

Larry Parsons

Youth Work and the Spark of the Divine

Based on interviews with Peter Cutts
and edited by Mark K. Smith

The Rank Foundation/YMCA George Williams
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Foreword

I knew when I first encountered Larry Parsons that this was a very special person. I met him in the mid-1980's and was immediately caught by his startling blue eyes peering over his glasses on the edge of his nose. His eyes seemed to touch my spirit and soul. If the heart of the Rank Charities' policies lay in care and compassion, then Larry lay at its very centre. My friendship and love for him rapidly grew, as did one of the most stimulating professional partnerships I have enjoyed in my working career.

Larry talks of 'fanning the flame' and then protecting it. He talks about "inspiring leadership within the peer group as essential to rejuvenating the community". He talks about "helping young people who are perhaps unemployed, apathetic and drifting, to dream dreams, to discover that spark within them and to rise up from the ground, and in their turn inspire others, and to show them that they have the power to make life worth living". All this lies at the very centre of youth and community work and, indeed, education. Education has always been at the core of my own career. It is such a powerful tool. Larry is an educationalist. He challenges with ideas, he sees the management of change as crucial to the future and leaves dialogue in his wake, helping to create true consideration for others. He commands respect.

This booklet is based on recorded interviews with Peter Cutts. It speaks for itself. Youth workers touch lives and can foster true and organic relationships. Our friendship and professional association and partnership have been a true privilege.

Charlie Harris
Director of Youth Projects for England and Wales
The Rank Foundation

Introduction

You have asked me about my philosophy of youth work. To answer that I will have to go back to my Christian roots. I hope what I am going to say will not sound like a theological lecture, but if you want to know where I come from this is what I have to say.

I believe that all human beings, whatever their backgrounds, whatever generation they belong to, are all created in the image and likeness of God. Therefore, in each of us there is a spark of the divine. If you think about it, all creative artists, whether of music or painting or sculpture or architecture, leave something of their own personality in their work. This is why, for example, someone interested in classical music can immediately tell the difference between a symphony by Beethoven from one by Elgar; someone interested in painting can tell the difference between a painting by Van Gogh and one by Turner; and architects can distinguish each other's work. I believe this to be equally true of God. For me he is the creator of everything which exists. There is something of Him in all of us.

So what is it in us that is particularly God's finger print? I think that God made his creation out of love, and love is the most powerful of all dynamics. Love requires a response. If you have ever fallen in love with someone who did not return your love, who

made it clear that he/she was not interested in you, you will recall a terrible experience. On the other hand, if you fall in love with someone who responds positively to your love, then life becomes a kind of living ecstasy. So God created us out of love, but he wanted us to return love for love.

In order that love may be genuine, the person has to be free. You cannot get love out of a computer; you cannot programme people to love you. It always strikes me as very sad when people's marriages break up, and there are children, that one parent will sometimes try to buy their children's love by giving them more expensive presents and treats than the other. It does not work. God made us free, but if you give someone their freedom you take a risk. They might abuse it. I believe we are free, but at the same time we can abuse our freedom, as the many problems in our world today illustrate only too clearly.

Human Nature

God's original plan was for a paradise on earth, but, because he gave us freedom, down the ages things have gone wrong. This I believe is illustrated for us in the Book of Genesis. I do not think many people nowadays take literally the story of Adam and Eve, but it does help us to appreciate how things began. However long ago humans made their appearance on the earth (and palaeontologists and archaeologists disagree about the date) at some point they rebelled against God. That exposed the flaw in human nature. That flaw consists of our innate propensity to be

selfish. It is selfishness which can destroy the goodness there is in human beings and the peace we all desire. Sometimes, because we are selfish, instead of loving God we reject him: and we usually reject him because we do not like the restrictions his instructions place upon us. Sometimes, also, instead of loving our neighbours we want to dominate them. In other words, our selfishness gets the better of us. We want our own way. If you observe a group of three or four year-olds at play it does not take long before you will observe this dynamic at work. Perhaps one is trying to get hold of a toy that another has got, and so on. This is human nature in the raw. There is something in us which makes us selfish and has to be curbed if peace is to reign.

I believe that if human nature is left to itself it can go to seed, grow wild. This belief is contrary to that of many humanists and atheists. They would say that the world as we know it was not created by a Being, call him God or whatever you like, but that the universe came about by purely natural causes; that human life developed from more primitive species by natural selection. True, human beings over the centuries have become more sophisticated; we have found out more about the planet we live on and about the universe of which our planet is but a tiny part. Modern astronomy has led to scientists revising their ideas on the size of the universe. It is vaster than the most sophisticated equipment can reach. Over the years human beings have discovered explanations of what were once considered mysteries. We have learnt to control many diseases which were previously considered incurable; we keep learning more about the delicate balance of species within the

environment. Yet there are still forces beyond our control.

