

Legacy of Care and Compassion Project of CHAM

St. Joseph's Vocational School, Winnipeg, Manitoba

Submitted by Sister Dianne McNamara SP, Kingston, Ontario

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Dear "Younger Self":

The Legacy of Care and Compassion Project has invited me to write a letter to you my "Younger Self" and to share some stories and reflections on my experiences in ministry. The timing is quite appropriate as this year, 2015, marks my 50th Anniversary as a Sister of Providence of St. Vincent de Paul. As my thoughts tumble back to the 1960's I remember you as a newly professed sister filled with the energy and zeal of youth. I have much to share with you!

I entered religious life wanting to make a difference in the world by working with people in need. I wanted to do this through a life of dedicated service with other like-minded women and thereby give glory to God. Back in those days there weren't as many choices in ministry for women as there are today. Like most organizations of women religious at that time, we were excited by the new focus of Vatican 2, which was to return to the roots of the Gospels as well as the vision and spirit of our founders and foundresses. Our congregational motto was "A heart consecrated to charity." This focus urged me to read everything relevant that I could find. I would never have imagined the profound, humbling and wonder-full experiences of this ministry and life journey that was about to begin.

One of my earlier assignments was to St. Joseph's Vocational School in Winnipeg, where I was assigned to work with young boys from 10-13 years of age. They all were suffering from multiple problems – emotional, intellectual, social, to name but a few. In order to feel more competent ministering to these boys I signed up for some evening parenting courses at Red River College. In my youthful enthusiasm, I was eager to meet the challenge of working with these youth using as many tools as possible.

On my first weekend, I was left in charge while the other five sisters were away attending meetings. That day some new life lessons would truly begin! I was responsible for the 12 boys. Like boys anywhere, these young fellows decided to put me to the test. They began by creating a flood in the bathroom showers! In turn this caused the ceiling on the floor below to cave in narrowly missing the head of one of the sisters. Surprised and annoyed, I sent the boys outdoors to burn off some of their energy in the playground. Of course, being boys, a fight ensued and one of them came

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running in to tell me that one of the boys had been hit and was bleeding profusely from his head. My imagination was running wild as I rushed outside uncertain of what I would find. I scooped the bleeding boy into my arms and headed for the car leaving one of the youth workers temporarily in charge. I was feeling panicky as I did not know how serious the injury was. Remember “Younger Self”, I was only in my early twenties and quite inexperienced then! I sent up a prayer for the boy and, as a new comer to the city, I added an extra petition that I would not get lost on the way to the hospital or that the old clunker of a car would not break down!

The doctor in charge thoroughly checked him out and said that the boy would be fine. He seemed somewhat amused by my anxiety and reassured me that the injury was only a superficial wound. The profuse bleeding made it look much more dramatic than it was. I was grateful to God that this lad in my care was OK. The drive home with my young patient was much more relaxed. We stopped en route and had an ice-cream which gave me the opportunity to get to know a bit more about the youth. He was actually quite an entertainer.

Arriving back home, we were quickly surrounded by the rest of the boys. My young charge proudly showed off his wound which was now covered by a decorated bandage. In a tone of great importance he told the events of the hospital visit with many comical embellishments! My young patient also wanted everyone to know that we had also stopped for ice cream. Thus it became very clear that I would need treats for everyone else later on in the evening! I was learning that God has a sense of humor when it came to events with these boys.

I left the boys to continue their playing and went to the chapel to give thanks to God that the lad was fine. I also asked for continued graces and wisdom to meet the needs of each of my young charges. You see, my “Younger Self”, it was becoming abundantly clear to me that I needed to entrust everything into the hands of Providence.

Just before bedtime that evening the playing became a little rough once again. I had already received enough of a scare and excitement for one day and did not intend to return to the emergency room with another child. Assuming one particular boy to be the instigator of the sparring, I sent him to bed a half an hour earlier than the others. At the time, I was unwilling to hear his side of the story. I had an important life lesson yet to learn.

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When it was time for bed and I had tucked each of them in for the night, I came to the bed of the presumed instigator. His bedding was rolled up in a ball in the corner of his bunk. He was still very angry with me. I tried to talk to him and even offered to straighten his bedding but he would have no part in it. Then one of the other boys in the dorm called out to tell me that the lad had not started the fight. I asked if this was true, to which he responded with a loud emphatic “yes”. At that moment if the earth could have opened and swallowed me up, I would have gladly disappeared! Real life is never that helpful.

