

# Thriving

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 Growing Edge Training online journal



## **Coming Full Circle:** Finding faith through compassion and connection

*Travis F. Winter*

*Do not depend on the hope of results. You may have to face the fact that your work will be apparently worthless and even achieve no result at all, if not perhaps results opposite to 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, the truth of the work itself. You gradually struggle less and less for an idea and more and more for specific people. In the end, it is the reality of personal relationship that saves everything.* ~Thomas Merton

I have had the privilege of working with troubled youth for almost 25 years. Somehow, the work has become engrained in the rhythm of my life. I transitioned out of a career as a carpenter to become a clinical social worker. Early on, one of the most notable differences about "the work" was the lack of observable tangible results. At some point, this became somewhat of a crisis of faith for me. How can you do a job if you can't see the results? I believe in the work, I want others to suffer less and be empowered to create a better life with meaning. In the end, it is this belief that has become the foundation of my faith in this work/practice.

For just under twenty years of my career, I worked in a specialized program for youth labelled as emotionally disturbed and typically psychiatrically challenged. I was there to provide support and teach them tools to learn how to manage their lives. I found this work highly challenging and equally rewarding and fulfilling. Around 1997 this program began to adopt the Circle of Courage Philosophy (Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 2002) now evolved into the Model of Leadership and Service (Brokenleg, 2016). It became the core foundation of the work we did together with youth, their families, and other providers.

I have had the good fortune to integrate these ideas over decades. I have trained staff and community members locally, regionally and nationally. I have used the philosophy and language to help youth understand themselves. I have sometimes seen the model be misperceived as overly simplistic. As time has gone on I still find new and additional ways to integrate these concepts into my practice and understanding.

So it is with this background that I present to you Sally G. Sally was a prominent member of the school community I worked in for many years. She came from the most significantly impoverished rural area, had no impulse control, swore often, was highly reactive, quick to conflict or physical acting out and challenged all of our skills. "Rage and rebel-

lion even can be seen as promising signs of health and strength. These youth have not yet succumbed, but they battle back as best they can to find belonging and independence." Seita, J. and Brendtro, L. (1995). When viewed in this context, Sally's behavior can be understood as an effort to find connection. Sally was fiercely loyal. This loyalty was a strength we could draw upon as beginning interactions with staff became the ever-tentative steps toward relationships so that belonging could occur.

As Brendtro and Seita (1995) share, "Adult-wary youth will not assume that you care about them in the absence of some concrete evidence." We worked hard with Sally, every single day. We earned our credibility through consistency, presence, compassion and understanding. It was draining. Often frustrating. But small steps led to deeper relationships. Over time, these relationships allowed us to teach Sally and to allow her to begin to feel empowerment in her own life. Sally graduated successfully from our program, got married and had children. Her life had challenges but occasional interactions in our small town fed my faith that our work made some difference.

Fast forward to about fifteen years later. I now work for the local community college as a clinical counselor. Who should walk in, but you guessed it—Sally herself. She has returned to school to follow her own dream and actualize her own purpose. She works hard, harder than most, to overcome her learning challenges and emotional first reactions. She has learned how to interact publicly, but privately still struggles with self-confidence and allowing others to help. So, it is that I am able to once again be a support, to remind her of the teachings of the Circle of Courage. Those seeds planted more than fifteen years ago can be tended and encouraged to blossom and proliferate. Our work has begun anew, yet it is very familiar.

Most recently I was asked by Sally to support her desire to attend a study abroad program through the college. She explained she was highly invested in expanding her knowledge and exploring beyond the borders of our country. I find myself writing a reference for this student, the one who could not sit still or respond appropriately for so long, to experience another country, culture, cuisine, and language. Knowing where she came from, this is literally an opportunity to see a new world. She successfully attended this trip and is now close to graduating from college. Sally found belonging. This has allowed her to grow beyond her perceived limits and begin manifesting her dreams.

Linda Lantieri (2002) suggests, "As we look within and examine ourselves, we will be better able to take care of the whole of every child we work with, to use our own empathy and for compassion to dissolve the barriers between the heart and intellect, and to help them develop their spirit as well as their minds." This is the true spirit and nature of the work.

When I have done training about the Circle of Courage, I am always asked "but does it really make a difference?" The implication being this is just another cookie cutter intervention du jour. I think of Sally. I think of all the youth with whom I have had the privilege of working. I think of my life and all those who have supported and loved me when I needed it most. I have faith in the work. The circle continues.

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