

## SMART COMPASSION: WHY WE MUST INVEST IN ATTACHMENT COMMUNITIES

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### Introduction

In 2004, The Commission on Children at Risk (a collaboration between the YMCA, Dartmouth Medical School, and the Institute for American Values) issued a report about at-risk youth by some of the nation's top specialists in a number of fields. Entitled *Hardwired to Connect: the New Scientific Case for Authoritative Communities*, the report identifies the growing crisis of American children who have significant problems with depression and anxiety, suicide attempts, substance abuse and acute physical ailments. They argue that disconnection from other people, as well as from moral and spiritual meaning, have caused a virtual epidemic of behavioral and emotional problems. Their research concludes that the response to our children's most pressing needs should be the formation of "Authoritative Communities"—social institutions that provide long-term support and healthy attachments for children who otherwise lack them.

Long before these researchers embarked upon this project, the founders of Sunset Youth Services, a grassroots non-profit organization in San Francisco, CA, had formed their own Authoritative Community. Since 1991, Sunset Youth Services has fostered long-term stability and growth for in-risk youth<sup>1</sup> and families through caring relationships and supportive services. *Hardwired to Connect* not only verified Sunset Youth Services' innovative relationship-based approach through scientific research, but has also helped provide the language and theoretical underpinnings for its work. Whereas *Hardwired to Connect* presented theory and ideals, the purpose of this paper is to describe an Authoritative Community in practice. Written by long-time practitioners in the field of youth development, this paper provides a real-world model of what we have renamed an *Attachment Community*.

In this paper, we discuss the characteristics of the Sunset Youth Services attachment community in order to call for greater development of communities such as this. Attachment is one of the most important indicators of difference between at-risk and resilient youth (Huebner and Betts 2002; Svanberg 1998; Ryan et al. 2008); yet, the formation of attachment communities is often neglected. Too often, valuable resources are put towards the services and interventions that fail to stem the tide of at-risk youth. In this paper, we examine the foundations of the Sunset Youth Services attachment community in order to provide an example of such a community in action. Before we begin, in the next section we provide a brief discussion of the importance of attachment to at-risk youth, demonstrate why we have renamed authoritative

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<sup>1</sup> Although Sunset Youth Services also serves "at-risk" youth (those at risk of involvement with the juvenile justice system), the majority of youth served are considered "in-risk": they are already involved in the juvenile justice system, engaged in multiple systems of care and exhibit compound risk factors.

communities attachment communities, and develop why attachment communities are necessary to provide security and dignity for youth.

## **Section 1: From authoritative communities to attachment communities**

*Hardwired to Connect* identifies the crisis of American children as consisting of two parts—first, the “deteriorating mental and behavioral health of U.S. children” that we referred to above, and second, “how we as a society are thinking about this deterioration.” As *Hardwired to Connect* puts it, the “programs of individual risk-assessment and treatment” that have dominated interventions with at-risk youth in the past couple decades are “not enough.” These interventions prevent us, according to *Hardwired to Connect*, from recognizing “the broad environmental conditions that contribute to the growing numbers of suffering children.” The call for authoritative communities responds to these environmental conditions, by addressing what *Hardwired to Connect* terms the root of the crisis: the lack of connectedness, both to other people and to moral and spiritual meaning. According to *Hardwired to Connect*, “authoritative communities” are “groups that live out the types of connectedness that our children increasingly lack. They are groups of people who are committed to one another over time and who model and pass on at least part of what it means to be a good person and a good life.”

### **The 10 Main Characteristics of an Authoritative Community**

1. Social institution that includes children and youth
2. Treats children as an end in themselves
3. Warm and nurturing
4. Establishes clear limits and expectations
5. Core of work performed by non-specialists
6. Multi-generational
7. Long-term focus
8. Reflects and transmits a shared understanding of what it means to be a good person
9. Encourages spiritual and religious development
10. Philosophically oriented to the equal dignity of all persons and to the principle of love of neighbor

Sunset Youth Services embodies all of these characteristics in our “attachment community.” *Attachment Communities* are a way of relating to individuals that is both morally desirable and strategic in the way we lead our lives and structure our relationships. We are convinced that *Attachment Communities* are the necessary response to a pressing, ongoing, and fundamental need facing our communities. Our goal in developing *Attachment Communities* is this: to foster relationships in which individuals experience security and dignity so that through these relationships they will 1) claim dignity for themselves, 2) thrive in social systems, and 3) foster new relationships in which others experience a sense of dignity and the ability to thrive. Our goal in shifting from “authoritative” to “attachment” in the naming of the community is to bring to the foreground the very characteristic that is necessary for these communities to succeed—connectedness. Attachment is, “Any form of behavior that results in a person seeking

proximity to some other differentiated and preferred individual, usually conceived as stronger and/or wiser.”

## **Section 2: The Nature of the Problem**

Our work with in-risk youth in San Francisco began in 1991. By every measure the youth we serve live difficult lives. From a very early age, most were forced to begin meeting their most basic needs on their own. With parents in jail, absent, deceased, or simply not caring for them, these youth experience the world as a place of persistent insecurity and disregard. As such their lives are underwritten by anxiety and inner turmoil.

