

IT COULDN'T HAPPEN HERE

One School Learns from Tragedy...



by Jared Scherz, Ph.D., M.Ed.

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Chapter One

The Critical Mass

“There are two educations. One should teach us how to make a living and the other how to live.” John Adams

It was supposed to be a normal day at the Kettering Middle School in suburban New Jersey; a brisk January morning, slightly warmer than expected for this time of year. The trees surrounding the school were barren, leaves swept away by the wind only months a few months earlier. The sky was a rich blue with a smattering of clouds overhead, dispersed by the distant rays of the sun. A red concrete building protruded from an opening between the trees. The building stood three stories high and was sandwiched by two playgrounds. This entire lot was once farmland, as was the case for most of this region in Southern Jersey, before it became more populated.

Children bustled in through the large metal doors on this Monday morning, some still waking from their sleep while others aglow with nervous excitement. The anticipation is not about the lessons and lectures that awaited them. In fact the academic curriculum truly only mattered to a select few and these were the children who were distracted from the usual politics of preadolescents and puberty. These children were preoccupied with the ongoing search for acceptance, the true mission of each teen.

It was 8:47 and the first bell just rung, indicating the move from homeroom to the first period class. Hallways were filled to capacity like the New York City subway system at morning rush hour. Children headed on their own paths, some stopping to further the latest gossip from the night before. Most were instinctively aware of the two-

minute break before the first late bell. It was a few weeks into the second half of the year, with most of the students and faculty readjusted since their three-week holiday vacation.

Suddenly, without warning, a scream pierced the hallway. A young girl's desperate and horrified voice echoed throughout the school momentarily freezing the hundreds of footsteps muffled by the stone floor. Without letting out their breath children gripped by fear, took off in every direction. Books and papers fell to the floor, trampled by the mob of panicked youth. Teachers, unaware of the cause of this commotion, attempted to calm the youth and restore order, although they too were inundated with catastrophic thoughts. It wasn't a fight, as that generally attracted the attention of others. It wasn't a gunshot because that surely would have been heard in their classroom. Images of terrorists and news clippings from 9/11 filled each teacher's head.

Mrs. Jones, the 7th grade Social Studies teacher was the nearest to the scream and the first one to reach its origin, the first floor boy's bathroom. When she arrived shaking and out of breath she looked down to see young boy holding his side, with a small pool of blood amassing by his side. He was conscious but not fully alert, seemingly in shock. Mrs. Jones instinctively removed her sweater vest and placed it under the young boys head. She placed her hand over his side gently and began to apply pressure to stop the bleeding. She had no formal medical training and she worried about causing more harm.

She recognized this young man as a student she had the year prior. Richard she recalled was his name. A well liked young man who was active in sports and an average student who never truly reached his potential. She spoke to him in voice that was

surprisingly calm, obviously holding back the tremor so as not to frighten Richard any further.

“Hold on Richard. We have help on the way”.

Mrs. Jones grabbed the nearest child she could find and issued instructions to go straight to the main office and have them call 911.

The ambulance arrived, what seemed an eternity later, bringing the child straight to the hospital. He had lost a good amount of blood but the paramedics assessed that he should make a full recovery. It wasn't until a few hours later when the parents called from the hospital that she learned he would be fine. The knife, which he was apparently stabbed by, hadn't punctured any vital organs. He would remain in the intensive care unit for the night to monitor him and then be moved to a private room.

While Richard was being attended to by the hospital, the faculty now turned their attention to the other victims, the students and unknowingly themselves. The rest of the day was spent attending to traumatized children and worried parents, who came to pick their children up from the school. They learned of the incident quickly as the media had broadcast it out onto most of the major stations. The school hadn't received this much attention in the sixty-two years of its existence and was not prepared to deal with such a crisis. It seemed like an eternity by the time three o'clock struck and the school day was officially closed. Although most of the faculty were relieved to go home to their own families they were aware that this was just the beginning.

At about 8pm that evening, the phone rang in Ms. Smith's home, the principal of Kettering Middle School. She answered the phone, as she had done several times in the past few hours, exhausted by the attention from the community. She was in part relieved

and in part anxious to hear the superintendent's voice on the line. Mr. Robert's had been the superintendent of the Lennapee School District for the past thirteen years. He and Ms. Smith knew one another well, having worked together for the past six years.

"How are you?" asked Mr. Roberts.

"As well as can be expected" replied Ms. Smith.

"I am sorry to bother you at home but we didn't have enough of an opportunity to speak during the day with all the chaos" he said.

"I know I am sorry about that, we have a lot to talk about," she replied.

The two agreed they would meet at his office first thing in the morning. Before falling asleep that night, Ms. Smith wondered about the days events, her meeting with the superintendent, the young man in the hospital and mostly about what her school would be like in the days and weeks to come. She fell off to sleep knowing it would all be different, but not certain how.

Ms. Smith woke but felt as though she hadn't slept at all. She was slightly queasy so decided not to have breakfast. She hurriedly got ready, not wanting to be late for her meeting with Mr. Roberts. During her fifteen-minute drive to the school she continued to ponder the question as to why, why would one child be so angry as to cause such physical harm to his peer. She knew the child who had committed this act of aggression, a 7th grader named Thomas Nettles. He was a quiet boy, not prone to any previous violence; in fact she couldn't recall any disciplinary problems whatsoever. She considered this young man for a while, trying to make sense of his apparent senseless act.

Upon stepping through the doors of the district administrative office building, she suddenly realized that her job could be in jeopardy. What if they are looking for someone to blame for this event? Had she done enough to ensure the safety of the 372 children in her care? Not knowing what caused this act she couldn't really decide if enough had been done to prevent it. Just before entering Mr. Robert's office she decided to herself that this was a random act, probably the result of domestic problems.

The two exchanged greetings and sat across from one another, Mr. Roberts behind his desk. They discussed the course of events from the day prior, going over issues such as media relations, statements to the parents, mental health services for the children, and school security/ safety upgrades. The two had talked for over an hour when Ms. Smith began to gather her belongings to head over to her school.

"One more thing Ann...I have one more thing I would like you to consider". His voice was slightly softer and she could sense his hesitation. "I would like for you to consider bringing in a consultant to the school".

Ms. Smith was still for the moment, perplexed by this request from her boss. A wave of resistance swept up through her as she replied impulsively, "What do we need a consultant for"? Her tone was sharp and defensive. Realizing this she quickly followed with, "I can't see how a consultant can help us now... what kind of consultant are you talking about"?

"It's going to be a long road ahead for both your faculty and students. People will be scared and quite frankly, I am concerned about the fallout from the parents. If they see we are doing something to help us get back to normal they may feel relieved, as though we really care about the learning community".

Ms. Smith was still attempting to process this issue. She wondered what the motives were of the superintendent. She liked him but knew he was susceptible to pressure by the school board and the community. Did he think I was incompetent? Did he want somebody to watch what was going on because I wasn't doing my job? Questions swirled through her head as she gave him a half-hearted assurance that she would follow up next week.

As she made her way back to the school, her head began to throb, thinking about all the items she would need to attend to. The decision to hold school today was made in the hope of restoring some sense of normalcy. Only about half of the children made it in for class although it seemed as if her workload had doubled. The press still huddled outside of the school, hoping for an interview, which she avoided for now. Numerous calls from parents needed attention, certainly above the solicitations from businesses around the state offering assistance. Security companies numbered the most frequent of calls, promising to help the school bolster security efforts. Was this really necessary she wondered? Had this small community, not known for crime and certainly not violence, now need team of experts installing security cameras and designing emergency action plans? We are not Columbine she told herself...this was simply as isolated incident attributable to an emotionally unstable child. She wanted to believe this very badly but that same queasy feeling from this morning just returned.

Chapter Two

The Impact of School Violence

In the two weeks that followed, Kettering school began to return to business as usual. Teachers still spoke in hushed tones during lunch breaks and children continued to gossip in the hallways, but overall, they were beyond the crisis. The school environment was noticeably affected however, as faculty and students alike were more aware of their surrounding and even the slightest of changes. This hypervigilance kept people on edge and as a result there were frequent spikes in tension throughout the building. Conflicts between people were quickly suppressed, as nobody wanted to provoke their counterpart to their breaking point. Suppressing these potent emotions lead to deeper and more uncomfortable feelings, which built like the pressure of a shaken soda bottle.

Teachers and students treated each other more cautiously and the already formed cliques became even tighter. Mrs. Smith spent more time in her office dealing with her burdensome caseload and perhaps shielded as well from the swarm of recent public attention. Faculty left school immediately after their last period while teams and clubs began to fade in popularity. Unlike the recent world events, which devastated New York City, the school could not unite against a common foe. There was only one clear place to lay the blame but somehow this didn't seem right.

The school had opted to not bring in grief or trauma counselors to the school, believing that the attention would just exaggerate the problem. At that time, nobody realized the level of impact this event had on the entire faculty and student body. It was

assumed since the school operated so efficiently, they could withstand this event without further turmoil. Perhaps the recency of world events had led them to believe the stabbing was trivialized in comparison. Perhaps the immensity of the World Trade disaster deterred school officials from wanting to reexperience the pain and suffering from that loss. In any event, the school attempted to move past the event but it was already in then and not something to be left behind.

By the Monday of that next week, the three-week anniversary of the incident only referred to now as “that day”, the staff met for the first time during their monthly faculty meeting. Mrs. Smith was there along with her vice principal Mr. Garcia. All the teachers were represented such as Mrs. Jones, the 7th grade teacher who was first on the scene and her hallway neighbor Ms. Perrino. Ms. Perrino, a 7th grade science, was the newest teacher at Kettering school, only two years out of graduate school and the youngest of the faculty. She was the first to arrive at the conference room, which on most days was the school library, and sat in the back right corner. Ms. Perrino was the one the so-called domestic terrorist turned himself into, following the stabbing.

Ms. Perrino was honored by the school district with a certificate of bravery, but contested that she acted only out of impulse and did not deserve such an award. While Ms. Perrino had been checking the bathrooms for children who had not yet fled the building she came across Thomas huddled in a shimmering heap in the corner of the boy’s bathroom. She saw the knife only a few feet from his quivering ankles, and the trail of blood smeared across the floor. As Ms. Perrino had explained what seemed like hundreds of times to the police and the reporters, all she did was ask Thomas if he was okay and then slide the knife away from the young man with her foot. She was

thoughtful, not about disturbing evidence or getting tainted with blood, but with Thomas using the knife to hurt himself. She didn't mention to any of the reporters or police how she felt the terrible burden of this young man and somehow understood what lead him to this desperate act. She senses that his act of aggression was more than retaliation for being picked on and ostracized by his peers. She understood being new and feeling left out, not certain how to gain acceptance from your peers. She could even sense the tremendous pressure he felt and the isolation of not being able to control his environment. Ms. Perrino mentioned none of this to anybody, as she did not want to seem sympathetic to his actions but she did feel it silently to herself.

As Ms. Perrino came out of the daydream she found the library filled with her colleagues. Teachers from all three grades filled the office, numbering thirty- two in total. Nobody was missing probably because they knew how Ms. Smith felt about staff meetings. It was a common jest among faculty that missing a meeting could result in excommunication like a priest from the Catholic Church. You wouldn't be punished or reprimanded outright; instead you would get the exact opposite- emotionless glares and intentional aloofness. It reminded Ms. Perrino of her own mother. You avoided making mistakes at all costs and when you did error, you felt helpless to make it right.

The meeting was called to order in typical fashion reading the minutes from the last meeting. That was the job of Mrs. White, the eighth grade English teacher. She read about the upcoming parent teacher meeting scheduled for next month, the issuing of report cards, and statewide testing protocol dreaded by the faculty. With the new statewide regulations on curricula, these tests were intended to measure student

achievement but faculty viewed it as a measure of their own competence. Teachers believed they would be blamed for low scores by students. Teachers were angry with the government and especially President Bush, who campaigned on this issue, persuading the public that higher accountability on the part of the teachers, would somehow stem the tide of our declining elementary and secondary institutions.

Mrs. White, a teacher of twenty-three years, believed that teachers were not at fault for the decline in performance by students. She was angry at feeling forced to alter her curriculum in order to meet testing standards issued by the state. Mrs. White was particularly upset with having to sacrifice her own creative work that took many years to develop. She believed her work was responsible for motivating and empowering students. Now the government was telling her what to teach as if they knew better how to reach her children. Mrs. White always referred to the students as “her children” because she felt responsible for not just their intellectual development, but their character development as well. Now schools had separate courses to teach values and good behavior, which seemed to her sadly ironic.

After the conclusion of the minutes, the agenda was presented for today’s meeting. Mrs. Smith always had this agenda prepared prior to the meeting and handed it out like a briefing to White House reporters. The teachers all were encouraged to hand in their ideas for the agenda, prior to the meeting, but they rarely did.

Mr. Garcia was directed to give an update on disciplinary problems and “at-risk” youth, as Mrs. Smith called them. This was a new agenda item in response to the violence of the past month. Mr. Garcia was charged with improving school security by partnering with the school counselor, Mrs. Vore. The two were supposed to keep a

weekly list of referrals to the counseling office along with any youth who were referred to the Vice Principal for disciplinary matters. From that list they were asked to assess who might be at risk for perpetrating violence and then determine how best to intervene. Mrs. Vore pleaded that there were better ways to use her time, which Mrs. Smith did not welcome. Mrs. Vore backed off quickly when she sensed that Mrs. Smith would not negotiate. She knew the principal did not act out of malice, she just wished to have her opinion valued. She was also aware that Mrs. Smith held the burden of the school on her shoulders and didn't always do a good job of sharing the load.

A list of four students was presented to the faculty, three from the sixth grade and one from the eighth. A brief description of the child's current situation was given, including the recommendations of the counselor and vice-principal. Teachers were asked to give their input but only those who knew the child. One young man in particular received a good deal of attention. Wendel James was an eleven-year-old African American boy who had been sent to the vice-principal for disciplinary action three times since returning from Christmas vacation.

Mrs. Jones was the most vocal of the teachers, not because she had Wendel in her class, but because she worked with his older brother who graduated the school two years prior. She disregarded the rule about sharing her opinion only for those students she worked with.

"What he needs is to know who's in charge. He will get away with whatever he can if he isn't held accountable" said Mrs. Jones.

Mrs. Stone, Wendel's 6th grade homeroom teacher and social studies replied.

“I don’t think it’s a matter of who is in charge Mrs. Jones. Up until recently we had a good relationship and we didn’t have problems”.

There was an obvious edge to her voice, probably a result of feeling doubted in front of her peers.

“I’m not saying he doesn’t like you, it’s just that he takes advantage. I know the family and the kids get away with murder. The mother is never home and the kids can do whatever they like”, returned Mrs. Jones.

“How is coming down on a child and making him feel badly going to help a child who has nobody interested in him to begin with?” she retorted.

A murmur of voices rose amongst the other faculty, talking with one another about their perspective on the problem. A few were in favor of Mrs. Stone view but the majority seemed to echo the sentiment of firmer discipline.

Mr. Garcia put a quick end to the discussion. “It’s not our purpose here to determine the best course of action for this particular student we are here to bring to everyone’s attention the children whom we are concerned about”.

The school counselor Mrs. Vore, sensing the teacher’s frustration at not being able to continue their dialogue added her own piece. “We all have different ideas on how to best help these children but we have to remember there is no right answer”. The faculty considered this thought for a moment but did not seem truly satisfied. Mrs. Vore knew the teachers felt powerless during the meeting and that a consensus of opinion would not likely be reached. She was also mindful that Mrs. Smith would not be pleased by the amount of time spent discussing the matter and so felt it important to move the meeting along.

The remainder of the meeting was uneventful, as teachers remained quiet, listening to the announcements but mostly waiting to leave. This is what Mrs. Smith called efficient but at what price?

Following the staff meeting Mrs. Smith returned to her office to find a message from Mr. Roberts the superintendent. She knew what he wanted and was hesitant to return the call. She considered waiting until tomorrow to call but knew that would only aggravate him. As he answered the phone she spoke before he could say a word. She told him about how busy she had been dealing with worried parents and persistent journalists looking for a story. She talked hurriedly about the changes they were attempting to implement in the school such as the peer mediation program and the inclusion of youth profiling at the staff meetings.

He waited for a pause and then broke in, "What about the consultant" he stated plainly. It was not so much a question as it was a statement.

Her voice became softer and filled with resignation, "I haven't found anybody yet". She held out some hope that he would not persist in his expectation but that feeling quickly faded.

He breathed loudly but did not say anything until she continued.

"I will make it a priority for next week. Do you have any suggestions on how to find somebody?"

Mr. Roberts couldn't tell if this was a further attempt at procrastination or she was sincerely looking for help. "If you are interested I do know of a psychologist who has done some consulting with other school districts. His name is Dr. Fanning. He has an excellent reputation within the community."

She took the information about the consultant but wondered if there wasn't more to his knowledge of this psychologist than he was letting on. She inserted his phone number into his calendar book for Monday morning and didn't think about it until then. She knew she was going to have to follow through with this psychologist but was not happy about it. How could she possibly find the time to add one more task to her day? She felt her control beginning to slip and fought within herself to remain calm. If this psychologist wanted to report all their problems to the superintendent then so be it. She would do her best to give him little to correct.

And so her week ended with even greater stress than when it began. She packed up all her work for the weekend and headed for home. She hoped nobody wanted anything from her there because she had very little left to give.

Monday morning came quickly as it often did when you bring work home for the weekend. Mrs. Smith was very devoted to her job and took great pride in the smooth operations of her school. This was part of the difficulty she believed in bringing on an outside expert, fearing that he would mess up her system. She had to find a way to go along with this without appearing overly negative. So, she decided silently to herself that this consultant might be helpful with advice on the peer mediation program. It was a new program to the school, which they had modeled on a school in Colorado, and seemed to be catching on slowly within her school. She knew her school counselor Mrs. Vore was not altogether enthusiastic about the program and didn't invest as much of her time as Mrs. Smith would have liked. She wasn't certain about where Mrs. Vore resistance came from except that it interfered with her ability to see the many children whom she had

appointments with during the day. Mrs. Smith asked her repeatedly to refer out students with emotional problems to community mental health professionals, but Mrs. Vore disregarded those directives. She hadn't pressed the matter at this point, not wanting another conflict to deal with.

After taking care of some important morning business she placed the call to Dr. Fanning. She expected to receive a voice mail or some secretary, so wasn't fully prepared when the psychologist himself answered.

“Hello this is Tom”.

He had a soothing voice that resonated with kindness.

She quickly put her thoughts in order. “I'm sorry; I thought I was going to get an answering machine. My name is Mrs. Smith and I was referred to you by John Roberts”. She spoke in a professional voice that was kind but evidently uncertain. When he didn't respond with more than an “ok”, she continued on. “I am the principal of Kettering Middle School and I was thinking about using your services”.

Tom sensed the discomfort in her voice and suggested they meet in person to talk about how he might or might not be helpful. She was surprised by his forwardness, but accepted the invitation for a meeting that next day. She gave him directions to the school and got off the phone with an odd sense of relief. She couldn't tell if she was happy to have gotten that over with or she was generally curious as to what this psychologist could do for her school.

In the time leading up to the meeting, Mrs. Smith thought about how she wanted to present herself and the school as a whole. She wanted to be well organized and not have any obvious problems, which would alert his suspicion.

Why was she so concerned about his opinion she wondered. She had seen a therapist when she was a child, no more than seven, at her mother's insistence. Her father had left the family and her mother was too upset to be there emotionally for her daughter. Her mother hoped a therapist could help her daughter deal with the loss. At least this is the way she remembered it. She also remembered being stubborn during the sessions because she was resentful toward her mother for not talking with her herself. She was hurting inside and might have welcomed the help, but did not want anybody to know what she was going through. It was at that point in time that she made up her mind to handle matters on her own and not ask for help.

She put aside the potential insight she may have gained from this memory and simply decided Dr. Fanning was not to be trusted. She would not take the risk that he had some connection with Mr. Roberts that could prove damaging to her career. It was not that the superintendent was out to get her, but she did not want to give him any reason to doubt her abilities.

Waking her up from the daydream, her secretary buzzed the phone, indicating that Dr. Fanning had arrived and was ready to see her. She asked Grace to show him back to the office. There was not room in the main office for the principal's desk so her office was stationed only a few doors down the hall.

She knew Grace would make Dr. Fanning feel comfortable as was typical with all guests to the school. Grace was tough and knew the school district like it was her own family. Grace could have retired years ago but decided to stay on at the school, for what reason Mrs. Smith did not know. It's strange she mused how you could work with somebody every day but not really know who they are or what they are about.

Although Grace walked slowly these days, suffering from years of arthritis, she arrived at the office in quick fashion. Formal introductions were awkwardly done and Grace left, confirming that Dr. Fanning had everything he needed.

“You are fortunate to have such a person helping to run your shop” began Dr. Fanning.

She considered his peculiar metaphor for the school and the casual style of his dress. A plaid button down green shirt, cachi trousers that were slightly too big and a black corduroy sport jacket with patches on the elbows. He looked more like a hippie college professor with his casual dress, small eyeglasses and graying mustache.

“Yes she said, Grace has been with me for quite some time, in fact she has been here since the two other principals who preceded me.” She went on, “Thank you for coming on such short notice.”

“You sounded hesitant on the phone, most do. Not many people are familiar with the work of a consultant.”

She didn’t like the fact that he had already interpreted her behavior but he had been accurate about her reluctance. She continued to listen.

“Would you like to tell me about your school and what you may be looking for?”

“Ok, well I guess that you should know that it wasn’t my idea to talk with a consultant. I called because the superintendent thought it would be a good idea.”

“So it is not you who are concerned it is he?” Dr. Fanning asked

We had an incident occur about a month ago but it was one of those unexpected things that will probably never happen again”.

