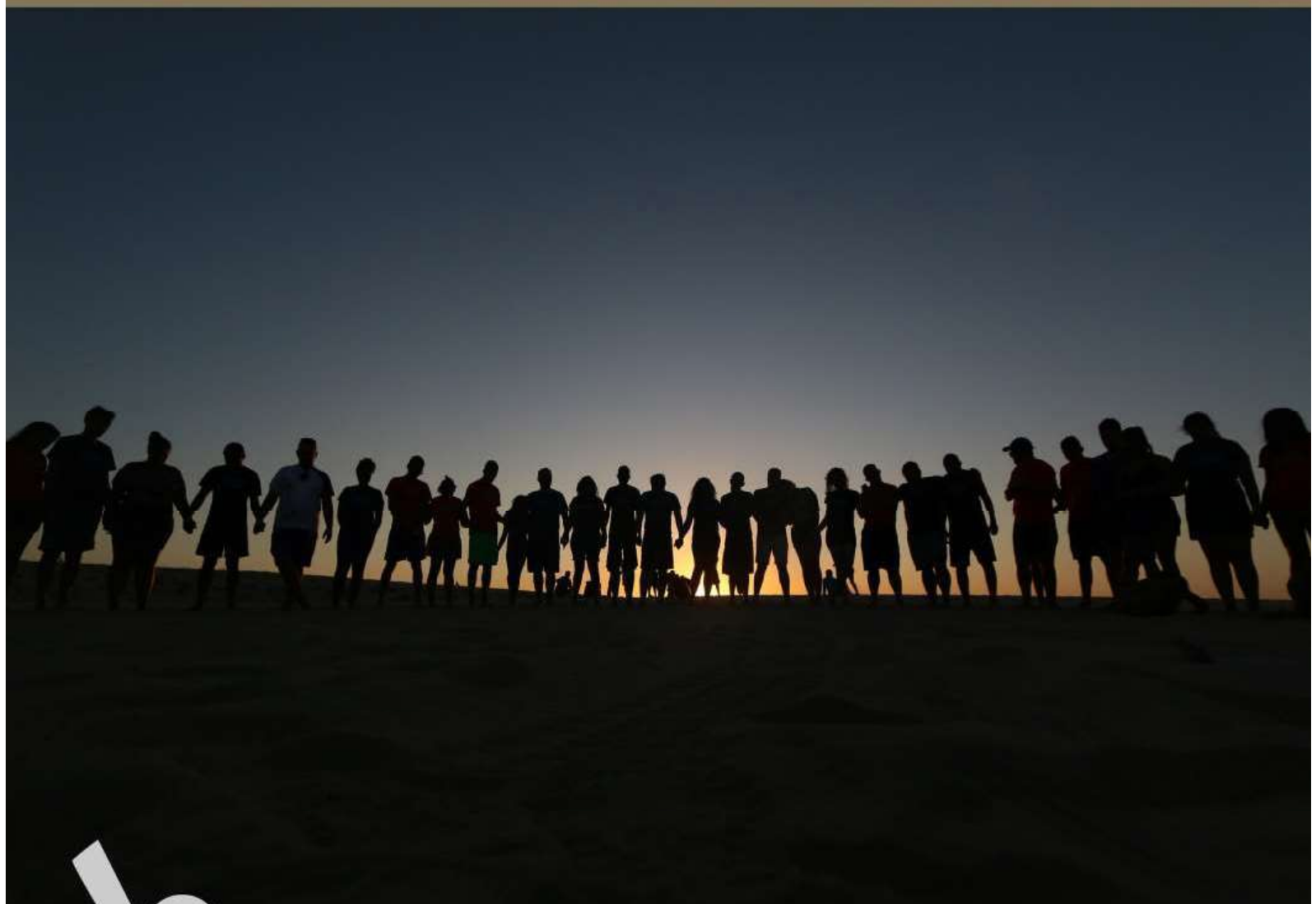


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A Very Special Student and her Kitty Cat

In loving memory of Teri Truscott

Dedicated to Taryn C.

Kiaras Gharabaghi

Telling stories in our field is common practice, and for good reason. Stories provide us with a sense of common disposition, something to smile about, to lament or to aspire to. They also allow us to find the familiar in the unfamiliar, to relate to one another on the strengths of similar experiences in different contexts. And so, with the holiday season upon us once again, I would like to tell a story that for me, at least, represents many of the traditions, values, spirit and hopes that are celebrated across many different cultures and religions this time of the year. It is a story about relationship, and it is very much a story about child and youth care, albeit one that reflects child and youth care as a way of being in the world rather than a professional, credentialed discipline. This is, as those of you who know my work, how I prefer it anyways.

A few years ago, a new student showed up in one of my classes. She seemed like most students seem early into the semester; a little confused, a little anxious, and a little lost. But she also seemed very happy to be there, smiling broadly and at everyone. In a large class with a diverse student body, one might not have noticed her at all. Except that this student clearly



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was not of the same or even similar age as any of the other students in the class; indeed, she was in her mid-70s. And she was in a wheelchair. And she was extremely talkative, willing to share aspects of her life both in and out of context with whatever the class discussion might have been at that moment. And some aspects of her life were rather unique, including her often shared stories about institutional abuse she had suffered many years ago at the hands of clergy in Newfoundland.

