

“He just refused to open his eyes.”

The Danville News

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August 31, 2023

“Cribs”

Word Count: 750

Newark State Hospital, located some 50 miles east of Rochester, New York, was a tolerable institution for those youngsters we once referred to as mentally retarded. Fortunately, our language improves as our knowledge and sensitivity matures. It was an institution typical of the period, housing kids whose parents, lacking the capacity or resources to care for them, sent them there. No judgment. Even back in the early seventies, society was embryonic in our medical expertise when it came to causes of disabilities and treatment, exacerbated by the dearth of social resources for children and families in need. Have we improved? I remember visiting one ward regularly as a college volunteer. Volunteerism gets in the blood. When we went through the process to become church members, an integral component included volunteering for mission work: playing with poor children in the slums of Elizabeth Port, shooting pool with women convicts, traveling to Montreal to fix homes, playing checkers with a boy suffering from muscular dystrophy (our parents expected us to let him win -- we didn't). By the way, our pastors refused to thank us for doing this work. It was what was expected. A wry professor at seminary asked: “Are we a reproducing church or are we just playing house?”

Visiting Newark State hospital weekly during my early years at Hobart College, I found myself invited to interact with dozens of male adolescents who had been warehoused in one large room, cots lining the walls. There was a ping pong table at the other end and a few tables for games. Things took place there you really don't want to know about, but should. The needs of one bullied adolescent, nearly deaf, forced me to teach myself rudimentary sign language so he could talk with someone. Newark State Hospital prepared me for student teaching in English at a local Roman Catholic school, especially when my supervising nun announced I was now the school's reading teacher: “You will teach several illiterate young men.” Phonics, here we come! We ignored textbooks, touring instead school hallways and sounding out the signs, eventually deciphering forms for getting a driver's license. Educators call this, 'praxis.' It always was amazing how kids who would whine about failing math could calculate their batting average or free throw percentage.

Later, I was selected to work in a pilot program for eight blind, deaf, and retarded middle-aged children. Prior to this program, these children existed without undue attention, for that matter, without any undue anything. Who had time or resources for excesses? They were fed regularly, diapered frequently, bathed occasionally, and returned to their cribs. To prevent them from crawling around and injuring themselves, they were, by the law of economics, kept in their cribs – day and night. Life for them was, as far as they perceived it, adequate. It was their life, they knew nothing different. All requirements were met.

After a few weeks of our program of operant conditioning (the magic of M&M's and ice cream) and individual attention (the magic of words and touch) we noticed a change in our kids. Well, it wasn't they who changed. We discovered that all of our charges were not as severely incapacitated as supposed. They had become how they had been treated. Most possessed partial vision. Several suffered only impaired hearing. One even suggested average mental competence.

Because we worked with them specifically, nurtured them individually, loved them personally, they began to awaken, emerging from their imposed restrictions. It didn't take any stupendous miracle for them to grow. All it took was for us to care for them each, encourage them each, day and night. The law proscribes. Grace prescribes.

At Newark State Hospital we felt shame when we realized we needed to do better by all of them. We did for eight. They were liberated from mere sufficiency, from accepting what the institution expected them to be. Our eight kids eventually learnt to run and play.

That which haunts you can inspire you. We realized how inadequate was their adequate existence in their cribs. What had been formerly sufficient, satisfying life's basic requirements, had been exposed as woefully cruel, stifling their potential. It frustrates me how many cribs are still out there, how many cribs we're still manufacturing and sticking kids into. Then there are those who choose to remain in their cribs. There once was a fellow who complained and blamed, griped and sniped about being blind, except he wasn't blind. He just refused to open his eyes.