Dr. Fanning heard the words probably and never, wondering how much she truly believed what she was saying. He gestured for her to continue now becoming more curious about her dilemma.

“A young man who has since been expelled brought a knife to school and stabbed another student. It was a terribly unfortunate event that was probably the result of some severe family problems. I don’t know if there was domestic violence or drugs in the home that would cause something like that”.

Again he heard her uncertainty about the probably causes for this unfortunate act of aggression. He was aware of the principal’s interest in perceiving this event as a matter of family dynamics. He wanted to be mindful of this want and her feelings about having a consultant come into *her* school.

“You are not happy with having an outsider come into your school it sounds”.

She was surprised by his directness and that he chose that to focus on her instead of the incident she just described.

“Well no I wouldn’t say that I was unhappy, it’s just that I don’t know what it is you can really do for us”.

Dr. Fanning considered that for a moment and then said, “It may seem intrusive for an outsider to come into your school, especially when it is not by your choice entirely and when you don’t even know how or if it can be helpful. And this coming so soon after such a serious trauma.”

He was very good she thought to herself and it didn’t seem at all like an act. He genuinely understood her dilemma, which helped put her at ease.

“Believe me”, he continued, “I am not here to find fault with the school or disrupt your hard work. The last thing I imagine you would need now is more pressure on you or the school.”

“We are under a lot of pressure. Still I don’t know if that is a reason to bring in a consultant. I have never heard of this except in cases where the school district is having serious financial problems and an expert comes in to cut costs.”

“You are right, it is not altogether common for a school to utilize a consultant but that is most unfortunate.”

“Why is that?” she asked.

“Well, consultants have only become popular in the last ten years used most commonly in large organizations. CEO’s hire consultants when there is a significant disruption in the company such as a merger or a change in leadership. I believe there is a greater recognition that consultants can help improve productivity, efficiency and even produce long-term financial savings. Sometimes consultants are called upon when a crisis has occurred and there is urgency to fix a serious problem. Schools however, which turn out the most important product in the world, rarely consider using the services of a consultant.”

Mrs. Smith wasn’t sure what to make of this analogy, as she never had considered learning to be a product.

“We don’t really have problems with efficiency here, we keep a pretty tight ship”.

“I would suspect that your school is highly organized and efficient. A consultant’s job as I see it is not to find fault, but to build on existing strengths. Even

highly efficient systems can find room for growth but only when there is a heightening of awareness about how you operate.”

He could see that Mrs. Smith did not fully comprehend his meaning.

“Let me describe it this way. A family such as the one here at your school is working toward improvements in many areas each day. Learning new teaching methods, implementing state and federal guidelines, and developing more effective behavior modification. Before making changes to each anticipated goal, you must have a clear picture of what is presently. When you use awareness as a tool for improvement, you generally find your strengths and their inherent deficits.”

“What do you mean?” she meant to think to herself but said out loud.

“Let’s look at this process on an individual level. We can use myself as an example. I view myself as fairly persistent. When it comes to tasks I am not quite skilled in such as fixing an electrical problem, I don’t easily give up, sometimes spending more time and effort than it is worth. So this seemingly useful character trait can have its drawback. Another way of looking at it is perspective. I might say perseverance while my wife might me as stubborn.

Mrs. Smith smiled at the example.

“A strength to one person can be perceived as a weakness to another, based on his or her own life experiences, needs, conflicts”.

Mrs. Smith wondered about the relevance to her school.

“I’m not sure how all this applies to us. We are a school without too many problems and we had what I consider an extraordinary occurrence. The way I think you

might be helpful to us is to improve our peer mediation program. We just set this up recently and I'm sure it can stand some improvement".

Dr. Fanning was aware of the obvious shift in focus and became slightly impatient.

"While I like any programs designed for children to feel empowered, I don't believe peer mediation programs by themselves are a solution to violence", he replied.

"You look surprised" he said, "let me clarify myself". "Having a system where children help each other resolve problems is very positive. In my experience it is meaningless however, without addressing the underlying issues, which create the need for this program in the first place."

Her surprised look turned to skepticism.

"Are you saying that the school caused this young man to act with utter disregard for another person's life?"

"You don't have to have overt problems within a system for events such as violence to occur. An undercurrent of tension exists in every institution where people work together. Sometimes that tension spikes and if conditions exist to spark this tension, aggression can occur. The idea is to become aware of the tension and how to work with it so that it does not influence people toward implosion or explosion. Let me stop for a moment because I think I got into a bit more than I intended to on our first meeting. I want you to understand that I am not here to give advice on programs and that I don't want to give any direct causation to the events of last month. My goal for you would not be to uncover problems within your school that lead to violence, but more to help the school reach a more satisfying state of functioning that better serves the staff and

students. If this state can be attained there may be a lessening of potential for student violence and certainly a process to heal from this trauma.”

“The truth of it is Dr. Fanning that we had a rare violent act by a single student that will probably never happen again.” Ms. Smith replied.

“The truth about student violence Mrs. Smith is that it is misunderstood. I too hope that it will never occur here again, but you may consider this even to be a warning and not just a misfortunate outcome.”

“To be honest”, Mrs. Smith began, “this is not at all what I expected”. I think I can understand your philosophy but I am not sure if we are ready for all that”.

“I know that must sound overwhelming. Perhaps you can tell me a little more about what you would like to see happen in your school if you would like?”

“I’m not sure I understand your question”, replied Mrs. Smith.

“If you were to bring in a consultant on your own terms to help you with any change effort within your school, what would it be?”

Mrs. Smith needed to think about this question. She considered herself more of a pragmatist, working with what she had instead of wishing for something different.

“Well, I suppose there are small things that could stand improvement, but I think we can just as easily go on without them.”

“What would that be?” asked Dr. Fanning.

“I would want greater investment by the teachers, less conflict among the faculty...it is very disruptive to our daily operations, higher test scores by the children, and more involvement from the parents. And it goes without saying that I want a safe environment where events such as the one from last month do not happen”.

Dr. Fanning nodded vehemently.

“Those sound like remarkable goals. I would estimate that the work needed to address all these goals can be done simultaneously, including the reduction in student violence”.

“You said violence of the students” interrupted Mrs. Smith. “We don’t have a violence problem, it was only that one incident”.

“Well, I think this may reflect a larger issue which is how I conceptualize violence on the whole. I don’t think a school needs to have multiple episodes of aggression to have a violence problem. I see violence as a sociological epidemic that is spreading across this country and even the world. We all live the consequences of it but only some of us have the opportunity to make a difference. I view schools as the key in this new era to making that significant difference.”

“How are schools supposed to make a difference? I don’t mean to sound skeptical, but as a whole we are more affected by student violence than any other group as a whole.”

“This is true. It is also the case that schools are the only place aside from the home, which exerts a steady and constant influence upon the child. While at this point in time we are inadvertently feeding the problem, years from now I hope we can be part of the solution.”

“How are we part of the problem? We have developed zero tolerance policies, making a clear statement to anybody committing this sort of act that it will not be acceptable? Do you think this kind of policy is wrong?”

“I believe that higher standards are well intentioned, but not in and of themselves effective. Take the state and federal standards imposed on the schools for academic progress. While the goal is to raise performance, I believe there are many who would consider this unreasonable. They would likely say we are hearing the 'what' but not getting the 'how'.”

Mrs. Smith considered this for a moment while Dr. Fanning went on.

“In the year 2000, Congress debated goals for future legislation. They already had content and performance standards, so it was suggested they take a third one called opportunity to learn standards. I believe this was the closest anybody had come to recognizing the missing piece. You can certainly legislate the what, yet this was an attempt to question the how.”

“What would your suggestion to Congress be?”

“I would have wanted the third standard to be the how or more precisely the process. We know what we want to attain so we may consider the way in which this can be done. Take violence reduction for instance. We may agree that a reduction in violent episodes are desired, but are not in agreement about the best means to accomplish this goal.”

“Is there a best way to do this?” asked Mrs. Smith.

“I believe there is no one right way. This is both the problem and the solution. We must recognize what works in Buke Montana, may be different from Jamaica Queens. The way we arrive at these answers can be similar. If we pay attention to how we ask the questions and come up the answers we can create a higher- level self-regulating system. We can create school environments where the importance is now the

way in which we solve problems and not the problems themselves. And isn't that what we want to teach our children. It's not just what they are learning but the process of thinking and deciding for themselves. We don't want automatons coming out of our schools that can simply recite the formulas for mathematical equations we want children who can understand the reasoning behind the formula. We don't just want children who understand that a World War took place on this particular date, we want them to question why wars happen in the first place."

"Violence is not simply the problem, it is the result of many problems gone unanswered. We can't eliminate aggression simply because it is damaging. We must first understand the factors that inspire aggression, facilitate it, and make it a realistic alternative for some. Until we begin asking the right questions we will continue spinning our wheels."

"Well what do you believe is the cause of violence in the schools?"

"That is a very complicated question. The answer is probably the same for why we have had wars in our entire history as a civilization. Instead of giving you my ideas, because they may not be accurate at all, maybe this is a good question for the staff to get them thinking about it. Simply asking them will help them to feel less powerless and move them away from being victims."

"Can you at least tell me how you see violence happening at this school when there has only been one major instance?"

Violence to me may be viewed on a continuum. On one end of the continuum would be overt hostility, while closer to the other end would be bullying and then further

down would be ridicule and teasing. Every school across the country is dealing with these issues now and unfortunately not as successfully as they would like.”

“Why haven’t they been successful and how did you know that is going on here?”

Dr. Fanning thought about that for a moment.

“As I said, this continuum of violence is potentiated wherever there is a concentration of people who spend a good deal of time together. If this system has a constant source of internal and external pressure, with no process for understanding the effect, there will be more radical results.

Let’s take the Post Office for instance. This organization has occasional violence that is well publicized through the media. Although we see the result of long standing tension and hostility, we miss the build up from lesser incidents along the way. We do not see the postal employee who feels demeaned by a spot inspection finding inadequacies in his job, leading to absenteeism, which then places an added burden on the already stressed system. Angry words may or may not be exchanged by the supervisor and employee, but the anger and hostility will likely build. Violence can often start with a rather benign interaction or demand that lingers and festers within the individual. The important piece that is missing is the system’s responsibility to scan their environment and understand the impact of such events. Instead of examining the culture in which the violence was perpetrated we hold the individual responsibility and deem him to be unstable. I would not argue that the person committing the violence is overwhelmed beyond their inner resources, but we cannot forget about the culture in which this escalation was facilitated.

Mrs. Smith began thinking about the violence within her own school and what may have led to this outburst.

He had said an awful lot and she needed some time to absorb it all. She wanted to dismiss his ideas as irrelevant to her situation but somehow knew the merit of what he said. She was searching for ways to dismiss the idea that an underlying level of tension existed in her school. Even if there was an invisible force acting upon the people in the system how would a greater awareness help diminish this influence? It was still too far fetched to believe. She would not rule out what she heard but was going to need more evidence before moving forward.

The meeting ended and Mrs. Smith thanked Dr. Fanning for his time. She had a good deal of information to consider and needed some time. She asked if they could arrange another meeting if necessary, in case she had any further questions. Dr. Fanning welcomed the opportunity and prompted her to call with any questions. His final words were about commitment and readiness, which she didn't completely hear. Her mind was continuing to think about their conversation although she kept coming back to those two words. Did he not think we were ready for this work? Did I not seem committed to this school? She wondered about the implication that she would not do whatever it took to improve her school and took it as a challenge. She also considered that his message was not judgmental but somehow needed to be cautious.

Even after he left, she wondered periodically throughout the day what she was getting herself into. Was she prepared for whatever risks this might involve and what would be the reward of moving forward? Could she really trust him to preserve the dignity of the school and not create the impression that her school had problems or that

she was incompetent. More importantly she wondered if she could trust herself. What issues would be brought up about her and the leadership she provided?

Chapter Three

The Assessment of Culture

A few days passed since her meeting with Dr. Fanning and so Mrs. Smith reported her follow through to the superintendent. She expressed her concern that the consultant was not interested in helping improve their peer mediation program so she was confused as to how he could be useful. She told Mr. Roberts that the consultant was suggesting what sounded to be extensive work, which could be very costly to the school district. To her surprise however, he discounted the financial cost and suggested meeting with him again to voice her concerns. How could money not be a factor she wondered, it was always an issue in the past- computers, gym equipment, supplies. There has always been a shortage and now suddenly it was not a concern. Causing her even further suspicion was Mr. Roberts's patience about this whole matter. He had never been so gentle with her in the past. Without further discussion she agreed to meet with him again and get a better understanding of what this consultant could do for them.

Upon her arrival to the school and prior to calling Dr. Fanning, she was met with an urgent call from the parent of one of her students. Grace told her that Mrs. Budhi had called three times since she was gone and said a meeting with the principal was needed right away. Grace told Mrs. Smith that she could reschedule the meeting with Mr. Garcia at one o'clock to accommodate this parent. Grace took this initiative often, which was both help and an annoyance to Mrs. Smith. She knew that Grace was right about being able to change her schedule she didn't particularly like her presumption.

Mrs. Smith thought about the upcoming meeting hoping it was not a serious problem. She didn't know Mrs. Budhi's son Ronald, nor had she met this parent at any of the open house functions. She wondered why this matter couldn't have been handled by the student's teacher but didn't think to ask that question before scheduling the meeting. She was tired of dealing with parents, especially those who wanted assurances the school was safe. She couldn't count how many times in the past month she had told a parent that everything was being done to ensure their child's safety and that what happened was an isolated incident. Deep down she wondered however whether these were true statements. She knew for certain that without a break herself from giving out such reassurances there could be no time to do her other work.

Brining her back into the moment was a knock at the door. She was expecting to see Grace with Mrs. Budhi, but instead saw Mrs. Vore at the door with a very concerned look on her face.

"Do you have a moment for me?" inquired Mrs. Vore.

"I don't have long I am expecting a parent".

"This is important but I am afraid it won't be quick".

Mrs. Smith could feel her shoulder muscles begin to tighten. How is it I am to get anything accomplished during the day when I am always dealing with the unexpected she thought?

"Ok come on in Mrs. Vore and close the door behind you".

Mrs. Vore came inside and did as she was asked; taking a seat directly in front of Ms. Smith's large desk creating distance between the two women.

“I was meeting with a young man at his own request. I finally got it out of him that he was fearful his name was on the hit list of another child”, stated Mrs. Vore urgently.

“A what?” asked a befuddled Mrs. Smith.

“He was told by several other students that he was on a hit list which to him means being assaulted or maybe even killed, I am not sure”.

“Who is the young man you met with and whose hit list is he supposed to be on?”

Mrs. Vore became noticeably uncomfortable, switching positions in her chair and taking a long deep breath. Squinting her face and pursing her lips together she seemed to be searching for the most diplomatic response.

“He doesn’t want me to say his name at this point because he is worried about retribution”.

The two of them had been in this uncomfortable position before. Mrs. Vore was always conscientious about the confidentiality of her sessions and wanted to maintain her reputation as a safe person to talk to within in the school. Mrs. Smith believed that everything going on inside the school was her business and could tolerate being kept in the dark.

With a sigh of exasperation Mrs. Smith asked, “How can you expect me to be helpful when I don’t know the whole story?”

Mrs. Vore knew this was a considerable amount of patience on the part of her principal and did not want to aggravate her further.

“The young man is Bobby Jones”, she said in defeat. “He is still in my office. I told him we would have to come forward with this information. He understood, but

asked for some time before it got out. I told him I was going to consult with you and that I would do my best to protect his right to privacy. He said a 6th grader named Scott Hall made the hit list.”

It was at that time when Grace buzzed her office to alert her that Mrs. Budhi had arrived and was ready for their meeting.

“Alright, let’s do this. For now, why don’t you send this young man back to class and tell him not to go home after his last period. We will probably have to call his parents so work with him however you want so that he understands this plan. I will come and find you after my meeting”.

Mrs. Vore knew she had done the right thing by informing Mrs. Smith. It was made very clear to her on the day she was hired, that no problem was too big, as long as the principal was aware of it. Mrs. Smith did not like being hit with problems that she did not know were coming. At the same time, she had wanted Mrs. Smith to allow her to handle this matter herself or at least ask her for her opinion of what to do. Mrs. Vore knew she could have resolved this easily by having the boys sit down with her together to work this out. In doing so, she might be able to avoid a big scandal that hurt the reputation of either of the students. She wasn’t surprised that Mrs. Smith did not give her permission to work on this solo, not even that her help wasn’t requested. That was not Mrs. Smith’s style and she would have to accept that.

Mrs. Smith continued to think about this new problem, brought to her by the guidance counselor, during the introductions. Mrs. Budhi was slight woman, she guessed of Phillipino descent. She had a hard time understanding her at first because of the rapid

speech and the heavy accent. When Mrs. Budhi slowed down after being calmed, the cause of her dismay became known.

“Would you repeat what your son said to you over the phone” asked Mrs. Smith.

“He called me on his cell phone and said that he wanted me to come pick him up. He said another boy wanted to hurt him and he could not stay in school a minute longer. He said he was on a hit list”.

With those words Mrs. Smith’s body tightened as if she experienced a shock of cold air. She wondered how this had spread outside the school when she had just learned about it minutes ago. She silently cursed cell phones, as this was the second time outsiders became involved before she was ready. Even if this story wasn’t true it was going to once again bring the community to a state of panic. She had just finished getting people to calm down and now this. She immediately thought about containment and resolving this matter quickly.

Within minutes, Mrs. Smith summoned Mrs. Budhi’s son Ron to the office for a first hand account of the story. Ron was nervous to be brought to the principal’s office and told his version of events with a trembling voice that occasionally rose into higher octaves. With every new name that was added to the story Mrs. Smith anxiety level grew. There were so many students involved in this rumor mill that she wondered just how many times this story changed since it’s origin. She knew it was impractical to bring every student into her office but she was very tempted. She wanted to chastise every one of them for not bringing this information forward in the beginning and allowing it to fester into a potential scandal for the school. Instead, she said some harsh words to Ron for worrying his mother before knowing the truth. At the same time she

assured Mrs. Budhi that the matter would be looked into and the responsible parties, no matter who they may be, would face stern consequences.

Mrs. Budhi seemed somewhat satisfied upon her departure and thanked Mrs. Smith for taking the time to see her. Ron looked relieved to be out of the office but began to worry what the other children would think when they saw him exiting the office with his mother.

While quietly strategizing her plan for dealing with this mess, Mrs. Smith realized her attention needed to be turned to Mrs. Vore. She felt better having more information but was still concerned about how far this had spread. Mrs. Smith knew by the next day she would have several more phone calls and visits from parents, not all of whom would be as easy to placate as Mrs. Budhi.

Upon reaching the door to Mrs. Vore's office she decided upon the first part of her plan. She would wait to hear which parents their children alerted and then deal with each individually, instead of drawing attention to the entire school. She realized this was risky, but was not about to make more of this than was necessary. She would certainly call in Scott Hall, but would do so with his parents present. If he was being falsely accused than she wanted them to be fully aware of the circumstances leading up to the questioning. At the same time, if he were guilty of this accusation, he would need to be immediately suspended and perhaps expelled. She would need to check with the superintendent before making such a decision.

She knocked twice on the door marked, Guidance Counselor and entered before hearing a reply. Mrs. Vore looked up from her paperwork, surprised by the abrupt interruption.

“This hit list business had spread to at least one parent already and we need to address this immediately. Please call the parents for Scott Hall and tell them they need to come in first thing in the morning with their son, otherwise he will not be allowed in the school. Don’t tell them what this is in reference to, except to say that you are following my instructions”.

Mrs. Vore nodded absently at the directive and before she could say a word, Mrs. Smith had left. Dealing with parents was a particularly sensitive and sticky matter for her as these relationships were important to her work. Mrs. Vore was counselor who followed a philosophical approach called “family systems”, which involved looking at problems or issues within the scope of the entire family. Relationships, roles, boundaries, and alliances were all critical in dealing with the emotional well being of a youth. In fact, Mrs. Vore was reluctant to see students individually, without their families, if the counseling were to last more than a few weeks. She believed that children did not possess enough inherent power within the family system to make the needed changes that often influenced student behavior. Mrs. Vore believed that a child’s academic or behavioral problems, if not related to learning difficulties, could only be treated successfully with the involvement of the entire family. Of course this was not always practical as some families were not willing or available to attend sessions. In these cases Mrs. Vore might still see the child individually, to help build their coping mechanisms and learn to better tolerate stress.

Having to call a parent and tell them they needed to bring their child in to school without reason would cause tremendous anxiety for the parents, she knew. She could not however disregard the instructions of Mrs. Smith, because this would be fairly evident at

the start of the meeting. She resented being put in this position as her secretary Grace could easily have made the phone call herself. She couldn't decide if it were Mrs. Smith disregard for her relationships with parents that made her angry or the directive to call them. In either case she was unhappy with herself for not saying something directly. Mrs. Vore began to question her assertiveness and why she placed a higher price on her job than her integrity. This self-awareness was both a blessing and a curse she thought. Most people would either deal with this or not, but not many would torture themselves trying to figure out how they were responsible.

Mrs. Vore considered all this as she walked through the hallway toward the room of Bobby Jones. She wanted to make certain he was okay before leaving for home and also to thank him for coming to her with his honesty and courage. As she approached the class she found the door open and the children gathering their belongings in anticipation of the dismissal bell. The children looked eager to leave but also sapped of their strength as they dragged their coats and book bags along the floor.

Her contact with Bobby was quick as he indicated he must hurry to get a good seat on the bus. She knew what he meant about that because she had several conversations with students about the bus ride home. Terrible acts of intimidation and bullying occurred during those rides home and there was little supervision to ensure each child's safety. She had hear talk of harassment on the back of the bus, including theft, destruction of property and even one account of a 6th grade girl being taunted with sexual remarks by a group of older boys. Much of the time she felt powerless to intervene in these situations because the children feared retaliation and often recanted their stories. Mrs. Vore was the last person who would make reports against a child's will, but she was

bound by guidelines insisting she put a child's safety first. In any case, getting to the bus early meant sitting up front next to the driver, which meant a higher degree of safety.