### **The Moral Dilemma**

The young people we work with experience the world as both morally confusing and morally challenging. If we define morality as the ability to distinguish between right and wrong and act accordingly, then many of these youth lack a clear moral compass and have difficulty complying with society’s code of justice. These young people have seldom if ever experienced a sense of dignity. Rather, they typically live with shame. Nor have they experienced what it is like to foster a sense of dignity in others. Most of our young people do not see themselves as having any value, and they certainly do not see the world as assigning them any value. As a consequence, these youth have difficulty seeing worth in others, and view others either as threats or as opportunities for exploitation. The *moral dilemma* may be understood as a disturbed view of self and others that undermines the child’s capacity to do the “right thing” or to strengthen and contribute to one’s family, neighborhood, and community.

### **The Social Dilemma**

The second dilemma these young people face may be called the *social dilemma*. Few of these youth have access to the services or assets offered by basic social systems (e.g. educational, legal, or economic systems). Indeed, they frequently experience these systems as hostile to their well-being. This lack of access is not a lack of opportunity in any simple sense. Rather, they are unable to access the benefits of these social systems, because they have not developed the kind of relational skills required by these social systems. They did not receive the home training that comes naturally to many families, which teaches them to relate to systems and authority. Part of this training is an instilled belief that one has the right and ability to access these structures.

In the United States today most social systems operate on the assumption that individuals within those systems will exhibit a core set of characteristics (O’Malley 1996). These core characteristics include self-directedness, empathy, industriousness, an appreciation of long-term rewards and consequences, among others (Cox 1998). Treated as “givens” and as “values” it is assumed that these characteristics are available to most if not all individuals and can simply be chosen. If you do not exhibit these characteristics, then often you are denied access and consequently are marginalized or denied the opportunity to participate (Brown 2011; Sparks 2011).

Most of our youth lack these characteristics. They are not simply “a given,” nor are they merely values to be chosen. Living and functioning in survival mode and driven by isolated self-reliance, these kids encounter the demand for these characteristics as fundamentally threatening (Ford 2002; Kerig and Becker 2010). The results of this conflict have enormous consequences: kids are kicked out of schools, cycled through the legal system, unable to access social services, and uninterested in career-oriented work.

### **Biology, Relationships and Survival Mode**

Recent developments in the field of neurobiology provide key insights that clarify the mechanisms causing the moral and social problems these youth face. “Attachment” refers to the tendency individuals have to seek affective closeness with other persons and to feel a sense of security in their presence (Bowlby 1979; Alvarez-Rivera and Fox 2010). It also refers to the affectionate and enduring bonds that form as a result. All children need an adult to attach to, respect, and depend on in order for their brains to experience calmness or feel relaxed. Trusted, consistent caretakers provide babies and young children with the ability to soothe themselves, thus training the nervous system to expect that their needs will be met (Siegel 2001; Lewis et al. 2007).

What happens to children whose cries go unheeded or whose needs are neglected? After prolonged exposure to stress, the body and brain (i.e. the entire child) experience a sense of being overwhelmed, an inability to be freed from distress (Siegel 2001; Lewis et al. 2007). Anxiety becomes an enduring feature of the nervous system’s physiology. Neurobiologists refer to this inability to calm oneself as being stuck in a chronic state of “survival mode” (Heide and Solomon 2006).

Children stuck in survival mode never experience a deep feeling of safety and rest (Siegel 2001). They become guarded, hopeless and difficult to reach. They have difficulty forming attachments with both caregivers and others. Furthermore, when stuck in survival mode, cognitive self-regulation becomes compromised, and reasoning cannot override instinct (Greenwald 2002). One’s focus is locked into the present, and long-term choice making is interrupted. Moral sensibility becomes highly limited. It is important to note that these cognitive functions disturbed by survival mode correspond to the characteristics expected, even demanded by most social systems. As a consequence, when we are in survival mode, situations that demand reasoning, communication, calm, or empathy may appear all the more threatening (Wood et al. 2002; Thompson and Gullone 2008). These demands reinforce the effects of distress, further disabling the ability to meet them.

The story of Da’nicia provides an example of a youth who was stuck in survival mode, but broke out through acceptance in an *Attachment Community*.

#### **Story 1: Da’nicia**

We met Da’nicia when she was in middle school. She was a vivacious girl with a sensitive heart. Life had already marked her with some permanent scars. Her mom walked out on the family when she was young. By the time we met Da’nicia, she had

already had multiple adults walk out on her, including family members, social workers, therapists, teachers, and friends. She didn't trust anyone. Da'nicia was quick to see every person and every situation as a threat. She often became extremely volatile and aggressive, especially if anyone tried to exercise any authority over her.

One particular day, Da'nicia was angry and lashing out at everyone. She wanted to fight with me so that she could have an excuse to walk out and never look back. As she screamed and spewed hateful words at me, I said to her, "You can be mean and push as hard as you want, but I'm not leaving. I will not quit on you and I will not walk away." Suddenly she stopped talking and just looked at me. I saw something soften in her eyes.

Many fights have happened since that day, and I'm sure there may be more. However, one thing has changed: Da'nicia knows that we will not walk away. In the years we have known Da'nicia, she has been in and out of jail, schools and group homes. She has cycled through Child Protective Services multiple times and has sometimes lived on the streets. We are the only constant force in her life.

Da'nicia has been welcomed into a different family at Sunset Youth Services through attachments that have wound their way around her heart. Her life is now filled with "adopted" siblings, aunties, uncles, and parents. She calls me mom, and I truly see her as a daughter. She often stays at our house and at the houses of other staff. She is involved in our family functions—birthday parties, baptisms, and celebrations. Our other friends now know her and are happy to see her. She will be 18 soon and still has a lot of life ahead of her. I don't know what her future holds, but I do know that we will be a part of it. Da'nicia is now quick to draw others into attachments and to let them know that Sunset Youth Services is a safe place to be. I have watched her grow from a mad, scared, lonely little girl to a welcoming, loving young woman.

