

Create a Space and Time for a Friend: A Minimal, but Magical, Intervention in Human Ecology

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INTRODUCTION

Human ecology has scientific and theoretical aspects, for it is superb framework with which to conceptualize, understand, predict, and design human and environment relationships. In addition to theory, practical examples of interventions abound throughout our human communities and each can teach a great deal about human ecology and relationships. This article describes a case in point to illustrate the value of practical work in the broad field of human ecology.

An Example

The unruly and unhappy child whimpered at first, then cried softly, then sobbed, and then bawled, loudly, intensely, and without any respite for those nearby. The accompanying and responsible adult tried out various tactics to hush the child, then when unsuccessful, tried to impede the loud sounds by diverting the child's attention. Next, he sought to divert the attention of bystanders, but had no success. Eventually he tried to reduce the suddenly increasing gulf of deeply felt emotions between his own self, the audience, and the small boy. Finally he sought any means available to halt the by now, cursed NOISE.

Nothing worked. Reaching the limit of human endurance comes quickly when the "id" of an unfamiliar and unhappy small child impinges on the daily complex reality of the "ego" of an average adult, especially one who is not typically involved in child care. In this specific case, the affinity supposedly existing between the adult and child were being severely tested by this little example of life's daily events.

And, the adult happened to be me! Moreover, I was not amused, for I did not know what to try next and felt myself reaching the dangerous end of an emotionally thin rope. Fortunately, in this drama that probably takes place in every

human community daily, third parties can and occasionally do, come to the proverbial rescue and intervene.

The Intervention

During one of those dragging days in a week of great tragedies, a friend saw the situation with the audience, child and myself, and then pulled me aside. She voluntarily and even eagerly said, "I will take the little one for a couple of hours!" She then added, "Then come by and have some sandwiches. You won't have to make lunch."

What a marvellous difference those few words and the promised actions made to me, and I am sure, to the child. My heart and soul instantly jumped from stressed out and near chronic panic to a peaceful vision of a quiet time for me with an honest chance to relax for a couple of hours. It would be the first time in nearly two weeks of child-caring that I would have the opportunity to stop for a rest.

And, how wonderful a gift she promised, a meal that I did not have to prepare for a by now ungrateful and unhappy child who would probably not bother to eat anything I fixed. Always talking about reducing stress, I, a teacher of others on techniques to reduce their stress, had bravely but perhaps foolishly agreed to watch over a three year old child for a week or two because the mother had to go to a hospital for emergency and major surgery. "Why, oh why, did I volunteer?" I asked myself again and again, as the first week wore on. In the situation, there was no way that I could not have volunteered, but even so, I questioned what I was doing, and why.

RESULTS

The two week long experience of being a voluntary full-time parent during a crisis situation made me realize what a magical moment is possible when a good friend appears to intervene. I appreciated the importance of the simple

opportunity to have personal space and quiet time. When one loses control over what had been secure space and time, goes with minimal sleep for many days, and in effect, works two or three jobs without respite, one can get very stressed indeed. In turn, the child recognized my stress and felt insecure as well. The two of us ended up caught in an emotional tangle. In this event, I found that even a couple of hours as a respite could and did restore sanity, enabling a stressed person to regain perspective, and thereby re-engage more effectively with what needed to be done. I became living proof, in addition to my utter and complete transformation in attitude towards parents who can and do manage three year old children. Yes, I was helping another person, but I appreciated the other friend who took two hours to relieve me when I could no longer cope.

After the two weeks, the mother was fortunately cured. After restoring the child to the now recovered mother, I wanted to rush about offering two hour respites to all parents in need. The familiar scenes of children fighting parents at grocery store check out lines, the exhaustion at the end of a day of coping with small children as felt by many parents, and the images and sounds of howls of a distressed baby in attendance at a meeting have altered forever. Once, I thought, how sad that the parent cannot manage, but now, I think, is there someone who might help for even a few minutes and thereby enable,

rather than disable?

CONCLUSION

Human ecology is the study of the fit or relationship between people and environments. In addition to study, practical intervention into situations is an applied science. Why don't more of us recognize the situations others endure? Why don't we notice those people who are for whatever reason, stressed beyond their limit? Why don't we intervene, perhaps by nothing more than saying, "I will listen," or as in my situation, by simply watching over a child for a couple of weeks, or hours. I admire and respect the unsung heroes of our day and age, the parents who manage their children effectively. But even more, I appreciate the volunteers who "see" the human needs throughout our communities, and who get involved to help and assist others. Minimal interventions, whether two weeks or two hours, can indeed be magical in effect and result!

KEY WORDS Intervention. Human Ecology. Space/Time. Community.

ABSTRACT Small scale intervention in life situations of humans can make major differences in their well-being and happiness. Using the dimensions of space and time, a practical effort to offer respite care for a stressed individual, enabled that person to cope far better in what was an adverse situation. More such interventions might make human communities far more pleasant for many people. Human ecology as a framework for thinking about the human conditions offers a guideline to such interventions.

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