

Rita Collins

RISK IN THE PEOPLE BUSINESS AND THE BATHROOM EPISODE

The young people, kids I call them, that I work with in a local authority residential "home" have for the most part life histories of emotional damage inflicted by adults, be they parents, teachers or social workers, and by "the system", in school, the courts or the social services. Being what the old guard call a "houseparent" puts me at the interface of the clients, my kids, and bureaucracy, my employers the local authority. It is a delicate position to be in. I have found that to do my job effectively, to care adequately, it is necessary to take risks.

The risks fall into two categories. There are the personal and the public risks, and in any situation both are often intricately connected. Just caring is a risk of that type. There is the personal danger I leave myself wide open to when I feel and show genuine affection for kids who can and sometimes need to hurt me; the risk of emotional hurt. And there is the public risk of being unprofessional in my attitudes. Child care staff are supposed to avoid emotionality, one needs to be able to act rationally and think objectively. The risk is public because I am a public employer, representing and belonging to a

group that badly needs and wants professional status, at the sharp end of social services where public censure is easy to arouse. And as I choose to take both these risks, another personal risk is incurred, that of being misunderstood and ostracized by my more professional unemotional (?) colleagues. The question mark indicates my doubts that many of the "rational objective care staff" have ever set aside the emotion of fear far enough to allow a full appraisal of the choices open to them.

I have chosen, and acting upon my choice very nearly cost me my job one day early this year. The occasion has come to be called by me and those close to me: "The Bathroom Episode".

Amongst the eight teenagers I care for (to varying degrees) are two fifteen year old boys, Tom and Peter, who are very different except for a common problem. Tom is dark and thin, has been in care since the age of two and is "a behaviour problem". He uses foul language constantly, soils and wets himself, refuses to go to school and needs great persuasion to keep himself moderately clean and presentable. Peter is more heavily set, and is

blonde. His main interest is disco dancing, he takes great care of his appearance, but he is light-fingered. His record sheet is as long as his arm, although he is a pleasant and likeable lad, very caring of others. Quite different to Tom who never shows a sign of giving a toss about other people. Their common problem is their emerging sexuality. Neither of them knows how to accept being male and adult.

Tom's mother is a dyke lesbian and has been a prostitute. Tom saw his dad rejected as a man and a husband and he was denied his mother's love from a very early age. The only kind of male Mum can bear to have close to her is a very little boy. So Tom doesn't want to grow into a man. His body, though, keeps developing, despite his wish to deny it, and he has confused, frightening feelings about women.

Peter on the other hand loves his mother, sister and grandma dearly. He wants to shine for them and he wants to look after them. But he knows and has witnessed both his father and his grandfather indulge in incestuous relationships with these female relatives. He worries in secret (for I am the only one he's confided in) that the adult men who he believes should protect and support their women are bringing them harm and using them in the worst way. What's more they are macho men, they drink heavily, they are manual workers, they make much of their masculinity. Peter doesn't know how he can be both a man and himself, a dreamy,

sensitive, tender person. And he wonders if incest is "in the blood"; will he start fancying his sister?

So what do you do with something inside of you and dangerous? You turn it out and use it against others, and in this society it's easy to find victims if the problem is masculinity. Women are fair game and easy prey. Just look at the glossy mags and the blue videos where women sell their image as sex objects, to have things done to them. And the boys **do** look at these, avidly. They also threaten female staff, either with straightforward brutality or, on occasion and in apparent play, with sexual undercurrents. It was when I overheard threatening remarks directed at a female stripper in a T.V. play that the bathroom episode occurred. I walked in to hear Peter and Tom competing in verbal obscenity. So I settled into an armchair and watched the remainder of the play with them. The vulgarity abated. It was my night to "sleep in" and it's my habit to take a bath before supper. So I announced that I was going to run a tub and Peter, in bravado and an attempt to impress Tom, offered to wash my back. I accepted.

Tom stood with his hands behind his back, leaning on the wall and studying the ceiling, the wall opposite, the taps, anything to avoid looking at me. Peter very diligently washed my back, down so far as my waist, and we chatted. They had entered when I was already immersed; they left before I got out

to dry. But at one point, when I reached for a face flannel, Tom caught sight of my breasts. Peter laughed. "Look at Tom's face!" he said. "Nah, natural innit?" Tom replied, embarrassed. "Yes" I said. "Anything you feel is natural", fully aware that he didn't mean to speak of feelings, but sighs.

Some weeks passed. The boys' attitude to me showed signs of having changed. The threats of physical attack were absent, the sexual innuendo diminished. I found picture magazines under their beds and we looked at them together. The obscenity and vulgarity were replaced by open curiosity. And Peter told me about his incestuous family. I can't say how or whether their behaviour towards other women staff changed. I hope it has. Nor can I say if their feelings about their sexuality have changed. But channels are open to communicate with at least one accepting adult, and a woman to boot. There is hope.

But word got out, as it is wont to do in a tight community like ours. The other staff got to hear about the bathroom episode, and the risks I took in that innocent ten minutes became abundantly clear to me. It's too painful to describe in detail how the senior care staff reacted. A report was sent to the offices and I was called in for a disciplinary hearing. I managed to convince the relevant council officer that I was not perverted, nor was I having sexual intercourse with the boys, and that officer, bless him, took a risk. He allowed me to keep my job.

I love the kids I'm employed to care for. Some of them love me. All I want to achieve is to teach them to love their "selves". That should not be a risky business in the public sense, even if it must be so in the private emotional lives of all of us.

Rita Collins (not her real name) is a Residential Social Worker in South East England. The boys' names have also been changed.

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