Her name was Teri. Teri soon became a fixture in our program. She was ever present, and her presence was always felt. Let's be clear, this was not always an easy presence. Teri was a learner with a very unique learning style; for one thing, the concept of writing papers, making presentations on topics provided by an instructor, or, for that matter, engaging in class discussions with commentary that related to those discussions, were not really at the forefront of her learning style. Taking notes, reading assigned texts, communicating by email, or retrieving information from online course portals also were, for the most part, outside of Teri's ideas about learning. Indeed, she was a critical resistor to the notions of assessments, exams, tests, assignments, or just about anything else that might be considered standard fare at universities.

There were some other things that weren't quite her style. For example, Teri wasn't overly concerned with knowing which courses she had registered in; nor where those courses might be taught, or when, for that matter. But she knew about child and youth care practice; in fact, some 25 years earlier, she had been registered in our program once before, completing a few courses (with reasonable grades) before withdrawing from the program. I have learned since that she had accepted work as a personal support worker with an organization serving the elderly in the community.



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But back to the story that I want to tell. Perhaps not surprisingly, students in my classes that Teri attended were, for the most part, ill-equipped to understand how to be with Teri; clearly, she did not ‘fit well’ amongst the 19 and 20 year old young people far more concerned with achieving high grades while not sacrificing their engagement of popular culture and largely doomed relationships characterized by seemingly unnecessary drama. More importantly, Teri did not appear to have a mobile device, which rendered her alien in this grouping of students, and so they mostly tried to ignore her.

Except for one student. She noticed Teri right away, and did what Henry Maier always insisted we should do more of – she said hello, she engaged, she made herself present in Teri’s immediate space in the classroom. And she listened to Teri’s stories, confusing as these sometimes were. And perhaps most importantly, she was able to discern the difference between stories that could be reflected on later, and stories that actually represented a specific need for Teri – such as ‘where is my next class’, ‘what course is this’, ‘what am I supposed to do right now’. And so this student responded to those needs, immediately and with great nurture and care.

I watched this interaction for weeks, noting the ever-deepening connection forming between my young student and my creatively wise student. The latter called the former ‘Kitty Cat’; in fact, she called everyone by names she invented herself, but no one was as special, as important, and as urgent as Kitty Cat. The two became connected in ways one would not have expected. It was not a one-way connection, in which the young person supported the elder. It was a relationship forming, featuring all that we hope for in healthy, meaningful and enriching relationships – mutuality, respect, commitment to dignity, honesty, practical help, emotional support, and so on.



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Kitty Cat became Teri's advocate and voice at times when Teri just couldn't figure out how to connect with me or other people in her courses. Kitty Cat asked for extra supports for Teri, a tutor, provisions for modifying assignments and tests, and most importantly, she demanded inclusion of Teri in class activities and group projects. Over time, Kitty Cat expanded Teri's peer network, and quite a number of students learned how to be with someone who seemed to be different than what might have been expected. Kitty Cat demonstrated to her peers that connection is not a function of sameness; we can connect across differences, including significant age differences, social contexts, and ways of being. And she demonstrated that conversation, interaction, and interpersonal relationships can be mutual and rewarding even when the parties to such have different styles, use different means and ultimately may even thrive within the connection for entirely different reasons.

Kitty Cat and Teri remained connected; I have learned recently that Teri would call Kitty Cat dozens of times per day, leaving voice messages that simply acknowledged the relationship, with no demands or requests. And I learned that Kitty Cat 'hung out' with Teri whenever possible, chatted with her, joked with her, and also learned from her about other life experiences and other ways of being. The relationship was deep for both Teri and Kitty Cat; it defined a period of life for them that surely will forever leave a trace.

Teri passed away during the summer, after several stays in the hospital for various kinds of ailments. Since her passing, Kitty Cat and I have been trying to understand more about this wonderful student at our School. We learned that she had quite a tumultuous youth and earlier adulthood, involving impossibly complicated love stories, dedication to others in many forms, including through her work as a personal support worker and in her charitable giving. Indeed, Teri may not have known how to care for herself entirely; during the last years of her life, she was living in poverty, and also



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in rather difficult and perhaps not the most healthy physical environment. But it can also be said that after what appears to have been a life of turmoil and adversity, trauma and loneliness, Teri found what she was looking for during those last two years of her life – a wonderful, caring, unconditional and non-judgmental friend named Kitty Cat.

When Teri died in hospital, no one came to claim her body. This happens sometimes; actually it happens quite often, because it turns out that loneliness and isolation are inherently well hidden in societies that are already prone to ignore those we can afford to ignore. Ultimately, Teri was buried at a cemetery on the outskirts of Toronto. The funeral was attended by a person who self-identified as Teri's niece. And of course by Kitty Cat. But that was it.

I tell you this story to honour Teri. To create a trace of a life that should not be forgotten. But I also tell you this story because of Kitty Cat. I know hundreds, perhaps thousands of child and youth care practitioners. It doesn't take a program for individuals to demonstrate excellence and authentic commitment to a child and youth care way of being in the world. It takes relationship, capacity, humility and a heart of gold. Kitty Cat *is* child and youth care. With this story, a pay tribute to her, to Teri, and to a relationship that will never cease to matter.

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