

One Quiet Hour - February 2005

Seven-year-old Adam* concentrates on the project in front of him. He is coloring on a piece of paper on the floor in my therapy room and I am sitting close beside him. Crayons litter the floor and he thinks carefully as he selects each color. He leans back against me like a baby bird snuggling beneath its mother's wing. This simple behavior says, "I trust you" and it is a very good sign.

As he colors, his head is bent forward exposing his neck. I can easily see the fading remnants of bruises in the shape of fingers and similar bruises are visible on the exposed skin of his arms. I know there are more bruises in places I can't see. I also know that he would never lean back against his stepfather like he is doing with me. It wouldn't be safe for him. The touches he receives at home are not gentle ones.

Adam's world is very small. He lives in a small trailer and attends a small elementary school. He doesn't play sports, take piano lessons or engage in any other activities outside his home. He has never had a party or been to a sleepover at a friend's house. Chances are good that he never will. His world is small, but it is very crowded. Brothers, sisters, mother, father, stepmother, stepfather, teachers, social workers, counselors, doctors, lawyers and judges - these are the people that inhabit his world.

He looks forward to coming to see me once each week. When his world and mine overlap, it is just the two of us. We play in the sandbox, draw pictures, or play with puppets. I learn a lot about his world from the way he plays, his choices of toys, and the emotion he puts into the activities of our sessions together. Sometimes he tells me stories of yelling and hitting and other times he tells stories of policemen and social services workers.

In his case, there is little I can do to make his home-life easier. The law has done little to protect him and as well-intentioned as they have been, social agencies have in many ways made his life harder. He is a powerless child at the mercy of a world of adults who like to think they care, but in reality they care more about their own interests and personal agendas than they do about children like Adam. To most of the people in his life Adam is just the troubled kid that makes teaching harder or the disruptive child that parents don't want their kids playing with. They can't understand him and many of them don't try. Even his caseworker is too busy and too jaded to emotionally connect with Adam. I can only help him cope. It breaks my heart, but I've seen it many times.

It always surprises me how the things of the world that otherwise would be important to me seem to fade in their significance when I am working with a child like Adam. In this quiet hour I don't think about politics, the war in Iraq, terrorism, my religion, or even my family. I concentrate fully on Adam. I am his for one hour. He knows he is safe with me and I will always honor and respect

him, his thoughts, and his dreams. He knows I will not betray his secrets or laugh at his fears.

In some ways he is an enigma to me. He giggles as he tells me about something funny his sister did at home. How does he find happiness in this life he lives?

When our time is up he rises to leave. Adam doesn't look back as he exits my office. He copes by living from moment to moment, investing only in that moment - no future and no past.

People often wonder how I work with children like Adam. "How can you sleep at night?" they ask shaking their heads.

I can sleep because I know that even if it is only for one hour, I can make a child's world a little more tolerable. I know I am helping create a better world for children like Adam because for one hour they can know they are safe and secure and that I really do care about them. I have no hidden agenda. I can sleep because even though I know I am helping to make his world better, working with children like Adam helps me to put life in perspective. It makes me a better father and a better human being. This is my calling and I wouldn't have it any other way.

*Not his real name.

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