She turned around to return to her office but was stopped by Ms. Perrino. It was her class that Bobby Jones came out of and she had meant to gather more information from this teacher.

"I saw you talking with Bobby, is everything okay? When he asked to speak with you earlier it sounded urgent so I sent him to you right away. I hope that was alright?" she added with sudden concern.

"That was just fine Ms. Perrino. I wish that all teachers took requests for the counselor as seriously".

She was sorry the moment she added that last part. It was not her concern that teachers did not value counseling; she had just wanted to appreciate her concern. Perhaps she was still upset from her encounter with Mrs. Smith.

"Mrs. Perrino, I wanted to ask you your thoughts about Bobby Jones. Is there anything unusual that you have noticed going on, either with him or the other boys?"

Mrs. Perrino was happy to be asked and immediately volunteered an abundance of information, some of which was relevant to this current situation. It seemed that Ms. Perrino was excited to have somebody's attention that would listen to her experience of the school day and even furthermore that somebody would take her perspective seriously.

"Bobby has given on school. He doesn't pay attention in class, he doesn't bring back homework and there is nothing I can do to help him."

"Has he been this way for long?" asked Mrs. Vore

“Bobby has never been a great student, but at least he would turn in his work and participate in class when asked.”

“You said you have tried many things but nothing works.”

“I tried consequences for the behavior, I’ve sent notes home to his parents; now he is in the back of the room so he is less of a disruption to the other students. I try ignoring him hoping the acting out will stop but it’s very hard to do.”

The two talked a while longer about the situation with Bobby. They discussed classroom management strategies and behavior modification techniques. Ms. Perrino took the suggestions but seemed to feel discouraged by her inability to reach this young man. To balance out this helplessness, she shared with Mrs. Vore some of her successes.

She talked about the creative way in which she handled what she considered an impending gender war among the students. She also talked about a young girl who started out the school year withdrawn and isolated from the other children. As a result of her sustained effort, this girl had now developed friendships and seemed to be truly reaching her academic potential.

“How did you do it?” asked Mrs. Vore

Ms. Perrino gave the question some careful consideration surprised that somebody was taking an interest in her accomplishment.

“I had to give her constant encouragement but in a way which didn’t make her a target for the other children or make her feel like a stand out. I wrote extra long comments on her papers and met with her frequently during lunch periods and after school. She did most of the work herself...it was her effort that made the difference.”

“That sounds terrific”, replied Mrs. Vore. It always helps to have somebody in your corner giving you consistent feedback. You should take credit for that”.

Mrs. Vore wondered if Ms. Perrino was aware of the paradox. She too was looking for support and guidance but wasn't quite sure how to ask for it.

Mrs. Vore enjoyed the exchange with this young teacher and was glad to feel useful. She often wondered about her role with the teachers and if she shouldn't be doing more to help them as well as the students. She knew how demanding their job was and recognized they gained little recognition for their effort. It was difficult to grow professionally as a teacher because there was little emphasis placed on staff development. She knew that was the case for many schools, but other schools were not her concern. Even as a counselor there was little in the way of supervision or collaboration. She realized how stagnated she felt in her work and wondered how that would ever change. Schools were sort of like a factory with a push for higher production. Working conditions were rarely examined and personal satisfaction was too seldom experienced. Perhaps she was ready to move onto a new career. Her daydream took her into various possibilities but somehow she always came back to the school. She knew there was something more to be done here but she had neither the right questions to ask nor the answers, which made sense.

Before leaving for the day, Mrs. Vore returned to her office to make the phone call to Scott Hall's parents.

At 7:30 am the following day, Mrs. Smith and Mrs. Vore arrived at the same time into the parking lot. They greeted each other politely and walked toward the building together. Mrs. Vore spoke first.

“I made the call yesterday to the home of Mr. and Mrs. Hall.”

“Good. I expect they will be here together this morning with their son?”

“Actually just Mrs. Hall. The parents are separated and we weren’t able to reach the father. There is a chance he will be here if Mrs. Hall was able to get a hold of him later in the evening”.

Mrs. Vore continued as she was met with a silent nod.

“She was very upset by my request for her to come in this morning and wanted to know very badly what was wrong”.

Still no response from Mrs. Smith.

“I didn’t tell her of course except to say that a problem had arisen which needed to be attended to right away. I told her I would be part of the meeting”.

With that she got Mrs. Smith’s attention.

“You would like to be part of the meeting?” She asked the question as if the decision had not yet been made.

“I feel I owe it to this family after that phone call”.

Mrs. Smith gave her a slight sneer, which wasn’t intended to be seen. “You didn’t do anything that deserves restitution. Besides, wouldn’t you be worried about how the family might react to you outside a counseling session?”

Mrs. Vore knew this was intended to be a slight against her but disregarded the invitation to that arena.

“Perhaps I can simply be there to facilitate the process. If the parent has a tough time then maybe I can lend some guidance”.

“I will see you at my office at 8:40, please be on time”.

Mrs. Vore believed this to be a small victory but at what price. She wondered to herself why Mrs. Smith treated her with so much contempt. Was she overstepping her bounds by inviting herself to the meeting? Did she not seem capable to help intervene in this matter? Maybe it was just the position of counselor that irritated her and it was nothing specific she did at all. She would continue to think about this but not right now. She wanted to get her morning schedule set up to accommodate this meeting. This would mean having to rearrange a few of her sessions, which wasn't a problem. Unlike private practice, she had the flexibility to see children at various times during the week, unless it interfered with a child's academic work. She was careful not to take a child out of the same class for too many periods, knowing that the work was hard to make up. She also knew which teachers were supportive of counseling and would help a child from falling behind. Of course there were the other teachers who resented any interference with the curriculum. Teachers such as Mrs. Jones, who didn't allow any children to leave her class at any time. Her reason for this rule was the preparation for statewide testing, which held the utmost of importance. Mrs. Vore suspected it was her own fear of failure that drove her rather than her fictional quest for student success. Mrs. Vore laughed to herself when she thought of the words S-o-c-i-a-l Studies, which to Mrs. Jones did not include the impact of peer and family relationships.

Once she completed rearranging her day, she headed toward Mrs. Smith's office. She was on the opposite side of the first floor, only about eighty feet down the hall. At

least she had her own office though, because in years past she would have to share space with the music teacher who worked two days a week. It took some time to convince the principal that she required privacy for her sessions, which meant rearranging space to find her a private office. If she had to pick someone to share space with though it would have been the music teacher. Except for the two days a week when her appointments were interrupted by a cacophony of sixth grade students who were forced to take at least one music class for graduation requirements. She affectionately dubbed this sound as the mating ritual of pubescence. Similar to their first time experience with a musical instrument, the new and awkward exploration of their physical bodies, which had outgrown their emotional readiness, often resulting in discombobulation.

All of this was still a step up from the beginning of her career when she worked out of the supply closet. Periodically during sessions with her students a teacher wanting a ream of paper would interrupt them. It was sad but she smiled anyway.

It was true that this was a school and not a mental health clinic. Feeling like a second-class citizen should not be surprising because the school's focus would always be education. She wished they would realize that a child with emotional problems would not reach their potential academically without counselor intervention and therefore her job had equal importance. She wondered too about the next generation of counselors and whether they would have it any easier. She had a strong suspicion that teaching was becoming harder due the increased emotional complexity of problems brought forth by students. With the push for mainstreaming education and the growing deficit of new teachers to replace the bulk of veteran teachers going into retirement, certain problems were bound to escalate. Teachers would not be equipped to deal with the range of

behavioral problems found in their classrooms, which will likely disrupt the education of the majority. She could envision law suits from parents whose children did not have emotional or behavioral problems protesting the interference with a suitable learning environment. What would they do with these children who were routinely unmanageable? She had a friend in fact who was a teacher in the New York City school system that told her frequently of those very problems they were experiencing. Children act up and get suspended, which certainly was not a solution to the problem. Many had given up on the parents, believing they were either too busy or not interested in helping. She suspected the answer for this problem had to do with increasing funding for mental health specialists who could work with these disruptive children but would the lawmakers realize that need in time?

She wished she didn't have to struggle so hard within her own school, knowing the larger issues may never be addressed. For now her focus would be on today and how to make a difference that may help increase her credibility in the eyes of her principal. And so she stepped into the meeting with Mr. and Mrs. Hall.

Both parents had arrived which was good news. Mrs. Hall must have been able to contact Scott's father later that evening. She looked at the two of them and wondered how long it had been since they were in the same room together. She knew they were separated but could not tell from her phone call whether they had an amicable breakup or deal with each other about their son. They looked to be uncomfortable sitting upright in their hard backed chairs, eyes darting about the room, and not speaking a word. They were in stark contrast to their son Scott, who slumped in his chair and stared blankly out into space. She noticed the positioning of the family with Scott sitting in the middle of

his two parents. Sometimes during her counseling sessions she would attend to how the family positioned themselves, realizing this may yield information about how they were aligned in the family. Whenever she found a child sitting between his or her parents, it often meant distance between the parents.

She was first introduced to Mr. Hall, a slight man of stature, dressed in an old and inexpensive suit. He shook her hand delicately and broke eye contact almost immediately. Mrs. Hall was dressed in professional attire that seemed to be purposely selected for the meeting. She acknowledged Mrs. Vore as having spoken with her on the phone and smiled at their formal introduction.

“I’d like to begin since we are all here”, indicated Mrs. Smith.

“I will try to make this brief as I know you had to alter your schedules to come in this morning.”

“Scott. What can you tell me about a list of student names of your creation?”

Scott’s head sank even further toward the ground, as he seemed to trying to disappear right into his chair. He murmured something inaudible.

“Would you speak up please so that we can all hear you”?

“I don’t have it”.

“What do you mean you do not have it? Did you have one?”

Scott realized he was cornered and had to make a quick decision.

“I got rid of it”.

“What was on it and where did it go?”

“Just some stupid names”

“Whose names and why did you write them down?”

“I don’t know” he began to murmur again.

“What was the purpose of this list?” asked Mrs. Smith firmly.

“These kids were always picking on me. I just wrote down their names because I couldn’t stand them”. In this last statement Scott’s mood became more agitated. He was obviously scared but what was more apparent to Mrs. Vore was his exasperation. She wondered how long he had been dealing with bullying and what toll it had taken.

“What did you intend to do with these kids on your list?” asked Mrs. Smith.

“Nothing”

“Then why were these students scared you were going to harm them?”

With that a small smirk of satisfaction flashed across Scott’s face, which was only visible to Mrs. Vore who sat adjacent to the young man. The smile was gone quickly and hopefully wasn’t noticed by Mrs. Smith.

“I don’t know. Maybe they thought I was going to do something”.

“Why would they think that? Did you tell anybody about the list?”

Apparently Mrs. Smith had asked the right question because that prompted the story which began to make sense of all this. Apparently, Scott had shown his list to another student although didn’t say what the list was about. This other student made his own interpretation, which then spread quickly throughout the school. The students on the list were popular and also for their terrorizing certain peers. It seems that much of the school had been aware of this from last week.

Mrs. Smith did the only thing she knew to do at that point which was to suspend Scott from school. There was a strict no tolerance policy for aggression, which she found Scott in violation of. She was clear about his intent. There was no argument from

Scott's parents who seemed to be in shock. They were likely embarrassed for not being aware of the problems their son was having and now worried about the way in which he had chosen to handle it himself. Before leaving, Mrs. Vore recommended some therapists she knew in the community and told them to call her if they would need any additional numbers.

Counselor and principal sat silently for a few moments after the family had left. A shared moment of incredulity brought the two together.

"There was never anything like this when we were in school was there?"

Mrs. Vore recognized this as a rhetorical question and remained pensive.

"I've got to call the superintendent and see what our next step will be".

With that, Mrs. Vore knew she was being dismissed. She walked back to her office thinking about the real culprits who had gotten through this unscathed. The only repercussion for the students who had driven Scott to this point would be greater attention and popularity. How would this cycle ever end?

Chapter Four

From the Eyes of an Administrator

“Hello this is Tom”, answered the phone.

“Dr. Fanning, this is Mrs. Smith from Kettering Middle School. I would like to meet with you as soon as possible to talk about your proposal”.

“Is everything alright? You sound distressed”

Mrs. Smith didn't like that she allowed her self to sound rattled but the truth was she could sense this problem getting beyond her control. She quickly explained the events of the past week and what the school had done for damage control. There was openness about her, a sort of vulnerability he had not sensed in their first meeting. He realized this was the right to intervene. Not everybody is available to consulting and even those who are ready have windows of opportunity you have to look for.

The two agreed to meet on Tuesday of the following week. He asked that Mrs. Smith block off at least an hour of her time for the meeting. He requested that she put together some ideas on what changes she would like to see occur within the school, even suggesting that she asked the same question of her staff. This last piece took her off guard. What did her staff want to change? If she asked that of them, she was certain she would open the door to a lot of complaining and griping about things which couldn't be changed. How would she ever keep order if they started questioning everything that was going on? She decided she would wait to even tell her staff she was bringing somebody in until she was certain about how this would all work.

In the meanwhile she attended to the fallout from the “hit list”. She was at least thankful the media didn’t get wind of this information causing her an even bigger headache. Since the matter was dealt with she decided not to alert the parents, believing this would create unnecessary panic. She blamed the teachers for keeping the issue alive as they talked about it as much as the children. She chided them for their inability to let go and told them they were as bad as the kids. None of this seemed to matter however as this was largely out of her control. She recognized this but knew she didn’t like it.

A three-day weekend helped to put some time and distance between this latest situation. It didn’t help her recuperate much however, as much of the time was spent considering what Dr. Fanning had asked of her. What did she really want to change in the school? She had already told him about her desire for increased teacher commitment and having less conflict. The wish for higher test scores was always an issue but she didn’t see how he could help with that. He had said something else to her, which she found interesting- the goals I initially select may not be the goals we ultimately chose. What did that really mean? Perhaps it had something to do with his encouragement to explore why I came upon whatever goals I chose and what importance they had to me personally.

When they finally met, it was Mrs. Smith that began with the questions. If she were to proceed with this consulting business, as she referred to it, then she wanted to know more about the person she was about to work with. She wanted to know his background, his knowledge of the school system, his successes and failures.

“Well let’s see. At the very beginning of my career I worked for a school district in Pennsylvania as an elementary school guidance counselor. It was a very rural town

outside of State College where Penn State is located. A small town called Belmonte, where the schools closed for the opening of hunting season. I could never figure out whether the closing was to protect the children against rusty hunters or it was more of a commemorative event. From there I moved to Chicago where I consulted with schools that had a shortage of counselors. That's when I really began to appreciate the importance of a good principal. I would equate that insight to CEO's when I went on to consult with large corporations."

"Do you prefer to work with schools or larger organizations?"

"I think there are advantages and disadvantages to both. I know that sound somewhat evasive so let me explain. I enjoy working with systems both small and large. Intimate systems such as families offer me the opportunity to get fully acquainted with those I am working with. We form deeper and more intimate relationships because we are fewer in number. With these families however, there are limitations on what they can accomplish because of their limited power within the larger system they are part of".

"I am not sure I understand".

"Take for instance the Hall family who you met with last week. If they were seeing me in therapy, I could potentially help them to improve relationships within the family, resolve conflicts with improved alacrity, and even get them reach a more common picture for the entire group. What I couldn't do as easily is help them deal with the outside influences, which are creating additional turmoil. The stress of their jobs, the pressure of the court system, and the conflict within the school system would be beyond my direct influence.

Now take the opposing perspective. If I were to be working for a large company, I would help them understand their organizational shape, including the way they manage power, reach decisions, balance productivity and quality; what I couldn't do is deal directly with life's intricacies of each employee that created and maintained this system. For instance, a Vice President in charge of Human Resources who put a low priority on staff training and development may be causing stagnation on the part of his employees. Perhaps his resistance to making any changes is due to the need in his life to be goal oriented. Time spent on training may be viewed by this VP as wasteful and counterproductive. Well, consider where this perspective originated. Perhaps his father was a man who focused exclusively on grades and not on effort. Maybe his wife was complaining that he always came home from work drained of energy and distant from the family. This man would not likely want to take on the additional workload of redesigning the staff development budget, because he is already feeling sapped of his energy. We might never get to this level of substance because we are focused on the larger picture. Does this help to explain my difficulty with answering absolutely?"

"So what you are saying is that multiple levels of systems are interacting simultaneously, although you must decide at what level to intervene".

"That is exactly right. And to make it even more complicated, when one level of system is affected, other layers and levels will shift, causing sometimes unexpected results."

"Can you give an example?"

"Sure. If we take that VP we spoke about before and now help him to understand the importance of staff development, he will have to make some important decisions

about his workload and maybe even his work/family balance. If he is not able to delegate responsibility for the needed changes, he may find a wife and family who become increasingly resentful of his time commitment. His wife may become resentful leading to an intensification of strain within the marriage. This VP will now experience this strain during his workday, effecting his interaction with other employees. The smaller system has now impacted the larger system and created another issue.”

“How do you ever get anything accomplished when it sounds as if the end result is always changing?”

“That is a very good question. Let me answer it this way- What I tell my clients is that I can never guarantee exactly what changes will take place following my interventions”.

“And you still get more clients”, she said teasingly.

This was her first use of humor he had experienced and he felt like she was begging to open up. Perhaps seeing him as fallible made him less of an expert and thus easier for her to relax.

“I tell clients that organizational learning can be incremental and transformational. Incremental learning reinforces what is already known and serves to make gradual modifications of improvement. Transformational learning can be more complex, in that the outcome is not predictable. Instead, the process by which an outcome is generated is what’s attended to. This type of change requires a willingness to take risks, because you are concerned with the journey and not the destination”.

“How do you know what change is needed for an organization?” asked Mrs. Smith.

“There are three types of change that an organization can engage in. The first is of course transformational, the second is incremental and the third is transitional. I already described the first two, and the last has to do with moving realignment. Organizations that are moving from one determined place to another.”

“You seem to prefer transformational change”, she stated.

“You noticed a rise in my energy level as I spoke about transformational change I see, let me tell you why. This type of change process requires courage, risk, and a willingness to examine what is. In addition, a change that is process driven has a great potential to become self-sustaining.”

She nodded as she continued to absorb the information.

“To build a shared picture that incorporates the needs and wants of the entire organization, all change requires a leadership that is both part of and aware of the change process itself. To do this we focus both on the want of the individual and the need of the system.

“The need of the system?”

“Yes, every system has a unique set of needs that if not responded to, will create tension and unrest. The reason why one organization is successful over another, excluding the obvious differences in resources, is the ability to scan the internal and external environment, make meaning of the information and ultimately to respond to the resulting needs. Let me give you an example of how this might work.”

“Let’s go back to the company we used earlier, we can call it Company X. If we take that same VP and teach him to pay attention to the environment, he will learn what is and isn’t working. In their case, he may observe that employees have become

unmotivated and apathetic in their work. If he were to interpret this information, he may come to find that an absence of training is partly responsible for this subdued mood. Now he can respond based upon this information in a way which supports some agreed upon desired outcomes, such as incentive and training programs.”

“It sounds as if the leadership plays a big role”, she admitted.

“I think you are right about that. Without the support of the administration, change efforts will meet great resistance.”

Mrs. Smith began to think about herself in relation to the school. Was she willing to support change and how could she become more thoughtful about the system?

“How can I do that with my school?” she asked.

“I believe you have already been doing this to some extent. Consider what I asked of you on the phone. You were asked to consider how your school would respond to the idea of change. What are there needs?”

“I’m afraid I didn’t give that much thought”, she admitted somberly.

“That’s okay, you have been doing this already. Just think about your staff and students. What would you imagine they would need to better perform their jobs and do so with greater investment and contentment?”

She struggled to come up with what her staff believed to be their needs. In having this difficulty she realized that perhaps she hadn’t paid enough attention to them. She felt badly about this but chose not to keep this to herself.

“Well, maybe the teachers would say they don’t have enough flexibility to be creative within the curriculum or that they would like their students to give greater effort.”

“Good! Now how would you test out these wonderings?”

“I suppose I would have to ask them.”

“That would be an interesting experiment I imagine”.

Mrs. Vore was very curious about the way that Dr. Fanning spoke. He was so gentle and non-assuming but he had this presence about him that inspired her. She wondered if all consultants worked this way. Instead of complimenting him on his approach she found herself wanting to challenge him.

“How is it that you came up with this approach? I don’t mean to question you but I was curious about this consulting business in general?”

“I think that is a very good question to ask. It sounds like you want to know how you are getting your money’s worth.”

There was a moment of silence. He continued.

“What I am describing to you I can not take credit for. It is the theory of Gestalt Psychologists and has been around for many years. We will take more about this theory as we go along. As for you question about consultants, here is what I believe: A good intervener should be measured not by their skills but by their ability to see themselves in relationship to others. This awareness drives the intervener to help create powerful interventions within the system.”

“How do you see yourself in relation to this system?” she challenged

“Well I am not quite yet certain about that, but I can tell you about how I see myself in relation to my work with you”.

The power of his words caught her off guard. She leaned back in her chair slightly. It was apparent that she was not accustomed to getting feedback.

“I feel very much at ease with you”, He began “I am aware of your own hesitancy to venture too far or too quickly which brings up my own desire to push harder, hoping you will soon appreciate me and what I have to say. I am aware of my need to be accepted and I often do that by being emphatic in my beliefs.”

Mrs. Vore did not know what to say. She had never heard anybody speak so candidly and felt somewhat uncomfortable. At the same time, she looked upon him differently. The only way to describe it was feeling closer to him. Dr. Fanning would later describe that phenomenon as “making contact”. He would explain that different parts of the system would need to make contact in order for boundaries to be transcended. It was somewhat more than she could absorb but it stirred her curiosity.

