

“Playing Chess Without Prejudice”

Lenhardt Stevens (2015)

*The names of the young men with whom I worked have been changed to protect their identity, even though they should be able to recognize themselves with my descriptions. The staff, however, have been given the names of Greek gods, because that is the company they keep.*

In a facility close to where you live, yet far enough away that you will never need to think about it, there are about twenty-some young men who are under the care of four (give or take one) adults. They are in a room where there is a television set that is not connected to cable, nor is it connected to the internet, even though on some nights, when the staff are feeling particularly charitable with their energy, a documentary from the web is played in order to offer something of educational value to their day. Once, we explored the possibility of a multiverse with several prominent string theorists. Telling criminals there are infinite possibilities that create an infinite number of dimensions gives them a feeling of freedom, albeit spiritual and somewhat disconnected.

It is nearly three thirty, and I await the transition to move the boys outside in order to expunge some of the energy they have. Much like a dog that is been inside all day, if you do not take a young man outside, he will ruin the furniture. The energy bottled up in their wiry frames is mostly nervous, a combination of insecure feelings towards one another, adults whose trust had been broken, and their present circumstance, which is to say none of them feel that the facility is a place where they can let their guards down. Given most of the backgrounds of these youth, it is a reasonable assumption to make that their safety is always in a precarious place. Most of them have been in a fight, even if the punches thrown did not land with the same accuracy as a hook from Mayweather. Some of them were jumped into gangs, meaning they were beat mercilessly until they could demonstrate to gang members that they could handle the violence. I wonder how many of them wanted to cry and told themselves not to, a natural inclination to have as your rib cage receives a blunt kick from someone whom you are meant to trust. But trust is a funny thing. I can trust you are not going to steal my laptop when you come over for tea. I can also trust you are going to violently accost someone who wronged me from the day before. In the first case, you earn trust by repeatedly demonstrating that you are someone who either does not steal or does not steal from people who they care about. In the second case, you demonstrate that you are going to come through with the violent deed because I have seen you violent before. There are ways to demonstrate that you are violent, but you show someone you are serious about it if you can harm those you are meant to protect. I know this sounds at best like a conflict of interest, and at worst it is plain absurd, but when you have credibility on the line, there is no time to waste considering the reasons too carefully. It is the way it is done, and it is the way it will continue to be done.

Dialectical Behavioral Therapy (DBT) is a treatment program designed to teach the boys skills in how they are to respond to emotional distressing thoughts, events, and situations. Some of you may be familiar with Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), especially those of you who have sought clinical support for your depression, obsessive-compulsive disorder, or anxiety. I will not give a detailed explanation of what DBT (or CBT for that matter) is, but I will tell you that DBT is far more interested in how we do rather than how we think, which is what distinguishes it from CBT sessions. DBT was something I would teach alongside of Aphrodite, who would send me text messages on ideas she had implemented the day before in her class. Some of her ideas involved drawing pictures and making up stories to go along with the pictures of animals demonstrating appropriate applications of their DBT skills, like a squirrel who was able to leave a distressing situation without inflicting further damage, or a porcupine who was able to tell someone what they wanted from them without using threatening language. With kids having a past of assault or other forms of abuse, they can get quite nervous and shift around people who they feel they need to begin to trust, thus making it imperative in their treatment that they find a new way to communicate with people that often feels very artificial at first and slowly becomes more natural in time. Conversations to get snacks at a time in which snacks are not being served must look particularly curious to outsiders.

“I want to tell you that I would like a cracker right now.”

“Why do you want the cracker?”

“Because I did not eat breakfast this morning, and I am still very hungry.”

“You are aware that right now is not snack time and it is not convenient for me to get you a snack?”

“Yes, but I feel that if I am given a snack I will be able to get through the day much easier, and I do not feel this will become a recurring situation.” Or something to this effect.

When I had my back to the class of nine (or so) DBT students, they would blow spit wads at each other and attempt to instigate fights. The irony.

Before dinner, I played chess with the one of two black clients, named Jürgen. He let me play as white, which made me want to make a comment about our respective chess colors relative to our ethnicities, but with these kids (and as much as they would hate to admit it sometimes; they are kids) it was important to keep off-color jokes - no pun intended - to a minimum, if not to eliminate them entirely from the picture. I opened with pawn from D2 to D4. He responded with the Alekhine Defense; knight G8 to F6. It would prove to be a strong enough move, and eventually led to my undoing for the remainder of the match. Jürgen made sure, on the basketball court as well as on the chessboard, that his opponent would understand the total nature of their defeat. He moved quickly, nimbly, taking pieces with the intention of taking two more before the exchange was complete. Son of a bitch. “You didn't have a chance,” Jürgen boasted. “Not a chance.”

