume more. Even where governments and the grand illusions of democracy maintain the status quo, the system still functions under the premise that we give our power away to an elite group. The much heralded information age has turned into an age of misinformation and manipulation – a seductive form of oppression that locks us into a world swayed by fear and leads us down the pathway toward our own annihilation, while the eerie shadows of a new fascism lurk in the background. And it is only going to get worse – much worse – unless ...

What can we as Child & Youth Care workers do? If we are indeed

change makers, how can we work toward making the kind of changes our survival requires? What can we do to offer alternatives to the madness that is driving this fragile planet and its vulnerable children toward oblivion? So, welcome to Radical Child and Youth Care – the beginning of the end.

## The beginning of the end?

When I (Moen) first tried to solidify my thoughts with the intention of facilitating a Radical Child and Youth Care (RCYC) workshop, I discovered how much fluid was inside my head. It splashed back and forth with every

question that rose up for me about this mysterious topic. Actually these questions had been splashing for years. You see, I've always been attracted to what I would call radical youth work, even though I had never heard those words throughout my degree program at the University of Victoria and despite knowing that much of my work in the field has been far from radical. My teachers may remember this attraction because I couldn't help reworking most of the time-honoured Child and Youth Care concepts, models and traditions.

That 'onion' model, for example, just made me cry, so I replaced it with a new and improved 'flashlight model of child and youth care work' that to this day makes me chuckle, particularly since the Child and Youth Care school taught us that critical thinking is a core skill.

But, since re-entering in the field after graduating, I've become increasingly convinced that it really is time for us to wake up from the slumber and reclaim our real freedom, our lives, our communities, our Earth. I declare this intention ultimately for the children and youth of the world. If our Child and Youth Care work does not rise to match the urgency of the times, we will become irrelevant. So I was delighted when my RCYC workshop took place in a room full of people who were also interested in stepping out of the box. In particular, I was thrilled to join up and form the Mayhem Collective with two radical colleagues who were as eager to chart a course and sail the rocky waters of this journey.

## Radical what?

Like good professionals we began with a review of the literature; scanning the internet, academic texts and relevant journals for any research or commentary on contemporary Radical Child & Youth Care [(2004)]. A summary of our findings can be found in the square identified as Fig. 1.

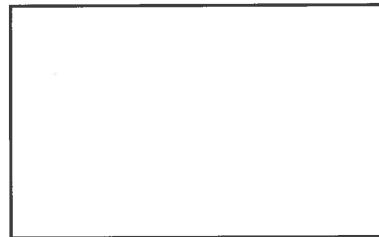


Fig. 1

We came up with five possible interpretations to account for our futile search:

1. There is nothing radical about Child and Youth Care
2. Everything about the Child and Youth Care field is radical
3. Radical Child and Youth Care does exist but hasn't been called names yet
4. Radicals in Child and Youth Care use a different word to describe themselves
5. Or, perhaps, we misspelled radical in our keyword searches.

Having concluded that 3 & 4 were most likely, we turned our empirical minds to the definition of the term "radical" and what it might mean in the Child and Youth Care context. *The Houghton Mifflin Canadian Dictionary* defines this adjective as: "1. Going to a root or source; 2. Carried to the

farthest limit; 3. Favouring or effecting revolutionary changes" (1982, p. 1076). This definition gave rise to the following questions: What is the root of Child and Youth Care? What does the farthest limit of Child and Youth Care look like? How can Child and Youth Care [effect] revolutionary change?

We decided that, in order to understand the word radical, we needed to turn to another field that fostered radical thought and action – Social work. The website *Barefoot Social Worker: the voice of radical social work in Britain* lists the aims of radical social work as follows: "To support social work that is informed by a class analysis ... strives to reduce poverty and inequality ... (and) strives for structural changes" (2003). So here we have a set of clearly identified specific issues that are to be addressed in the practice of radical social work.

Similarly, the Washington D.C. Social Welfare Action Alliance website states that radical social workers are "committed to social, political and economic justice, peace and alliance building with others working for fundamental change in existing class, racial and gender hierarchies" (2001). Further they encourage not only radical but "progressive" change. Their site also links to definitions of progressive, which includes "Promoting or favouring progress toward better conditions or new policies, ideas, or methods" (*The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 2000).

We concluded that the word "progressive" offers a crucial distinction, as it is obvious that



being radical, or taking radical action, is not necessarily positive or life affirming. For example, the recent British Columbia government welfare reforms initially aimed to cut off recipients after two years and currently refuses support to anyone over 19 who cannot demonstrate 'financial independence' (i.e. that they have worked 840 hours and grossed \$14,000 in the past two years). How many of us achieved this in our 20's? Radical change – yes. Reasonable, rational, compassionate, humane and progressive action – absolutely not.

