

Journeys of Respect and Purpose

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It was an interesting summer. The 40th anniversary of Woodstock came and went. The best point made in the press about it at the time was the comment of a police chief. He expressed great respect for that crowd as “the most courteous, considerate and well behaved” group of young people he’d ever met. I love to see those adjectives used to describe children and young adults.

In July, my son Andrew and I took a road trip from Seattle to Los Angeles. Along the way, we had the good fortune to visit with this year’s FosterClub All-Stars. They had joined us a few weeks earlier at our annual National CASA staff picnic. FosterClub brings these young people together to “train, educate and make a difference in the lives of their peers in foster care across America.” What a great group of young people—fun, lively, interesting. I respect them for their thoughtful and honest presentation of difficult foster care issues.

Recently, respect seems to be more in evidence among the young than among some older folks. Health care forums around the country have degenerated into shouting matches. Fox News and MSNBC can’t seem to figure out how to stop name-calling attacks on each other. If only I had some magic, I’d instill the courtesy of many young people into every national debate about difficult issues.

Sometimes our perceptions of morality get in the way of respect. The journalist H. L. Mencken once wrote that “morality is the theory that every human act must be either right or wrong, and that 99% of them are wrong.” The parents of maltreated children often do not get much respect. It’s too simplistic to view these parents as morally bad people. As Mencken also said, “for every complex problem there is an answer that is clear, simple, and wrong.”

One group of young people in care who have too often experienced little respect are gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and questioning youth. You will read more about this in these pages. I firmly believe that everyone has a purpose in this world. If we accomplish something beyond basic safety for children, I think it should be to help them find who they are and what they want to become.

And probably, youth need to realize that getting to what they want to be is not as simple as making one

choice. As behavioral economist Dan Ariely points out, we almost never have the opportunity to choose between absolutes. Instead, life is about weighing the relative merits of various options. This is the complicated work our volunteers do in their advocacy for children.

The work requires a respectful and compassionate understanding of young people as highly capable individuals. Debates about their participation in abuse and neglect proceedings have often been based on the myth that young children cannot tell truth from fiction. According to Professor Alison Gopnik, even fairly young children have some understanding of the difference between law and morality as well as between fantasy and reality.

I would like each of our volunteers to know that while we aim for specific results such as safety and permanency in our cases, each step of the journey has its own value. The Trappist monk Thomas Merton once wrote a friend that no good action is wasted even if there is no immediate victory:

When you are doing the sort of work you have taken on...you may have to face the fact that your work will at times be apparently worthless and even achieve no result at all, if not perhaps results opposite what you expect. As you get used to this idea, you start more and more to concentrate not on the results but on the value, the rightness, and the truth of the work itself. In the end it is the reality of our personal relationships that saves everything.

My journeys this past summer were both by cars and by words—the words of young people, of my family, of foster youth and of the writers listed in the sources section below. I respect, appreciate and learn from all of them. And what I learned was, in the end, pretty simple. In the words of a song Jimi Hendrix played at Woodstock, “The reason we’re here, every man, every woman, is to help each other, stand by each other.” 🗣️

 For bonus information on the books, resources and organizations mentioned above, see [CASAForphildren.org/Connection](https://www.casaforphildren.org/Connection).