One day, Randy became irate from a quarrel he had with another client over the pool table. Randy went into the office with Aphrodite, where she began to shower him with rays of

unconditional support and understanding. This did not take with Randy, and he only became more upset. He took the pool cue, which he had brought with him into the office, and snapped it across his knee in a fit of rage. Aphrodite, unphased, told him that everything was going to be alright. Let's spend a portion of this essay trying to understand what people mean when they assure someone who is undergoing a particularly difficult moment that everything is going to be alright. Now, on the one hand, everything was not going to alright. In fact, it would be safe to say things were going to get significantly worse for Randy. With this latest act of unchecked anger, the breaking of the pool stick and turning it into a weapon, Randy was headed back to juvenile detention. Jail for children is a languishing affair. Unlike the structured schedule of a residential treatment facility, in detention youth can be expected to spend the majority of their day in their own heads without any adult guidance to get them through feelings they might be having. They will most likely receive up to fifteen hours of sleep a day, spending the majority of their time in a cell where they will read books and write letters to "girlfriends" (do the girls know they are girlfriends, I wondered sometimes), their guardians, or their friends. I have heard from several former clients that this was some of the best time they had spent since their arrest. I have a hard time believing them for a number of reasons. Firstly, the books they are reading are almost exclusively used for their escapist value. While there is nothing inherently wrong with a touch of escapism, when it becomes a sole preoccupation you may forget how to interact and confront your present circumstance. Secondly, sleeping is used a form of escape that should be minimized. I can remember days at the facility when we agreed to have a nap in the middle of the day in their dormitory, the only place clients are allowed to sleep. Waking up these youngsters from nap time was much like rousing a fatigued hyena in the Serengeti. Their sleeping is a way of their coping without confronting issues that remain unchecked while they are in detention. Therapy is hard; you must do the therapy. When you arrive in detention, you are issued the government provided clothing and items that you will be using throughout your stay. The company who makes most of the items, ranging from slip-on slippers that are not designed to fit you well but suffice for the purposes of keeping your feet away from the gangrenous mildew on the shower floor, is called Bob Barker, like the former show host of America's favorite midday television program the *Price is Right*. At the facility, we used the same slippers, and the youth would become overjoyed after seeing a pair. Continuity, even between trying chapters, can give a person a lot of comfort.

Poseidon had a large beard and was the eldest of the staff. As I am writing this, Poseidon will have left this particular treatment facility and returned to a former troubled youth center in a major city. There he will perform much of the same tasks he was asked to while at the facility, but his duties of using a tractor to mow the facility's lawn will be sorely missing. On some days in the summertime, you could hear a vintage tractor starting up from where you were doing paperwork inside the office. And if you peered out the window at that time, you would see Poseidon sitting atop the tractor with his sunglasses on, making sweeping circles in the grass, his wheels occasionally sinking a few extra inches into the dirt that cannot support the weight of his

tractor. Routine and the steady repeating of activities is something residential treatment is predicated upon. "Predictability inspires reliability," said Poseidon to me once, "and reliability inspires safety." In that case, Poseidon reliably riding the tractor every week gave a lot of us a feeling of safety. Grass will need to be mowed, and someone will be there to do it. I feel a real sense of loss knowing that Poseidon is no longer mowing the grass on the field. He did his task very well, and in a place where things are mostly done poorly, a well-maintained lawn can be the difference between giving up and trying to be consistent with the rest of your surroundings, in this case, well-maintained fields.

Up at the other division of the facility there are youth who have not yet been adjudicated of their crime. They await court dates and cannot, by order of their Probation Officers, mingle with the clients who have been admitted into residential treatment. They occupy a dreaded limbo between a convicted criminal and someone who is accused of breaking the law. They sit in a small house, closed off from the residential program, and wait to play Xbox, filling their time with bracelet making or lifting weights in their amply supplied weight room. Here we must constantly remind the clients that because they have not been to trial yet, they should not discuss the nature of their crimes with the staff, else they require a subpoena to the staff member who was told sensitive information.

No matter how often you visit the topic with therapists, the extent of some of these boys' violent behavior can cause significant distress in a youth worker trying to maintain an even-handed air. As you develop bonds with these young men, you must practice a fair amount of forgiveness on the behalf of their victims when you engage in normal conversation. Before you join the throws of people who believe these boys should be locked up with the key thrown away, I cannot stress enough how scared these boys really are. They are self-harming, suicide ideation prone, and self-loathing adolescents. Before you try to hurt them, know how much they hurt.

Peter had raped his younger sister for a period of about three years when his parents discovered them. His mother would come into our facility with her mascara smeared and a slight expression of fear on her face. He would pick up her son to take him to a church service that the rest of his family attended. Everyday that she would come through our doors, I would say hello and send Peter on his way. Somehow, that family will welcome their boy back into their household. Someday, Peter will be able to live with what he did and, with hope, he will be able to find a woman he loves and treat her decently and gently, and they will make love without worry or feeling wrong. For all of the Sex Offenders I worked with, I wish them nothing but the most honest joy that consensual sex can bring. For all of their victims, I wish them same, but several times over.

There is a quilt whose dimensions are roughly five by six feet at the facility where everyone has a cutout of their hand adhered to its surface. The quilt was donated by a group of old women from a church down the road. The hands had a goal for each of the clients and the staff who also placed a hand on the quilt. Some previous goals include, "Lose Weight," and "Go

home,” and “Stop doing drugs.” Some of the youth I worked with once they left the program will return to a similar program only weeks after their departure. Sometimes, we give boys back to a house where they committed their first offense and repeat offend because they associate with the people who got them their to begin with. It is hard to assign blame.

Aphrodite became the sole teacher of their Dialectical Behavioral Therapy after I left. From what I heard, Erik thinks that Aphrodite is a better teacher of DBT than I ever was, although I am suspicious of what motivated Erik to tell Aphrodite that. You see, people will praise their gods when they believe it will curry better favor, a habit I can hardly fault them for, because it may lead to the gods showering them with popsicles or graham crackers. I desperately wanted to keep teaching the boys philosophy after I had left the facility. You see, I furtively started a society in which we read Platonic dialogues and talked about the Good. The hoodlums were interested in being right, both in the sense of knowing the *right* things, and in the sense of acting in the *right* way. It was never made evident to me that I had accomplished either of those things after I left the facility.