

Extracts from "Behind Closed Doors" by Polly Curtis Part Four: Is There Another Way?

[Two Wishes editor's added notes are in square brackets]

Relational activism and radical tenderness.

... **Nigel Richardson** led children's services in Leeds from 2010 to 2016 during the time the previously failing service was turned around. "The fundamental proposition is about family: family is the way we do business," he says. "But what family means is different to different people. You need to think creatively about it. If the state intervening in the life of a family is a last resort, as the legislation around the Children Act makes absolutely clear it's fundamentally about children being best served by being brought up in their family networks. **Family is the most important, but the most forgotten utility of the twenty-first century.**"

[Nigel Richardson continues] It's about choices of where to put your efforts. "Absolutely there are children who would benefit from the adoption process, but we don't put the same resources into family networks. We talk about fostering and adoption and it has a warm feeling about it. But actually it's stranger care. **If anything happened to my kids as they were growing up, what would I want to happen? I would want an exhaustive look at our family network in all its guises, people that the kids knew. I would not want strangers. Yet that's what we do.**" He describes a scenario where a child is at risk of going into care and how they look for a family member to step in and take the children instead of going to a stranger - even if that family member is in another country, or is not family by blood. ...

[Main best practice to achieve this is Family Group Conferencing, successfully used in Leeds.]

[In New York, campaigns have slowly reduced numbers of children taken into care. But it seems very family court based. Plus family care is highly surveilled, so that it is more like supervision than felt support.

Plus it can be over-zealous (helpfully perhaps) or even gamed by people who want to cause trouble.]

... **Bailey Burger** is Assistant Commissioner with the \$330m annual budget responsible for the recent huge expansion of prevention services in New York. Her strategy is rigorously evidence-based, trying to situate services via the agencies that deliver them, as close as possible to the communities they serve ... **"If you're asking what we prevent, [1] it's increased incidence of child abuse and neglect, it's [2] worse harm to children, and it's [3] removal of children," she says.** Four out of five families complete the programmes they start. Of those, only one in thirty-eight families have another child welfare investigation within six months. For those who enrol but do not complete preventive services, one out of seven have a repeat, substantiated investigation within six months. ...

... The social worker system is a plaster on the self-inflicted wounds caused by poverty, inequality,, prejudice and isolation. Social workers are sent out to undo layers of dysfunction so far outside of their control, and without the tools they need. The prism of family separation and how the state goes about it reveals a decay that goes well beyond a narrow part of the state designed to support families and extends to every part of society. In England it needs a radical intervention but **there's a lack of will because of how invisible this process is, cloaked by secrecy but also masked by marginalisation.** ...

... The system has been allowed to drift under a blame culture that corrupts its own processes, and free from scrutiny because the victims at the heart of this story are not only poor, marginalised and voiceless but are also the perpetrators of the biggest crime in society's eyes: poor parenting. This is behind closed doors because we don't want to see it; it's too painful an indictment on our society. This system, that 'others' and marginalises the families within it, does us all a disservice. **We're all on the 'good enough' parenting spectrum. This isn't happening to other people; it's happening to us. This isn't the fault of social services, or the courts or other authorities; it's our collective responsibility.**

Because looking after the most vulnerable children is what a society does.

A thought experiment

p258 ... **To build a better way of doing social work, maybe we have to start again.** ... [Includes a comprehensive summary of the many complex (and contradictory) multiple factors that would improve the (downstream) system. She suggests re-setting social work into two separate sections: community support officers and child protection officers.]

... We tell ourselves that there are solutions to these problems. But there are no happy endings, every story I heard was about loss that stemmed from a broken family. **Pretending they can be 'fixed', that children can be rescued from their own parents, denies the complexities of the human relationship and the profound need for love and belonging that they are built on.** This is the paradox: that love and abuse are intertwined in the lives of everyone in these stories, and so often in their parents' lives and in their parents' parents' lives, too. Of course there are children removed for good cause from emotionally, physically or sexually abusive or neglectful parents, and there are stories of children's lives made a little better, or a little less worse, giving them a chance. But **simplistic 'rescue' narratives seldom tell the whole story: separating children from their families always has some fallout.**

... We've cut the early intervention and universal services that can help families thrive, and we haven't worked hard enough to establish ones that are proven to work. So **we are getting to children too late, leaving them in terrible circumstances, then 'fixing' the problem by separating them from parents who, despite everything, they still love.**

... The courts are now pushing back, demanding that more is done to help families before they are taken to court. **As soon as that 'conveyor belt to care' that the Chief Social Worker Isabelle Trowler denounced has been switched on, relationships break down. Once in the courts,**

the adversarial nature of the system makes it harder for families to work their way out.

... Children love their flawed, broken and sometimes useless parents. You punish children when you remove them, pushing them into a shameful and 'secretive' world of foster care. **Blame and judgement percolate through the whole system.** Courts blame the social workers for being ill-prepared for hearings. The child protection social workers blame the referral team for slow responses. National politicians blame local politicians for poor practice on the ground. We all blame the parents. Mothers shoulder disproportionate amounts of responsibility: dads are allowed - and even encouraged to disappear. The guilt and blame also extends to the very people the system is designed to protect. **Children feel it. They see the impact of a separation on their parents, they understand themselves to be the cause of it. It is a crushing, painful outcome.** The prism shows us not broken families, but a broken society. Is there another way? ...

... Throughout the writing of this book the idea that emerged was of vulnerable families punished for their perceived failings, whereas in fact many of those [family failings] are the structural things they can't control; poverty, geography,, isolation, race, ableism and gender inequality all play a part. Rather than fixing a housing issue, we remove a child. ...

... the political barriers to these ideas [difficult combination of simple pragmatic solutions, family focus, radical tenderness, trauma aware, skilful workers, challenging families to change] rest on the left-right dichotomy over the duty of the state to support versus personal responsibility to change. I saw the effects in some of the cases I reported on: the dependent relationship between social workers, services and families rather than a mature relationship-based model where support workers can challenge families to improve. I don't think there's a golden age we should return to - even when the system had enough money, it was not evidence driven. ...

... Social workers can't be expected to fix or make up for the underlying problems in society ... To fix this, we need to nurture a stronger society. A stronger society means less poverty, less isolation and stronger social networks. It means more understanding, and realising that simply cancelling men, for example, doesn't fix anything. It would understand that the saviour narrative of rescuing children from broken homes doesn't account for the love lost. It just stores up future traumas.

Author's note

[Polly Curtis describes how she, a journalist, was resourced for months to research the one topic. She was set up to do months of 'slow-news' reporting by Tortoise editor, James Harding (ex The Times)]

The resources to do this reporting challenged the need to clean up those difficult contradictory narratives for easier consumption. It's in those contradictions that the real story lies. ... Our narratives often demand perfect victims - entirely blameless people who are sympathetic casualties of circumstances. That's a limitation on the truth because the truth is always messier and more complex. **Just like there are no real 'baddies', there are no pure 'goodies'. Our rush to judgement and to put people in boxes eats away at what makes this story so fascinating** - the interplay between people and society and where our responsibilities begin and end.