Looking to the future, the humanist would say that, if you allow sufficient time, human beings will know everything there is to know; that we shall have eliminated not only diseases but our weaknesses of character as well; that there will be a perfect world. That is the opposite of what I believe. I think that optimistic philosophy lies behind much of what happened in the 1960s and 70s in the so-called 'First World'. The accepted wisdom then was that people's private lives must not be restricted. Children must be allowed to develop at their own individual paces; they must discover knowledge for themselves; parents and teachers must be enablers rather than teachers. Sexual morality was considered a matter of personal preference - 'let it all hang out', as the saying was. Objective standards no longer applied - each to his own. The age of love and peace had arrived.

I would suggest that, if you look at our world today with an unbiased eye, the evidence points to the opposite conclusion. On the micro-scale children who receive little discipline and structure to their lives become pests. When they grow into their teens they can become aimless thugs. Football hooliganism, for instance, has become almost a way of life for some. I think that on the macro-scale we are inclined to forget that the twentieth century witnessed more violent destruction of human life than any previous century. During World War I something like six million men were killed on the Western front. In World War II the total killed was

over three million, and that does not take into account the Holocaust. Nobody knows precisely how many people Stalin killed in Soviet Russia. More recently in Africa we have heard of slaughter of almost unimaginable proportions between Hutus and Tutsis. Mao Tse Tung disposed of millions of his own people during the Cultural Revolution. The scale of destruction is huge. It has been made possible partly by the power of modern weapons, but the root cause is the same as it has always been – overweening selfishness and the lust for power.

In the twentieth century we destroyed more of our natural environment than ever before and the full effects of global warming have yet to be experienced. Already there have been dreadful floods caused by the destruction of the rain forests. Yet there is no sign that the people who control global commerce and industry are in any mood to modify their plundering of our natural resources.

Youth work

What has all this to do with the work of the Rank Foundation? Going back to where I started – that everyone has a divine spark in them – it is my belief that the first aim of every teacher, whether in schools, colleges or universities, or more informally in the home or local community, should be to discover that spark in each of their charges, to look for the talents we all have in some measure. Having discovered it, educators need to nurture it very carefully until eventually it can be fanned into flame. John Ruskin wrote: “Education is leading human souls to what is best, and making what is best out of

them; and these two objects are always attainable together, and by the same means; the training which makes men happiest in themselves also makes them most serviceable to others.” To achieve this involves discernment and dedication. To use a gardening analogy: when you plant seeds and the little seedlings show above ground, you have to protect them because they can be easily destroyed by predators or frost. You have to nurture them until they are strong and healthy enough to grow to fruition. So it is, I believe, with human beings, only in many cases the period of nurturing will be longer. Because of the divine spark we must never give up on people. No matter how unpromising the background someone comes from, no matter how far they may have gone astray, damaged themselves by drugs, alcohol or whatever the cause may be, we must never give up. This, I believe, should be the driving force of those of us who want to help young people. In my experience, when youth workers look for the divine spark, and encourage youngsters to take responsibility for their actions, great things can happen.

In addition to encouragement and protection there is also something called discipline – not a popular concept in today’s climate but rightly understood it is, I believe, essential. If every instrument in an orchestra were to play a different tune the result would be horrendous cacophony. A proper degree of discipline is necessary both by the individual players and by the group as a whole. In order to reach the required standard each instrumentalist has had to discipline themselves over a long period of time.

Right now there are lots of athletes all over the world preparing for the next Olympic Games. They are undertaking lengthy programmes of disciplined training. We are here talking not of weeks or months but years during which men and women are so inspired that they give up many hours each day to training their bodies and minds to reach international standards. When it comes to the development of character in general we tend to think that training is not necessary; that people will somehow develop their talents and become good citizens if left to their own devices. In the animal world, horses have to be broken in before they can become useful; farm animals have to be domesticated; plants have to be husbanded. If you just leave animals they remain wild. We are part animal, so if it is true that animals need training, so do we.

We then go a stage further. We have to devise for young people aims which are achievable. It is no use having wonderful visions and drawing up elaborate plans if they are not rooted in reality. What is achievable will vary from group to group: some will be more talented than others. At the same time you have to develop an ordered environment in which training can take place. It is necessary to provide sufficient support and structure. If you want young people to co-operate with a youth project the structure must be observable: they must understand the reasons for it so that they can come to 'own' it. At the same time the structure must be sufficiently flexible for the exercise of initiative. But initiative is not the same thing as licence. Youngsters who go around in gangs bent on criminal activity are using

initiative, indeed some of their raids are planned with military precision, but it is initiative gone wild. It has turned to licence.

