When directors lose their way

by Margie Carter

Work, like marriage, is a place you can lose yourself more easily, perhaps, than finding yourself. It is a place full of powerful undercurrents, a place to find ourselves, but also, a place to drown, losing all sense of our own voice, our own contribution and conversation. (David Whyte, 2009)

Directors of early childhood programs are an amazing lot! I typically see so much dedication, such hard work and creative problem solving. But then that inevitable undertow of deadlines, crises, and illness begins to suck you down. Before long, you're drowning, and with crisis management becoming a way of life, you don't even recognize your vital signs slipping away.

I encounter different symptoms of this condition when I walk into a center. Sometimes the director is so overwhelmed that the overall culture of the program is one of stress and irritability. Other directors handle the strain by emotionally, if not physically, withdrawing from the culture of demoralization. Either way, the undercurrents of negativity and resignation don't speak of a healthy organization. The director still appears dedicated, but has lost his or her way, barely managing and certainly not leading.

I first discovered the work of David Whyte when researching leadership models and organizational development strategies while writing *The Visionary Director*. Co-author Deb Curtis and I began that book with Whyte's (1994) words, "We cannot neglect our interior fire without damaging ourselves in the process." In reviewing Whyte's work, management consultant Peter Block says, "The unique contribution of this book is the way it eases us into the dark and unmanageable side of the workplace." This seems like something early childhood managers could benefit from examining. Two years ago when updating *The Visionary Director* for a new edition, I searched for new books Whyte had written because he brings a unique voice to the work of leading organizations. Reflecting on his own experience of losing himself in his work, Whyte offers poetry, psychology, and creative arts to corporate executives. He believes managers need to be

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engaged in courageous conversations and clarity about the larger world that is shaping their identity. They must be sure they are who they want to be, doing what they truly believe in.

Engaging in conversations

"What we have to confront in the present workplace is the reluctance to engage in conversations that really invite the creative qualities hidden deep inside each human being. . . . My work has executives asking, in many areas of their lives, personal and professional: What is the courageous conversation I am not having, but need to have to take the next step?" (Whyte, 2001).

When you are mired in a crisis-ridden organizational culture, you sometimes can't find your own fire amidst all the smoke. It is easy for directors to feel helpless, to lose themselves and feel victimized under conditions that include an ever-growing body of standards, a focus on measurable outcomes, and a faltering economy. There are so many factors that seem out of control. While this feeling of helplessness is understandable, I also know that directors seldom claim the leadership potential their position offers them. Instead, they let the limitations and pressures of current conditions constrict their imaginations and creativity. Under the 'be realistic' or 'meet the standards' banner, directors tend to stay focused on how things *are*, rather than on a vision of how things *could be*.

If you see yourself as the person who develops your organizational culture, your leadership will extend beyond managing an early childhood program. Cultivating imagination is as critical to your success as acquiring skills. I think this is why David Whyte is so sought after by corporate executives. He reminds them to consider other resources that call forth their creativity and personal passions. He fans the fires of imagining new possibilities. Whyte suggests approaching work as a conversation in a relationship and paying attention to not only what we have *done*, but who we have *become* in the process.

Questions for early childhood leaders:

- How do I think my work life is influencing who I have become?
- How do I feel about this?
- What conversations do I need to have with myself about my work life?
- What conversations do I need to have with others?

One of the conversations I long to have in our field is why we so easily settle for mediocrity. I jumped with joy when I read Debra Sullivan's (2010) words, "Effective leaders know that mediocrity is not an option." I think it's a challenge to let your mind spin out new possibilities when you are so used to adapting and accommodating yourself to how things are. Entering into deeper conversations can help you break out of accepting mediocrity, even when you're not sure how you could accomplish anything more. Talking with each other reminds us how little we've settled for and stirs up longings for something much more.

Nothing without joy!

In reckoning with how he lost his way, Whyte describes slipping into a 'slow forgetting' of how to be a full participant in life, something children so readily model for us.

"In my early teens, I had looked around at the strange world of adults and saw with a kind of horror that almost all of them seemed to be preoccupied with the details of life in such a way that they had lost sight of the greater picture. Adults seemed to have forgotten basic elemental and joyful relationships with clouds or horizons or grass that seemed necessary to be a full participant in the creation I saw around me. This form of false maturity, this slow forgetting, was late in coming to me, but I had fallen for it at last and it was now beginning to smother me . . . what could I do to open up that current of childhood engagement which I had felt so strongly until recently? By what steps had I forgotten the promise I had made as a child not to fall into a false form of maturity, which is actually a form of nonparticipation, of not seeing, not hearing, and not imagining?" (Whyte, 2009).

