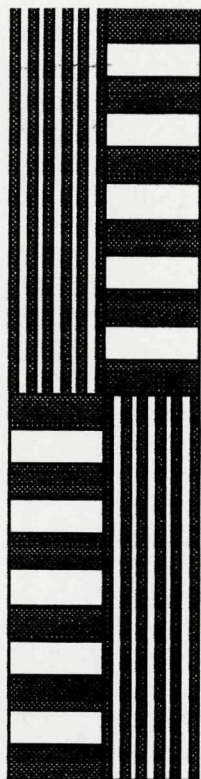


STORIES FOR THE NEW YEAR: Second Thoughts

By The Editors



There are some things that don't take any second thoughts, for example a decision not to make any New Years resolutions this year. On the other hand we often run into situations which take second, and third thoughts, and at times haunt us with their potency.

It was Santayana who said that those who forgot the past are bound to repeat it. But what of those who don't know the past, what will be their recompense? Recently, we were faced with a story that will not be forgotten; it has overtaken the thoughts of many New Yorkers, a group that is familiar with, and hardened to an over abundance of tragic stories that daily face that large city (and others as well). A 6 year-old child, Elisa, who had, on an earlier occasion, been removed from her family as an abused child, was returned to the mother who had previously abused her. Elisa was born with cocaine in her blood. She was found dead with cigarette burns, broken fingers, and much more. Her mother, a victim of abuse, rehabilitated once, but again a crack addict, believed the child had been taken over by the devil.

Social workers were both on the right and wrong side of the helping process. At school, both the principle and the social worker actively advocated with both the welfare department and

with the courts, to no avail. Following one report of possible abuse by an agency, that deals with troubled families, a child welfare worker complained, that she was too busy to deal with Elisa's troubles as she had other emergencies. We don't know what the social workers in the Child Welfare department did. Did a worker visit the home? Was a worker dealing with the situation? In its attempt at a cover up, the welfare department claiming confidentiality, and the law, would not discuss the case. Some facts are clear. We do know that they were informed in advance that the child was in danger, they knew the child previously had been taken from the home because of child abuse. The mother was not fit to raise the child in safety. The child is dead.

In the course of investigation of the case, reporters found an internal memo which showed that the Child Welfare department had been urging case workers to close out two cases for every new case they took. This policy might serve to permit some children to live in danger, and on the other hand, a worker might think twice about whether to open a new case, and risk the agency sanction.

Some might say "it's the same old story." Not quite,

because this story has an odd twist to it that could have turned it into a fairy tale with a happy ending. Prince Charles of Greece had seen Elisa on a visit to her school, and moved by the plight of Elisa, while she was still, alive, had offered to pay for her care and for her schooling. It seems unreal, but true. No, not the same old story, except for the ending. But can we learn from this story? The same newspapers that reported this incident also wrote about how students in survey after survey indicate a lack of knowledge about the history of their country. Does our focus on the future, or the "hear and now," in the jargon of therapy, cause us to ignore our past, our history. It caused us to wonder about what the Welfare Department knows about history. It should have reflected on the data that shows that the child most likely to be sexually abused, is a child who has previously been abused. Of course if the department ignores the past, this story will be repeated, the agency will hide under the protection of confidentiality (a dangerous concept at times) and the law. But it is the child who will pay the price.

We have maintained from our first issue of *Reflections*, that stories were the narratives of our lives, they shape our lives and help us aim for the type of future we want. We cannot forget our own stories of the past, or the profession's stories of its past. Like the students in school, we are not too up on our history, either. This void may not create problems for us as practitioners, after all, do our clients ask who the famous social workers were,

or about the history of the program that provides certain benefits? But remembering can sustain our pride in what we are as a profession. Perhaps we have forgotten our past. It might help to recall the roots that have shaped our professional narrative. It might help us to better understand our commitment and obligation to oppose memos which promote policies we know can endanger the lives of children, and are not in their best interest. It might help us to reflect, "what would Bertha Reynolds have done in this situation?" It might help us save a life. Those are our second thoughts, what are some of yours? □

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