

# THE CIRCLE OF HELPING: FROM DARK DUNGEONS TO RAGING RIVERS

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*In this narrative, the author relates the story of her work with a Native American male adolescent in a juvenile corrections facility and the experience of meeting him several years later when the circle of helping was completed.*

Recently, I heard on the radio about a man who had drowned while rafting a wild northern river. I know that river and I know a little about drowning. This is a tale about how I almost drowned and about how, in the process, I experienced a reaffirmation of my belief in social work.

Several years ago, I worked at a juvenile correctional facility, a place where young people who had broken the law were remanded into the care of the state, supposedly for rehabilitation. There, in a male-dominated, militaristic environment, a few social workers tried to serve the unlucky legions who were relegated to this place set apart for them. I remember it as one of the most challenging and rewarding jobs I ever had, where daily dramas and crises played out against a bleak background of decaying buildings and tired, overburdened staff.

The particular unit I worked in was home, sometimes temporary but often a long-term, revolving-door residence, to a population of males between the ages of sixteen and twenty. The number of residents in our unit varied, anywhere from twenty-five to fifty youth at a time with one social worker for all of them. These young people were among the neediest in the state. As older residents, most of them had long criminal histories although some had been adjudicated on single Class A crimes, usually arson that caused death, murder or manslaughter, or a sexual assault. They tended to be poor, throwaway, mentally ill, abused, angry, and violent.

## **Lonnie**

Lonnie (not his real name), a Native American boy from a rural area, had grown up in the care of the state. His social history was a patchwork of placements, foster homes, group homes, treatment centers, and correctional facilities, with an occasional bounce "home" to the reservation to live with his mother or another relative. These home stays were nothing more than short visits until another incident involving substance abuse and criminal activity brought him to the attention of the police and then the courts. As a ward of the state he had burned through a long procession of human service caseworkers, from neophytes to world-weary, battle-scarred veterans.

Starting out in the units for the youngest residents, Lonnie was committed for both short stays and longer ones through the age-graded units until he "graduated" into ours. This latest incarceration was for two burglaries and a minor drug possession charge. He was, of course, already well known throughout the juvenile facility since he had virtually grown up there. As in any closed society, the people, both staff and residents, are known by their reputations. A big, powerful, dark-haired kid, Lonnie was labeled occasionally charming but ruthless, smart but underachieving, manipulative, criminally minded, sociopathic, doing life on the installment plan.

While outwardly engaging, Lonnie was deeply suspicious of corrections personnel.

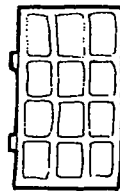
Although this attitude is common among incarcerated juveniles, Waller and Patterson (2002) believe that the historical and current oppression that has been experienced by Native Americans may exacerbate this tendency. As a social worker employed by the facility, I was not immune. I did, however, have one advantage over other workers—I had previously worked with his cousin and had helped him to get into a Native American-sponsored alcohol treatment program. The cousin wrote Lonnie a letter stating that I was a good person who might be able to help if Lonnie gave me a chance. Having been vetted by a family member, I was able to develop a contract with Lonnie that began with helping him to stabilize his behavior in the unit and progressed to assisting him in considering long-term plans.

Things went well for awhile and Lonnie seemed to settle into the institutional routine, even moving up the various group levels of status and privilege. The Christmas holiday, traditionally a difficult time in any prison, brought with it the usual minor incidents and one major episode: Lonnie and two others from our unit escaped in the night. He was on the run for several weeks and was caught committing an unusually serious crime, a burglary that escalated into a high-speed, stolen car chase, ending with several people, including Lonnie himself, severely injured. By then he was nearly eighteen and with such a checkered past that the courts and the administration of the correctional facility decided it was best for him and for society that he be “bound over” into the adult prison system. It was believed that he was beyond redemption in the juvenile system, having received all the “benefits” that it had to offer. Legally, since he was approaching eighteen, he could be sent to court for a bindover hearing and in this proceeding, several legal standards would have to be met. The state would need to convince the judge that, among other things, Lonnie had committed serious

crimes of an adult nature, that he had lived in the world as an adult rather than as a child, and that he was beyond any help that the juvenile system could give him.

### Dark Dungeons

When he was returned to us from the hospital, I went to see him. Due to the escape, the resultant pending criminal charges, and the initiation of the bindover procedures, he had been transferred into a locked unit. I helped him to connect with a lawyer who specializes in juvenile bindovers and visited him regularly to offer support while he waited for a court date. Since he was no longer in my unit, I had to see him after my regular work was done and so I would stop at the locked unit a couple of times a week on my way home. This unit consists of a large, windowless, cement room with individual cells around the perimeter, dark and cool in both summer and winter, reminiscent of a cave or a dungeon. He was there through the long winter and seemed to look forward to my regular brief visits, especially since he received no family visitors. In consultation with his lawyer, he decided not to fight the bindover since being convicted as an adult would end his tenure in a juvenile system that he hated. Also, as an



adult, he would be a first time offender and thus receive a lighter sentence for his crimes.