So what do we need next? We need good role models. Where youth groups have been successful it has always been because there have been role models to whom the young people could relate and respond. It may have been an adult or one of themselves. This uncovers another characteristic of human nature. There is in all of us something of the herd instinct. Peer pressure is tremendously powerful. Some people of my age seem to think that it is only young people who are subject to peer pressure, but that is not true. My generation is just as subject to such pressure and prejudice albeit about different things. Since this trait is ingrained in us a successful youth group needs someone with a sufficiently strong personality to inspire and lead it.

In my opinion one of the reasons why youth work in the inner cities has not always been as successful as it might have been in keeping young people out of criminal activity is because many of the adult youth workers do not live where the young people do. They are commuters who have their homes in 'better' areas. To be a credible role model to whom others can relate it is necessary to share the conditions in which the members of the group have to live. Really to understand a person, to give them hope where previously no hope existed, it is necessary to demonstrate by one's own life that the problems they are up against can be overcome; that good can be salvaged from evil; that to rise above seemingly impossible hurdles is achievable. It would be an

interesting study, if someone had the time and money, to find out how many youth workers there are who actually live in the same locality as the young people they deal with! My guess is that the percentage would be surprisingly small.

There are precedents for the good which can come from the sharing of hardships. Mother Theresa and the women who followed her are examples. Mother Theresa was the headmistress of a posh girl's school in Calcutta but left her convent and went to live in the slums and shared the privations of those to whom she ministered. One of the reasons why the Salvation Army did so much good during Victorian times, and continues to do today, is because their officers live in working class and deprived areas among the poor and lonely they serve. Because of changing conditions in the Western World much youth work has become professionalized. It has grown away from its roots. Visits to outdoor centres can be beneficial but they cannot be substitutes for on-going youth work back home. I think this is one of the reasons for the growing divide between rich and poor, between one generation and the next. The supreme example, of course, is the life of Christ. He did not visit earth as a heavenly commuter but took human nature and lived among us. Moreover, he chose a lowly career as an artisan and once he embarked on his missionary work he lived the life of a wandering rabbi "with nowhere to lay his head". The poor, the outcast, the despised, the sick and the lonely rallied to him in their thousands. The Church of England did us a great service when it banned the Wesleys from its churches because, as a result, they then took their ministry out into the countryside and the mining

villages; they journeyed and lived among the people they wanted to evangelise. I fear this is an element missing from some of today's youth work.

This brings us to leadership. A potential danger in today's world is the power of the media. It is so strong that it can make people into stars and role models almost overnight. It can equally quickly unmake them. The media barons can create fashions which they think will have a lucrative response. When looking at the current youth scene in the round, one has to be aware of the many forces to which young people are subjected. These things need to be born in mind when devising youth programmes. Leadership involves being able to size up a situation correctly and having the ability to discern realistic ways of addressing the needs and aspirations of those who follow. This, in turn, involves the selection of suitable people as youth leaders.

Having said all this, something must come from the individual young person. It is well known that a person addicted to alcohol can never, will never, overcome that addiction until such time as they recognize that they have a problem. Only then can their recovery begin. It is the same with drug and sexual addiction. From that point on outside people can help and gradually things can be put right. That is what I mean by a spark of the divine. It is there but it can remain dormant or submerged and never burst into flame. That is a tragedy because it is the divine spark which provides the motivation for human beings to dream dreams and then struggle to fulfil their potential.

This must not, however, detract from the necessity for governments, local authorities, churches and voluntary organisations to provide practical support for young people. Idleness, for example, is a killer of character. It provides the seed ground for all sorts of ills and evil. Idleness is the corrupting offspring of unemployment. It leads to aimlessness and loss of hope, and hope is essential for human life. Nor must we allow ourselves to be deterred by the size of the problems we face. Because the media is omnipresent and we know what is happening all around the world, sometimes people get the impression that the task is too great for adequate solution. But that road leads to despair. Big oaks spring from little acorns. Almost every youth movement and every religious movement has been started by one individual or occasionally a small group. Very often the founder has been a visionary, a dreamer, who, responding to the problems of the time, thinks they see a way forward. Sometimes, but not always, that person is also a practical administrator. Often, however, the two talents are not found in the same person. If the vision of the visionary is to be realized it must be implemented by someone who is very practical as well as being inspired by the vision. I think these are all things we should be looking at when considering how to develop our youth work.

