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working with runaways and their families:
How the SAJA Community Does It

THE ORIGINS OF FAMILY COUNSELING

During my first months at Runaway House, I was impressed by the skill and sympathy with which the counselors (none of whom had had any formal psychological or social-work training) worked with individual young people, the ease with which they accepted and dealt with a good deal of mischievous and confusing behavior, their calm in the face of almost continuous anxiety and occasional suicidal desperation. They seemed almost always to strike a nice balance between tender indulgence and humorous toughness, between granting freedom and respect to the runaways, and confronting them with the need to "look at the options" they would face when they left the House.

In contrast, the counselors were much less comfortable and capable in dealing with the runaways' family situations. In part, this was due to the number of runaways, the immediacy of their problems, and the air of crisis they brought with them. In part, it was due to the counselors' attitudes and to the perspective which came from living and working collectively in a runaway house. In some ways the counselors were themselves runaways—refugees from, and protestants against, a social order that pushed them toward constricting careers and marriage and a political system that was hierarchical, racist, sexist, and imperialist.

What they saw of the world that sought to re-engross the young people seemed only to confirm their sympathies and their fears: on the phones and at the door of Runaway House, they encountered parents, police, probation officers, and mental health professionals who seemed bent only on coercing young people out of their independence, cajoling them out of the objections that led them to leave home. It was terribly hard for counselors to live with and support the struggles of the young people and understand, much less sympathize with, their apparent oppressors, to be committing themselves

to a new kind of social order, and yet to yield up to the old the children who had fled it.

The relatively few family conferences they held did little to change the counselors' minds. Some parents were genuinely concerned, responsive, and self-critical. But many seemed both unreasonable and perversely inflexible. There seemed no way that the runaway could return home without completely capitulating, no way the parents would accept any responsibility for the schism between themselves and their children. The volume of arguments was deafening, the density of their elaboration mystifying. In order to make some progress, to clear some space so that a runaway could go home, the counselors tried to get the family to deal with particular behaviors, to reach small compromises: If John kept an 11 o'clock curfew, he could let his hair grow down to his collar. And with depressing regularity, the counselors saw these compromises break down or prove insufficient.

Some parents kept their children in a continual bind. Young people who returned over and over to Runaway House were given no room to compromise at home but were not permitted to be placed in one of the group foster homes. Others returned home, promising and promised a "new leaf," only to be locked up in mental institutions or sent to training schools.

The more we talked about "families," the more sensitive the counselors became to the inadequacy of their work with them. They tried to remedy the situation by referring families to mental health clinics and private practitioners, but returning runaways reported that family therapy rarely took place. The young people were put off by long waiting lists and intimidated by the forms and the formal trappings of professionals. Too often "therapy" seemed to perpetuate, not relieve, the runaway's difficulties; even though the family as a whole was sent, it was the young person who had to take the psychological tests, who was labeled as "the problem," who seemed to have to "answer for" his or her actions. Often the therapist would see the runaway without the parents, sometimes the parents without the young person. But even in joint sessions, many runaways felt put upon, "accused" by professionals who seemed to share their parents' point of view as well as their power.

THE FAMILY SEMINAR

In January of 1972 I helped start what has become "the family seminar." It was formed in response to the needs of the runaways and their families in order to supplement the energies, perspective, and training of the Runaway House counselors and to provide a place where people interested in counseling could be helpful to others while they learned. About half the original members were workers at Runaway House and the other SAJA projects. The others included half a dozen people who have subsequently entered graduate school in psychology and social work, a former psychiatric social worker, and a professor of social psychology. Aside from me, only the psychiatric social worker had had any formal training in psychotherapy or family therapy.

I was at once excited about, and wary of, helping to start the family seminar. It was one thing to be a researcher and a consultant to an ongoing project like Runaway House, quite another to help initiate a whole new program. I trusted the ability of the SAJA counselors in their own projects but wondered how they and those who did not work in SAJA would perform in this new, more self-consciously "therapeutic" setting. I felt confident in helping SAJA's projects work collectively but was as yet unsure of my own ability to be part of a collective process. I wondered if I would be able to share my knowledge without dominating discussions, to accept the opinions of, and share responsibility with, people who were much less experienced than I.

We began by talking about why we had each joined the seminar: my desire to help Runaway House provide a service, and to teach; the social worker's disillusionment with more traditional therapeutic situations; the counselors' need for skills; the psychologist's and the students' impatience with the arid and self-conscious professionalism, the numbers and tests of academia. All of us, it turned out, wanted to work cooperatively.

There seemed in our first meetings to be a groping honesty in what we said to one another, an attentiveness in the listening. The people who came were serious about the work they were about to begin, open and self-critical about their motives. We were all together by choice, out of interest in the work and in working together, not because it was required or because it was supposed to be "good for us."