An often-quoted sign hangs over the entry to the Diana School in Reggio Emilia: "Nothing without joy!" I want every early childhood leader to have this as his or her motto. Somehow, even though we have children in our midst, even though they persist in living with joy despite all the stresses in their lives, we adults have forgotten how to do this. This is both a symptom and a cause of 'slow forgetting' and losing our bearings. If you aren't fully participating, engaged with gusto, in the creation around you, you will surely lose your way, your heart for this challenging work in these difficult times.

Questions for early childhood leaders:

- How would you describe the characteristics of your organizational culture?
- Is joy a daily experience for everyone in your workplace?
- What might you do to "open up that current of childhood engagement"?
- What sustains you when the going gets rough, people get prickly, and exhaustion sets in?

Whyte says, "The antidote to exhaustion is not necessarily rest. The antidote to exhaustion is wholeheartedness." I think many of the current trends and mandates in our field don't engage our hearts or minds. Beyond cheerleading, how can we lead when we aren't fully engaged or working wholeheartedly? Note that we are not talking about working harder, but working wholeheartedly. To me that

requires keeping an eye on something with deeper meaning than the regulations, a vision of how your work could make the world a better place in a significant, not half-hearted way.

I honestly believe early childhood programs are in a pivotal position to foster relationships that can heal the rift people feel between themselves and others and between themselves and the natural world. In our work we can address issues of bias and inequality in our thinking, actions, and structural arrangements. Early childhood programs can give the children and adults an experience of joy, of empowerment, of democracy in action, so that they have the will and know-how to make this a priority. On the whole, most programs weren't developed with this vision. They've been focused on risk management, regulations, and school readiness. There is so much more we could be reaching for, seeing the connection between our work, ending violence, healing the planet, and social justice. We can create places where the hopes and dreams of children and adults are nourished.

Putting structures under your dreams

"The key seems to be to find a restful yet attentive presence in the midst of our work, to open up a spaciousness even in the center of our responsibility. To find some source of energy other than our constant application of effort and will. If we attempt to engage the will continually, it exhausts us and prevents us from creating something with a pattern that endures" (Whyte, 2001).

Along with encountering directors who've lost their way, I've met a growing number who have worked with an attentive presence and a fierce fire in their hearts, which has sparked new dreams and possibilities among the teachers, children, and families with whom they work. Those who have created lasting results have formed strong organizational structures and systems to underpin their dreams. Those who haven't taken this step often lose heart, lose their valued staff, and ultimately lose even their own health and well-being trying to single-handedly keep their program on course with their vision.

Questions for early childhood leaders:

- Beyond your own effort and will, what resources can you draw on to add more building blocks toward living your vision?
- Are your systems and structures serving your teachers or are you asking them to spend their energy in service of your systems and structures?
- What have you been creating that represents, with all good intention, a 'pattern that endures'?

Bringing a vision to life takes time and requires a steady rhythm of breathing in and breathing out. You need to recognize the signs of burnout when your vision blurs or when you become cranky, reactive, or resigned to how things are. At these critical junctures, remember to carve out some time to tease out some renewing perspectives. Touch base with someone who has served as a mentor to you, directly or indirectly through thought-provoking writing, truth telling, or inspirational actions. Find other leaders to regularly get together with, *especially* when you feel you don't have the time. Together you can open up a spaciousness, even in the center of all your responsibilities.

Seeking a good work life

Like Parker Palmer (2007), who encourages teachers to consolidate their identity with their integrity, David Whyte reminds us to see the connections between our job satisfaction and the alignment of our inner passions with our work life. This ultimately is what sustains our engagement, our sense of possibility and belief that what we are doing really matters.

"The other interesting thing about a work life is how different it is from a workday. The tasks we face on a given day are often around specific actions, or specific conversations we need to undertake. The tasks we face in pursuing a work life more often have to do with intangibles, with what cannot yet be touched or spoken, and very often with the great intangibles of our unhappiness. In a good workday you are more often than not trying to make other people happy; in a good work life you are trying to make yourself happy" (Whyte 2009).

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