### **Detachment Communities**

Through the years, we have discovered that a key contributing factor that entraps children in survival mode is what we term *Detachment Communities*: relationships that youth have with both individuals and institutions that are characterized by devaluation, discontinuity, distrust, and destruction. These relationships are not episodic. Indeed, one of the few continuous factors in the lives of these youth is the destructive nature of their relationships. These relationships impact their development on the most basic moral and physiological levels. Just as important is the way in which these kids perpetuate those relationships, fostering the very kind of community that has made their lives so difficult. Destructive relationships beget destructive relationships. Just as there are communities in which one experiences care and security, there are those in which one experiences disregard and vulnerability. We refer to these as *Detachment Communities*, and most of the youth we work with in San Francisco live their lives as part of *Detachment Communities*.

*Detachment Communities* are marked by one overriding feature—individuals within them frequently live their lives stuck in survival mode. As such, *Detachment Communities* tend to

perpetuate survival mode in the individuals who persist in them. Such communities foster conditions under which individuals are deprived of healthy attachments.

*Detachment Communities* generate conditions that promote survival mode in five ways: relational characteristics of devaluation, discontinuity, distrust, destruction and self-perpetuation.

1. *Detachment Communities* are characterized by persistent devaluation of individuals within them. Individuals' personal value is usually not recognized to begin with. The youth are typically not wanted at home, in school, or in their neighborhoods. With no place to belong and a pervasive sense of insecurity, these youth do not value themselves nor do they value others.

Many of the kids we work with at Sunset Youth Services don't dream about the future. For them life is too real, too threatening. The stress of mere survival fills every space of their energy and imagination. More significant perhaps, these kids have no one to imagine with them, no one to dream with, no one to explore the "what ifs" of their future. These kids have no one in their lives to help them feel safe and worthwhile.

2. Detachment Communities are characterized by relational discontinuity. Our youth experience instability in their most primary relationships. Parents, teachers, friends, and others are continually coming into and moving out of their lives. They are further destabilized by environmental discontinuity: devalued and unwanted, these kids frequently have no place to be. Their housing is in a constant state of flux. They are kicked out of one school and then admitted into another. They are in and out of jail. Even therapists, counselors, and social workers move in and out of their lives.

The effects of discontinuity can be seen in three ways. First, these kids have no "home base." They have no place of security they know they can go to when all other environments feel threatening. Second, they come to expect that adults will move in and out of their lives. For example, whenever Sunset Youth Services staff members leave town, kids ask them whether they will come back. Third, they have no sense of shared history. Indeed, without people in their lives to help them recall both positive and difficult moments, they lose a sense of continuity to their own histories.

3. *Detachment Communities* are characterized by distrust. Experiencing devaluation and discontinuity, individuals learn that they must meet all of their own needs; no one else looks out for their interests. This distrust primes them to perceive all encounters that demand something of them as threatening. Often, when presented with a situation that may seem difficult to navigate, even if the encounter does not seem to demand something of them, their suspicion is automatically piqued. Conversations or encounters that seem complex or difficult to understand immediately trigger feelings of mistrust. These feelings quickly escalate into adversarial feelings and actions.

4. *Detachment Communities* are characterized by destruction. Neurobiologists describe those who are able to thrive in stressful situations as "resilient" (Born et al. 2002). Resilient individuals

experience the cumulative benefits of having faced and overcome situations of stress and anxiety. Forward-looking, resilient individuals expect that things will turn out well. As such, they engage in the work of constructing a life. Individuals in *Detachment Communities*, by contrast, experience a sense of constant battering. Life confronts them with waves of stressful situations, few of which are handled in a way that pays cumulative dividends. As such these individuals do not work constructively toward a future. Rather, their lives are fragmented and reactionary.

5. These characteristics are amplified by the most dangerous and problematic of all these elements—*Detachment Communities* are self-perpetuating. In our experience this self-perpetuation happens in two ways. First, individuals in these communities are attracted to others like themselves, thereby propagating and reinforcing existing characteristics. Second, parents stuck in survival mode are likely to pass their inability to form attachments onto their children, resulting in intergenerational self-perpetuation. The result? *Detachment Communities* and their problematic effects will not be disrupted and made different unless that disruption is deliberate.

### **Detachment Communities and the Moral and Social Dilemma**

Over the years we have identified the characteristics of people who are readily capable of developing attachments. These people have relationships in which they are invested. They choose to work for the highest good in the other person. They make decisions that result in others feeling safe and valued.

The youth that we meet in our work frequently express an inverse set of qualities. In most of their relationships, they are not invested in what happens to others. They are not likely to choose the highest good of the other person, nor do they tend to make decisions that result in others feeling safe and valued. These kids do not readily form attachments.

Are kids living in *Detachment Communities* innocent? No. Should they be held responsible for the choices they make? Absolutely. However, our point is to emphasize that they live in a set of conditions and an environment that make right choices extremely difficult. We do not need to think of these kids as morally innocent or even victims in every context in order to recognize the significance of the conditions that inform their relationships. *Detachment Communities* make it likely or almost certain that individuals will live life stuck in survival mode and experience an ongoing heightened sense of threat. When faced with perceived threats, it is extremely difficult to reason beyond one's immediate instinct to look out only for one's own interests. In survival mode our moral sensibility is compromised. It is difficult to care for the needs of others. It is difficult to form attachments.

