

# AN “ALTERN- ATIVE LIFE STYLE” FOR CHILD CARING AGENCIES

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The term “alternative life style” is open to many interpretations. Therefore some clarity in the use of the term is essential to avoid the confusions which always seem to accompany its appearance; and particularly when it is related to Child Care Agencies.

In what follows the term “Life Style” will refer not to a particular expression or organised form of social activity, such as a Commune, so much as to a basic philosophical affirmation of the **human** dimensions of social being over against the technological or scientific description of human existence which, out of a concern for the “thing-in-itself”, eclipses the personal and existential dimensions of the person as an acting subject. Ernest Toennis first made the distinction between **Society** as that objective rationalised creation of technical reason, dominated by efficiency and concern for planning and structural orthodoxy, and **community**, a social network of human beings who by intimacy of contact and shared history live out of a collective memory, sustained by stories and myths of identity which give weight and meaning to the present. The argument of this article is that child care agencies have become dominated by the first, the assumptions of **SOCIETY**, when their proper concern is not “Social Planning” so much as the maintenance of “Community”.

What seems to underlie the present protest concerning social priorities and an accompanying move to an “alternative life style” is a recognition that **Society**, the product of human ingenuity and technology is threatening at its roots the sources of **Community**, the crucibles within which individuals are nurtured, sustained and legitimised as worthy. It is this deep current which gives birth to the particular and distinct forms of “alternative life styles” we see emerging, and in its general value-orientation the alternative point of view raises a question concerning the theory and practice of child and family welfare. In the end society and community are indispensable each to the other. But the full force of the protest will be voiced here without qualification

as a stimulus to debate; it may die the death of a thousand qualifications at another time, and in other places.

## Identifying the Enemy: Institutionalism and Professionalism

There is a current dilemma for people involved in the so-called helping professions which, on the face of it, seems disabling. It is the growing realisation that the institutionalised forms of caring for those at risk in our society are counter-productive to their stated aims.

A recent court-case in Melbourne over a child beaten to death by the mother and the mother's de facto husband revealed that the adults were the products of child-care institutions. A film such as “One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest” graphically portrays what we know to be true of many institutions caring for the mentally ill and retarded in Australia. Professionals working within the Prison and Social Welfare Institutions report that it is in such environments that the first offender learns to sharpen his anti-social attitudes and develop the skills of criminality.

The general case for the negative consequences of institutionalisation has been forcibly argued by Ivan Illich in relation to the fields of education and medicine. Social welfare in general and child care in particular are not exempt from this criticism. There is a recognition growing within all these areas that the three hags of modernity, industrialisation, urbanisation and bureaucratisation, stir a brew of toil and trouble for those working in the field of social welfare **within the very environments established to avoid such anti-social consequences.**

The Problem is compounded by the growth of “professional mystification”, the myth that professionals are the only ones with the knowledge and the skills to deal with the problems that are thrown up by our complex, sophisticated environments. Militant unions that, for the best of all possible reasons, fight for professional standards are also the protectors of vested interests and established privilege. As John Holt writes in **Escape from Childhood**, “it is important to try

and understand how the idea of help has been so largely corrupted and turned into a destructive exploitation, how the human act of helping is turned more and more into a commodity, an industry, a monopoly" (p. 61). It is impossible for most professionals to believe that people can get along without the help of the helper, that most people left in a supportive and concerned environment recover at much the same rate as those committed to institutionalised or professional care.

Part of the problem so defined, Holt argues, is due to an exercise of tyranny by professional helpers who, in order to exercise highly developed skills, become involved in a conspiracy (unwitting in most cases) to create the helplessness upon which such skills can be exercised. The need lies in the helper as much if not more than the one who is helped. Charles Mercer in *New Society* (Jan. 1976) makes ironic comment on the miner in the 1930's in the Welsh valleys, who with one bedroom for his family of seven, only realised he had a housing problem when he was told so by the middle class investigators into housing conditions of the working class. Having been told, he (the Welsh miner) could now say, "I have a housing problem, seven of us have to sleep in the same bedroom".

Another such illustration is the story of the library programme in an inner-city suburb in Melbourne to read stories to children after school. When the numbers increased some mothers, overjoyed that their children were showing an interest in reading, offered their services. They were politely refused on the grounds that only a trained librarian can read stories to children! Such extreme illustrations serve to underline the dilemma.

The complexity of institutional forms of care, reinforced by a negative form of professional status-seeking leads inescapably to a problem of flexibility. As numbers increase and costs escalate, quality of care reduces. It is an act of blindness not to recognise that the present systems of care are proving inadequate not only because they are not sufficiently adaptive but because they are reflective of a total

societal malaise, a crippling incapacity of arrest dehumanising processes that increasingly reduce average citizens to a state of inner helplessness. To cry for more money to overcome this situation is to avoid the central issue. The problem is not lack of funds but lack of an awareness as to where a solution lies, to the growing sense of impersonality as our population increases and daily life becomes more complex.

### RIECH

Reich in *The Greening of America* sees much of this malaise as reflection of the destruction of "Community", under the assault of technological reason, a process hastened by consumer-oriented advertising that has reduced families and collectives to individual parts because it is the isolated unit that is most susceptible to consumer seduction. The interactions between people become remote, the family has no work, no life to share together. The TV becomes the most popular form of child minding and both in content and style the problem of isolation and fragmentation increases.