The two went on to discuss some of the formalities of the consulting arrangement such as time spent in the school, approximate length of the arrangement, and other technicalities. From what Dr. Fanning described, he would spend the first couple of weeks observing, interacting, and formulating an understanding about the school system. He gained permission to sit in on classes, meet with teachers, and join the staff meetings. Mrs. Smith did not feel comfortable allowing him such free reign of the school but remembered what he said, “Growth may occur when we feel off balance”. She was definitely feeling off balance.

The goals for this consulting still felt vague to Mrs. Smith. She didn’t want to press the matter at that time because she wasn’t certain where it might lead. She was already struggling to make sense of the work they had done thus far.

She mentally reviewed what they had agreed upon thus far. They agreed that a better understanding of student violence would be a helpful overarching goal. With a

better understanding of student violence he suggested that the school would likely find new ways of coping with this problem. The first step he said to all of this would be to learn what facilitates or inhibits the change process within the school. She wasn't sure what the change process was currently and got a knot in her stomach when she started to search for the factors that influenced this process. She quickly moved onto to other thoughts about the faculty and how they would respond to having a relative stranger inside the school, observing and commenting on their activities. She would find out soon enough as the next staff meeting was this Friday and Dr. Fanning would then be introduced.

As the staff congregated into the library, they took notice of Dr. Fanning, sitting in the front of the room next to Mrs. Smith. They had already heard some rumors of a professional who had come to the school to make recommendations to the superintendent. Some experienced fear for their jobs while other felt resentful at having some outsider infiltrate their school.

Dr. Fanning took note of the rise in energy within the room and how in particular some of the faculty dealt with this intensity. He didn't know which faces matched the names on his teacher roster so he made mental notes he would later examine. The first to catch his attention was a heavysset woman with small-framed eyeglasses that rested off the bridge of her nose. She seemed to scowl around the room as if she were an army colonel appraising a battlefield. She seemed to be removed from contact with the larger group. She sat facing the rest of the staff in the far corner of the room.

Long desks set up in a large rectangle framed the room itself. At the adjacent row, closest to Dr. Fanning, he watched a young woman who kept her head down as she walked. He noticed the professional but conservative attire, which seemed less than comfortable. This woman seemed to deflect energy as if she were attempting to not be noticed. This young teacher seemed to maintain a strong boundary between her and the system. He speculated that her anxiety helped her to believe that others were not welcoming of her, not realizing how she kept her distance from them.

Much the opposite perhaps of the woman who sat directly across from him. She seemed to absorb energy as she interacted with her coworkers. This tall and slender woman had a presence about her that called for the attention of others. In her exchanges she seemed to be exerting her influence onto others, perhaps without even being aware.

It was interesting to Dr. Fanning how much you could pick up by simply observing behavior. He was curious to learn whether his speculations would match up once he got to know these people. Dr. Fanning was aware that his own projections could play a role in how he viewed these people. If there was something familiar about a person then he may in fact be recalling a personality from his past that he was not fully conscious of. It was this understanding that prevented him from making too strong a judgment before he could validate or invalidate his intuitions. He also wanted to recognize what he chose to attend to. For as much data as he may be collecting, there was other data he chose to ignore. He might assume that others attended to these women just as he did, but knew this was a common and often fault assumption.

Most of the other teachers seemed to pair of in two's or three's engaged in conversation. Each of these small groups represented a subgroup, with common

characteristics that brought them together. Dr. Fanning continued to pull back his focus from the individual, to these smaller subgroups, to the room as a whole. He was shaping his picture of the total system. It certainly had a life of its own that most within were probably unaware of. One of his short-term goals would be to expand the awareness of each of the members to the larger system level.

Mrs. Smith brought the meeting to order and asked for Mrs. White to read the meeting minutes from last month. Once completed Mrs. Smith passed out the agenda for today's meeting. The first topic was the introduction of Dr. Fanning.

"I would like to introduce everybody to Dr. Fanning. He is a consultant we have brought on to help us deal with the recent violence at the school. Dr. Fanning is going to spend a few weeks with us. He will probably sit in on some classes and talk with the faculty. He will probably have a hard time remembering all of us so if you could introduce yourself to him and make him feel welcome it would be appreciated. Dr. Fanning, would you like to say anything to the staff?"

"Thank you Mrs. Smith. Let me first thank all of you for allowing me to sit in on your staff meeting. I look forward to spending time with each of you in the next few weeks. If there is anything you would wish of me or like to be aware of, please let me know".

"Are there are questions for Dr. Fanning?" Mrs. Smith followed.

There were a few moments of silence while the teachers looked around at each other, waiting. When nobody spoke up Mrs. Smith suggested they continue with the meeting and allow for faculty to approach Dr. Fanning on their own.

Amongst the more commonplace issues discussed by the faculty they also began dialogue regarding the next parent-teacher conference. A chorus of collective sighs could be heard throughout the room. It was evident the faculty did not look forward with enthusiasm toward this event but it wasn't clear why. Mrs. Smith seemed to ignore the almost silent protest as if she had not even noticed. She went on to inform the teachers that due to parent complaints following the last conference, this year there would need to be some changes. The first of which would be an increase in time from five minutes to ten minutes with every parent. Mrs. Jones was the first to protest.

"That means our time will be doubled. How are we supposed to do that?" Her tone was clearly annoyed and she made an obvious effort to show restraint.

Mr. Perry the 8th grade math teacher followed up quickly.

"If we begin at 7pm and are supposed to end at 9pm, technically we can only see twelve parents. That leaves at least ten parents without any time."

Mrs. Stone the 6th grade social studies teacher was the next to speak.

"I don't think it will be a problem for me. I make sure that I speak with all of the parents regularly so that the conference should not be about anything they don't already know. That way they don't need to spend too much time talking."

With that statement the energy level rose significantly. Dr. Fanning watched as teachers broke out into sidebars across the library apparently disturbed by the statement.

Mr. Garcia broke in after a brief moment and asked that the teachers give him their attention.

"Everybody knows that every parent does not show up for these conferences so you won't have to include your entire class in your calculation of time." This statement

seemed to be intended for Mr. Perry. “We are sending home a notice to all the parents suggesting that they contact their teacher to set up their ten minute block of time. If they don’t respond, you can only give them what time you have remaining.”

Once again the teachers began to discuss this news. Dr. Fanning observed the individual perceptions being shared between subgroups and within individuals but not within the group as a whole. He followed the flow of energy from the onset and found an interesting pattern. Once the individual dealt with the new ideas on conceptual level, energy was exerted between the smaller subgroups only slightly extending their boundaries. Rather than widening the boundary to the entire system for assessment, the energy was interrupted. It was a remarkable process that seemed to leave the faculty stuck within their own energy feeling trapped. At least this is the way he imagined it to be. To truly understand if this was the experience of the teachers, he would have to check it out, which he was not yet prepared to do.

It was evident that a completed unit of work could not take place because of the interruption of the flow of energy. Closure was not found, at least in the traditional sense and withdrawal from the larger group was the result. Perhaps this was what encouraged the smaller subgroups to strengthen their boundaries reinforcing the existing structure. Dr. Fanning knew that he would ultimately want to heighten their own internal experience of this process and open them up to the bigger picture. Organizations, which are more hierarchically based, are referred to sometimes as pyramids **. This organizational shape has a number of strengths, including stability, consistency, and conformity which helps to develop a sense of safety. There are inherent weaknesses to

this shape as well which will be dealt with later on. For now it may be assumed that the safety factor has lost some of its influence and thus the system is ready for change.

Following the meeting, Mrs. Smith questioned Dr. Fanning about what he observed. She was looking for feedback on the meeting but more importantly searching for affirmation. Dr. Fanning recognized this and began with an affirming statement.

“Your faculty seems very loyal” he began.

She considered the statement and any underlying meaning.

“I suppose they are, I had never thought about it that way.”

“In what way had you thought about it?”

“They never seemed pleased if you want to know the truth.”

“That may be the case, but consider the fact that they follow your directives without being pleased. I can only imagine what it would be like if they were pleased.”

Mrs. Smith felt positive about the exchange. She decided not to press for any more information at this point and suggested he mingle with the other teachers in case they had any questions. Dr. Fanning knew this was positive indicator to be allowed free access to the staff. That certainly requires a fair amount of trust on the part of this principal.

As the staff slowly made their way out the door, Dr. Fanning remained in the library, waiting for any faculty who wished to speak with him. Mr. Garcia was the first to approach him.

“Hello Dr. Fanning, we haven’t yet met. My name is John Garcia. I’m the vice-principal.”

“It’s good to make your acquaintance and please call me Tom.”

“I imagine you and I will be spending some time together.” Mr. Garcia said plainly.

“Is there a time or day that would work well for you since we are on the subject?”

“Any time you want to talk I will be available, just let me know.”

Dr. Fanning expressed his gratitude for the invitation and the two said goodbye.

He hadn't realized it but another teacher was standing to his side apparently waiting for him to finish his conversation. He recognized the young woman from the staff meeting. Mrs. Perrino introduced herself.

“I hope I am not interrupting, is this a good time?” she asked

Dr. Fanning was momentarily confused by the question. Neither no or yes would have worked.

“This is a perfect time” he replied gently. I am Tom Fanning.

“My name is Ms. Perrino. I am the 7th grade science teacher. I am relatively new to the school, somewhat like yourself.”

“It's quite awkward being new isn't it?” he said questioningly.

A look of calm came over her face, as her cheek muscles seemed to relax. She wasn't smiling quite so purposefully now.

“Yes, yes it is” she said emphatically. “I hope you feel welcome here and if there is anything I can do...”

“Well since you ask, I wouldn't mind spending some time with you if that is alright?”

“That is fine with me but I'm afraid being so new here I probably don't have a lot to offer.”

“Sometimes the newest people have the most to offer.”

She thought about his statement but didn't respond.

“I understand you were the one who disarmed the young man who committed the stabbing.”

“It wasn't that big a deal. I am surprised everybody built it up like they did. I was acting on instinct and not really thinking. If I had thought about it, I probably would have run the other way.”

“If I saw a young man with a knife I might have run the other way myself. My wife says to me it's a good thing I weren't the Punxsutawney ground hog, otherwise we would never have a prolonged summer.”

She smiled at his willingness to poke fun at himself.

“What was the young man like, the one who did the stabbing?”

“Thomas. I didn't know him very well. You might want to ask Mrs. Jones his homeroom teacher.”

Dr. Fanning knew she wasn't being purposely evasive. She really seemed to believe she could not offer any useful information.

“Okay I will do that. I would also like to speak with you further if that is all right? Maybe I could sit in on your class tomorrow?”

Mrs. Perrino hadn't had anyone sit in on her class aside from Mrs. Smith. As a new teacher she needed to be observed at least three times during the school year to be off of probation. She didn't much like being observed because of how self-conscious she became. It wouldn't have been as bad if she knew what Mrs. Smith was thinking. She didn't get much feedback other than she was doing a “good job”.

Dr. Fanning could see her discomfort and added, “My intent is to get a feel for the school culture, not to critique any particular teaching methods. In fact I don’t know enough about teaching to offer anything very useful anyhow”. Dr. Fanning knew this wasn’t completely honest but he felt the need to put her at ease.

The two agreed that tomorrow morning after homeroom would be a good class to observe. That was the group, which consisted of Bobby Jones, the young man who had been on that list. She briefly updated Dr. Fanning on the scenario, which took place less than a week ago. He said he was somewhat familiar with it but appreciated her input.

It was late in the day and Dr. Fanning knew the teachers would be eager to get home and so was he. He felt slightly drained after the staff meeting and hadn’t had time to process his own experience. As a psychotherapist for many years he knew how valuable it was to understand his own gut and what it told him about the people he was working with. There was no mistaking what his gut feeling at this point because he felt the knot since early into the staff meeting. He had not yet understood what it meant.

Dr. Fanning woke the next morning certain he had dreamed about his childhood days in the fifth grade. He couldn’t remember exactly what he dreamt of but knew it had to do with mixed emotion he had for his teacher. The name would not come to him, which meant hours of mental anguish throughout the day trying to reconstruct his memory. He tried to let that detail go, knowing it wasn’t the most important aspect of this dream. Her face was the only piece that was really clear. White soft skin, wrinkled in neat folds down through her neck. Silver framed eyeglasses that hung from her neck with a metallic chord. Her eyes looked tired but wonderfully wise. A kind woman but

didn't appear to be very happy. He found himself wondering whether she had family or lived by herself. Dr. Fanning didn't know if this were a new thought or an old one he was just now recalling.

In the dream, he tried to get her attention, tried to get her to notice him. He answered every question in his mind like a model student, but she wouldn't call on him. She would do no more than glance at him over those spectacles as if to make certain his hand was raised. He was charged with excitement, confident he could get her acknowledgment but it came too late. When she finally called on him he froze, not knowing the question to be answered. In his enthusiasm to answer a question he had lost track of the lesson. Just as he began to experience the embarrassment in front of his teacher and classmates, he woke up. He could remember no more.

There were some more apparent interpretations of the dream such as his need for approval or his fear of failure. He dismissed both of these options, as he had not yet become that invested in the school to be worried about the outcome. Dr. Fanning searched for less obvious symbolism as he dressed and headed out for his twenty minute drive to the school. Since nothing more came to him he decided to let his subconscious work on the dream for a while as he attended to mental preparations for the school day. He sketched out a tentative plan for the day, which began in Ms. Perrino's social studies class for her second period. Before he did that he decided to check in with Mrs. Smith to let her know he was around.

As he rounded the hallway corner and approached her office, he found Mrs. Smith speaking with a young girl. The girl appeared to be sad as her head hung toward the floor. At first he wondered whether she was in trouble and receiving some harsh words

from the principal. He wondered what she could have done this early in the morning to deserve this reprimand or maybe something had transpired the day before. He couldn't seem to make out the words so he simply watched their exchange.

Then, something happened, which he did not expect. Mrs. Smith put an arm around the little girl and pulled her into an embrace. It was firm hug that lasted several moments. When they pulled apart the girl was smiling and looking directly into Mrs. Smith gaze. With a pat on the head and another few words, the girl turned and bounded down the hallway. Dr. Fanning approached.

“Good morning. It seems like you are off to an early start”, he said.

“As always” she replied.

“What was that about” he asked curiously.

“Oh that. It was nothing really; she was having a difficult time in one of her classes and needed some encouragement.”

“So what is your plan for the day?” Mrs. Smith made an obvious point of changing the subject so he respected her wish.

“I thought I would sit in on some classes this morning, talk with some students and teachers, then maybe make friends with the cafeteria staff.”

Mrs. Smith looked skeptically as if she couldn't decide if he was serious.

“Those are the real people you have to please if you want to survive your first day of school”. He smiled as he said that wishing her a wonderful day and walking toward his first class.

Dr. Fanning wasn't sure exactly how to get to where he wanted to be. He had a small map but didn't want to seem like more of a tourist than he already felt. He stopped

one student and asked if she could direct him to Ms. Perrino's class and soon found the way.

The students were still moving about the hallway so he arrived in time. He did a quick scan of the room and found Ms. Perrino standing with her back to the room as she made some last minute notes on the blackboard.

"Good morning" he said just loud enough so as not to scare her.

She turned and faced him, trying not to appear startled.

"Oh yes, you said you were coming by today didn't you?"

"Is it still okay that I sit in on your class?" he asked.

"Of course, of course. Let's see if we can find you a desk. Do you want to sit in front or in back?"

"Wherever I will be the least disruptive", he replied.

Ms. Perrino thought to herself that she would be nervous wherever he sat.

They found him a chair in the far rear corner of the room. A globe was perched in the middle of this round desk and an atlas hung on the wall to his left. From the rest of the artwork on the walls and writing on the blackboard he assumed this social studies class was focused on world history.

As the children made their way to the four neat rows of desks, they each turned their attention in his direction. Some gave him coy smiles while others stared inquisitively. One particular young man who sat in the desk directly in front of Dr. Fanning approached him directly.

"Are you somebody's parent?" he asked.

"Yes I am a parent but to nobody in this school" Dr. Fanning replied.

The boy seemed satisfied for now with that information and plopped down into his desk. Ms. Perrino was beginning the lesson and asked the children to take out their notebooks but this young man seemed to take his time in getting ready. Dr. Fanning watched him emptying his backpack into the desk, seemingly not concerned with what was going on around him. While the other children had their pens out and copied down copiously the notes being dictated, this young boy continued to rummage through his desk.

The lesson focused on the Civil War and a country divided. This topic was of great interest to Dr. Fanning as his career plans at age thirteen was to be a history professor. This was one of the reasons he chose to sit in on this particular class. He had a curiosity about other children at this age and how they felt about this subject. Sitting in on this class was like a window to his past, gazing at himself forty years ago.

As the lesson went on, Dr. Fanning's attention kept returning to the young man in front of him. This student was not just distracted from the lesson he seemed to be in a totally different place altogether. He scribbled on his notebook cover, took out different objects from his desk to study and then replace, and none of this did he do in secret. He seemed to be drawing attention to himself but nobody responded. The teacher went on with her lesson and the other students went on like he wasn't even there. Dr. Fanning found this especially interesting.

As he drifted off himself into a deeper level of thought, he occasionally shifted back into the room, wondering what this young man would do next. As the young man became louder and more overt in his actions, Dr. Fanning wondered how the class could concentrate on the lesson.

Then, back into his head as if summoned by a flash of insight, a realization. He had the feeling that something made sense if he could only focus his thinking. Yes, he had it. The dream from the night before was beginning to make sense. The young man trying desperately to get the teacher's attention was not about proving himself or being liked, it was about contact. He needed to feel a connection to take away the loneliness, to feel alive. But why was that dream becoming clear now? What was the common thread? Then it was clear- the last conversation he had that night was with Ms. Perrino. She was telling him about her experience at the school and whether she said it directly or not, it was about contact. She felt alone in at least her professional work and perhaps her personal life he didn't know. She wanted to have a deeper level of exchange with a peer or maybe even her supervisor. Yes that was it. She needed to gain permission from the authority figure, the principal, but without contact it was not possible. She felt ignored or maybe even dismissed. Just like the boy in the dream and just like the young man in this class.

It was only a theory but it felt right in his gut. That's how he knew when something made sense to him is when he checked it out in his stomach. The rise in energy he felt confirmed this speculation even if it were simply his own experience of the school. He wondered whether others had this experience as well and knew he would want to explore this further.

When the class came to an end, Dr. Fanning stopped to introduce himself to the young man who he helped him to make a valuable insight.

“Hello again. My name is Tom.”

The boy didn't hold back his surprise. His eyes narrowed suspiciously and his posture became rigid. Maybe he expected that to be in trouble for not paying attention in class. Dr. Fanning sensed his discomfort and tried to reassure him there was no threat.

"I want to thank you for helping me understand something" he said.

"What was that?" the boy asked.

"I figured out that people here in the school are really hurting and that they are going through it by themselves. They seem to want to come together they just aren't certain how to do it."

"Everybody is afraid", replied the boy.

"I think you are right. How do you deal with it?" asked Dr. Fanning.

"I don't know. I guess I make myself annoying."

Dr. Fanning was impressed by his insight and honesty. He pressed the boy to continue.

"How does that work?" he asked

"I don't know. It just makes me feel better."

With that, the young man excused himself, not wanting to be late for his next class. As he started for the door he turned and said, "My name is Bobby".

Dr. Fanning smiled and watched him leave. Just as soon as he was out the door Ms. Perrino approached.

"I see you met Bobby Jones", said Ms.Perrino.

Dr. Fanning took in a deep cleansing breath and nodded affirmatively toward Ms. Perrino.

"He has been one of my more challenging students this quarter", she said.

“I can see that”, Dr. Fanning replied.

“I just don’t know what else to do with him. I’m afraid he has given up and I can’t reach him.”

“What is that like for you?” Dr. Fanning encouraged her to go deeper.

Not certain how to answer the question she asked for clarification.

“What is your experience of not being able to reach this young man”, he stated patiently.

“It’s frustrating. I feel helpless. I know in my head it’s not my fault but I can’t help but feel responsible.”

Dr. Fanning recognized two important themes here, but for now he chose to focus on the one. “Helpless”, he said affirmingly.

“Now that I think about it, I’ve been feeling a lot of that lately.”

He gestured for her to continue.

“With everything going on here in the school since the incident, I think a lot of people have been feeling that way”.

Dr. Fanning encouraged her to find a deeper level of meaning in this that she may not be attending to.

“What do you imagine is significant about feeling helpless, here at the school?”

Ms. Perrino pondered the question a moment.

“It’s like we have all this untapped potential that sits unused. The longer we don’t use it the more pressure that builds. After a while it causes a drain on the system.”

“That is a wonderful insight. Can you describe how you see this working for you?” Dr. Fanning asked.

“I know that I have a lot to learn but I feel stuck. I came into the school with all this enthusiasm about how I would make a difference. Now I go home so tired at the end of the day, it feels like I haven’t done anything worth while.”

“Is that the helplessness you described?”

“Why yes, I guess it is”, she said.

“What happened to all of your energy”, he asked.

“I really don’t know. It seems to have gotten lost somewhere along the way. I wish I knew how to get it back.”

Dr. Fanning could tell she was sincere in her wish. He knew from his work in other schools that this feeling of exhaustion was common. Teachers have spent so much energy giving that they aren’t getting enough in return. Each time the cycle completes itself the teacher loses another charge of energy. He believed this process was partly responsible for many of the problems facing schools today. The students have not become any easier to work with, in fact they have become a good deal more challenging. With fewer teachers and less resources to support them, the system finds an increasing complexity of problems. One of those problems is the rise in student violence.