The entire dormitory was now so quiet you could hear a pin drop. I took a deep breath and in a voice loud enough for all to hear, I apologized to this young fellow. I felt so badly about wrongfully accusing this child. I asked him if he thought he could forgive me. Reluctantly, he thought he might. After remaking his bed, I tucked him in and turned out the lights. As I did so, each one of the boys said good night to him and all was finally calm. My first day in charge at St. Joseph’s Vocational School was certainly a baptism by fire!

That evening my prayer was one of gratitude to God that no one had been seriously injured and that I had learned two very valuable life lessons – that of acknowledging when I make mistakes as well as asking for forgiveness. These learnings are key for me in relating with others and are now still part of my life practice.

As time went on, I came to know each one of the boys and their unique personalities. I became very fond of each of the boys we had in our care. To this day I continue to pray for them and wonder how their lives have turned out. They taught me so much. I also came to realize how important it was for me to respect each one of these boys and how important it would be for each of them to learn about respect for others, acknowledging when they had harmed another. We all need to learn about seeking forgiveness and being forgiven. This essential learning is important in all areas where there is disrespect or violence.

Another lesson I learned the hard way occurred one day when I was trying to fix an item which had been broken by one of the boys. We didn’t have access to a lot of tools, so I was using my shoe as a hammer. I happened to mention that I wished I had a real hammer to work with. A couple of hours later one of the boys showed up at the kitchen door with a brand new hammer. On asking him where he had found it he said with great pride that he had “borrowed” it from the hardware store across the street!

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We made a hasty trip over to the shop where the lad explained to the shop keeper that “sister” was trying to fix something and needed a real hammer. In the boy’s rationale, he assumed that he could borrow one since the store had lots of them. The shop keeper was very gracious and took the hammer back without pressing any charges. He told the young fellow to ask the next time before he “borrowed” anything from this store.

I was very grateful for the shop keeper’s way of handling this situation. However, this event did precipitate a group meeting to emphasize the importance of not stealing things even if there was a good reason. We told them that this also applied to “borrowing” even among themselves. They were to remember to ask permission first.

For me, “Younger Self”, it was also a reminder of being careful what I wished for, as my young fellows were always eager to be of help! Obtaining the hammer was a noble gesture by the young fellow, even though misguided one on his part. I did appreciate his willingness to help me out. I only hope he remembered this lesson for his future choices.

On another occasion at the residence there was a meeting with our psychiatrist, myself, and the mother of one of our boys. The mother had sat stoically silent until the boy started to tell us something that had happened at home. At that moment, in another language, the mother spoke angrily to the boy. The child quickly stopped talking and withdrew into himself. After a half hour of continued silence, the psychiatrist decided to conclude the meeting.

Knowing how important it was for us to understand what was happening in this child’s home, I needed to be creative in trying to support this little fellow. So I decided to share a little popcorn with him and take him for a walk. Eventually he told me the translation of what his mother had said to him during the meeting – “What happens at home, stays at home”. I explained to the boy that this was not helpful advice. We had been told that his mother was involved with people who were in trouble with the law. Because of this, we did not want him to be put in harm’s way and possibly get hurt. He could not understand why his mother did not trust us. I suggested that perhaps a lot of bad things had happened to her in the past and maybe she was afraid. I told him that it is wise sometimes not to trust someone whom we don’t know and explained that we needed to earn another’s trust. I mentioned perhaps he and I might talk with his mother and perhaps in time, she could come to trust us too. Unfortunately, this boy’s mother never did meet with us. The experience of working in isolation from the family was a

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major ongoing concern to me because when the boys turned 13 years old they returned once again to their dysfunctional family environment.

Some days there would be a foreshadowing of stormy events ahead. One morning I noticed that the eyes and expression on one of the faces of a lad looked ominous. I wondered how long it would be before something inevitable would happen. My intuition was correct. Shortly after breakfast I heard shouting and shoving in the next room. I ran in quickly to see a fight in progress. Another sister and I attempted to step in between the two boys whose fists and arms were flying.