A tragic turn is at work here. The very thing that would give these kids a sense of security and well-being, a sense of dignity and worth, is the very thing that they are least capable of—attachments. What's more, if kids fail to form a bond with people capable of helping them get through distress; they will deepen their belief in the need for isolated self-reliance. By not pursuing attachments they perpetuate their own survival mode, interrupting their ability to meet

the demands of moral conduct and social systems. The possibility of a future different and better than the present seems unrealistic.

### **Section 3: The Nature of the Solution**

#### **Attachment Communities: A Commensurate Solution**

When individuals are stuck in survival mode they cannot simply choose to get out. Release will only come when someone else intervenes, alleviates the distress, and restores the conditions for a sense of safety and well-being. This is what *Attachment Communities* can do. This is why *Attachment Communities* are critical to our work among in-risk youth and families in San Francisco.

Attachments are fundamental to well-being. If we are to effectively address the problematic aspects of these kids' lives, our response has to be of a scale and quality proportional to the nature of those challenges. We have to develop new relationships that will inform the lives of these youth in ways that interrupt and work against the effects of the destructive relationships that otherwise define their lives. We must disrupt indignity and develop communities characterized by attachments in which enduring, affectionate bonds enable individuals to experience dignity and security. We call these communities *Attachment Communities*. An example of one youth in our attachment community is that of Alejandro.

#### **Story 2: Alejandro**

When we met Alejandro, he was an active gang member cycling in and out of jail and group homes. Both his father and mother before him had been active gang members. He had lost his mother to gang violence when he was only 3 years old and had not seen his father since he was 12. That was 3 years before we met him.

Alejandro was very hardened and had no interest in developing relationships with anyone. He was referred to our youth center for job training by his probation officer. He made it very clear that he had no interest in getting to know anyone, and that as soon as his job was over, we would never see him again. For the first few weeks, Alejandro just watched from a distance and observed how we related to others. Alejandro saw the relationships of trust that we had with other youth. It was only a matter of time before he began coming in early or staying late just to hang out in the office. Soon, he was talking more about the important things in his life and began expressing an interest in making some significant changes.

One day on the way to the grocery store, we stopped when we saw him hanging out at a bus stop. He said that although he was really tired, he couldn't stay in the group home all day because the staff was gone. We asked if he wanted to go to our house to unwind, and he said yes. Once in the car though, he asked if he could just stay with us because "You guys are cool. I like just kickin' it with ya'll." So he came and ran errands with us, and we had a great day together.



In my most recent conversation with Alejandro, he said, “Remember when you tried to talk to me about feeling for the people I was robbing or hurting? I think I do now. I think I understand that these people don’t deserve for me to treat them that way.” Alejandro needed patience from us. He needed understanding from us. More than anything, he needed to know that the love he was getting from us was true, and that he couldn’t kill it, no matter what. Recently when he was arrested again, he made one phone call: to us. He said he’s never had anyone care about him before and although it’s strange, he likes it.

### **Programs Are Not Enough**

Efforts to resolve problems generated by *Detachment Communities* that fail to address relationships will finally prove insufficient and may even worsen the problem. Consider an example: kids in *Detachment Communities* frequently fail to thrive in economic systems (e.g. they have difficulty acquiring and maintaining stable jobs). In response, we might establish job-training programs, an invaluable need in communities like ours. However, if individuals are failing to thrive in economic systems as a result of being stuck in survival mode, then any effort that does not operate in a reparative way on the level of relationships will be less than fully effective. Job training must be done in the context of restoring holistic and healing relationships—in a sense, “resetting” their nervous system. Kids need job training; however, they live with a prior and more basic need: attachments. Programs such as job training will be increasingly effective to the degree that individuals within those programs are also part of an *Attachment Community*.

### **Disrupting Indignity**

When we first arrived in San Francisco, an immediate and obvious problem presented itself to us. Many of the kids in our neighborhood were not wanted at home; as such they stayed on the streets. They were not wanted in school; as such they were expelled. They were not wanted in their neighborhood; as such they were arrested. The reasons why these kids were not wanted, whether or not their continual expulsions were “fair” was beside the point. A fact was before us: these kids were not wanted.

Our response addressed the root of the problem: where they were not wanted, we created a space for them to be accepted. This space took two forms. First, we opened a youth center—a physical place for these kids to spend time when they had no other place to be. Second, we made ourselves present by paying attention to the details of these kids lives: when they needed someone to meet with their teacher, we went with them; when they needed an advocate at court hearings, we supported them; when they needed food, we found resources; when they needed a ride to the hospital, we took them and stayed with them. The two spaces were united by a single aim: to create a stable, continuous, and familiar space in which these kids, in all their specificities and peculiarities, were wanted.

Our response was the morally right thing to do. Regardless of any subsequent payoff in the form of changed lives, our response was worthwhile for the simple reason that these kids ought to be related to in a way that gives them a sense of worth and dignity. Recognizing this, our response

was also the right thing to do from a practical point of view. That is to say, our response effected change. As a solution to the problem, it's worked. Over time, many of the kids we have been in relationship with now claim a sense of dignity for themselves and foster that dignity in others. Moreover, their ability to thrive at home, at school, and in relationship to the legal system has vastly improved. (For statistics on the effectiveness of our programs, see Appendix A). Although progress is often slow and occurs over the course of many years, the changes are undeniable.