The Welfare Agencies are involved here as much because of their success and visibility as for any other reason. Magistrates refer children at risk to an appropriate institution or agency for want of any alternative. But often in that decision the subtle membrane of belonging, an inner sense of life-space, is ignored and ruptured. Again efficient processes, apparently unavoidable, breed impersonality. What is demonstrated again and again in this process is a general social incapacity to tackle the problem at its root, the pervasive disintegration of voluntary communal centres of belonging.

### SCALE, PLANNING, POWER

It is against this background that the move for alternative life styles has come. The thrust of the movement is towards reducing in scale interactive networks so that some intimate communal experience is possible. It is not primarily a protest against people's intentions as much

as a conviction that the injustice of social institutionalism emerges out of our system of civilisation and its cultural embodiments. The average person or family is denied personal participation of a significant kind, and yet forced often to respond to manufactured social environments.

### THREE CONSEQUENCES

The protest therefore is directed against three consequences of modern social planning: scale, organisation, and power.

- 1 Clearly as the scale of operation increases the possibility of intimate personal contact reduces. In an attempt to recover a creative human scale alternative life styles seek to embody a secure, small circle of people directed to keeping a warm habitat of reference for its members.
- 2 Secondly in reaction against the confining forms of social planning with its complexity and overlap of services, and with its inescapable bureaucratic accompaniments they have sought for a definition of community which is not contrived or structured by external forces. It is a movement in part dedicated to "anti-structure", which stated positively means autonomy of thought and action, control of decision-making and self-employment of community life space.
- 3 In the third area of power, which in Weber's terms is the capacity to actualise your will over the will of others, the resistance is to socialmachinery which coerces people's responses and limits their right to free choice, however unwise or ill chosen that choice may be. Therefore the argument goes, it is essential to create social units of manageable size, and within and autonomous environment such as to the accompanying dimensions of love and justice.

### SMALL IS BEAUTIFUL

The recognition that only a genuinely human habitat can nurture human beings, and that small is beautiful, has led to a flowering of neighborhood and family cluster-

ings of an inter-generational kind. Much of the motivation emerges from a feeling of anxiety about the stability and health of the family unit. But it is much more than that. Health, in the total sense, is rather the gift of a supportive network of people who recognise the uniqueness of each member of their primary reference group. To the degree that neighborhoods exist in this extended sense and where the subtle membrane of "community" remains intact then there are resources within the hands of ordinary people-in-community to do much of that "cure of souls" which has become, under the impact of welfare history and professional mythology, the exclusive province of Care agencies. If it is true that all of life hangs on the thin thread of

families within familiar neighborhoods oriented to receiving individuals into their shared life as part of their normal expectations? Without the weight of professional expertise and multitudinous other responsibilities, such groups could more readily spend time and take responsibility for those included in its circle.

As a consequence those committed to community health would find their task re-defined. The task would be that of encouraging extended family groupings as an alternative to institutionalised care whether day centres, family welfare or residency programmes. In other times "tribal" responsibility has provided the genuinely therapeutic centre for most people who ad-

find ourselves significantly affirmed. That is the argument that underlies the move to alternative Life-Styles. In the end, however we may dislike it, the case seems unanswerable.

Whether we have the will or the capacity to fashion creative alternatives is the question that remains. It seems from the perspective we have been considering Welfare Agencies the most critical question of all. Child care programmes have not moved far enough. In the last decade we have seen a move from the focus on the child to a concern for the family unit. That movement now points further, . . . to the family-in-community and to the creation of familial communities. The next step needs to be taken.

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## “The cure of souls and professional Mythology”

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conversation as Peter Berger claims, then an intimate social environment in which a nomic conversation is possible, a conversation that creates, reinforces and assures identity, needs to be a prime focus of the action of concerned human beings of any religious, political or social persuasion.

Such a value stance requires an accompanying mode of operation which is directed not to a further atomisation of the units of social commerce, divided by such variables as age, sex, status or education, but rather the recovery of an organic sense of community sufficiently open to embrace within its warmth all those who by circumstance or need fall within its care.

### The Alternative: Realistic or Idealistic?

From this perspective some implications for child care services can be drawn.

Firstly why should those regarded by the police, courts or medical services as being either culpable or at risk be referred **as a matter of course** to institutional forms or care? Is it not possible to have de-centralised units, such as small circles of

justed, as the community absorbed their hunt and pain, readily, creatively and permanently. Why not now?

If this "counter-culture" proposal seems naive, idealistic and unrealistic, the problem may be not that it is so but that our educational support-systems and professional hubris has lead us to conclude that it is so. The structural fundamentalism which afflicts us all leads us to distrust the healing processes resident within an open gathering of average human beings. To the degree that psycho-social environment is taken seriously, in the end we must trust it to do what our ventures in care never do, support the individual's growth into wholeness for the majority of his life. In the end if there is no essential community which gives life to the people of a particular culture, the social structures will never prove an adequate substitute. However efficient, co-ordinated, de-regionalised or available services may be, in the end they fall helpless if there are not voluntary associations of people, living out of an affirmative view of human life who provide the continuing network of contact in which we

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