From these preliminary searches it occurred to us that since Child and Youth Care embraces each person's unique self, radical child and youth care work can be as diverse as those who practice it. Where the social work examples were defined by issues and ideas, we came to the conclusion what is radical Child and Youth Care must be *personally* defined.

## So radical what?

At a personal level, we know many radical Child and Youth Care practitioners in the field and have heard stories of their radical stances and practices. We, ourselves have a few to offer. So when we sent out a questionnaire to colleagues and agencies soliciting radical stories we expected oodles of responses. Silly us.

I (Moen) understood this lack of response through a metaphor that (literally) struck me as I waited in a café to meet one of the few Child and Youth Care workers who did respond to our survey. I sat down with my coffee (shade

grown, fair trade, organic decaf with soy) when a wasp stung my neck, practically on the thorax. Needless to say, I was bouncing up and down assessing the swelling rate when my colleague showed up. Of course, being a Child and Youth Care Outreach Worker she had after-bite and anti-histamines in her pack.

We laughed at the idea that sharing our stories of radical Child and Youth Care work is like sticking our neck out knowing that there's always a wasp waiting to sting. How many people would take the risk of sharing a story when perhaps their actions were not necessary legal, or could result in reprimand, getting fired or, even worse, in drawing the ultimate Child and Youth Care sanction – being called unprofessional? Ouch.

We understand the sensitivity around sharing radical stories and the potential for the judgements that may come from others. In fact we have heard stories that have evoked powerful emotional responses in ourselves. But what a loss it would be if such stories were never told. If it is unsafe for us to share these stories, these examples of when we moved beyond the traditional Child and Youth Care role into a more rooted, more extreme, more revolutionary way, then we will never learn or grow beyond the box.

So, true to our cause, we began writing down some of our own radical thoughts and moments. In this exercise, we chose to make a distinction between radical principles, slogans if you will, and radical practices, or Child and Youth Care in action. The following statements and ques-

tions are examples of what we consider to reflect radical principles:

- If you don't recycle and compost, don't bother doing child and youth care (think about it).
- The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child has rendered all wars, nuclear bombs (and Bushes) illegal.
- What cultural value set determined that creating a friendship with a 'client' is unprofessional?
- Since, as Child and Youth Care workers, our sense of self is a vehicle of change within a relationship, then who am I today?
- Can you see yourself celebrating a youth's drug use?
- If BC's Ministry for Children & Families were actually parents, we'd have to apprehend the children.
- What do you do when those in power do not act in the best interests of the people or the planet?
- How many more young people have to die by sex, violence and consumption before we smash the TVs?
- All unnatural harm to the planet can be summarized under one term: Civilization.

Principles and thoughts are important, but sometimes no more than entertaining. We are more interested in how one's beliefs, the root or core of Child and Youth Care, are translated into action: those moments when we did the 'right' thing regardless of judgements of others, and sometimes regardless of rules or law. We are interested in such stories!

Consider, for example, the headline “Youth Care Worker Loves Client.” What judgements might be evoked by such an attention grabber and why are we so afraid to say what we feel in our own hearts? Is love not at the very core of our work, the reason we do what we do? To experience and express love represents the highest form of human potential so why do we have so much difficulty in even *saying* the word? How many times have you told a young client that you love them? In our own experience, not very often.

I (Moen) still fear the judgmental backlash and whippings with the unprofessional stick. Yet I have used the elusive word despite the cultural taboo. On one occasion, I had been supporting a youth with whom I’d been connected off and on for the last three years, despite changing jobs. She was messed up and just about to head up island to run from heroin. Her lifestyle and risks were a slow slide into suicide and I actually thought this could be the last time I’d see her alive. She was the first to say, “I love you” as she hugged me, crying. My response could have been a safe “Thanks,” but it wasn’t. What I said in return came directly from my heart, an unedited, non-strategic expression of my feelings in the moment – “I love you,” I also said, without hesitation.

Consider the headline, “Elderly, Sick Mother of Counsellor Dumped on Client for Money.” What images of abuse and malpractice can be conjured through such a statement? Yet the real story line belies such conclusions. In this case we are referring

to a sixteen year old girl, a typical ministry tennis ball who had been volleyed from worker to worker and home to home. Finally they bounced her to a Child and Youth Care worker – let’s call her Care. Care, as care workers do, built a meaningful relationship with the girl. Then the ministry said, “Thanks Care, our assessment now suggests that this youth does not need you anymore” and, in accordance with procedures, the file was closed.