### **The Characteristics of Attachment Communities**

In contrast to *Detachment Communities*, individuals in *Attachment Communities* move beyond survival mode toward an experience of well-being, security, and value. *Attachment Communities* actively work to produce these results. *Attachment Communities* generate these favorable conditions in five ways, each of which interrupts and transforms the relational characteristics found in *Detachment Communities*. It is worth noting: *Attachment Communities* do not replace *Detachment Communities*; they work to transform them.

1. *Attachment Communities* are characterized by valuation. Relationships are marked by an active positive valuing of its individuals and a deliberate seeking out of other individuals' highest good. Philosophically this takes the form of an orientation toward the equal dignity of all persons and to the principle of love of neighbor. As valuing, *Attachment Communities* are experienced as welcoming, warm, and nurturing. Kids learn to expect that at Sunset Youth Services we will always be happy to see them, establishing a fundamental contrast to other areas of their lives in which adults expect them to be a problem. Note that valuation here designates recognition of the worth of another without implying approval of any particular choices or behaviors. Indeed, valuation will include judgment against those relationships that generate devaluation.

2. *Attachment Communities* are characterized by continuity. This characteristic is crucial. Remember that "attachments" refer to enduring bonds. Without continuity *Attachment Communities* cannot work to transform the effects of *Detachment Communities*. The relational discontinuity of *Detachment Communities* destabilizes individuals, producing anxiety and fragmentation. In a countervailing fashion, *Attachment Communities* become a "home base" to which individuals can return. Thus, continuity assures a space where relational stability can be expected. A subtle but significant corollary to continuity bears noting. Over the long-term individuals are known for who they really are. When valuation persists, they know that they are wanted without condition. The combination of continuity and valuation produces shared history—the knowledge that one has been cared for over time. This combination is a vital condition for forming attachments and producing the sense of security and well-being that attachments promise.

3. *Attachment Communities* create an environment of trust. Having been valued over time, individuals learn to trust that valuation is probable in the future. This characteristic is vital to the transformative potential of *Attachment Communities*. The distrust fostered by *Detachment Communities* causes individuals to expect that they must meet their own needs: they look to exploit, and they expect to be exploited. Yet, when these individuals are cared for over time, they learn to trust *Attachment Communities* as a place of security. Trust, in turn, produces a

sense of claiming and belonging. When youth begin to trust that they are wanted, they begin to claim the *Attachment Community* as their own. The sense that one belongs to and can claim a relationship is a hallmark of attachments (Bowlby 1979).

4. *Attachment Communities* are constructive, whereas *Detachment Communities* are destructive. The sense of security and worth fostered by *Attachment Communities* soothes distress. As distress ebbs, attachments form. As attachments form, individuals become increasingly capable of experiencing and exhibiting the characteristics that so many social systems prize. The individual begins to construct a life in which she or he thrives.

Additionally, *Attachment Communities* encourage spiritual and religious development. Such development consists of individuals learning to appreciate values that transcend the immediate demands of daily life. This appreciation, in turn, directs individuals toward a future that is different and hopefully, better than the past. Spiritual and religious development constructs a relationship between difficulties faced today and a life of resilience tomorrow.

5. *Attachment Communities* reinforce and extend themselves. They become characterized by self-perpetuation. These communities are multigenerational. We are now witnessing our first generation of youth coming into their own as parents and breaking the cycle of detachment and devaluation. These communities also self-perpetuate by becoming increasingly better at producing transformative effects. As more individuals come in and are transformed, the community becomes exponentially more effective at transforming lives.

### **Attachment Communities and Moral Transformation**

The most striking transformation takes place on the moral register. Individuals who once devalued themselves and most others begin to claim and foster dignity. Where they once navigated relationships through the dialectic of threat and exploitation, they begin to seek in others the highest good. This is a fundamental change; its significance cannot be overemphasized. This change alone justifies investment in *Attachment Communities*.

Moral transformation requires more than moral education. Simply knowing the difference between right and wrong does not automatically produce a desire to do what is right. The desire to choose right over wrong is the essential element to moral transformation. Moral transformation requires repair at the level of attachments.

Many of the kids who come to Sunset Youth Services start out experiencing their everyday world as hostile. They expect to find their own meals. When being expelled from school, they expect to advocate for themselves. When called to court, they expect to attend unaccompanied. They expect to sit in emergency rooms alone.

These kids must learn to expect that Sunset Youth Services is one place where they will be wanted and where they can count on others to help meet their needs. *Attachment Communities* must actively seek out those places in individuals' lives where they are experiencing the most distress and intervene there by inserting healthy relationships into the web of relationships that

currently make up the individual's community. We address specific needs in specific situations, such as meeting with youth and their probation officers, accompanying youth to court appearances, helping youth get into schools, being involved in family reunification, providing emotional support in crisis situations, making sure basic needs are met, and more. As a result, there is a natural, built-in reason to "be together," and a relationship of trust can be developed and deepened. In many families, these activities are performed by a parent, and in a very real sense we play the role of surrogate parents.

When staff spend time with youth, the relationship must always be the goal for the adult. It must be intentionally fostered, even if the youth doesn't realize that the establishment of a healthy attachment is the greater goal. Oftentimes meeting the simplest of needs, such as giving rides to youth, serves as the avenue through which deeper relationships are established. Continuously addressing needs over an extended period of time then leads to the formation of trust.

