

Days of Hope

*Passionately communicating the love of God
to hurting kids in a gentle way*

A Glimpse of the Kingdom By Jon Wells

Why don't they want to go home? Why aren't they more motivated to get back to a normal life?

Turns out, many of them don't know what 'normal life' is.

"I was only there for a few weeks. I ended up running away. The judge should have known better, everybody knew it wasn't going to work out. She is on drugs and I can't be around that stuff. That was never going to work, I don't know why they sent me home."

I was sitting on the floor catching up with a young man I have not seen for a couple of years. We first met during a stint at a different facility, and now he had made an appearance at another. In intervening years he had bounced through a couple of programs and foster homes before the state decided to send him home.

"I love my mom but I am never going to make that work until she gets clean."

It turns out that his father has recently been released from prison, and is doing well.

"He has a job, and a wife, and kids. He is going straight, and he said if I stop actin' up I can maybe live with him."

In the early years at Days of Hope I worked with youth in St. James almost exclusively. Now that we are serving in multiple facilities, I am experiencing firsthand how there is a whole population of youth

that simply float from one program to the next. These kids see it clearly, because they know each other from the countless previous placements. There is an army of children who are spending their entire childhood this way; literally growing up in residential.

I used to wonder why they were so satisfied with the miseries of residential life. I would ask myself, *why don't they want to go home? Why aren't they more motivated to get back to a normal life?* Turns out, many of them don't know what 'normal life' is.

I have made a point of checking in with this young man every time I visit his current placement. His story is typical: Conflicts with peers, physical aggression with those who step up to him, oppositional responses to the staff, refusal to comply with simple things like schoolwork or group processing. It is amazing how little intervention it takes to redirect his intentions.

On our first encounter I challenged him, "You could get your levels and walk out of this place if you wanted to, you just don't care."

"Yeah, you're right- I could be a level one if I tried."

"How soon?" I asked.

"When you coming back?"

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"Wednesday."

"Stop by, you will see." He responded confidently.

Come Wednesday, he was off his restrictions and had achieved his level one status.

Now every time I see him I get a report. To be sure, not every report is perfect. He still has his stumbles, but for weeks now he has been making measurable improvements. When we talk I challenge him to take his eyes off of the kids around him and focus on bigger goals. *Stop playing king of the hill. What is the next step? Is this the life that he wants for himself?*

Throughout our encounters one single verse has defined his path.

Without a vision, the people perish. Proverbs 29:18

If he only knew how liberating life would be if he could indeed get his act together. The simple joy of having his own bedroom, the basic everyday freedoms that we all take for granted. But he has no such vision to inspire him to transcend this place. He can't even imagine such a promised land. The only reality he has ever known has been much more restrictive.

It is amazing how disabling hopelessness can be. Without a reason to move forward, so many of these youth settle for petty games and stupid choices. Why not? There's nothing else to move towards in their limited line of sight.

It leads me to wonder what unimagined freedom I am missing out on. What vision do I need to catch to inspire me to move towards a better place? What promised land would I be trekking towards if I could only catch a glimpse of it?

Perhaps if I had a solid grasp on what it is like to live every day healthy and fit, I would be willing to pay the price to get there. Perhaps if I really understood the unique oneness that God intends for my marriage, I would strive to live out deeper intimacy in my own marriage, rather than settle for the status quo.

What about you? What are you missing out on? We only move towards those things we see.

God help us to catch a glimpse of the Kingdom, a vision for something better, something worth moving towards!

It is certainly true that the youth we serve are victims of abuse. Every story is unique, but as a group, these kids have suffered every form of mistreatment you can imagine, and some that you can't. As I walk through facilities every week, the youth I encounter all have a long, sad story to tell. They are certainly victims.

But it is also true that every one of these young people have made choices of their own. They are exhibiting behavior that makes it impossible for them to function in a foster home, in a school district, in a community. They're sometimes aggressive and violent. They are sometimes suicidal. They engage in substance-abuse, high-risk sexual activity, and many of them become abusive towards others.

As I talk to people about the youth we serve, folks generally react in one of two ways. Some respond with bleeding hearts, insisting that these kids simply need love and recovery from a painful childhood. Others respond like drill sergeants, insisting that these juvenile delinquents are a danger to society and need to learn some discipline. Where you land on this issue largely depends on whether you see a victim, or a perpetrator. Is this kid simply suffering the fallout from years of pain or is he just a neighborhood bully who is breaking into houses and threatening other kids? In this case, I don't believe that the truth lies somewhere in between. I believe both sides of that coin are absolutely true.

And while the history of abuse is the ugly cause that drives all of these destructive behaviors, it is the behavior itself that keeps these kids in residential care.

