

Psychologica

Volume 38, Number 1

Magazine of the Ontario Association of Consultants, Counsellors, Psychometrists and Psychotherapists

Family



Special Edition Winter | Spring 2015





Audrey Miller

PSY: So Audrey, how did you get into this work?

AM: Once I graduated with my MSW, I started working with differently abled folks through the Ministry of Community and Social Services. That was 30 years ago. I certified as a rehab counselor, primarily dealing with individuals with catastrophic injuries and acquired disabilities. The kind of work I was doing with that population was certainly transferable to families dealing with aging and disability. So ten years ago, Eldercaring was birthed. This is a work of passion and love for me and I feel very privileged to be able to be invited into people's lives at this point of difficulty. I was able to take those skills and look at the entire family and the client all as very important players in the caregiving team.

PSY: Okay, so this is the Family System approach.

AM: Exactly. So there's a Family System approach and it's about understanding and being able to see the interplay within all those systems. We're not aging in isolation. So much of the time, families don't want to talk about these things. We prepare nine months for birth and it's a very exciting time. Nobody wants to

talk about death. Nobody wants to talk about getting older, so we move forward until quite often there's a crisis. Those are the majority of the calls I get — in crisis mode. I'm trying to spread the message to start the process before a crisis occurs. Because when we plan, we have choices. And when we react, we lose the ability to choose, quite often.

PSY: It's a very personal thing you have to do. You have to come in and immediately ask all these painful and difficult questions. Or start the ball rolling towards addressing those painful...

AM: That's true, and what's particularly challenging is that, unlike the practice psychotherapists have, which is usually over an extended period of time, quite often I'm invited in for a one-shot assessment only. So they say: come in, figure out what we need to do and then, thank you very much, goodbye. Part of what we're doing is offering this kind of assessment, which is comprehensive and thorough, but we have to very often think on our feet and have the knowledge to be able to guide. This absolutely requires a professional approach. There are lots of folks out there who looked after their own parents and feel they have something to offer and I'm absolutely sure they do, but the reality is, people don't want, for example, to move twice, if they're looking at a move at all. Quite often we are dealing with folks who are vulnerable, so it's really important that all the care and attention and knowledge be available to help guide the families in a professional and proper manner and not leave anything out.

PSY: You've got basically one session?

unnecessary. He uses language only sparingly. This child doesn't experience the world through words. He uses a completely different map-of-the-Universe than the one I use to navigate life. Give this young man a coffee table to repair, a bookcase to assemble, he's your man. Take him to the forest, he can set up camp, start a campfire with wet wood, find his way in the dark. Ask him to tell you what he needs/wants/feels/thinks, or even what his plans are for the weekend ahead, and you get nothing or idk, teen texting-speak for "I don't know." And he doesn't. I am learning to be OK with this. I am learning to honour and respect his non-verbal manner, to admire his Just Do It attitude. Instead of describing life, he is riding headlong down rock-strewn mountain biking trails, or traversing a zipline on Mt. Hood.

As his nature-loving, hiking, but only slightly adventurous mom, I simply cannot join him in most of his heart-pounding activities — extreme mountain biking, ski racing, rock climbing, bungee jumping, sailing. I can drive him to the hills to ride bikes with a buddy, send him off to wilderness canoe-trip summer camp, but I cannot myself enjoy the "scary sports."

Who is this child, so different from the rest of us in the family? Where did he get his physical acumen, his daring? He

experiences life on high-speed adrenalin. Words are not required on a double-black-diamond downhill ski run. Other kids like being with him. He likes people, is relaxed socially. He just doesn't talk much. This is the kid who would kindly hand his ice cream cone to his little cousin, who dropped hers at the zoo. "Here. Want mine?" Enough said.