Children are able to sense these problems on an intuitive level, even if they can’t articulate it into words. As a result of their perception that teachers don’t care or aren’t motivated, they too become apathetic. The environment becomes more competitive like Darwin’s survival of the fittest theory. Those who hold power rise to the top of the food chain and unfortunately these are the kids who aren’t necessarily the best role models. Those without control are left to cope with their underdeveloped compensatory strategies, which prove to be insufficient.

Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold are two prime examples of this phenomenon. These two youth were at the low end of the food chain within their school and the build up of pressure overwhelmed them. They felt powerless within the system, their resiliency gave way and they decided to create a catastrophic change. While not excusing the actions of either of these two youth, one must first understand the environment, which facilitated their escalation.

Dr. Fanning was fearful that unless there was an increased global awareness of the larger systemic issues playing a role in student violence, the problem would only worsen. While schools invest their energy into interventions, which don't encompass the bigger picture, we watch the problem worsen. We have seen this process in other organizations where high pressure and poor attention to the environment are common, such as our post offices. While people wrongly speculate that the post office hires mentally unstable individuals, we miss the larger picture. Scapegoats are unfortunately common in our society because we don't want to invest energy into the appropriate areas, maybe afraid that the work is too enormous or that we are unsophisticated in how to reach resolution.

Ms. Perrino represents the future of this nation's school system and sadly she is reaching that state of ineffectiveness years sooner than her predecessors. She wasn't just feeling the weight of her dilemma she was experiencing the burden of society. It was a sizable problem but one that could be addressed with a change in perspective.

"Ms. Perrino, I think you have touched upon that important part of the iceberg that protrudes from the water. Now if you like, you can explore deeper under the water and understand how to proceed."

"How do I do that?" she questioned.

“Consider how that process you just explained to me about investing energy with no equal return is supported by the system you work in. How do you allow that system to flourish? What is your role in maintaining the status quo?”

“I really don’t know. If I did, I would certainly do something about it.”

Dr. Fanning could see she had gone as far as she was ready at this time. He acknowledged the important work she had done and encouraged her to consider picking up that work when she was ready. As for Bobby Jones, he suggested that perhaps his struggle was somehow paralleling her own. Maybe if she were to explore that area, she would find the right questions to ask herself.

Dr. Fanning spent the remainder of the morning walking the halls and learning about the hidden culture of the school. By that he meant the workings of the school that were less visible to the obvious spectator. The hallways were the best place to look for this data, closely followed by the cafeteria. He had about thirty minutes until the first group went to lunch so he chose to wander the halls until that time.

He walked by the hallway on the first floor by the boy’s bathroom- the place where the stabbing had occurred. He began to wonder what led up to that moment in time and what the school was like prior to that event. He suspected that although the trauma had changed the school, there were many facets of its current state. Trauma tends to exacerbate those characteristics that are either dormant or not predominant.

The New York City disaster is a prime example. New Yorkers bounded to together resolute to overcome the terrible tragedy that befell them. Acts of bravery and generosity cohesed the city and the people within. It was not as if these characteristics

did not exist prior to September 11th, they were simply amplified and more visible. The same holds true for those undesirable traits. The impatience and intolerance of New Yorkers were never more pronounced as well. Middle easterners were victimized and scapegoated through a release of new and old repressed hostility.

Here at the Kettering Middle School, organizational traits were amplified much the same, although there was no common release of tension. Traits such as efficiency and organization have resembled more like rigidity. This highly efficient system all but eliminated dialogue and group collaboration. Faculty and students alike kept themselves guarded and removed from others. What he imagined to be a hallway at one time full of children talking and laughing was now of a more subdued milling.

Dr. Fanning made his way to the cafeteria where he could hear the growing rumbling as he approached. The smell of grease and floor wax permeated the air even outside the lunchroom. In this room were a quarter of the students of the school, numbering somewhere around ninety children. There were four lunch periods in total, the first beginning around eleven am. He knew this was early, but not as early as other schools he knew of, some beginning lunch at 9:30 in the morning.

He scanned the room taking in the operation and how efficiently the student groups were organized for their lunch. He did a cursory walk around the room, picking up an apple off the metallic counter and proceeds to an optimal vantage point in the far corner of the room.

At one table near the middle of the cafeteria, he observed a group of children laughing and playing. Upon closer scrutiny, he found there was one child in the middle

of the commotion who had a very serious look on his face. Dr. Fanning walked closer to get a better look at what was going on.

It seemed that the serious looking boy was the subject of mocking by his classmates. They were talking about his weight, making hurtful comments and one boy even poking the boy's side with a plastic fork. The child being teased was not overweight, but he was certainly stouter than some of his peers. The other children laughed and removed food from the boy's tray.

A monitor or teacher, he wasn't certain, caught site of the harassment and quickly moved on the scene. She said some harsh words to the children doing the mocking and removed the young boy from the table. She had him sit at another table about twenty feet away with children who seemed to be a grade younger. At that table, the boys snickered to themselves at what went on but nobody talked to the estranged child.

Dr. Fanning was tempted to intervene but knew he was not the school saviour. He was a consultant who was charged with helping the school to raise their awareness in order to make useful changes. In a little notebook he kept inside his jacket pocket, he jotted down some notes. This was the type of bullying he knew existed within the school, in fact the same kind, which took place in most schools.

Continuing to scan the room and scribble thoughts to his pad, Dr. Fanning noticed another interesting exchange taking place only a few feet away. This time he could hear the dialogue of four older girls, dressed in designer clothes. They seemed to be angry with another girl, a former friend, who had allegedly been gossiping outside the circle. The girls set up an elaborate plan to catch her in the act, involving a three- way call. They went on to describe her punishment, which included a message on her answering

machine about a pregnancy test and starting a rumor about her promiscuity. The girls were vicious in their plotting of revenge.

Dr. Fanning continued to write in his notebook, making the notation of “relational violence”. It was a term used most recently by school psychologists, describing the malicious behavior of adolescent females. This behavior did not readily draw the attention of adult monitors, because there was no overt aggression or rule violation noticed. This behind the scenes cruelty was just the type of escalating problem, which could lead to more serious outcomes.

Dr. Fanning recalled the 8th grade-shooting spree of Elizabeth Catherine Bush, a Catholic school and wondered about the similarity. Nobody knows for certain what sparked that episode of violence, but it is thought to revolve around awful teasing and ongoing harassment. A March 19th article by Time magazine stated that, “what made Bush snap is even more of a mystery”. Is it really? Are we not yet aware of the tremendous pressure experienced by teens and pre-teens? Do we not want to recognize that this behavior is learned and that an environment that tolerates this also serves to reinforce it?

Dr. Fanning could feel the sadness envelop him like a thick dark rain cloud. It was the first time in a long while he could recall being so affected by what he witnessed. Typically he was able to keep a professional distance, in order to remain marginal in his consulting relationship. This was becoming increasingly difficult as he felt the powerlessness; he knew was shared by these victims. The victims included the children who promoted this type of aggression because they were suffering in another way. They suffered because their lives were navigated by the pursuit of power and glory, which he

knew from his clinical practice, often resulted in terrible pathology. Loneliness, depression, marital difficulties and other ailments often brought these one-time power brokers into his office, unaware of how they fell from their perch.

The phrase “it’s lonely at the top” has a mixed message because the top can often mean there is nowhere left to climb but very far to fall. Those people who thought they were reaching success at its highest plateau were confused when fulfillment did not follow. If they were honest and self-aware enough to realize they were climbing the wrong mountain they lacked the energy to find their way. Instead of acknowledging to themselves of being fallible and misdirected, they continue to deplete their energy and then attempt to rob it of others. Then, to avoid the pain of who they are, attempts are made to distract themselves with alcohol, affairs, and the temporary satisfaction of wielding their false sense of power. This is what these children had in stored for them only they were too immature to notice and too self-involved to care.

Instead of giving up on these children, as he knew so many had done before, Dr. Fanning used his fear and sadness to create energy within himself. He did this by recognizing how his continued effort would ripple across other systems, connecting to others engaged in a similar pursuit. Together their energy would unite, inspiring others to join them in their quest for a higher level of being. A psychologist named Maslow called this phenomenon the pursuit for self-actualization. There was no name for this process on an organizational level that he knew of so he referred to it as _____

Dr. Fanning was reminded of a movie called Pass it Forward, which depicted a young boy whose hope had inspired the personal growth of others around him. This is a wonderful example of how a ripple effect can be created by tapping into your inner drive.

Despite all obstacles that came into this young boy's path, he never gave up what he believed to be his true path.

Dr. Fanning made his way to the teacher's cafeteria, a smaller version of the one used for students. It was later in afternoon so he would only find half of the 7th grade teachers and all of the 8th grade teachers. All faculty except the ones on cafeteria duty were found there, since the few people left the school for lunch. Time was the issue as teachers only had a forty-five minute span, not allowing for travel to and from the school.

Ms. Perrino was not there, although he learned later that she used her lunch period for class preparation. Through conversation he learned that teachers had little time to prepare lessons, which meant the newer faculty worked all hours to get ready. Mrs. White and Mrs. Jones laughed as they recalled their first years, trying to develop a new curriculum.

Mrs. White noticed that Dr. Fanning seemed preoccupied and asked him if he was okay. Dr. Fanning relayed the story of what he had witnessed in the lunchroom and that was still thinking about the children. He shared with the teachers both scenarios, including the young boy who had been so badly teased by his peers that the monitor had him change tables and also of the older girls who seemed to be plotting some sort of revenge.

Mrs. White remarked how awfully children seemed to treat each other these days and made a historical reference to children from three decades ago.

"Kids have always been mean to each other but I've never seen this type of cruelty in all my years", stated Mrs. White.

“It’s like they are filled with venom. I don’t know what makes these children so angry at such a young age”, agreed Mrs. Jones.

The two traded stories, each one topping the other in terms of outrageousness. The stories went from bizarre youth behavior such as disrobing in the middle of class to parental oddities including a tirade from a mother whose son got an A minus on his report card. They mostly talked to each other occasionally looking toward Dr. Fanning to see if he were still paying attention. He couldn’t tell if they were showing off for this new spectator or they were really intrigued by this societal evolution of peer relations. He suspected more of the latter but gave them the benefit of the doubt.

Dr. Fanning occasionally asked questions of the two women but mostly mirrored their amazement. At one point he asked seriously what it was like to work such unpredictability. The ladies paused for a moment, considering the question. While their stories were vivid and descriptive, they did not say much about their own experience, which was of particular interest to him.

“Its just part of the job”, replied Mrs. White.

“For me it’s very tiring”, replied Mrs. Stone.

Dr. Fanning sensed that Mrs. White was less willing to disclose personal experience so he remained with Mrs. Stone for the time being.

“I’m tired just listening to the story”, he said honestly.

“Without knowing what to expect on a daily basis, or even hourly for that matter, you always have to keep your guard up. These days you don’t know whether a child is going to curse at you for being corrected or even bring a gun to school. And I’m not even talking about the trouble makers, this goes for all my students”, said Mrs. Stone

“It sound as if it is harder to retain control”, remarked Dr. Fanning

“We don’t have nearly as much control as we need”, returned Mrs. Stone. We can’t show that though otherwise they will be even more difficult to manage.

“I don’t agree”, countered Mrs. White. I feel like I have total control over my class, they just don’t always like it. They are not used to being disciplined because they don’t have anybody doing it for them at home. I don’t mind being the one to teach them how to be proper young adults, but it certainly takes away time from the work.”

“The job of the teacher continues to expand but the time to do all this work remains the same”, offered Dr. Fanning in agreement of the increased demand.

“You got that right. Nobody seems to recognize what we are up against. Instead of giving us more support they place more restrictions and greater demands on us. I don’t know how some of these younger teachers are going to make it”, said Mrs. White

“I’m glad I am near retirement. I don’t think if I had to start over again today I would make the same decision. There is too much to do it all well”, said Mrs. Stone.

“What means do you have to communicate these feelings to those in charge?” Dr. Fanning directed his question to their support system.

Both ladies laughed mockingly at the suggestion.

“What do you mean support system? Who are we going to tell? They all know what is going on that isn’t the problem” said an angry Mrs. White

“I don’t think anybody knows what to do. If they did I am sure they would be helping us, it’s not like they want us to fail” followed Mrs. Stone

“What is it you need that you are not getting?” asked Dr. Fanning

Both teachers looked at each other, deciding which was going to field the question.

“I’m not sure the purpose of talking about things we can’t get. Why get our hopes up to be disappointed”, stated Mrs. White.

“Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter”, said Dr. Fanning.

“Dr. Martin Luther King said that”, replied a surprised but knowing Mrs. White.

“I know, I saw it hanging on the wall of your classroom.”

There was a long silence. Mrs. White seemed to be lost in thought. Mrs. Stone sat there looking at Dr. Fanning wondering about his intentions. He was certainly not gloating about stumping Mrs. White. She had never seen anybody cause Mrs. White such contemplation, but he did so out of concern, she knew.

“Okay, where do I begin?” stated Mrs. White emphatically. “What do I need”, she mused aloud. She took a deep breath and began. “First of all, we need a better system of discipline that is consistent across the board; as a teacher I need greater input into decision made in the school- after all, how these decisions often affect my work but nobody asks the people who have to make this work; I need lesser restrictions placed on me for my curriculum. I know this one is hard because the state has developed these mandates and not much can be done about that.

“Okay and out of all the very important areas you mentioned, which would you say is uppermost for you now?” asked Dr. Fanning

“I need more freedom to be creative with my curriculum. If I can’t be creative I can’t feel good about what I am doing.” Mrs. White seemed relieved to have said that out loud.

“Yes, yes Mrs. White. You have lost your freedom to be creative and now you feel stuck. What you want is permission to do what you know works best. To be creative and inspire creativity”, answered Dr. Fanning.

“When I used to teach years ago, I would bring the most radical ideas up to my class and watch them flounder in their own brains. They were forced to think for themselves, to challenge the moral majority. They knew there was no such thing as “classical literary works”. They learned to judge and interpret what was worthwhile for themselves because they were forced to make meaning for themselves. We could read whatever we found interesting and inspiring to the kids, not what some state official believed to be valuable.

I remember the day we began A Stone for Danny Fisher. After the first chapter of reading out loud in class, the children were mesmerized. They were glued to their seats and there was no movement. The bell to end the period rang but the children didn’t want to leave. That’s the way teaching ought to be.”

Mrs. White could feel her heart pounding inside her chest wall. She couldn’t tell if she were nervous or excited or both. All she knew was this was the most energized she has felt in a long while. She hadn’t realized until now, that her stagnation around school was affecting her personal life as well. She knew she was becoming bitter but did nothing about it. Still though, she was not about to change her ways just because she better understood her resistance, as Dr. Fanning put it. Why begin to be hopeful when

she worked in a system that would just bring her back down. No, she would not do that to herself again, especially so close to the end of her career.

Dr. Fanning noticed the change in her body language. She seemed to be working through an inner conflict she had not yet made known.

“What is happening Mrs. White, you seem pensive?”

Mrs. Stone entered the conversation again.

“She is just like the rest of us, not believing she can be successful in a system where her needs aren’t taken into consideration”, said Mrs. Stone.

“Are you speaking out of frustration or do you believe that this school system is so finite that it’s beyond change?” asked Dr. Fanning sincerely

Mrs. Stone thought for a moment, not wanting to seem as rigid as her colleague.

“There is nothing I have seen to give me hope that change can occur. Maybe if you could make some changes I could be convinced it’s possible”, replied Mrs. Stone.

“If I were only that powerful”, mused Dr. Fanning teasingly. “Even if I could impact the system in such a way, it may not be as satisfying as you might think.”

“What do you mean?” asked Mrs. White

“Consider your more difficult students who struggle and struggle until they want to quit. I am guessing that these students at times manipulate their parents into helping them with homework, to the extent that it may not be their own work. Even if they get a good grade on the work, it doesn’t really feel satisfying. Sure they are happy with the grade but the sense of accomplishment isn’t there. Now, if that same student happens to take a chance and put forth some effort, actually finding they can get the right answer,

they feel ecstatic with their success. I imagine it's the effort that feels rewarding sometimes more than the actual result"

The problem you describe is admittedly more complex. When you truly don't know the best way to proceed and your previous efforts have resulted in disappointment, there can be a sense of helplessness difficult to overcome. As human beings we are persistent though and often replicate the same pattern of effort. We do not always recognize what we are doing is similar to what we did before, so we continue on. Ultimately we run out of steam and become stuck."

Mrs. Stone jumped in at that point.

"Are you saying we should look for new ways to fix the system?"

"You are on the right track, but instead of viewing the system as broken, maybe you can think of it as functional, but not meeting your particular needs. I would encourage you to look inward and not outward."

Both teachers looked confused. Dr. Fanning continued to help clarify his words.

"When an organizational culture is perceived as an oppressive system one's spirit becomes diminished. A person within that system may begin to lose sight of who they are and what they stand for. They may either identify with the system, joining with it, or they rebel and feel victimized. There are those who linger somewhere in between, but given enough time they ultimately chose a side. In either case, the person loses their power or at least their perception of power. They assume they have no control and act as if they are helpless. If a person believes they have lost their leverage they become ineffective."

“In this organization I believe there are many who may fit this description. In fact, there may be more of you than you realize. If enough of you reach this point, the system itself becomes ineffective. Trying to change the system itself can only result in further discouragement.”

“So what you are saying is we have to look inside ourselves?” Mrs. Stone said skeptically.

“If one person begins to search within themselves, instead of waiting for their questions to be answered an interesting thing will happen. That person will learn to recognize what role they are playing in the script and then decide if they want to rewrite the scene they are playing out. As Susan Osborn describes in her work, we often spend our time being a character in someone else’s tale instead of being the author of our own story. Once we learn to rewrite our story, we will take on the ownership for whatever happens. We will learn that even the unfortunate events have meaning, which if we study them can be learning opportunities. Let me give you an example.

I worked with a CEO doing some job coaching a few years back. He was a very business like fellow with an inscrutable work ethic. I would say on average he worked about seventy hours week. He hired me to help him become more comfortable with delegating work to his employees. We worked together for about a month, not getting very far. He seemed to have a difficult time trusting his employees and therefore taken on too much work himself. He was aware of this dynamic but couldn’t seem to make any changes. One day, during a session, he came in unshaven and disheveled, very uncharacteristic for the consummate businessman. He told me that his wife left him, which although was not unexpected, still devastating. Once he worked through much of

the pain and anger toward his wife, he realized that there was a common thread between his professional and personal relationships. He found that by his lack of trust for others, he was not perceived as a generous or warm man. While at first he was unable to realize this perception others had of him, because he gave exceptionally high salaries and what he considered an excellent benefit plan. It wasn't until his wife had left him saying that he was so independent and so self-sufficient, there didn't seem to be a place for her in his life. In other words, she didn't feel needed.

By allowing himself to explore the painful experience of losing his wife, he came to recognize his pattern for relating to others. Gaining this insight allowed him to make more conscious decisions on how he interacted with others, including his employees. While he wasn't able to restore his relationship with his wife, he eventually become admired and respected by those in his company.

This process of self-exploration is not an easy one. It often times involves letting our defenses down from within and taking a serious look at who we are. There are immediate benefits to engaging in this hard work. As we become proficient in this process our appearance to others will change. We will build our spirit for life and with that our energy to relate to others. Our relationships will reach a deeper level of intimacy because we are giving more freely of ourselves. Ultimately, we will take on a sort of mystical quality that becomes infectious to others. You will then join with others who are engaged in the same process. Now, instead of having a group of people who point fingers and place blame, resenting an uncaring culture like a scorned child, you will witness a revitalized culture in which people look to contribute and build a system's energy. The result will be a balance of give and take that keeps everybody stimulated

and supported. The result will also be an environment where hurt and resentment are dealt with through understanding and self-improvement.

“In order to regain your spirit, you must change your attitude toward the world. You must realize you are owed nothing and whatever you get is likely the result of self-less giving. You may begin by simply attending to who you are and what that feels like. Become more aware of your needs and what happens when they are not met.”

“But what if others are not engaged in the same process and they take advantage of your vulnerability?” asked Mrs. Stone.

“Being self-aware may seem like vulnerability, but actually it proves to be a great source of inner strength. By allowing our dark sides to become known, we don’t need to hide from the world. We can admit our flaws and weaknesses with compassion instead of fear and self-loathing. We can’t be hurt by others when we work to be secure with ourselves, healthy and unhealthy.”

“People typically pretend they are okay, putting great energy into a façade so others will be impressed or at least not frightened away. Nobody is truly fooled though because they are doing the same thing themselves. If you find somebody who is not on this path toward self-improvement than you may inspire them with your own willingness to extend yourself. Eleanor Roosevelt said that if you approach each new person with a spirit of adventure, you will find yourself endlessly fascinated by the new channels of thought and personality that you encounter.”

Mrs. White considered what she heard and then spoke.

“Do you really believe that the problems in this school are the result of people not focused on themselves?”

“I believe people are focused on themselves but not necessarily directed in the most useful way”, answered Dr. Fanning.

“So if people would learn to look inside for the answers instead of expecting them to come from the school then everything will change.” Mrs. White said this in a disbelieving but hopeful tone.

“Not just the school Mrs. White but your entire community, maybe even someday the world as a whole.

“Well I have to say Dr. Fanning that I like your spirit. Some of the things you said are a little bit out there for me, but you certainly present your ideas with a passion that is hard to resist. I will admit that I am an old dog that had a hard time with change. I would love it to happen but I... just don't know.”

“I am always willing to learn, however I do not always like to be taught, Sir Winston Churchill”, said a smiling Dr. Fanning.

Mrs. Stone offered her final thought as well.

“I really enjoyed talking with you. Your ideas are inspiring even if they are as Mrs. White put it, out there. I especially liked your famous quotes; I will have to use some of those with my students.

Dr. Fanning did not mind the good-natured teasing by these two older women. He took it as a sign of their comfort with him.