It was not a swift process, however, and as the winter wore on, we re-contracted to focus on this enforced pause between adolescence and adulthood. I helped him to redefine his incarceration as an important moratorium, a time to consider where he had come from and where he was going, who he

had been and who he wanted to be. I pointed out that as a newly minted adult, he would be leaving behind his struggles with hated authority figures from his childhood world—the teachers, probation officers, corrections staff, and caseworkers—and I challenged him to consider how he wanted to shape his adult life path and what strengths and talents he could find in himself, his culture, and his community. According to Greene, Jensen, and Jones (1996) “many clients of color who have been devalued and disempowered by society may deny or downgrade the strengths and resources they have” (p. 178) As an adjudicated juvenile offender and a ward of the state, Lonnie had collected a file full of labels and negative identities and as a Native American, he had internalized some of the devalued identity that is reflected from the dominant culture.

Knowing that the use of a narrative modality can help “clients find internal validation through already existing examples of resiliency and strength” (Kirven, 2000, p. 261), I introduced the idea of using the long hours to write about himself. Lonnie wanted to use his time productively and laboriously began to construct a life narrative, giving me several pages each time I came to visit. I would review them, writing comments and questions that I hoped would elicit his strengths and resources, and drop them off in the morning, thus giving him time to think and respond in writing.

Anticipating his return to the reservation upon his release from the expected adult jail sentence, I encouraged him to assess sources of strength and support that existed within his immediate and extended family and in his Native American culture. After some discussion, Lonnie was able to identify a paternal uncle who had been helpful to him after his father had died. This man did not live a criminal lifestyle and was positively connected to his tribal identity. With some encouragement from me, Lonnie began to

correspond with his uncle and reestablish their relationship. Waller and Patterson (2002) point out how important it is for helpers to consider the cultural strengths and informal familial resources that exist in Native American communities and believe that the most important intervention might be to “strengthen existing connections, restore broken connections, or establish new connections” (p. 82) to natural and familial resources.

Some of the high-risk youth in Ungar’s (2001) study of the social construction of resilience reported finding a few adults in their placements who were able to help them redefine their identities. Ungar gives an account of one Native American adolescent: “When returned to his community, J.R. successfully brought his new identity construction home with him. He joined a youth drumming circle and began to look for role models in Native Warrior societies. For J.R., time inside broke a cycle of delinquency and offered him, through his participation in the discourse of his caregivers, greater access to the resources necessary to sustain a powerful self-definition” (pp.147-148).

As time went on, I attempted to focus Lonnie’s attention on how his family and friends would be able to tell that he had left his old “badass” identity behind him in prison. What would be their first clues that he was different, more adult? These questions were designed to help him to consider solutions and discover specific new behaviors that would encourage him to shed his problem-saturated identity.

Eventually the exceedingly slow grind of the wheels of justice ended with a completed bindover that sent him immediately to an adult jail. While there, he wrote to me occasionally to let me know how he was doing, but eventually I lost track of him.

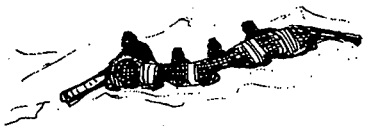
### **Raging Rivers**

Now my story fast forwards several years to a time when I was on a weekend trip with



some family members. We had decided to go white-water rafting, a first-time experience for all eight of us. Upon arrival at the pre-trip briefing, we were excited and a little nervous and carefully listened to the safety instructions. After being loaded on vehicles that transported us to the point of embarkation, we carried our rafts down to the river. Outfitted in lifejackets and helmets, we piled into the boat. Each boat had a guide and our family's guide was a small woman who inspired confidence with her crisp directions and good humor. In a swirl of water, we were off with several other rafts, all paddling down the river. It was an exciting day and I found myself thoroughly in the moment, intensely aware of the bright sun, the rise and fall of the raft as we dug our oars into the white water, the green of the trees as the riverbanks rushed by, the continuous soaking in waves of cold water, the squeals of exultation we uttered as we flew down the river.

By midmorning, we were settled into the rhythm of paddling, with the white water



sometimes giving way to a break of swift current in calmer waters. Our guide yelled out that we were approaching Magic Falls, the biggest and most dangerous stretch of white water on the river. Suddenly we were in the midst of so much surging foam that the nearby banks of the river vanished from view. My exhilaration changed to fear as I felt the raft rise into the air and my body tilting over the side of the boat past the point of recovery. In slow motion, I arced up and then down, deep down into the chilly water. Just as quickly I bobbed to the surface, only to find myself enveloped in the churning foam that obscured my vision. The world narrowed to the surging current, the washing machine effect of the water, and my struggle to breathe. Every time

I inhaled, my mouth and lungs filled up with water. "So this is how I'm going to die," I thought in stunned surprise.