### **Attachment Communities and Social Transformation**

The term "resilience" refers to a person's ability to exercise relative mastery over the nervous system: the ability to remain calm even in situations of distress. The key to resilience is the individual's ability to carry a baseline sense of well-being into a variety of demanding situations (Born et al. 1997). In counter-effect to entrenched survival mode, *Attachment Communities* help generate resilience by providing the space of security wherein the nervous system can expect to successfully alleviate distress. Individuals who learn to thrive within *Attachment Communities* are able to take that experience into other domains of life.

The demands of social systems that may have once inspired a sense of threat are met with an increased calm and confidence. This calm makes it all the more likely that cognitive self-regulation can be exercised in ways that allow for cooperation, industry, empathy, and an appreciation of the balance between short term difficulties and long term rewards.

### **Shared History**

There is little else we do at Sunset Youth Services that is more important to the youth, and more enjoyed by them, than the retelling of our experiences together. It assures the kids that they are known. We understand who they are and where they've come from. At the same time, we continue to want them and seek them out. These histories testify to the fact that success can follow difficulty. Kids who live much of life under stressful conditions need to be reminded that anxiety and indignity can be overcome. Tomorrow can be different than today. It reassures them that even as they come and go, our relationship to them endures. Finally, it gives them a sense of resilience, helping them use the security and worth they experience here to overcome stressful encounters elsewhere.

From another point of view, the retelling of shared history is bittersweet. It bears witness to the fact that the kids' relationship to Sunset Youth Services is qualitatively different than their other relationships. If the experience of care and continuity here is remarkable, that is only because they experience disregard and disruption in other relationships. What's more, the retelling

reminds us of the magnitude of the challenges we face in helping to make these kids' lives better. For every experience of dignity and security they have in relationship to us, they have thousands of other interactions marked by indignity and insecurity.

#### **Section 4: How to Build Attachment Communities**

Because *Attachment Communities* concern themselves with the particular details in the lives of unique individuals, they will differ from one another in important aspects. Nevertheless, they will also be similar to one another in crucial areas, as discussed in the last section. These crucial similarities provide directions for how Attachment Communities ought to be built. Outlining these directions will be the concern of the final section of our paper.

##### **General Models, Unique Individuals**

On some levels, *Attachment Communities* is a concept that can be generalized, as its goals may be applied to different and unique contexts. At the same time, its foremost idea is that we must attend to the details and specificities of each individual's life. Generalizations are always in some measure impersonal. There is no "general" way to form attachments.

*Attachment Communities* operate according to a core ethic: each individual must be related to as unique and valuable. Applied in each setting, it means an individual must be cared for according to the terms of that individual's own life and his/her specific relationships. If an *Attachment Community* wants to effect changes in that life, then it must enter into and offer positive support within each of those relationships.

Certain practical consequences follow. *Attachment Communities* become familiar with all the key relationships in the life of the individual they wish to care for. It must track and potentially be present to each of those relationships. The life of the individual is the principle "site" of the work *Attachment Communities* do. Given the discontinuity of relationships in *Detachment Communities*, this requires an ongoing and sustained effort. This sustained attention seeks to bring value, continuity, trust, and well-being into all aspects of that life.

At Sunset Youth Services this work of tracking and being present to the details of each individual's life takes up the majority of our time, energy, and resources. Indeed, from a certain point of view this is the only thing that we do.

It is worth noting that in our culture there is every disincentive to pursuing this kind of diligent and detailed work. Our culture prizes generalizable knowledge of, and automated responses to, social problems. These responses allow us to develop one-size-fits-all solutions. Yet such solutions fail to treat individuals as unique ends, and therefore fail to produce attachments. One-size-fits-all approaches simply will not work.

##### **Making a Community One's Own—Risking Relationship**

Those who work with so-called "in-risk" individuals are of two minds. There are those that think that in this work one must maintain strict service-provider/client relationships. This professional

distancing creates a boundary or space within which the needs of the client can be met and from which the service-provider can come and go. In contrast, there are those who think that this professional distancing is not always valuable or required. Those who develop *Attachment Communities* are of this second mind.

In order to build *Attachment Communities* we must become an integrated member of the communities we wish to help transform. This kind of sustained and attentive work requires that traditional professional boundaries be redefined. Individuals with whom we would seek to form reparative attachments must no longer be held at arm's length as is common in professional practice, but embraced closely and placed into our own lives.

It follows that we must make the community we wish to transform our own. If we position ourselves outside of the existing community, reducing it to the status of a project to be worked on, we effectively place ourselves outside of the space of attachments. We cannot expect to build the trust of the individuals whose lives we wish to affect if we remain an "outsider" to their world.

From the practical point of view of our experience, it is unlikely that we would be able to navigate the relationships of the kids we worked with if we did not live in San Francisco. Having an "insider's" view of the culture of the neighborhood is vital to understanding who kids are and why they do what they do.

Certainly this is controversial. By becoming a part of the community we wish to change we make ourselves vulnerable to certain risks, risks we might otherwise have avoided altogether. The easy escape provided by professional boundaries is no longer available, and by forming affectionate enduring bonds with another we place ourselves in a position of relative vulnerability. An attachment is a two-way relationship. Another's hurts and failures become our own. At Sunset Youth Services, this has meant enduring the pain of suffering alongside kids who are daily battered by poverty, abuse, racism, drug-addicted parents, and a host of factors beyond their control. Worse yet, it has meant losing those we love to violence. When one is invested in communities these tragedies are felt deeply and personally.