As the teachers excused themselves to return to class, Mrs. White turned and faced Dr. Fanning. She started to say something but then stopped. She nodded her head in a silent acknowledgment to Dr. Fanning and walked away.

Dr. Fanning remained at the table a while longer, thinking about the two women he had just spent time with. The time had gone by quickly but he had kept them well past their lunch break. He felt good knowing that they remained and listened, even if they did not quite believe what he had to say. Perhaps he was trying too hard to convince others that there was a better way instead of just allowing what needed to happen, happen. After all, his job was not to teach them a better way, but simply to help them better understand what is. They could decide for themselves what should be.

Following that exchange, Dr. Fanning made a greater effort to hold back more, allowing others to find their own path. He didn't want to come across as preaching so he listened more and asked questions to raise awareness. He did this for about a week and a half with various members of the faculty. While getting to know others better, he became more familiar himself to the school. He was becoming less of a stranger and more like a familiar observer.

Each day he spent time doing more of the same. Sitting in and observing classes, having discussions with faculty and students. All this helped him to increase his understanding of the complexity this school system offered. He compiled notes and ideas he would later present when the time for intervention was right. He sensed he was holding back because he remained in evaluative mode, even knowing that this was still a time for potential change. Simply because he was gathering his information about the school didn't mean he couldn't be helping them grow.

The week moved along slowly for the next few days. He seemed to have formulated a clear picture of who the school was and wondered how much of this picture was shared by others. As an outsider your perception is sometimes different because you

haven't experienced what it is to be part of the system from within. After several days and many hours inside the school, he believed he had a better sense of what it was like to be a teacher, and a student. He had not yet spent enough time with the principal and vice principal he knew, but that would come soon.

For the next few days he recognized that he was become more impatient. His insights seemed to slow down in the days to come and his interactions lacked the energy he found early on. He knew there was a peak when the learning curve would straighten out and he recognized that plateau would soon be upon him. He reviewed the weeks' work in his mind and searched for reasons why he was feeling so drained. Dr. Fanning knew from his years of experience there is no absolutely correct way of going about his work and that the results of his effort would be unknown. If he had any influence on the affairs of the school it wouldn't be clear until some time in the future. All he needed to do was be true to himself, which meant being authentic at all times and with all people. His exchanges with staff toward the end of the week were not that way. He had become too distant in his professionalism. He wasn't certain what that was about, other than the idea that he himself was experiencing the influence of the school. Yes, that was probably it. All this time he had been thinking about his own influence, he forgotten that the environment was affecting him just the same. He needed to attend to this experience of himself within the school because this was useful data.

As he scanned his interior, a process called focusing he learned from a psychologist named Eugene Gendlin, he senses an urgency he could not name. Instead of trying to decipher this internal sensation, he attempted to create a set of pictures that had deep meaning. In this meditation state he constructed the vision of a young teacher who

was confused and lacked direction. He formulated an image of a subdued hallway where children milled about without intention. He also saw a cafeteria where children received emotional scars, right in front of supervising adults. With these images a flood of feelings bubbled up through his stomach and into his chest. It was a heavy weight this school carried and he collected this responsibility within himself. Without movement the weight seemed to subdue him and rob him of his energy.

Dr. Fanning reminded himself of when he felt most energized- at the beginning of the week, before he had spent so much time in the school. He realized that none of his exchanges felt quite so genuine since the one with Mrs. White and Mrs. Stone. That is where he would now direct himself as he completed his assessment phase. Since he was near the end of the assessment period and needed to begin working with the school, he would need to help them develop a shared picture of what they wanted to look like. To complete his initial assessment he would need to meet with the principal, Mrs. Smith. He knew she would be most anxious to gain his perspective from the week so he needed to be thoughtful on what to share. Too much honesty may unnecessarily increase her burden and jeopardize the trust bestowed upon him by faculty. Too little information and she may not have the impetus to embrace the change effort. Such a delicate balance that he weighed in his mind.

Chapter Five

The Power of Change

“Good morning Dr. Fanning”, said Mrs. Smith as she motioned for him to follow inside the office.

Dr. Fanning did not need an escort to her office now that he had spent almost two weeks inside the school building. He could now roam the halls and not be stared at by students and avoided by faculty. This wasn't because people now trusted him it was more about the loss of novelty he presented for the rumor mill. While at first he was suspected to be a spy from the superintendent's office, planted in the school to decide on which teachers to fire, he later became the one intended to replace the principal. He wasn't certain of any recent rumors but that didn't mean they didn't exist.

“I know we are scheduled to meet today, but I was called into a school board meeting to discuss the expulsion of Scott Hall. It's just a formality but there it is something I can't miss. I arranged for you to meet with Mr. Garcia today and then we can meet tomorrow.” Mrs. Smith hurried to explain as she packed up her belongings.

Dr. Fanning was aware of her attempt to downplay the meeting, not wanting her anxiety to show through. She spoke hurriedly and did not make much eye contact. Dr. Fanning offered to join her at the meeting but she told him it was not necessary.

He left her office and headed to see Mr. Garcia, making a mental shift for this new encounter. He hadn't spent much time with the Vice-Principal so he wasn't certain what to expect. The staff talked little about him and his role seemed somewhat hazy. He

began to consider his other experiences with Vice-Principals and the range of roles they played throughout various school systems. Some VP's were utilized as Deans or disciplinarians while others served more as curriculum heads. It seemed to depend on the size of the school and the Principal in charge. For the most part this job seemed to be most similar to middle management within any large company. Not quite in positions of real authority in the school but not considered general faculty either. It is an interesting position and one that requires a certain amount of diplomatic aerobatics. Perhaps this is why he hadn't heard much about Mr. Garcia, because he kept his head low.

Mr. Garcia's room was large although empty looking. As opposed to the Principal's office with books on the shelves and certificates on the walls, this room seemed almost unoccupied, except for the large desk in the center.

Mr. Garcia greeter him warmly and bid him entrance into office. As Dr. Fanning took his seat in the small hard backed chair in front of this large desk, he sensed what a student must feel when about to be reprimanded. Like being on a raft in the middle of a large waterway there was no easy way to be comfortable.

Mr. Garcia offered him some coffee, which is the standard beginning to any school meeting. Dr. Fanning quietly smiled to himself wondering what a school day would be like without any coffee being available. He certainly wouldn't want to be a student on that day.

"So I guess it is my turn", said a curious Mr. Garcia.

"I typically pick the biggest kids last, I guess it stems back to my days on the playground", Dr. Fanning said in a joking voice.

The two men laughed together as Dr. Fanning made light of the therapy experience. Dr. Fanning knew men were typically less comfortable in therapeutic encounters so he tried to normalize the situation.

“I was always picked last myself”, said Mr. Garcia, “but that was more about being Hispanic than it was about my ability.”

“The other kids didn’t know how good you were or they didn’t care?” asked Dr. Fanning

“I think maybe they didn’t care to know. I was one of seven Latinos in my school as my parents were among the first non-Caucasians to enter the neighborhood. Proving myself became a way of life from early on.”

“Has it gotten any easier?” asked Dr. Fanning

Mr. Garcia smiled faintly understanding full well the meaning of the question.

“These things take time”, was all he said. “That’s one of the reasons I moved to New Jersey. I used to be a Vice-Principal in the New York City school system.”

“There were other reasons you moved?” Dr. Fanning prompted him to go on.

“Teachers here just don’t appreciate how well they have it. The New Jersey schools are very different from schools in New York. At least here the hostility is contained. Where I came from there was no hiding it.”

“I would be interested in hearing about your experience there as I too have spent some time in the New York City schools- Staten Island and Brooklyn”, said Dr. Fanning

“I look at those schools in New York like a time bomb waiting to go off. Everybody is miserable and they aren’t doing anything about it. The veteran teachers are

all being forced into retirement and the new teachers don't last more than a few years at best. I'm glad I got out when I did."

Dr. Fanning knew of many teachers and administrators in the New York City school system that felt similarly, but at this point he was more interested in Mr. Garcia's experience and how that influenced his current situation.

"What was it like for you there personally?" asked Dr. Fanning

"I spent each day feeling more and more powerless. I couldn't help the teachers and I couldn't please the administration. When it appeared I was joining too closely with one side or the other I would be seen as a traitor. It was like a civil war and the children were the innocent victims."

"The principal was a guy whose only interest was looking good in front of the superintendent. He didn't care about the school or the students he was just interested in getting an appointment to some wealthy school district where he wouldn't have to work. He forced all the veteran teachers out and hired young teachers he could manipulate into doing things his way. When it came to curriculum, he changed the entire format without any input from the teachers. Nobody could say anything of course because they were worried about losing their job."

"I was very sorry I transferred to that school. I could have remained at a smaller public elementary school where I might have made principal, if I stuck around. Instead I thought I could make a difference in a bigger high school."

"Is that your goal to become a principal?" asked Dr. Fanning

"Isn't that the goal of every Vice-Principal?" he said rhetorically. "Well it used to be at least, I don't know about now."

“Something has changed for you”, said Dr. Fanning

“At this point my goal is to not make any waves. I have a family to support we just bought a home here in New Jersey. Maybe down the road if an opening becomes available we will see what happens.”

“You sound like a person who has returned from the front line and are not ready to go back any time soon”, said Dr. Fanning

Mr. Garcia thought about what Dr. Fanning said. While he did feel like a combat veteran he didn't want to be perceived as giving up the fight.

“I haven't given up if that's what you're thinking. I am choosing my battles carefully”, said Mr. Garcia

“It's unfortunate that education has become such a place where sides are drawn up and everybody is expected to choose. How difficult it must be to get things done.”

Dr. Fanning said this with sincere empathy, but at the same time making a statement about the school environment.

“That is also life”, countered Mr. Garcia. “We are teaching children about the real world. That's why it's hard to understand those people who advocate for taking volleyball out of gym. In the real world everybody cannot succeed. If you learn to deal with failure early on it will be easier when you grow up.”

Dr. Fanning wondered about this significant shift in Mr. Garcia's attitude. Just a moment ago he seemed like a defeated military officer and now he was defending the system. He wondered whether he should point out this change or just let him go on.

“So you are saying what goes on here at the school is normal and people should just learn to live with it because that is life.”

“Yes, that is what I am saying more or less. You can’t always change what doesn’t work you simply have to learn to accept it. I learned that a long time ago from my father. He was an immigrant who worked very hard to provide for his family even though he didn’t like what he did or who he did it for.”

Dr. Fanning now had a slightly better understanding of what was going on for Mr. Garcia. He was conflicted between two voices. One of which was his father’s voice, which said to work hard and allow the reward to follow. The other voice was his own or perhaps his mother, more of an idealized dreamer that believes more in freewill than destiny. During this conversation he could here the conflict within Mr. Garcia for which voice was prominent. Maybe inherent in this conflict was the decision to remain passive, not giving enough will to either voice.

If Mr. Garcia was a client in his practice he may have delved further into this issue. As the school consultant he simply wished to make the Vice-Principal more aware of how this apparent conflict affected his role within the school community. If Mr. Garcia could appreciate his ambiguity, perhaps he could also see how he communicated this across the other subsystems and larger system as a whole.

“Your father and my father would probably have a lot in common. My father too was an immigrant and believed that everybody had his or her lot in life. He was a stubborn man who didn’t tolerate any difference of opinion. Unfortunately, I was a child who couldn’t keep my opinion to myself. As an adult I believe that he respected my willingness to differ with him but as a child it just felt like betrayal. I guess you can understand that.”

Mr. Garcia nodded his head slightly in acknowledgement, but mostly seemed lost in his own thought.

Dr. Fanning continued.

“If you don’t mind me saying so Mr. Garcia I imagine it took a lot of courage for your father to do what he did in taking care of the family. Moving away from his native country and starting over without knowing what the outcome would be. You must be very proud of him.”

Mr. Garcia seemed to understand the subtle message being delivered by Dr. Fanning. Taking risks was not easy, especially when you could not predict the outcome. By venturing forth into the unknown out of sheer hope for something better, was a true act of heroism. Mr. Garcia suddenly felt shame as he thought about his own situation. While he told himself that he was keeping his head low for the sake of his family, he wondered what his children could be proud of him for doing.

“There is no shame in being a good provider.” Dr. Fanning spoke as if he could read the thoughts and feelings of the man in front of him.

Mr. Garcia looked at Dr. Fanning directly in the eyes. The two held each other’s stare for several moments. Finally, Mr. Garcia spoke.

“I feel like I have lost my way”, he said sadly. “I used to enjoy what I was doing but now there is no joy.”

“Why did you get into education?” Dr. Fanning asked gently

“I was misunderstood growing up. I think my serious nature and strong will, caused others to shy away from me. It wasn’t until I got to middle school that a teacher finally took an interest in me. With only average grades and not much motivation I

didn't really stand out as a student, but this one teacher noticed me. I will never forget her- Mrs. Palmeri. She was kind and fair but held me to a much higher standard than I held myself. She didn't let me get away with my lackadaisical attitude. She was like a female version of that teacher from the movie, *Stand and Deliver*, have you seen it? Mrs. Palmeri taught me to take pride in my work and that not doing well was okay, as long as you gave your best effort. I remember she would say the only failure is a failure to try. I don't know if that was an original quote but it made a lot of sense to me then."

"She had a significant impact on your choice of career", said Dr. Fanning

"I wanted to touch the lives of children who nobody else saw the potential in. I wanted to turn around young lives that were headed in a bad direction. That is why I took the high school assignment in New York. I figured what better place to make a difference."

"Are you still pursuing that vision?" asked Dr. Fanning

"To be honest I think I forgot about the vision or at least put it aside. I told myself I was just disillusioned and that teaching is much more than changing lives. I guess that's why I have a hard time dealing with the new teachers of our school. I think they remind me of myself or at least the person I wanted to be." With those words Mr. Garcia seemed to go limp in his chair. He had a meaningful insight that overcame his need to remain controlled and safe.

Dr. Fanning remained quiet. He wanted to be careful not to influence Mr. Garcia in one direction as he now had to have faith that he would chose his own course. Once a person becomes fully conscious of what hidden agenda drives them, they are free to make clearer decisions if they honor their true inclinations.

“Thank you Dr. Fanning, I believe I have a lot to think about.”

Dr. Fanning took this as a message that he was done talking for now. He offered Mr. Garcia the invitation to follow up with him whenever he wanted. And with that, he left the office.

Dr. Fanning needed a quiet place to sit with his thoughts about this conversation, so he headed to the school library. He had yet to visit the library when it wasn't being used for a faculty meeting and noticed it had a different feeling, perhaps calmer. Without the tables aligned in the center of the room there was more space to move about. Dr. Fanning took advantage of the peaceful milieu to roam the shelves, perusing through the multitude of books and periodicals. For a middle school library he was quite impressed with the wide selection. While most of the books were geared toward research, there was also a small section on fiction for pleasure reading. He wondered how often these books were checked out though, as a thin film of dust covered the books and shelves. With the advent of the internet and the popularity of computer games it seems that reading had become an afterthought for today's youth.

Dr. Fanning picked up a copy of The Catcher in the Rye, a favorite of his from childhood. As he began reading through the first page he was interrupted by a small figure that had pulled up beside him. The young girl with ponytails and wide eyes handed him a note without saying a word. The note was from the main office and signed by Grace, asking him to report to the Superintendent's office at once. When he looked back down from the note the young girl had left as quietly as she appeared. He thought about checking out the book before leaving but didn't want to delay. So he placed the book back on the shelf, wiped the dust from his hands and set forth to the district office.

The trip only took about seven minutes, as the building was strategically located in between the elementary and middle schools. Dr. Fanning arrived quickly after departing from Kettering. He checked in with the receptionist and was directed back to the superintendent's office.

“Hello Dr. Fanning,” Mr. Roberts said from inside the room. “Come in and join us.”

The superintendent was sitting with Mrs. Smith and another woman whom he did not recognize. Dr. Fanning entered the large office and sat at an empty chair by the conference table, between Mrs. Smith and the unidentified woman. Dr. Fanning greeted Mrs. Smith and shook hands with Mr. Roberts waiting for an introduction.

“Dr. Fanning, this is Ms. Janet Segal, our school board president.”

“It's nice to meet you finally. I have heard a lot about you of late,” she said in a neutral tone, not wanting to give the impression of having a bias.

Mr. Roberts followed up the introductions with a brief explanation of their meeting and why he had been requested to attend. It seemed that the school board had not been informed about the hiring of an outside contractor and was somewhat concerned with finances. Due to the large expenditure, they wanted to understand the rationale for hiring an outside consultant.

“What do you think of our little school district?” asked Ms. Segal

“I am grateful for the warm welcome I have received. It has made my work that much easier”, replied Dr. Fanning.

“I would like to hear about that work sometime when I am not so rushed. Unfortunately I can't stay and talk more as I must leave now for another appointment.”

He knew he had been polite but guarded in his interaction and felt a need to demonstrate some warmth and respect. He had been careful in his wording knowing that he was being evaluated, which didn't feel good to him, even though he had been through it countless times before. Ms. Segal was not the sophisticated, well-dressed businesswoman he recognized from the world of big business, which made him that much more thoughtful. Since she didn't conspicuously attempt to seem powerful, perhaps she operated more from behind the scenes. He knew this was a skeptical attitude to have but he was familiar with the workings of school boards. While they seemed to have the best interest of the children in mind, they often used this leverage as any other political body that held power. Instead of using the position to imbue others with control they often viewed their role as the gatekeepers. School boards often took the role of safeguarding the school against corruption, although they may never say that.

As the superintendent returned from escorting the board president out of the building he began talking with the principal before being seated.

“Do you know how the school board became aware of Dr. Fanning?” he asked rhetorically. “One of your teachers seems to have had a conversation with a member of the school board they are friendly with.” Mr. Roberts was obviously annoyed by this act of betrayal and probably at having an intrusion into his decision.

“Do you know who it was?” Mrs. Smith asked defensively.

“I'm sure it was one of your old-timers who think they can use their influence... It doesn't really matter now though.” Mr. Roberts seemed to alter his mood once he realized how he was talking in front of Dr. Fanning.

“I can understand why a teacher might look to sabotage the process”, said Dr. Fanning.

Mrs. Smith and Mr. Roberts both looked at him expectantly.

“I am not intending to be critical, but the way in which we all went about setting up this work together wasn’t entirely successful.”

“What do you mean?” asked Mr. Roberts

“Even though it is somewhat typical in the way a consultant is brought on to help an organization, those who are most involved with the system were not consulted. They may feel angry or fearful at the prospectus for change. Or, they may just be angry at having an outsider interfere with the balance they have achieved.”

“Did you expect us to get the teachers approval before hiring you?” Mr. Roberts asked somewhat sarcastically.

“I think I understand”, said Mrs. Smith. “But it isn’t always practical to involve every level of the system in decision making.”

Dr. Fanning wondered, whether Mrs. Smith’s need for approval from Mr. Roberts was influencing her stance. She surely was upset herself with the way Dr. Fanning was brought on but instead of voicing those feelings was supporting her boss. This was certainly going to be an area in need of work but he wanted to approach this with extreme sensitivity.

“We may simply be aware that people respond differently to directives. Some fight you head on, some respond with non-compliance, others may take a more passive aggressive role like the teacher who went to the board, and there are the few who are

compliant but do so begrudgingly. If we label those people as saboteurs we are missing our own culpability.”

Mr. Roberts acknowledged his understanding too of Dr. Fanning. He began to consider the way in which he rushed the consulting contract and pushed it through without much consideration for how others would react. He rationalized it by figuring the school faculty did not know what was best for them and wouldn't respond favorably if they had input. He hoped that once they got to know Dr. Fanning they would be appreciative of his intervention.

“Is that how you felt Mrs. Smith?” Mr. Roberts asked her with interest although he came across as accusatory.

Mrs. Smith became noticeably uncomfortable with the shift into the here and now. That is what Dr. Fanning considered to be the optimal space for potential of important work to be done. While the focus of immediacy was threatening to most people who typically speak in the past or future, and rarely about how they experienced another person in the same room.

“It wasn't thinking very clearly at the time with everything going on.”

Dr. Fanning was aware of her attempt to avoid this opportunity for contact.

“It seems as though Mr. Roberts is inviting you to give him an honest account of your experience”, said Dr. Fanning. “Is that right Mr. Roberts?”

“Well, I'm not sure if I really want to know how you felt”, Mr. Roberts said while feigning laughter.

“Let me interject if I may”, said Dr. Fanning. “The two of you have been working together for a good period of time. You know each other fairly well and

therefore work together with good efficiency. In order for you, Mrs. Smith, to accomplish your objectives within the school, you will need to complete support of Mr. Roberts to feel safe. If you don't believe you have backing then you may be reluctant to be as genuine as you will need to be with your staff."

Dr. Fanning was making a powerful statement to Mrs. Smith about who she was and how she interacted with others, below and above her. He knew he was asking her to take a risk and come outside of her comfort zone. School systems can be extremely political places in that a lack of diplomacy and being vulnerable were viewed by many as weaknesses. If these weaknesses were demonstrated too often, it could mean terrible problems for a person's career.

"I don't know what you are asking me to say." Mrs. Smith said this with irritation in her voice. "Of course I wasn't happy to have somebody come into the school but I am fine with it now."

Tension was building in the room and all of them became uncomfortable. Mr. Roberts attempted to redirect the conversation by switching topics but Dr. Fanning kept them focused.

"Perhaps Mrs. Smith the angry feelings you are having about the question is about something else." Dr. Fanning knew he sounded a lot like a therapist offering an overused cliché but he did not want to abandon this opportunity.

"I don't know what you mean", said Mrs. Smith, offering her resistance.

Dr. Fanning knew instinctively that he was moving too fast and pushing too hard but he had become frustrated himself by the level of guardedness and diplomacy that was operating in this school and the entire district for that matter.

“What are you most aware of?” Dr. Fanning restated.

“I am aware of feeling pressured to offer an answer to a question I have already answered”, said Mrs. Smith.