In hind sight stepping between them wasn't the wisest decision on our part! We were both sent reeling – the other sister with glasses asque and me with a painful punch to my left arm. The fight continued to escalate so we called for back-up and continued to intervene. All of a sudden there was a loud cracking sound and I was seeing stars! You guessed it. I had been hit again, this time with a right hook to my nose and jaw. An x-ray confirmed that I had a broken nose. I was also sporting quite a shiner! The timing couldn't have been worse as we were to have a board meeting the next night. We decided to use subdued lighting and hopefully avoid any inquiries. Over those next couple of weeks I was looked at with many puzzled glances. For me, humility was my major learning that Christmas!

This event caused us to reflect on the impact of violence in our residence. We could see that violence begets violence. Our first preference was to remove the boy from our residence. This was not possible then and so we spent a lot of time discussing with the boys the importance of self-restraint and patience. It was interesting that the boys were able to notice that one lad who had arrived recently was often the instigator of fights. They thought he should go to another facility. This event did provide a lot of opportunity for some serious conversations with the boys. For me, another of life's lessons was that anything worthwhile has an associated cost. I just did not expect that it would be a broken nose! I do know that God does give us the graces we need with any given event and this experience was no exception.

My final story about working with the boys, "Younger Self", remains a powerful memory for me. One day when I was tidying up, I noticed one of the boys hiding in a corner under one of the tables. I went over to him and sat down on one of the nearby chairs to talk to this young fellow. Out of the blue, he said that he loved me and, he wanted to have sex with me. He assured me he knew what sex was because he watched it being performed at his father's house. I was shocked and deeply saddened.

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He was only a 10 year old little boy and already, he had lost the innocence of his childhood.

I told him that one day when he was grown up I hoped that he would find a wife that he would truly love and who would love him in return. I also tried very hard to tell him how much he was loved and how special he was in God's eyes. Given his life experience, it was very hard for him to believe that truth. It was just so foreign to him. I had to trust that God would do for that little boy more than I could ever ask or imagine. I continue to hope that sometime during his life this little boy did come to believe in his own sacredness and that he did find true love.

Despite the lack of government support, financial and otherwise, somehow we were able to manage at St. Joseph's. One of the sisters planted a huge vegetable garden thereby providing food for our table. I would often wake up early in the morning to the smells of pickles being made or garden produce being canned for later use. Our meals were very nourishing but I must admit that I never ate squash in so many different forms! We sisters lived very simply with our focus and energy directed to the well-being of our boys. The Winnipeg police force was good to support St. Joseph's. They would often provide tickets to sporting events whenever professional teams were in town and accompany the boys to the games. There were other generous benefactors who would drop off a bushel of apples or toys for the boys. We were always so grateful for anything we received.

One of my deepest sadness which occurred while ministering at St. Joseph's would come on Christmas Day. One of the sisters and I went to visit some of the former residents, whose chosen life of crime had taken them to Stoney Mountain Penitentiary. That Christmas we visited with one of the young men who had just been released from solitary confinement. Despite all of our efforts, this is where some of the boys would potentially end up. For some, the life patterning was too deep and they were not able to break out of the cycle. Could we have done more to prevent these events from happening? My honest answer is "no". Our society is still experiencing the same systemic problems. I ask myself "Why?" "How much have we really learned as a society?"

As you can see, "Younger Self", my ministry at St. Joseph's Vocational School was both a rewarding and a challenging period of my life. I learned there so many important life lessons – respect for others, the need for forgiveness, the meaning of self-

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acceptance, true love and trust in God. And yes, let me not forget – the importance of being in the right place when intervening in a fist fight!

I believe that I and those who worked alongside me were blessed to have the opportunity to get to know the boys in our care. We focused on affirming who they were as persons rather than what they may have done wrong behaviourally. Because of my ministry in Winnipeg, I know for certain that we cannot judge another unless we are willing to walk a mile in their moccasins.

Underlying the ministry at St. Joseph's Vocational School was a genuine love for each of the boys. We cared about each one of them and did our utmost to provide a loving, safe and trusting environment for them to live in and to grow. But we were also realistic enough to know that when they left our care, we had no further direct influence on them and/or their lives. We could only hope that a seed of compassion was planted in their hearts.

We offered to the boys our compassionate hearts and a reliance on Providence. I trust that the gift of our presence in their lives offered them the potential for hope and a better future.

With gratitude and blessing from your now "Older & Wiser Self",

Sr. Dianne