But what is the alternative to making the community one's own? On the one hand, the transformation of a community requires attachments. On the other, we cannot effect transformation if we remain at a position of personal distance with regard to the life of the community. The only effective option is to make the community "my" community. If we at Sunset Youth Services want kids and parents to claim and belong to us, we must be willing to claim and belong to them. We cannot, at the end of the day, simply leave relationships behind to be picked up tomorrow when the work day begins.

### **Those Who Build Community**

The work of building Attachment Communities is primarily done by two groups of community leaders: founding or first generation leaders, and indigenous or second generation leaders. The

capacities and responsibilities of these two groups differ. These differences bear brief articulation.

Founding or first generation leaders are those who identify the effects of a *Detachment Community* within an existing community and begin the formal and deliberate work of changing them. This formal work might take the form of establishing a community center, as we did at Sunset Youth Services, or it might take some other form.

First generation leaders are those who will become the primary attachment figures in the community. As such they have principal responsibility for working to ensure the development and enculturation of the *Attachment Community's* core characteristics. This means designing processes by which the community will make contact with individuals, welcome them into relationship, and work to mature that relationship. These processes are the foundation for everything else the community does. It is vital that first generation leaders not only be capable of forming new attachments, but that they already have individuals in their lives with whom they share affectionate enduring bonds. The work of constructing an *Attachment Community* takes years. These first generation leaders can grow discouraged and exhausted if they are always working to build new attachments while never enjoying the well-being of participating in established attachments. First generation leaders must be prepared for the scale of commitment entailed in developing an *Attachment Community*. It involves moving into a community and making that community one's own. It involves long-term commitment. Any significant transformation brought about by *Attachment Communities* takes years. Those looking for short term payoff will be discouraged. Lastly, it involves making oneself readily available. Boundaries of personal space are tremendously important to retaining identity and energy. However one has to always be ready to support individuals within the developing *Attachment Community* who may need care.

First generation leaders are not committing themselves to a job. They are committing themselves to live their lives in a particular way and in a particular place.

Indigenous or second generation leaders are those who have formed reparative attachments with first generation leaders, and who have become capable of being attachment figures for others. They have learned to claim dignity for themselves and foster dignity in others.

Second generation leaders are vital to the long-term success of an *Attachment Community* for several reasons. First, these leaders represent the *Attachment Community's* ability to self-perpetuate, expanding the community beyond the efforts of the founders. Second, these leaders are non-specialists. As such they have an existential understanding of the pressures and difficulties of *Detachment Communities*. Their lives testify to the transformative effects of reparative attachments. Third, second generation leaders facilitate much of the community's work. The range of relationships that founding leaders can track and engage in is limited. Second generation leaders are able to extend the impact of *Attachment Communities* through significantly more relationships. One example from our work at Sunset Youth Services is the story of Ghazi.

### **Story 3: Ghazi**

We met Ghazi in 1992. He was the second child out of four, and he and his parents were Palestinian immigrants. Ghazi's parents had a difficult time adjusting to their new country and he struggled with school. Surrounded by poverty and violence as a teenager, he and his brother began to hang out on the streets and make their living through the "underground economy." Violence became a normal part of his life, and after being arrested multiple times, Ghazi began to hang around Sunset Youth Services. At first he was distant and hard, but he slowly began to move in closer to the Youth Center and the staff.

We knew Ghazi for many years before we began to see movement toward better decisions. In fact, several times over the years he got angry at us and threatened to never return. He always did return though, either on his own or when we sought him out. We had faith that Ghazi would stay invested if he knew we were invested in him. Through the years we built more trust with Ghazi by taking part in his family's life and responding to crises within his own life. When he or his brother were in jail or in trouble, we were there to help. Eventually, Ghazi stayed off the streets and out of trouble, and began tapping into his potential.

In January 2001 we hired Ghazi to work at Sunset Youth Services, where he received intensive training and began to transition from being a program participant to a leader. Having Ghazi work at the Youth Center presented an excellent opportunity to grow closer to him. We performed his wedding and held the baby dedication ceremony for his first son. Nevertheless, Ghazi still struggled with feeling angry and threatened by new and foreign situations.

Since his days as a former juvenile offender, Ghazi has followed a path of tremendous positive change. Over the past 17 years he's been involved with Sunset Youth Services, he has matured into a strong neighborhood leader and effective mentor who is dedicated to serving high-risk youth. Ghazi is now a critical part of the Sunset Youth Services staff. A former recipient of case management services, he now works as a Juvenile Case Manager building attachments with young people so that they too may break the cycle of crime, violence and drug abuse.

Perhaps Ghazi's biggest accomplishment has been overcoming his use of violence and anger. Today, he avoids conflict and positively channels his energy into what he cares about most: neighborhood kids, struggling families, and his own family. As with all of us, the journey is not over for Ghazi. But he now possesses the resilience to face future obstacles with hope and courage, and he will never again be alone.



Second generation leaders present challenges as well as benefits. They often need both the freedom and the encouragement to grow through their attachments to the first generation leaders, who remain their attachment figures. Having experienced the long term trauma of *Detachment Communities*, second generation leaders continue to need the healing security and moral uplift of the *Attachment Community*. However, we should remember that everyone, regardless of age or experience, remains in need of affectionate bonds. The need for these bonds is part of what it means to be human. When an individual is transformed, that individual does not leave one sector of the community—the “to-be-transformed” sector—and enter into the “finished-with-transformation” sector. Rather, everyone is in relationship to everyone else, forming bonds that continue to change us.