“Ok and what is that like for you, to feel pressured.”

She thought about that for a moment. “It’s awful! I have enough pressure in my work that I don’t need to feel any more.”

“Keep going”, prompted Dr. Fanning

She sighed with exasperation, apparently conflicted about what she wanted to say and what she believed was the right thing to say. She took a deep breath and let it out.

“This job has more pressure than you can believe. If it’s not the demands of the parents it’s the teachers. The school district wants things done one way and the faculty another. I am always in the middle and there is no way to please everybody. All I want is to provide a good learning environment for the students but rarely even get to talk with them to know how they are. When I was a teacher, I could form close relationships with the kids and now I don’t even know every student’s name. It’s embarrassing to admit but it’s true. And now on top of it all I am told that I have to bring in a consultant on at the time the school is in its biggest crisis...” Instead of finishing she shook her head.

“Do I put pressure on you?” asked Mr. Roberts

“You may not realize it but you have very high standards. I do too so I don’t see that as a bad thing. It’s just that I feel like I am never doing enough...maybe that is my own fault, I don’t know.”

Mr. Roberts smiled. “My wife says the same thing to me.” They all laughed. He continued to speak after a moment of reflection.

“I am sorry Ann if I don’t appreciate you more openly. I never told you this but your school is one I rarely have to worry about. You keep everything so organized...it’s very reassuring to know you are there.”

That was the first time Dr. Fanning had heard anybody within the school district use a first name. He had become so accustomed to last names he didn’t even realize how formal it was until just now. He could see that the principal was moved by what she just heard.

“Thank you John. That means a lot to me coming from you.”

With that said, Mr. Roberts changed the focus to the matter before them. It was apparent that these two professionals were not quite comfortable with such an open display of emotion and were eager to return to their professional demeanors.

“Are you seeing any evidence of problems within the school we can directly link to violence? If we can do that for the school board, they will have a harder time dismissing the importance of your work”, Mr. Roberts asked innocently.

Dr. Fanning felt a wave of frustration and humor. The principal and superintendent had just engaged in some very important work within their professional relationship, improving trust, and now he wanted what amounted to a laundry list of problems within the school. Establishing a direct link between the school and student violence was certainly useful for those who allocate money and mandate legislation, but not nearly as simple to connect. Besides, he was not about to put himself in a position, which raises his level of power and diminishes that of the principals. If she felt her role in this change effort becoming trivialized, their relationship and their work could be sabotaged, especially after he had just urged her to become more open.

“I’m not sure if I can answer that question John, but let me propose an alternative. Maybe what we want to look at is the relationship between all school environments and student violence, giving specific examples from this district to validate this perspective. We can describe to the school board how this approach to violence prevention is extremely innovative and can serve as a role model for other schools across in the nation. It might be a good balance for the school community as well to generate some good media attention.”

The smile on Mr. Robert’s face was hard to hide. He absolutely loved the idea of being a pioneer in the area of school reform. It may have been his competitive nature but he envisioned the platitudes from his contemporaries in the field. Of course the idea too that his school district could potentially be a safer learning community for all the students.

“I like it. When can you be ready to present to the school board?”

Now it was Dr. Fanning’s turn to be surprised. “What do you mean?”

“There is nobody else who can present you ideas because there is nobody that knows them like you do. Now that the school board is involved, it is going to take a persuasive argument to convince them we are taking the most prudent course with this work. I don’t want get into another debate with them about money that lasts until our next budget meeting. If they can get on board with this idea, then there will be less pressure to justify results, at least in the short term.”

I understand your dilemma John. This is not the type of work that creates measurable results unfortunately. We are working on a process that is palpable, but not

very tangible.” Dr. Fanning paused as he considered this for a moment. “Alright, I suppose I can put something together, in say a week or so?”

“Well, unfortunately we really can’t wait that long. I can’t explain it now but its best we do something for the next board meeting, which is tomorrow night. I’m sorry to do this to you.”

Dr. Fanning exhaled deliberately, the most demonstrative sign of his displeasure Mrs. Smith had seen.

“In that case I better get going, it seems as if I have some homework to do.”

With that, Dr. Fanning left, leaving Mrs. Smith and Mr. Roberts to their own uncomfortable silence. Mr. Smith typically didn’t share his dealings with the board so openly and he was concerned that the conversation would be kept confidential.

“Mrs. Smith, I trust that our meeting will remain here with us?”

“Of course it will”, she replied. As she got up to leave she paused a moment as if considering saying something.

“Is there something more?” he asked.

Mrs. Smith had not been certain she wanted to ask this question but it was too late now to change her mind. “I wanted to ask you something... it seems as if you and Dr. Fanning are very familiar, have you worked with him in the past?”

Mr. Roberts considered the question, not looking at Mrs. Smith. He finally turned to her and said, “he was our family therapist back a couple of years ago when my son Jason was having some problems. He was extremely helpful with my son and unexpectedly the whole family. I had no idea problems with one person involved the entire system. That’s when I began to learn about his work with schools.”

Mrs. Smith felt relieved to know the association but a bit guilty at her boss having to disclose that information. Somehow she felt calm inside, although she wasn't quite certain what that was about. As she made her way back to the school she felt an increase in her energy level as if she had made some connection within herself that she couldn't yet describe. Perhaps it had to do with a willingness to not be so perfect. Whatever it was, she was now eager to get back to her work. She knew on some deeper level that there was much work to do and now she was seeing this work more clearly.

Chapter Six

The Aftermath

Dr. Fanning spent the night reviewing his notes on school violence. Presentations were part of his job but in this case it seemed he would be presenting to a less enthusiastic audience. School faculty made for interesting audiences because they often looked upon training as cruel and unusual torture. They often had little input into the type of training they received making them somewhat reluctant. He preferred to speak spontaneously about most topics, giving genuine feedback that was unrehearsed. In this case he knew it would be helpful to have concrete data to give merit to his theory. To do this he spent considerable time on the internet, scanning through a number of sites related to organization culture, workplace violence, and statistics on education from the past decade, and the numerous organizations which were created to stem the flow of violence.

Much of his manual resources on school violence were outdated, since he was years out of graduate school and not forced to do research. It's not that he didn't like research it was more about the statistics that turned him off. He hoped when making his decision of going into psychology he could avoid the painful experience of mathematical equations and formulas, only to find that statistics was a required course. Fortunately, it only took him three times to pass the class, delaying his graduation only a few months.

His final project was a doctoral dissertation on the perceptions of violence, a comparison of teachers and administrators. He postulated that administrators would rank external factors, or those not related to the school environment as more closely associated

with student violence, while teachers would rank internal factors higher. He believed this to be true because of the pressure that administrators felt to keep their schools free of stigmatization that they could control student violence. Teachers on the other hand are less driven by politics and more in touch with the school culture. Teachers are affected by the school environment or culture, much the same as the students and thus were speculated to be more aware of the connection between culture and violence.

It turned out that he had a difficult time getting enough school administrators to take part in his study, so the results were not considered statistically significant. It was discouraging that schools did not take a greater interest in his work, as it only served to help them in the future, but this only served to strengthen his resolve.

As he continued preparations, flooded by old excitement and trepidation from his graduate work, he put together what seemed to be a very poignant argument for his position. He assimilated a large amount of information, in preparation for the variety of questions he would likely have to field. He included a healthy amount of statistics, on the recommendation of the superintendent. He understood that statistics could be a persuasive argument, but unfortunately the numbers did not serve the purpose in this case. He would include them however, even though he didn't enjoy being so bookish. He reminded himself that the purpose of this presentation was to help the board appreciate the magnitude of violence potential and what he believed to be the incomplete efforts of the majority of violence prevention advocates. To support his work they would have to understand the limitations of existing programs within the schools which address bullying prevention, peer mediation and the like. It would not be an easy population to convince but he felt ready for the challenge.

The principal asked him however to give this seminar to the faculty, parents, and school board, because she believed it would be helpful toward drawing more attention to the scope of the problem and ultimately gain more support, financial and otherwise.

It was a large meeting hall, used primarily for board meetings. Members of the community to give their input regarding school matters attended these monthly meetings. As far as he could see, there wasn't one empty seat in the hall. In fact every space imaginable was filled with folding chairs to accommodate the large crowd, some of whom remained standing in the back and along the sidewalls.

Dr. Fanning would give a brief overview of school violence and then open the floor for discussion. The superintendent and the school principal both volunteered to answer direct questions pertaining to school matters. He suspected they made this offer because they were not certain of Dr. Fanning's appreciation for school politics and the need to cajole the community.

Mr. Roberts stepped up to the podium to make the introduction.

Youth violence was once an issue beyond the walls of the classroom but that is the case no longer. Student violence as it is sometimes referred is among the most significant threats to public education. In 1999, students aged 12 through 18 were victims of about 2.5 million total crimes at school. In that same year, these students were victims of about 186,000 serious violent crimes at school. Of these violent crimes, 47 school-associated deaths were reported between July 1, 1998 and June 30, 1999- including 38 homicides, 33 of which involved school-aged children (NCES).

Violence, one thought of, as a social problem in “bad neighborhoods” has now become a national epidemic within all urban, suburban, and rural schools. According to Richard W. Riley, former Secretary of Education, there are approximately 16,000 antisocial incidents each school day or about 1 incident every 6 seconds (Studner, 1996).

Students have become increasingly fearful about being in school. In a survey done almost ten years ago of first and second graders in Washington D.C., 45% reported having witnessed muggings, 31% reported having witnessed shootings, and 39% reported having seen dead bodies (American Psychological Association Commission on Violence and Youth, 1993). Despite public perception that school violence is limited to urban areas, the most recent school statistics show an equal vulnerability to suburban students for in school violence. One study found that 6% of the adolescents surveyed in rural states across the country indicated they had at some time brought a gun to school; Of this same sample, 42% indicated they had access to a gun if interested (Srebalus et al., 1996).

A more recent 1996 poll of American adolescents revealed that 47% of all teens believed their schools were becoming more violent. One study done almost six years ago stated that 90.8% of surveyed high school seniors responded often or sometimes to the question "How often do you worry, about crime and violence?" (Maquire & Pastore, 1994).

Direct aggression is only one measure of violence impacting the nation’s students. Of equal or possibly greater concern is the threat of violence experienced each day by the over 53 million teenagers who attend some 16,000 schools across the country. A 1999 study found that approximately 8% of these students in grades 9th-12th were threatened or

injured with a weapon, 14% report having been in a fight, and close to 7% (grades 6th-12th) report being bullied.

How are children supposed to concentrate on learning when their most basic need for safety and security is compromised? This same question can also be asked of the educators who experience a similar threat of violence as their student counterparts.

Recent statistics aren't available but a study done in 1994 found that between 2-6% of rural, suburban, and urban schoolteachers were physically attacked by students. In that same year, between 5-18% of those same teachers report a threat of attack by students.

Students and teachers alike are reporting an increased threat of daily violence within the schools. When students feel unsafe, they may experience social, emotional, and learning difficulties. When teachers feel unsafe they become unwilling to extend themselves in a way necessary to fully reach their students. With the increasing diversity of threats to our academic integrity, including drugs, gangs, violence, bullying, depression and countless other issues, serious threats to thwart our student's potential is compounding the problem.

Educators are well aware of the problem, ranking aggression as the number one concern facing our schools and communities. In a study done almost six years ago, 72% of the respondents reported that staff training to deal with violence would be their top priority, and we know the frequency of violent events has risen dramatically (Maquire & Pastore, 1994).

Prior to September 11th, the media was zoning in on widespread student violence, which raised our collective awareness of the problem. With the recent world events, we await an unknown impact on domestic problems such as youth violence. An argument

may be made that that country has become more unified through trauma and thus the level of youth violence has declined. On the contrary, however, trauma often gives rise to increased energy toward self-preservation, which may in the long term multiply the problem of student violence.

Prior to the global events I mentioned that localized crisis held public attention. Tragedies such as the school shootings at Little Rock, Columbine and, more recently, the 1st grader who killed a fellow classmate in Flint, Michigan, were becoming common media headlines. We may not see it as on the front pages now, but students in all grade levels are still using handguns and other weapons to solve common disputes. This means that every episode of bullying, racial tension and other harassment have the potential for disaster.

Evidence of this trend can be found by scanning a national news organization on a weekly basis. If only one fatal assault is reported during the week, there are likely to be many more which go unreported. Localized aggression within a school system is a daily event, which is often times not deal with by the students or faculty, for fear of reprisal, or public stigmatization.

School violence is not a new phenomenon however, although less was known about the problem in past decades. The early seventies witnessed the first comprehensive study of school crime, conducted by the National Institute of Education. The conclusion of the study found that adolescents were at greater risk of becoming victims of violence while at school than when away from school. Even with these results, researchers were aware of the substantial underreporting of offenses and thus the seriousness of this national problem.

No comprehensive study was conducted in the next decade, although many smaller scale studies were done. Results from these studies yielded confusing findings for the lawmakers of the time. While the frequency of violent crime leveled off in the late seventies and early eighties, already high numbers were being reported during that time. A study in the late eighties for instance, found that 91,000 teachers were attacked physically in that year, almost four percent of the nation's teachers (Gaustad, 1991). Violence against students also studies in that same year found thirty four percent of a nationwide sample of eighth and tenth graders having reported that they were robbed, threatened, or attacked while at school or on a school bus (Greenbaum et al., 1989).

Student violence is a national problem that seems to be escalating, if not simply in frequency then certainly in intensity. Equally as alarming as the epidemic itself is the narrow focus by various experts in the field, on simple correlative variables. It is the child who perpetrates the aggression, therefore the child who seems to be held accountable. I would agree that children and their families require better internal and external resources for coping with the stress of adolescent development, yet we must consider the powerful influences of the environment where these children spend an even greater amount of waking time than home, that is the school.

Over the years, there has been a change in the nature of aggression within schools. There are more violent episodes involving the use of weapons than ever before. California is one of the few states that mandate the maintenance of statistics regarding violence in schools. In the 1980's a 28% overall rise in the use of weapons was found, with a 100% increase in gun-related incidents (California Department of Education, 1990). This statistic was further broken down into a 50% increase in elementary schools,

a 79% increase in middle schools, and a 142% increase at the high school level for weapon possession. Across the country in Florida, a reported 42% increase in gun related incidents was reported during that same time span (Gaustad, 1991). It is evident that school violence is not isolated to particular communities, geographic regions, or socioeconomic status.

The prevalence of youth violence, although an explicit concern of the general public, is somewhat controversial according to a number of researchers. While some point out that in recent years there has been an “eruption of violent crimes committed in schools throughout the country” (Deneberg, 1998; p.1); others believe that statistics may be misleading.

It may be that youth crime is at “its lowest ebb in a generation...but as a result of news coverage...adults believe juvenile crime is increasing” (Tucker, 2001; p. B2). One explanation for this controversy is the lack of conclusive and comprehensive surveys on youth violence. “While no recent nationwide study of the real extent of youth violence is available, small-scale and regional studies indicate that youth violence is increasing, at least slightly” (Schwartz, 1996; p.1). According to Moles (1991), some types of school crime, such as theft and drug use, have remained level or diminished in recent years. A similar study collected data from 1993 to 1999 and found no change in the percentage of students who were threatened with a weapon on school property (NECS). This research suggests that the way we categorize violence among students plays a role as well. While not all aspects of violence are increasing in the schools, the perception of the threat of violence is growing.

Perhaps the severity of violence among this country's students plays a role in public perception. A review of well publicized near catastrophic and catastrophic events in our nation's schools from the past decade may illustrate this point. In the six years from July of 1992 to December of 1998, there have been 13 school shootings involving multiple victims in the United States (Williams, 1998). In the two years *not including* but following the Columbine tragedy, there have been seven incidents in separate schools, in which twenty-three people were wounded and six were killed (Bower, 2001; p.30-31). Eleven more near catastrophes were averted such as the plot in Port Huron Michigan in May of 1999, in which two young students were caught with a list of 154 targets, a stolen building plan, and a confiscated handgun. In February of 2001, an 18 year old in Elmira New York was apprehended with a handgun, a duffel bag containing 18 bombs and a sawed-off shotgun. These are only two of the widely publicized incidents, which influence public perception.

The "Columbine Effect" sometimes referred by the media is also called the contagion of violence. This phenomenon is well documented in social psychology literature, being studied around youth suicide in particular. One study, done with preschoolers, found that the contagion of aggression was highest when associated with negative attention. For those adolescents who are interested in attracting public awareness to their desperate plight, acts of violence have proven to be an effective tool.

The rise in dramatic violence has certainly heightened awareness of the general public, perhaps highlighting a new issue. Regardless of whether violence is on the rise in America's schools, the choice for dramatic escalation of problem solving by students in this country appears to be different than in past decades. As a research community, we

seem to be in our infancy of understanding this latest surge of catastrophic violence perpetrated by our students. If we begin to explore these causative or contributory factors, we may then be able to develop more effective prevention and intervention strategies.

Researchers from many disciplines are attempting to pinpoint the causative factors of violence among youth. The majority of studies seem to focus on early warning signs and individualistic predictors for violence. The media supports this idea or in some cases may buttress this overly simplistic approach. A recent article from a California paper stated, "Educators must do a better job of detecting signs of potential violence in students..." (Los Angeles Times, 2000). Unfortunately, if we continue to subscribe to the premise that responsibility rests only within the children themselves, we as the public may never fully appreciate the systemic influences brought on by organizational culture.

To understand the dynamics of organizational violence, a comparison may be made to the nature of volcanoes. With volcanoes, our focus is generally drawn to the eruption itself, instead of the underlying dynamics responsible for this event. So too with violence, we often attend to the aggressive act without truly understanding the build up to this event. If we want to reduce the potential for violence in your organization, you must first attend to the process.

In order for a volcano to erupt, a number of specific conditions must be met to facilitate this geological event. The large plates that divide the earth must be aligned in such a way as to produce frictions on their boundaries. The resulting heat and pressure causes the mantle to melt into magma. When enough magma is formed, it rises through the denser rock layers towards the earth's surface.

Such a comparison may be made to organizational violence. Conditions are similar in that a number of subsystems, instead of plates, come together forming friction. This friction may be the result of decision-making, group formation, boundary shifts, power struggles, and other politic events. The resulting pressure experienced individually and within groups may lead to competition, hurt feelings, rejection, isolation, and the overall deterioration of a person's resiliency. If this pattern is continuous, a person often times loses hope, experiences a sense of powerlessness, and lashes out.

As is the case with volcanoes, there are different types of eruptions. A non-explosive eruption may occur with effusive lava flow. This is comparable to the more subtle expression of violence found in harassment, bullying, and social isolation (antagonist) or self-mutilation, depression, and other forms of self-harm (agonist). An explosive eruption with voluminous lava flow is synchronistic with volatile acts of aggression such as violent assault, perpetrated by both antagonist and agonist.

To predict violence is often as difficult as predicting a volcanic eruption. While we cannot always or accurately forecast the event, we can certainly attend to the clues. With a volcano we measure the amount of magma accumulating in reservoirs, watching as the gases come closer to the surface. We may sometimes experience earthquakes or vibrations warning that an eruption may be eminent. To recognize this process we use tools such as seismographs and correlation spectrometers. Scientists who constantly monitor the volcanoes read these tools.

With respect to organizational violence, we don't often monitor the process nor do we always look for the clues. Some experts suggest that we monitor the "at-risk" children who may be predisposed to committing such events. Unfortunately this is only

the tip of the mountain, as the process begins deep below the surface. The tools for monitoring this process are our own self and system awareness, regularly discussed by all those who are involved.

As with a seismograph, the faculty must monitor the spikes in tension, experienced at different intervals throughout the school year. Various internal and external pressures must be brought into the public forum so that decisions can be made on how to release the tension. Often times the act of open dialogue is enough to reduce the tension in and of itself if the process is fluid and finds closure. If the process is stagnated in some way, it can actually create more friction than no intervention at all.

The keys to healthy process

- a. Encouragement for individual and group awareness
- b. Make sense of awareness in terms of unmet needs or wants.
- c. A system for open disclosure of data sets.
- d. A facilitator who monitors the exchange of ideas.
- e. Identification of needs, themes and key issues.
- f. An understanding of the impact (consequences and rewards) for change.
- g. A method for reaching a shared picture for change.
- h. An ongoing evaluation of the change effort.

Questions and Answers

“Dr. Fanning, you seem to take the emphasis off of the students and their own accountability for being aggressive. Are you saying the kids have no role?”

“I suppose I may be overcompensating for the abundance of literature which pushes us to hold children and their families accountable. By no means do I contend that children and their home environments play no role, in fact I believe they play a major role. Let me explain myself with an analogy from my private practice.”

“When a family calls me to help them with their son or daughter who is having terrible behavioral problems, I insist on meeting with the entire family for at least the first few sessions. I am often met with resistance from parents who have the belief that I do not comprehend them. They may say things like, I am not the one with the problem or I don’t know what good it will do to come in; I think he or she needs to meet with you by him or herself. Once we go through our initial tug of war, some parents are then willing to bring the entire family to the session. After a few meetings, we work to reconceptualize the problem from the individual to the family system. The child, who has been acting out, is typically the family scapegoat who calls attention to the underlying issues within the family. If I were to see the child by themselves, I would not only be missing the important power dynamics that limit a child’s work potential but I would also be reinforcing the notion that the child is the problem. Many other psychologists would disagree with me, believing that individual therapy helps build coping skills and the resiliency needed to deal with problems, which has good validity. My point simply is that all behavior can be better understood if looked at in a contextual framework, meaning the environment that is having an often-unseen impact.

“Don’t you think that children who commit violence are mentally unstable and represent a different scenario than the one you explained?”