At that moment, there was a break in the waves; I was able to breathe and I could see our raft behind me and to the left. My survival instinct kicked in. "Nose and toes, nose and toes," I repeated to myself silently. I was recalling the safety briefing that we attended that morning when we were told that if we went overboard, we should head downriver with our noses and toes pointed ahead of us to minimize damage if we were thrown against the many rocks in the river. The waves pushed me up and suddenly I could see our raft with the guide trying to maneuver over to my position. She extended her oar to me and I grabbed it, only to be swept away once more by the huge waves, tossing me further and further downriver. Again, I was plunged into another long stretch of whitewater, gasping for air, lungs bursting, straining with the effort to keep afloat and correctly positioned. As the inevitability of death by drowning became obvious, I thought, in a brief moment of clarity, that this was not such a bad way to die, here in this wild river, deep in the forest.

Then, from out of nowhere, to my right was another raft, and the male guide was offering me an oar, pushing me over to our own boat. Just as quickly, our guide maneuvered our boat alongside and I was able to grasp the ropes on the side. My nephew and my niece's fiancé reached over the side and heaved me aboard where I fell to the deck in a soggy heap. "Are you all right?" the guide yelled. "I think so," I croaked, "but just let me lie here a minute." My shoulder and arm were pinned uncomfortably under my body but I didn't have the strength or the breath to move them. After a few minutes, grateful for breath and life, I resumed my place in the raft and we continued our swift descent down the river.

### Reunion

Around one o'clock, all the boats in our party pulled over to the side of the river for a lunch break. Although wet and waterlogged, I was happy to be alive and on dry land. As we ate, a young man dressed in a guide t-shirt kept looking over at me and I was aware that he seemed vaguely familiar. He smiled and I smiled and he ambled over to the rock where I was seated. "I thought you weren't going to make it," Lonnie said as we hugged each other. "So that was you! Oh my God, you saved my life!" I responded, suddenly realizing that he was the other guide who had come to my rescue.

Much later, as everyone piled into the main lodge to have a surf and turf dinner while we watched videos of the river run that had been shot from various places on shore, the head guide joked about how I had decided to go for a "swim" at Magic Falls: "We usually lose a few there but we don't always get them back!" I laughed, too, feeling the exhilaration that comes from surviving a near-death experience.

Lonnie met my eyes across the room and nodded his head toward the door. We walked out into the cool evening and made our way along the large deck that encircled the lodge building. Sitting with me in the twilight, Lonnie caught me up on what he had been doing since he got out of jail. He proudly told me that he had not been involved any other criminal activity although his life had not been easy. He had lived around with several relatives, including his uncle, and worked at many different jobs. Finally he had found his way to the white water rafting company where he could use the river running-skills that his uncle had taught him. His easy affability helped him to fit in with the other guides, and he was popular with the customers who went on the river trips. He was proud of his skills and of his new identity as an accomplished river guide. Using the skills taught by his uncle, Lonnie had found a constructive occupation

that was a good fit for him, providing plenty of excitement, the freedom of being outdoors and working autonomously, and a way to make a living without resorting to criminal activity.

We recalled our memories of the correctional facility, and I learned that he had fond memories of some of the people who worked there, but a shadow came over his face when he recounted the many dark days that he spent in lockup awaiting his fate in court. "I want to thank you for all the help you gave me. There were a lot of times that I wanted to give up but then you'd show up and we'd talk and I'd feel like I could hold on a little longer. All that talking and writing helped me to figure things out, helped me to see I didn't want to be locked up all my life." I smiled at him, "And now the shoe is on the other foot, isn't it? I thought I was going to drown and then you came along and helped me." "Yeah," he replied, smiling with me, "I guess people have to help each other through life. I'm glad I was able to return the favor." We talked about the importance of people helping each other whenever they could, that somehow that completed the circle of our common humanity.

As we said warm goodbyes, I thought I would probably never see him again, and I was thankful that our life paths had crossed. Not only had he helped to save my life, he had given me a special glimpse of the futures of many of our clients. As social workers, we usually don't know how the lives of our clients turn out after we have been part of their life journeys for a time. I have often thought about particular clients, wondering how they were and wishing them well. At least in Lonnie's case, I have part of the answer. My reunion with Lonnie reinforced my commitment to social work as a force for positive change in the world and to being a part of the human circle of helping.

Lonnie, like J.R., was eventually able to find a new identity and empower himself within

our written and oral dialogue. When Lonnie and I met again years afterward as helper and helped, our were positions reversed. By helping others to empower themselves, we are creating a future where they will be able, in turn, to help us as a society and sometimes, as in my case, to help us in a very personal way.

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