Essential attributes that must be shared by both first and second generation leaders are passion and commitment to the well-being of the individuals who come into the community. Because *Detachment Communities* are so robust and their effects so devastating, the work of *Attachment Communities* must be deliberate and sustained. An *Attachment Community* can only be built by those who are willing to invest their lives.

### **Necessary but Insufficient**

As a response to the effects of *Detachment Communities*, *Attachment Communities* must be distinguished from a program-based response. To be sure, *Attachment Communities* may have programs as part of their work. But the logic of these programs, taken in isolation, must be distinguished from the logic of *Attachment Communities*. Programs are necessary, but when faced with the work of transforming relationships they are insufficient.

Early in our work we elected not to pursue a program-based approach. Two reasons informed this choice. First, it quickly became clear to us that programs, catering to specific needs, functioned as a filter for selecting which individuals one is able to assist. Having come from youth ministry, our principal interest lay not in meeting particular needs, but in meeting the needs of particular kids, whatever those needs were. The aim was to build relationships of transformative support agile enough to address needs as they arose. Programs alone did not realize this aim.

Second, and more importantly, a program-based approach seemed to misdiagnose the nature of the problem at hand. By attuning attention to selected needs—say, after-school tutoring—it failed to focus attention on the need for relationships. If the nature of the problem we faced was relational in character, then a non-relational response appeared inadequate.

This meant that the basic organizational rationale for Sunset Youth Services became relationship building—what we now refer to as building *Attachment Communities*. This rationale informed the structural, staff, and programmatic choices we’ve made. If a given program or policy seemed unlikely to further the work of developing relationships marked by security and well-being, it was not pursued.

Early on, very few people took this organization seriously. Experience, corroborative scientific study, and successful outcome data have affirmed our approach. It is now clear that the web of relationships that informs the lives of these kids so negatively could only be disrupted through the development of sustained affectionate bonds.

If we, as a society, expect schools, programs, and the penal system to accomplish what only an *Attachment Community* can accomplish, then we will be largely disappointed. Our investments in education and reform, social programs, and specialized training will prove to be insufficient if the virtues and values fostered by *Attachment Communities* are left out. If the problem is relational in nature, then the response to that problem must be relational as well. In this sense, *Attachment Communities* are a central factor in the development of the life of individuals upon which other social elements depend.

### **Claiming Dignity**

At Sunset Youth Services our motivation for developing an *Attachment Community* stems entirely from our desire to love and care for the youth of San Francisco. This motivation inspires the diligent, deliberate, and ongoing work of seeking out the best for individuals in the particular details of their lives. Wanting the best means wanting them to thrive in all of life—we want them to have life and have it to the fullest.

Our motivation has inspired inquiry into the conditions that keep these youth from thriving. This inquiry has yielded our understanding of *Detachment Communities* and their effects.

Understanding *Detachment Communities* has shaped the ways we work to help bring about change in these kids' lives. Here's the point: inspired to love these kids' for their own sake, we have discovered that loving them brings about fundamental transformation. We care for these kids and we want them to thrive. It turns out that in caring for these kids, they thrive.

Our long term aim is clear: we want to intervene in these kids' lives in ways that disrupt the devaluation, discontinuity, distrust, and destruction that they experience in their everyday interactions. We want to disrupt the conditions that drive kids more frequently and more deeply into survival mode. More than this, we want to work against the effects of these destructive experiences, fostering resilience. Specifically, we want these kids: 1) to claim a sense of dignity for themselves and to foster dignity in others; 2) to thrive in social systems and learn how to help others to thrive.

Today, many juvenile justice interventions are based on a programmatic model that provide key and necessary services to youth. Yet, these interventions often fail to fully transform the lives of individuals and frequently serve as ineffective barriers to further delinquency. By building attachment communities, we hope to create interventions that are long-lasting, effective, and most importantly, transform the difficult lives of the youth in our community. Instead of the momentary and often fleeting relationships created through juvenile justice programming, we seek to create long-lasting change in the lives of youth. We call upon juvenile justice policy makers to invest in the formation of attachment communities as a way to stem the tide of delinquency. The upshot is this: There is both a moral and a pragmatic reason for investing in

the formation of *Attachment Communities*. As a response to the moral and social dilemmas in the lives of the youth we work with, *Attachment Communities* are both the right and the effective thing to do. They are smart compassion.

### **Appendix A: Statistical Data on the Effectiveness of Sunset Youth Services' Programs**

Between 2007 and 2009, nearly 80% of youth in the Case Management Program successfully avoided committing a repeat offense<sup>2</sup>, and over 90% demonstrated a significant increase in their desire to graduate high school. Progress is also determined using the Youth Risk Assessment; a comprehensive evaluation tool that assesses each client's needs and evaluates long-term progress. Upon intake, each youth is rated at one of eight risk levels in 12 life domains, including substance abuse, family, juvenile delinquency, nutrition & health, gang activity, and school. In 2008, of youth who participated in the program for at least 9 months, 100% achieved improvement in at least 3 of 12 domains on the Youth Risk Assessment; in fact, nearly one third of youth offenders demonstrated reduced risk in at least 8 categories.

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<sup>2</sup> Updated: Over the past five years, from 2012–17, 90% of Sunset Youth Services' participants do not reoffend within 12 months of completing our Violence Prevention and Intervention program.

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