“I do believe that a person may be predisposed to a rapid decompensation, which allows them to act impulsively and potentially homicidal, but that does not happen in a vacuum. Decompensation is a complicated process, which begins in the roots of early character development and continues throughout their adolescence. As a scientific community I believe we are in our infancy of truly understanding this process that combines genetic, environmental, familial, social, and physiological factors. As a practitioner who is not involved in research I can only speculate that the extreme cases of violence may have a higher causality with mental instability, but those cases are the minority. The overwhelming cases of violence to which we refer today, are those involving our typical urban, suburban, and rural child.

“Dr. Fanning, in the public and private business sectors, what if anything compares to with student violence?” asked one of the board members.

“Student violence in my estimation is most closely related to workplace violence. This is the only area I know of that has any substantial research done which can help us gain a better understanding of the impact from organizational culture. I know I am making a small leap from adults to children, but I believe many of the underlying issues are similar.”

“It is estimated that approximately two million Americans are victims of workplace violence each year, costing employers well into the billions of dollars. I read recently in a large EAP newsletter that a study found several motivations cited for workplace violence including personality conflict, work-related stress, family problems,

emotional problems, firing, and substance abuse. While this information is helpful in some ways, it does not fully explain the underpinnings of the environment, which is generally disregarded as a causative factor for violence.

“Dr. Fanning, you seem to place the onus of responsibility on the administrators for effecting school climate. What about faculty’s responsibility? Let me also ask if I may, what evidence there is to support your position”

“As with any other system, small or large, every person places a role in creating the climate, therefore it is everybody’s responsibility for creating change. I may place greater emphasis on the administration, because they hold a greater amount of power within the system. Unless administrators’ are willing to relinquish some initial control to support the change effort, there can be no long-term movement.”

“The evidence you are looking for is what I call data. Data can be generated in different ways, such as interviews, surveys, and observation. Much of the bias I have comes from my work with educators, so I tend to utilize the scientific work done by others. There is one such study done in October of 2001, by The Met Life Company, which found a non-supportive administration was the second biggest reason for teacher’s job dissatisfaction, just one percentage point below low salaries. Job satisfaction is an important issue within school systems because the national five year quit rate for teachers is at thirty percent. Just to give you a comparison, teachers have an annual quit rate of 13.2% contrasted against a combined 11% for other professions.

“What are the other reasons cited by teachers for low job satisfaction?”

“The four main complaints were inadequate support from the school administration, student discipline, limited input into school decision making, and of course salaries.”

Chapter Seven

A New Beginning

The news from the district office that the school board had accepted the expenditure of funds for the purposes of the consulting work, arrived an hour before the staff meeting. It was good news for the administration, as they could now engage in the work at hand more freely and without fear of controversy.

Mrs. Smith seemed especially pleased with the news and was eager to share it with Dr. Fanning. She was somewhat surprised with herself for being so enthusiastic about the decision and attempted to temper her emotion. She enjoyed Dr. Fanning's company and he was proving to be more valuable than she could have imagined. The two had worked very hard in the past week, putting into place some of the interventions suggested by Dr. Fanning. They were not seeing any real changes in the attitudes of the faculty, but she had to remember that this would all take some time. Even without major shifts in attitude from the faculty, Mrs. Smith continued to feel inspired. She made certain not to demonstrate too much enthusiasm not wanting to draw attention to herself.

She knew part of the reason for her renewed energy came from her meeting with Mr. Roberts. For the first time she felt unburdened as if she was not trying to measure up to impossible standards. Up until that time she felt like a pole vaulter who set the bar one foot beyond her capacity. Every time she approached the pit, her energy would drain, knowing she was not going to clear the bar. And now it was different somehow, more than just the feedback from her boss. It was much more actually, and something she

probably wouldn't have figured out until she began to read a book, suggested to her by Dr. Fanning. The book was called, The Celestine Prophecy, a work of fiction. At first, she thought it odd he would recommend what amounted to a work of science fiction. She couldn't even find the book at the bookstore at first because she was looking in the self-help and psychology sections. It wasn't until she asked a store clerk that she learned it was in stored in the new age section. She should have guessed, with all the odd references Dr. Fanning made to energy and contact.

What she found through reading this book amazed her. It was the part about control and how human beings live in what the author called 'control dramas'. She realized how her relationship with her subordinates and superiors reflected unresolved issues from her upbringing. At first she was reluctant to acknowledge the possibility that work relationships could be affected by issues with her parents, but after reading this for a while she was convinced. She had never felt quite successful as a child, which she attributes to feelings of inadequacy. Her mother was not emotionally available, probably the result of a chronic depression while her father was a rigid man who worked all his life as a physical laborer. He didn't understand her interest in reading and thus she felt guilty for feeling like such an oddball. Besides, she always believed he wanted a son and that he didn't know how to relate to a daughter. As a result, she became a hard worker who didn't attend as much to human relations as she did to being industrious. The book helped her to realize that she gained energy by directing others instead of forming meaningful connections.

She was eager to begin building cohesiveness among her team although she was also anxious about how she would be received. The staff was only about half loyal to her

from what she could tell and the rest would probably be glad to see her fail. She had to admit this unpleasant reality but at least she was being honest with herself. To do otherwise would be a mistake she could later regret. These teachers seemed to wait for her to make mistakes so they could show her up. Mrs. Smith realized this attitude was partly responsible for remaining so guarded among her staff but how was she to be open without letting herself become too vulnerable? She hoped Dr. Fanning could help with this conflict without it being too obvious. If it became too noticeable that she was being coached, which is what it felt like, the staff could possibly lose respect for her.

She couldn't imagine what she was trying to accomplish exactly and it didn't help that Dr. Fanning said that was okay. How was it supposed to be a good thing that she didn't have goals in mind? When she asked this question of Dr. Fanning all he would say was, "some kinds of change do not present a clearly desirable outcome". She understood that message in her head but it was still difficult to accept. He suggested that a shared picture of commonality might be a good starting point but he didn't say how to do this. All these unanswered questions stirred considerably anxiety for her which she was concerned would come across in front of her staff.

She was going to try something new for this staff meeting, which also added to her nervousness. Against her better judgment and again originating from the suggestion of Dr. Fanning, she was going to enter this staff meeting without an agenda. The agenda, Dr. Fanning suggested, was a subconscious way of controlling the meeting. She wasn't sure she agreed with this perspective, but she didn't want to appear controlling by resisting his suggestion. In her mind at least, the agenda represented good organization

and she was going to demonstrate to Dr. Fanning how disorderly the staff meeting could become when they were not well organized.

From her office, Mrs. Smith took with her a pad and pen to record notes from the meeting. It was not that Mrs. White was not a competent note taker, but she wanted to record thoughts and impressions she didn't want shared with others. Down the hallway she walked, fully self-absorbed with anticipation. She reached the library expecting to see an empty room, but that was not the case.

She suddenly realized she was tardy for the meeting, every faculty in their chair, looking at her as she moved to her seat. It wasn't like her to be late and she silently chided herself for the mental slip. Embarrassment spread through her and she began to lose focus. Scrambling to find her meeting agenda, fearing she misplaced it or worse yet, forgot to bring it with her. This was turning out to be a mistake she thought to herself. How did she get into this predicament she chided herself as she attempted to remain calm on the outside. She couldn't remember what she was doing any of this for or how she could allow herself to lose such control.

Mrs. Smith could feel all eyes in the room on her as she kept her head down, pretending to be sorting through her papers, even though there were few she brought with her. Yes, that was it! She had no plan, no format- she was to run the meeting by being a facilitator and not simply the leader. It all sounded so easy when she spoke about it with Dr. Fanning but now she could not think of how to begin. As she picked her head up and looked around the room she caught sight of Dr. Fanning. His gaze was steady and unflinching. She maintained eye contact for several seconds as if absorbing some unseen energy. She took a deep breath and smiled.

“Welcome everybody, I’m sorry I am late. I want to do something a little different today, which is probably obvious from the seating arrangements.”

The chairs were arranged in a wide oval, as was suggested by Dr. Fanning. He suggested that a desk in front of people represented some unseen obstacle to making contact. She wasn’t certain she understood what he meant but took his suggestion. For her it felt like being naked. The table represented a sort of shield that protected her against others in the room. She was uncomfortable but moved forward.

“Instead of following our usual agenda, I would like to open the floor up for an open discussion.” She stumbled over those last words knowing she had repeated herself. She couldn’t wait for others to start talking so she could collect herself again.

Faculty looked at each other around the room, obviously confused about either the instructions or the purpose of this invitation. Mrs. Smith knew they needed more information so continued to speak.

“What I want if for us to try having a meeting where the topics come more from the staff. I tried having you forward your ideas to me prior to the meeting but that wasn’t working...so I’d like to try it this way.”

Mrs. Smith felt herself being defensive. Dr. Fanning had encouraged her to become more self-aware and now she couldn’t turn it off. It was really a lot easier she thought when she didn’t analyze herself at every moment- it was really frustrating.

There was still silence among the faculty. Mrs. Smith could tell from the reactions of the staff that they were tentative to speak. She saw out of the corner of her eye a hand slightly elevated and she felt relieved, until she realized it was Dr. Fanning.

“Perhaps you can tell the faculty more of the reason behind making this change.”

Dr. Fanning had not intended to make an intervention this early, but he was aware the faculty needed some help in getting started. Maybe if they understood what was happening, they could get in touch with their resistance.

Mrs. Smith wasn't sure what he was looking for and was definitely uncomfortable with disclosing too much personal information to the staff.

“Well, I want to know more about what the faculty thinks and what they would like to see happen in the school.” She was talking directly to Dr. Fanning but the message was to the staff.

Mrs. White raised her hand and gained the attention of Mrs. Smith.

“You mean you want us to tell you what it is we want to talk about?”

Mrs. Smith replayed the words in her mind to make certain that is what she was saying. “Yes, that's exactly it.”

Mrs. Smith was hopeful a dialogue would then ensue, but instead there was more silence. She wondered why this was so hard for people but didn't know how to find out. Her anxiety began to rise again as they sat there in what seemed like an eternity.

“I don't think people are comfortable with this format...they are not accustomed”, said Ms. Vore.

“Are you willing to talk about your own discomfort?” asked Dr. Fanning.

“Oh, you are right”, she said. “I shouldn't talk about everybody else. Well, let me see...I suppose I am more used to having an agenda. We don't typically have much in the way of discussion.”

Ms. Vore waited for a response and then realized she wasn't going to get one. She continued hesitantly.

“Are we to create our own agenda or should we just start talking about issues?” she asked.

“Why don't we come up with an agenda so we're not all over the place”, suggested Mrs. White. As the meeting recorder she was in the habit of being quite organized.

Each time a person spoke they looked to Mrs. Smith for consent but she gave no indication of approval. This was the suggestion of Dr. Fanning that she create an experiment in which she is not leading the meeting, but instead facilitating the process. She read an excerpt he gave her, from a book the night before on gestalt theory. She read about the '*Law of Pragnanz*' or as it's more commonly called the law of equilibrium. The principle states that every experience tends to become as good as prevailing conditions make possible. When she asked Dr. Fanning how this applied to the upcoming meeting, he warned her that it might not start out as she had hoped and that if she worked at attending her own awareness and the group process itself, she would likely be satisfied with the outcome. Mrs. Smith wondered whether Dr. Fanning worked at being mysterious or it simply came naturally to him.

In any case, it took a tremendous amount of energy she realized to remain quiet during the meeting. She attempted to consider what this meant to her but came up empty. Was as good it was going to get she wondered?

Mrs. Jones cleared her throat and gained the attention of all in the room.

“If you want to know what I want, it’s a better system of discipline. These children are so disrespectful there is no way to teach them what they need to learn. If they think they can get away with whatever they do, there is no way to keep them under control.”

“What’s the problem with our discipline policy Mrs. Jones?” asked an obviously irritated Mr. Garcia.

“The problem is, there is no discipline policy”, snapped back Mrs. Jones.

“I have to agree with Mrs. Jones”, said Mr. Perry. “The students are growing more disrespectful every year. I don’t blame them entirely. Without accountability on the part of the parents, how are we supposed to manage the students?”

“I don’t think we have much to complain about”, said Mr. Garcia. “Where I come from there are metal detectors and video cameras in the hallways. There are police instead of private security and even they don’t gain the respect of the students. Where I come from the students wouldn’t think twice about stabbing a teacher who challenged them in public. All we have here is some spoiled kids who need attention.”

The tension in the room had sparked in a matter of minutes. Dr. Fanning observed the sub grouping of faculty according to beliefs, which seemed to reflect the length of relationships within the school. Mrs. Jones and Mrs. White were certainly aligned while Mr. Perry and Mr. Garcia seemed to be more independent. These two men were also among the newest to the school.

Mrs. Smith realized she was sitting on her hands. This was just the kind of out of control meeting she attempted to avoid and now she was allowing it. She didn’t know how much longer she could allow this to go.

Ms. Vore, in typical form, attempted to quell the conflict, knowing how Mrs. Smith felt about these meetings.

“What kind of discipline do you suggest Mrs. Jones? What is it we can do to these kinds that hasn’t already been done to them?”

“I think we should stop coddling them”, replied Mrs. Jones.

This was obviously a remark aimed at Ms. Vore. She was seen by some of the older faculty as soft. There was a long-standing battle between the guidance counselor and some of the core faculty, who were upset with students being taken from their rooms during class time. Ms. Vore attempted to accommodate certain teachers who were preparing for testing, but it was impossible to do this all the time. Ms. Vore herself was upset with some teachers for the way they treated the children and furthermore their attitude toward counseling. They didn’t seem to understand that emotional problems made learning near impossible, making her an ally and not an enemy.

Dr. Fanning wondered how much of this tension was due to the violence only a few months prior. These teachers seemed to be carrying around feelings that may not have been freely expressed and certainly did not find not closure. He made a mental note that revisiting the events of December may be a useful vehicle for team building.

Perhaps he would wait and see if they would move in this direction on their own.

Following the meeting, Mrs. Smith and Dr. Fanning went back to her office to process the experience. Mrs. Smith walked slightly ahead of him, moving quickly and quietly. When they reached the office she closed the door behind them and sat hurriedly at her desk. She didn’t say a word, seeming to be assimilating meaning from her

experiences. Not certain of where to begin, Dr. Fanning initiated the dialogue by commenting on her appearance.

“You seem tight”, was all he said.

“I don’t know what just happened in there. Nothing went as I expected and you didn’t even do anything.”

Dr. Fanning considered which of her two dilemmas he wanted to attend to, opting to keep himself out of it for the time being.

“You had hoped for something different?” he stated somewhat questioningly.

“That was pure chaos. Nobody listened to one another and nothing got resolved. We were totally disorganized...and now everybody must be wondering what the hell is wrong with me for just allowing it to happen.”

“What were you hoping for?” persisted Dr. Fanning.

“I don’t know but it wasn’t that. Did you see what went on in there when I didn’t provide any direction? It was worse than I imagined.”

“You seem discouraged. Perhaps if you explore your experience we may learn something useful. Now tell me, if you had some image of what could potentially go wrong, you may also have had a picture of what could have gone well.”

Dr. Fanning was intent on helping Mrs. Smith examine her expectations and how the meeting seemed disappointing to her. He hoped that by allowing her the space to just be, she may move into a broader exploration of the system and its experience. Firstly though, she needed to make contact within herself.

“I suppose I was hoping the staff would organize themselves more easily, not fighting for floor time. They didn’t agree on much of anything and now they are

probably going to start bickering during the day. Before you know it, the entire faculty will become divided and we will be at war.”

Mrs. Smith’s fantasy was becoming clearer. By letting go of control, she believed the faculty would separate into factions, ultimately leading to mutiny. She had taken a significant risk in experimenting with a new method of facilitating and now it was important to find the benefit to this experience.

“What was it that occurred during your meeting that leads you to believe the staff will become further fragmented?” asked Dr. Fanning.

“You were there! Didn’t you see the way they argued about every topic brought up. They are like children who can’t get along and in the absence of good leadership, they were at each other’s throats.”

“Tell me if you can, what you were aware of within yourself, during that meeting”, inquired Dr. Fanning. “Or even what you are experiencing right now.”

Mrs. Smith stopped talking for a moment and seemed to slow down her breathing. Dr. Fanning had taught her about doing an internal scan and how important it was to attend to her thoughts, feelings, and sensations. She closed her eyes and took two more deep breaths, in through her nose and out through her mouth. Without opening her eyes she began to speak.

“My back and neck are in knots...my stomach is churning like I just ate something that didn’t agree with me...my thoughts are racing too fast to catch them.” After pausing for a few moments she said softly, “I am anxious”. She opened her eyes and reported to Dr. Fanning that she felt out of control, now and during the meeting. When she felt this way, her thoughts became catastrophic. She was just now becoming

aware of this pattern that began many years prior. When she felt out of place in her family growing up, she hid herself in her reading only it didn't prove to be an easy escape. She learned a good deal from hiding within her books and acquired a fair share of knowledge that got her to the place she is today. Only now, this strategy didn't seem to be working nearly as well.

“Okay, so maybe the meeting isn't going to lead to anarchy, but it certainly isn't going to help with our goals”, stated Mrs. Smith.

“Oh”, was all Dr. Fanning said.

Mrs. Smith thought about the goals for the school and what Dr. Fanning might have been thinking. She recalled the objective of building a more cohesive team that would create a shared picture of meaning and intent. How could this meeting have helped at all with that goal she wondered to herself?

“Are you saying that the conflicts which emerged during the meeting were important for building our team?” she asked.

“What do you think?” replied Dr. Fanning.

Mrs. Smith knew that her intended answer was not what he was thinking. But how could disagreements and fragmentation be helpful.

“Do you think it was a necessary part of our process?” she said hesitantly.

“Go on” he urged.

Mrs. Smith put her thoughts together, not certain where she was heading.

“But they were so condescending toward each other, nobody really listening to what the other had to say.” Mrs. Smith went back to her protestation.

“You seemed to have done a wonderful job observing the dynamics within that meeting. You attended to the process as well as the content, which is difficult to do. Now consider yourself within that observation- had you ever felt the way you did today, in this meeting, during any of your previous meetings?”

“Well sure, just never to that extent”, she replied.

“Okay, now consider your staff”, he instructed.

Mrs. Smith’s eyes widened with her realization. “Maybe that is how they have been feeling all along but to this point had never expressed it openly.”

“I think you have got it”, he said warmly.

“You mean all the while, I interpreted our meetings as organized and efficient, yet there has been tension among the staff they have only just now felt comfortable expressing?”

Mrs. Smith said this out loud to herself as much as it seemed like a question to Dr. Fanning. The realization made her slump low in her chair and her face took on sadness.

“How have I missed all that?” she asked quietly.

“Maybe a more important question, is what will you do now?”

“Is that why you didn’t intervene during the meeting?” she asked.

“Sometimes there are no interventions, except to understand more fully what is”, he replied. “You have begun the process by which you can heighten your awareness about the various systems within your school. Just as you learned to scan inside yourself and readjust your internal boundaries, you also learned you can better appreciate the larger community by adjusting those boundaries as well.”

“I think you lost me. Do you mean I can change the staff?”

“Perhaps not the people themselves, but certainly your relationship with them.”

“I wouldn’t even know where to begin”, she said sadly.

“Maybe that question is the place to start. To move in a certain direction requires a shared picture of what that change will look. Otherwise it is still only one agenda and one set of needs being met.”

“But if too many people are involved in the decisions of where we are headed, won’t we get bogged down in debate?”

“The faculty may not have the tools yet for effective decision making, but with your leadership perhaps they will learn. A good facilitator is often times more valuable than a decisive leader. If the faculty feels as though they have some input into the functioning of the school, there will likely be a richer and more diverse environment to work in. Granted, this can be more work, especially in the beginning, but in the long run it can really be beneficial.”

“Do you realize this type of thinking is contrary to the way every school system in this district operates...forget the system, probably in the entire country?”

“Then maybe you will join a long line of innovators. Rockefeller, Gates, Semmler, all of these individuals were pioneers in their field. They all took risks because they envisioned a better way.”

“But how can we really make changes when they won’t be supported by the larger system? We can do only some things here in our little school, but the district and state will continue to do things the way they have always been done. They will hand down decisions on how to run the school that we have no control over. I will still have to live

with teachers being transferred into my school that are friends or family from somebody high up, and so on. There is really only so much that we can do.”

“I agree with you. You may be starting small, but change must begin from somewhere. Dr. Jane Bluestein writes about the experiences of Bishop Desmond Tutu. He grew up in a South African ghetto with hardly any resources except for the church building they were schooled in. There was one teacher, Mr. Ndebele, who inspired his students despite an environment that “conspired to make us feel utterly dejected”. His courage allowed others to reach their potential. Sometimes it just takes a beginning.”

Mrs. Smith held Dr. Fanning’s stare for several moments, feeling his sincerity and passion. She wanted to feel those things also but she had so much to lose. How does one change when they have been one way for so long? She was working the New Jersey educational system, and surely she was going to be swimming against the tide. She considered just humoring Dr. Fanning until his job was done and returning to the way things had operated from before. She knew however that this was no longer about what he encouraged, this was what she knew was right. By ignoring these new ideas, she was not going to feel good about herself. And so she began writing. She began writing about her picture of what she wanted the school to be.

Weeks passed and Dr. Fanning spent less time in the school. Instead of meeting with faculty and observing the daily events, he came in for coaching sessions with Ms. Smith and Mr. Roberts. He also agreed to join the faculty in staff meetings, helping them to develop their shared picture of change. The next such meeting was about a month

away, the principal had agreed to have one sooner, but school wide testing and other events seemed to get in the way.

As the staff sat expectantly for the meeting to begin there was a noticeable change to the mood in the room. The energy was raised, a combination of anxiety and excitement. With all the recent changes in the school, nobody was quite certain what to expect from this meeting. Some of the staff were suspicious with the new attitude of the principal while other more novice teachers were less skeptical.

“I wanted to change the world, but I have found that the only thing one can be sure of changing is oneself- Adlous Huxley.”