Each generation has to produce its own solutions. The world is changing faster than ever before. Therefore, the environment, the problems, the hopes and worries of people in twenty years time will be very different from what they are now, as indeed they were twenty years ago. Youth workers who have influence with young people must not allow

themselves to get so hooked on devising a particular form of structure or a particular line of approach that they fail to notice changes taking place around them. This may involve discarding cherished traditions and replacing them by something more appropriate. Nevertheless, no matter how things may change there must be a continuous core and strategic aim. In my view this is one of the abiding benefits of Christianity. The inspiration and rule of life left to us by Christ are as relevant today as they were two thousand years ago. This should, I believe, be true also of youth work. There must be an abiding, sound philosophical and spiritual core to it.

Conclusion

Finally, I come back to where I started. For me, though I realize not for everyone, the teachings of Christ as given to us in the Gospels provide the most reliable guide for creating a better world. I am very aware that institutional religion has been responsible for many bad things over the centuries. I am also aware that there are lots of wonderfully good people who do not subscribe to denominational religion at all. All I can say is that I believe that there is a spark of the divine in all of us and unless there is a spiritual element to what we endeavour to do it will not flourish. Whether our work lies in outdoor centres, in inner city clubs, in schools, in the work place, we must not pursue practicalities at the expense of spiritual values. Both are necessary.

My own learning curve received a big jolt when I joined the Rank Foundation. Since the coming of

television you can sit at home and watch major sporting events taking place. The cameras will probably enable you to see more detail of a football match, for instance, than if you were seated high in the stands, but there is just no substitute for being present at the ground. To soak up the atmosphere, to watch the reaction of the people around you, to be there, cannot be replicated by even the most sophisticated equipment. So it was with my experience of the conditions in which many of my compatriots have to live. I had read about the situation in the deprived parts of our inner cities; I had read social history; I had seen news broadcasts and documentaries on poverty and deprivation, both in this country and abroad. Nothing had prepared me for the reality I encountered when I started visiting some of our inner cities in the course of my work for the Rank Foundation.

The 1980s were a time of industrial unrest when the powerful trade unions clashed head-on with the monetarist policies of the Thatcher Government. As I shuttled between public schools and the inner cities I became increasingly concerned at the gulf between the richer and the poorer members of British society. I researched the history of youth movements during the past 150 years. What I found was that all the groups which had survived (Boys Brigade, Scouts, Guides, YMCA, YWCA, Boys Clubs and others less well known) were founded by people inspired in different ways by the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. They belonged to different Churches and did not all agree on certain aspects of theology, but it was the Scriptures which formed the core of the philosophies they followed in their youth work.

When I looked abroad I found that youth work there contained a spiritual element. Even the Hitler Youth had a spiritual element of a sort, albeit a twisted fascist philosophy of extreme nationalism manipulated by evil men. To catch and hold the attention and enthusiasm of young people you must have more to offer than entertainment. It was the desire to help in bridging the gulf between management and the shop floor, between the comfortably-off and the poorly-paid and unemployed, that we started the 'Gap Scheme'. This involved young volunteers from public schools working with young people in communities where there was deprivation and poverty.

I have been critical of a certain kind of youth work that is purely secular and has little to offer apart from entertainment and material enhancement. Having said that I want to emphasize that I have met many marvellous and dedicated youth workers for whom salary, promotion, and long working hours were never a prime consideration. I was privileged to know men and women who had devoted, 20, 30, even 40 years to selfless care of the young, often in very difficult circumstances. Some were salaried professionals, some voluntary workers. However, I firmly believe that there must be something of the volunteer in all youth workers. While professionalism has come to stay, if not salted with the devotion and selflessness of the volunteer, bureaucracy can become a dead hand which stifles initiative and kills the personal touch. We all respond to people whom we know care about us: directives from some bureaucratic department implemented by officials

whom we, perhaps, never see or talk to are no substitute.

Finally, what of the future? The idea that human beings can, by their own efforts, create a perfect society and turn our fallen world into an earthly paradise is, in my view, a false and cruelly deceptive optimism. On the other hand, I believe firmly that we all get opportunities from time to time for doing good and if, with God's help, we seize the moment we can leave our small patch of the world a little better than it was before we passed through it. So despite all the problems we are aware of, and the flaws inherent in human nature to which I referred earlier, I remain optimistic. Each generation of young people contains the same potential as its predecessors. There are many fine dedicated adults working to develop that potential for the future well-being of society, but the torch must be handed on. If I achieved nothing else during my time with the Rank Foundation I discovered Charlie Harris and Chris Dunning, the current directors of youth projects. They have vision too; they have much first-hand experience of youth work. I was more than happy to leave the torch in their hands, and what a marvellous job they are doing, but in due course their turn will come to pass on the torch to the next generation. As I have said elsewhere flexibility is the name of the game. "New wine needs new wineskins."