**But if we are serious, we mean really serious, about building honest and meaningful relationships with young people, can we just close them like a file?**

Needless to say, Care continued to meet with this girl, now as a friend. Their friendship grew and this now young adult spends Christmas at the counsellor’s home, they watch movies together, she eats over occasionally and yes, Care sometimes pays this “closed file” to elder-sit.

How often are we encouraged though our education and training as Child and Youth Care workers to question the cultural scripts that form the basis for the systems of “care” in which we practice? How many other cultures of the world’s caregivers operate under such a strict sense of separateness and individualism as we do? And what is the impact of coaxing a youth through heavy-duty relationship building techniques into trust, faith, disclosures and exposures only to close their file and bolt? We ask them: “How are you feeling?” – a question a friend asks another friend – only to slap up a

protective boundary if they ask us anything too personal. We label relationships as “co-dependent” and “enmeshed” that in other cultures are called “caring”. We pathologise family beds, wearing your baby and breastfeeding three-year-olds – that is called “parenting” in other cultures. And thus the big question for us is: how many of the issues we aim to support youth through are actually created by the same arbitrary premises and cultural principles guiding our practice? In short, if we do not question such premises are we, in fact, the problem?

Consider another headline; “Youth Gets Stoned With Counsellor.” In this real-life scenario a girl, let’s call her Hope, is so addicted to heroin that the youth worker cannot spend enough time to build any meaningful relationship before Hope takes off for another fix. Other counsellors who worked with Hope would send her back to the streets to stick the needle in her arm or refuse to work with her when high. But there was a worker, we’ll call her Centred, who knew the risks involved in sending Hope to the streets to inject. Since the purity of heroin swings like a pendulum, there is always the risk of an overdose or reaction combined with threats from predators ready to prey on the user. If Hope was found by the police and arrested, she would be forced into a dope sickness beyond what most non-addicts could ever imagine. And if they didn’t arrest her they would take her rigs, her clean rigs, that prevent using dirty used needles. Then how long would it be till she returned again to



Centred, if at all?

Centred refused to abandon Hope. When Hope needed to use, Centred gave her private space in her office with alcohol swabs, clean needles and a sharps disposal box. Soon Hope would feel 'normal' again and then they could do the work that needed to be done: attending to health needs, setting doctors' appointments, getting Hope food to eat, setting up welfare support, having therapeutic conversations, and eventually working on housing arrangements. In short, Centred was helping build the supports that would eventually help Hope heal. This form of harm reduction, which we would argue definitely finds the extreme corners of RCYC, helped the worker watch her become capable to keep herself healthy and well. Most importantly, this worker watched Hope live.

Now try this one; "Youth Outreach Worker Brainwashes Youth into Terrorism." What do we as Child and Youth Care practitioners do with youth when the world is operated by an elite force that is consistently not acting in the best interest of the people or the planet? The radical answer is easy – arm the youth!

In my work (Moen) as a youth counsellor, I consistently feel frustrated that all the issues I work to support youth through are essentially symptoms of the structures around us: capitalism; the media barrage of violence, sex and consumption; and the prevailing violent relationship between people and Earth, to name a few interrelated systems. In my own work journey it wasn't hard for me to conclude that if I was not



engaging in some form of structural change with the youth then I was doing nothing more than convincing them to accept the premise of their conditions. In short, in not acting to make structural change, I am further colonising youth into oppression.

Being Child and Youth Care inclined, we believe a most powerful form of structural change comes when the youth themselves are active in the change process. That is: provide opportunities for youth to act out, speak out, shine out and, of course, gather them in a group and arm them!

We have seen that one of the most common types of group work is to take youth of similar risks and social circumstances, facing similar issues, say drug-use, and put them in a room together. Often these groups offer great 'networking' possibilities and just reinforce the conditions and scripts that have brought the youth together in the first place. But let us tell you a story about another kind of group. Six years

ago the 'Peaceweavers' were born. The size of this group had varied over the years to a maximum of eighteen and the age of members had ranged from 12 to 22. The role of the numerous adult supporters during its history was to provide the youth opportunities to gain skills and knowledge by following the youth's direction, not to lead and control. I (Moen) rejoiced inside when, after an 'action' at the Legislature, a reporter kept on looking at me asking: "Who is in charge of this group?" I remained silent as several youth got in his face and told him over and over: "No one. No one!"

The Peaceweavers essentially came together to promote and engage in radical and progressive social action and change according to the principles of Mahatma Gandhi, "Be the change you wish to see in the world." Regardless of where they come from, we consider all youth to be at risk in this era of "Generation Last." This was evidenced by their ease in identifying the mammoth multi-

tude of issues to address. They came together to learn from one another as well. The group was always comprised of youth from various social settings, privileges and personal circumstances. One Peaceweaver wrote after moving on, "I never knew my privileges until the Peaceweavers."