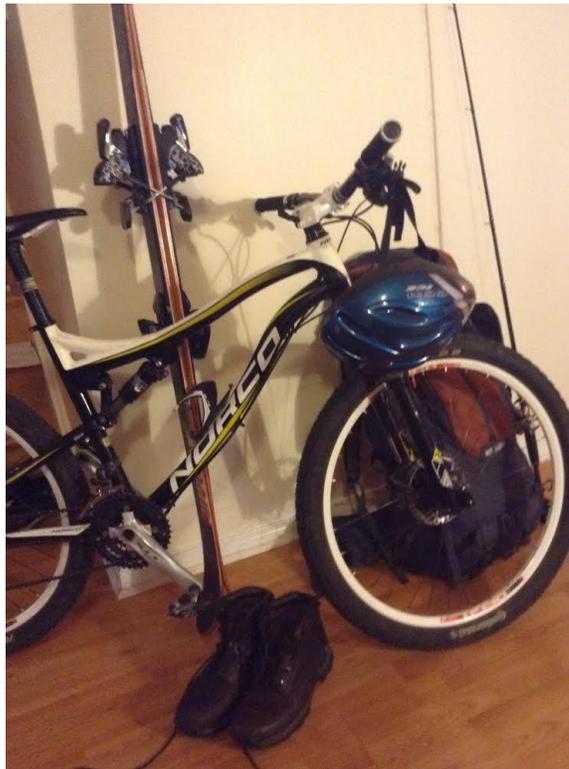
How can I help him sort through the crises in his life if he does not tell me (or anyone else) about them? How do I even know what his dreams and goals are? I listen between the words and am learning to be content with this.

Even when I am not working, when I am hiking or travelling, awed by the grandeur and beauty of nature on the rocky coast of BC, or by the stillness of a northern Ontario lake at

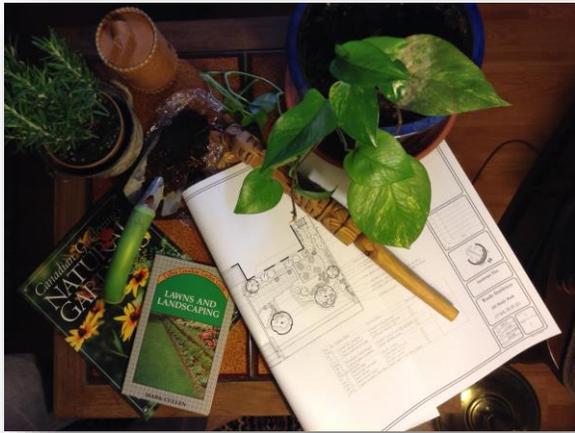
evening, or by the rich warm sight and smell of seaweed and mud at low tide on the Bay of Fundy, I am searching for words to describe what I see, what I feel. If I am not recording it on paper, or sharing it with someone, it is only half an experience for me.

How do I convey my love for him when he tunes out my words after a sentence or two, eager to be off and doing again, or just wanting to be quiet? How do I enter his world when much of what makes his heart sing is so alien to my own nature?

With this one I am learning to speak in sound bites. To say it succinctly, once, and then stop. Hard for this



Credit: Deborah Kinsinger



Credit: Deborah J. Kinsinger

writer/talker/therapist mom. The rare times he does want to talk I have learned to stop and really listen. Most often what comes next is about mountain bike equipment, the torque of the chassis on a car or the new skis he wants for the school ski racing team. I ask questions, engage him, glad for even this small invitation into his world through conversation. And what a rich world it is.

My younger son lives in a physical world, where life is either exciting, or he is just content to be for a while until he has hatched a plan for the next adventure. Safety is not a big issue for him. He jumps, runs, falls down, gets hurt, all in a day's work. His quiet nature and athletic exuberance remind me that life is bigger than the life I live. And as he disappears, legs pumping, up over a rocky, muddy mountain trail on his bicycle, he adds color, depth and a whole different focus to my view. I think I will write about it.

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For several years she was chair of the Psychology Dept. at the Canadian College of Naturopathic Medicine in Toronto, worked in Crisis Counselling at Stevenson Memorial Hospital in Alliston, ON and at Scarborough Centenary Hospital.

She has been a writer forever. She has published stories in 6 Chicken Soup for the Soul books. Her new book Hope and Miracles comes out in February 2015.

She is a proud mom of two independent, creative and interesting young men.

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