In more than a decade of working in the setting, I have never heard anyone say, "Well, you had a lot of bad stuff happen to you a long time ago. You're gonna have to stay here for a few years."

But every week I see how behavior drives the need for treatment. As long as a young lady insists on carving up her own flesh, as long as a young man rises up violently to attack staff or other kids, as long as the perpetration continues, as long as the behavior persists, these youth are stuck in some sort of treatment.

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Stewardship Corner

This past month brought added annual office costs. Our expenses in February exceeded our donations by about \$600. We appreciate the faithful giving of those of you who are partnering with us to send Chaplains into facilities!

Questions Kids Ask

By Aaron Jeffers

“Why’s life gotta be so scary??”

“Hey. Sit up here on the couch.” I said.

“He can’t Pastor Aaron.” Then it hits me. This kid always smelled like poop. That’s why every time I went into this cottage the kid would keep asking me questions so that I’d sit by him on the floor. Great kid, but he was just always so scared to go to a bathroom, he’d just let loose in his pants.

At another cottage there’s a kid that can’t keep his hands off of anybody. He just thinks he has to cross boundaries to feel a sense of normalcy. You hear an echo of two or three kids yell in synchronicity, “Hey, stop touching them! You’re crossing their boundaries!

Here’s one I still can’t believe is so rampant; kids carving themselves up with sharp objects. I remember the first time I spoke with a girl who was self harming; she had a cut every sixteenth of an inch from the line of the shorts down to the knee around half the circumference of the leg.

Jon always told me that brokenness has a path. So does fear. Every story is unique. One kid poops his pants as a mechanism to ward off someone abusing him. Another can’t keep his hands off you because he was severely sexually abused. Any sense of power and dignity that he had was lost, and the message is placed; *You are not valued unless you are touched*. So out of fear of loss or for self-worth and value, he crosses other people’s boundaries. Perhaps they’ll cross his boundaries and make him feel valuable again. Another child cuts herself because she is horrified by the numbness. She lives in a prison of loneliness and sadness from the overwhelming waves of emotions.

In the face of all this, I encounter a simple question.

“Maybe I’m wrong, but I can’t believe God authored the pain, suffering, and horrific tragedies that happen on a daily basis.” The question is voiced by a good friend who used to serve as a chaplain with these youth. I’m not sure if he is asking for himself or on behalf of these kids.

I believe those things are caused by man’s abuse of authority and freewill. I do know this for sure, “The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit.” (Psalm 34:8).

Have you ever watched or read *Lord of the Rings*? Perhaps like me you have found yourself asking, ‘Why didn’t one of those eagles just carry Frodo from the Shire to Mt. Mordor so he could just toss the ring into the fire and just be done with it? Then Frodo wouldn’t have to have gone through all those scary things.’ Why isn’t there immediate rescue?

I believe that our hearts need the journey. We need to see Samwise pick up Frodo and carry him up the mountain. We need to see that the power of friendship, fellowship, and love trump all fears. I don’t believe God ever wanted any of his children to experience living in fear, but I know he’s relentlessly committed to releasing us from the power of fear and carrying us up the mountain of God. 1 John 4:18, “There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love.”



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We are currently scheduling speaking engagements for the spring and summer. If you are interested in inviting one of our chaplains to come and share with your church, class, or community group, let us know!

Friendly Fire continued . . .

In February I was giving a Bible to a young man in an isolation room. When I got ready to highlight a verse for him, I was surprised by the passage that came to mind. “It is hard for you to kick against the goads.”

The scripture is derived from the Acts 26, as the apostle Paul relates the story of his own conversion on the road to Damascus. He shares how Jesus spoke to him, asking ‘why are you persecuting me?’ Then he adds one more sentence, a detail not included in earlier accounts. Jesus gives voice to a simple observation, and His compassion is evident in the phrase:

“It is hard for you to kick against the goads.”

The concept is a perfect illustration of Paul’s misdirected life. An ox goad is a sharp metal point, mounted on a pole, generally used to motivate stubborn animals to comply with their masters. And those particularly stubborn oxen energetic enough to try and kick back against the sharp point of an ox goad will simply receive a bruised foot for their trouble.

Like Paul, so many of the youth we serve find themselves in a predicament of their own making. Notwithstanding the abuse that started them out on this painful path, they too are ‘kicking against the goads.’ It is the ultimate version of friendly fire, casualties suffered as a result of their own actions. Without intervention, many of these kids are heading towards bigger and bigger consequences. High school dropouts. Single parents. Lifelong poverty. Incarceration. Substance abuse. Another generation of domestic violence. These are the sharp points that our youth are encountering as they continue down this difficult road. And they are bound to continue to suffer from self-inflicted pain until they see the light and make a change.

Please pray for these kids as we endeavor to share with them the possibility of something better.

It truly is hard to kick the goads.