They began their campaign by creating and facilitating a workshop that explored peace, and more importantly, action from the participants. They shared this workshop in an international conference and introduced it into camps and schools. The feedback consistently admired the fact that the youth did all the facilitation in the workshop. The group moved on to creating a "Cup of Peace Coffee House" for five years in a row. They planted peace poles and an apple tree. On two occasions a mammoth banner of peace was moved through the community to be painted by many hundreds of hands. They videotaped their group process, [were] part of a documentary called the "Virtues Project" and have been interviewed on radio and TV. They created posters, banners, t-shirts and a peace tree with flags and messages. They walked in 'Earth Day' marches, peace rallies and protests. They produced guerrilla theatre for demonstrations that drew comments such as "that was incredible" from reporters and "that was the best thing I've ever done" from the youth.

They gathered support and tools from scores of guest teachers; used consensus decision making; practised non-violent communication; engaged in philosophical discussions of what is violence and

non-violence in actions; explored the parameters of civil disobedience; created workshops and youth retreats; practiced contact dance; produced guerrilla media; explored media deconstruction and, most important, they learned and practised the discipline of critical thinking!

As a group, they fed one another by sharing their ideas and their stories. In my (Moen) association with them, I found myself in constant awe as I learned about vegans, anarchists and the dissolving of the boxes that once caged gender and love. And I learned and internalized their shining light and indomitable hope. Indomitable hope!

We tout the ecological model in Child and Youth Care to understand the systems that contain us. This is a useful model, and with the Peaceweavers I have watched the impact in the lives of these youth of the phenomena we were co-creating. I watched them as individuals launching into love and care of the world in which they live, working to re-connect all those little circles and systems that articulate our lives on this planet. In short: heal the Earth and her little children and we will heal ourselves.

### **Radical now what?**

Contrary to our grim opening remarks there has never been such a hopeful place in the history of our planet and people. We are at the edge of massive transformation. We know from our Child and Youth Care studies and more importantly from watching youth find the magical place of change, that we need to name it, to have

awareness of what is wrong in order to change it. We now know that feudalism didn't go away, it simply transformed into the corporations that now own our land, our food and water, even some of our genes. And slavery – it slipped out of our vision to the first world over the third. But one benefit of globalization is that our eyes and ears have extended around the world and we can name which pieces of clothing and chocolate beans have little-bitty fingerprints on them. Thus we have choice. Not only choice, but as those living in the land of greatest privilege, we have responsibility and accountability.

So what do we as Child and Youth Care workers do? First arm yourself! It will mean that you will be able to give way more hugs. Write your own manifesto, embrace Mayhem and contribute to the *Mayhem Collective* website: "We are Revolutionary Child and Youth Care workers and change makers who believe mayhem is about breaking down the structures that oppress us all, and manifesting the alternative. We aim to learn and provide children, youth and the world with tools to grow a hopeful revolution, to reclaim our lives, our freedom, our dignity, and our Earth. And we seek the inherent wisdom, freedom and knowledge of children and youth, in turn finding our own freedom" (2004). Ask the youth to tell you who has made a difference in their lives and listen to them. Question everything including our collective rants. And tell your stories so that we can think ourselves out of the empty box. Take action. Never regret, but



always reflect. And of course – listen with a wide-open heart.

*“Revolution is just another word for nothing left to lose.”*

— Uncle Joey

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## Nobody owns one

There is a well known saying among cat owners that nobody owns a cat. However vulnerable and domesticated they may appear, they are the most independent and strong minded creatures around. We may feed them, and refer them when necessary to a reputable vet, but beyond that, within the first six weeks of life, nature and their mothers seem to have taught them everything they need to know. We may pick them up and stroke them, but then we must put them back down and they will skip off into their own wholly inscrutable lives.



The kids we work with are in many ways like that. When we first meet them we have virtually no idea of their complex and tangled lives, their backgrounds, families and histories. Just like cats, most of them came to us because they were in some sort of fight, run over — or lost. Many of us are tempted to want to “own” them in some way, to rewrite their past, manage their present, and plan their future. Knowing nothing, we are all-knowing about how they should be.

But the world they want to go back to is not our world. Most are grateful for the respite, the food and the hospitality; they appreciate that we walked alongside them through some scary times and perhaps shone some light into dark places in their lives. We pick them up and stroke them, but we remember Gibrán’s counsel that “your children are not your children ...”

We must put them back down, and onwards they go.

Nobody owns a kid.