These first few exploratory meetings helped give form to my own attitude toward the seminar and to my role in it. My growing respect for the potential family counselors strengthened my belief that the practice of counseling was not mysterious, that it could in time be learned by people who lacked both advanced degrees and extensive formal training or book learning. I had seen Runaway House counselors work well with young people; surely the people in the seminar could learn to work with their families. SAJA and Runaway House provided a supportive context for the counselors in their work with young people; perhaps the seminar could provide a similar context for family counselors.

As an experienced therapist, I could help the counselors realize that they were capable of seeing and understanding and feeling what went on with a family. I wanted to help them to be more sensitive to their own experience, rather than to force them to fit their observations into any predetermined pattern. In time I would be able to help them to generalize . . . from their own experience; later on they could learn the patterns that others had found.[1] What I wanted to teach in the beginning was an attitude, a perspective that required openness and intelligence, not formal knowledge: an insistence on allowing the family to reveal itself, to unfold its world in one's presence; a respect for that world; and a continuous and honest attentiveness to one's own reactions to that world and to the people in it.

[1] See bibliography at end.

The form of the seminar was not unlike other more traditional supervisory groups, but its cooperative and participatory spirit seemed different. We tried from the beginning to share the responsibilities of organization and planning, to decide among us who would do what work and why. Supervision was by the group as a whole, not by me or the social worker. Differences in experience were acknowledged and appreciated, but everyone's opinion was valued. Each person had his or her own potentially enriching perspective. All decisions about membership in the seminar, assignment of families, readings, coordination of activities, fees, and participation in the work of the Runaway House were made in the seminar and by consensus.

The first months of our work with families were chaotic. Most seminar members, like the Runaway House counselors, were confused, angered, and depressed by their initial meetings with families. How, they asked, in a variety of ways, can I make sense of everything that is going on: the multiple and contradictory versions of a single episode, the bizarre mixtures of hurtfulness and caring with which family members treat one another, the shouting and crying, the shifting alliances.

Some seminar members tried, according to personal inclinations and previous reading, to fit families to the Procrustean bed of highly elaborated "systems" theories or to fix the psychodynamics of each individual family member. Some, opening themselves to the family, felt overwhelmed or infested by their emotions. Others retreated into a silence that was meant to protect them. Still others could see the family only through ideological lenses; they focused almost exclusively on the prison-like cruelty and hypocrisy of the nuclear family, on its degrading sexism.

We struggled in these early months to see both individuals and family, to feel the oppressiveness of the parents' conventional attitudes without dismissing the humanity of those who voiced these attitudes. Over and over we returned from flights of speculation about family dynamics and psychodynamics—our equivalent, I once fantasied, to the family's rules and recriminations—to the experience of being with a particular family. Slowly we tried to piece together the details of family history and of communication in sessions, to help the counselors understand the part they played in the family's life.

Again and again, family counselors came to the seminar overwhelmed by the air of crisis that seemed to pervade the act of running away, by the jeopardy to the child if reconciliation were impossible—the threats of permanent separation, the sanctions that angry parents and an insensitive penal system might bring to bear. Over and over we had to slow the counselors down, to help them to disentangle themselves from the web of family concerns, to help them work backward toward registering these concerns without becoming ensnared by them. Only then could the counselors return them, clarified, to the family. Counselors, as well as parents and children, had to come to see the act of running away as an intelligible event in the life of the

whole family, not an objectified and isolated happening, a crime or a catastrophe or an aberration.

THE FAMILIES WE HAVE WORKED WITH

As the Runaway House counselors became increasingly conscious of the possibility of seeing and understanding the runaway child in the context of his or her family, as the seminar was able to provide people to work with them, we discovered large numbers of families who were open to working with us.

During the year before the family seminar began, counselors at Runaway House had met with approximately 15 to 20 families, usually for only one session. During the first year of the seminar, counselors from the seminar, working in pairs, saw 42 families. In the second year we saw 82 families; 23 for one session, 44 for two to six sessions, and 15 for more than six sessions.

About half of these families had had some kind of previous counseling. Many had gone voluntarily to see ministers and school guidance counselors as well as social workers, psychologists and psychiatrists. Others, mostly poor and black, had been ordered by courts to do so. Those who had had previous therapy had generally found it unhelpful, trivial, insulting, or somehow "not quite the right thing."

Young people wanted to work with us because they saw the counselors—in contrast to therapists and adults in general—as supportive of their struggles to be heard and respected in their families. Most of their parents were more wary. They agreed to work with us because their children, who had almost unanimously disliked previous therapists, wanted to and because they saw counseling as one, if not the only, way to try to get their child back home.

Generally the young person's Runaway House counselor was present at the first or first few sessions. The Runaway House counselor was there for support in what was often a frightening confrontation at a time when it was easy for the young person either to close off completely from her or his parents or reenmesh herself or himself hopelessly in repetitive and futile arguments. The counselor has been able to provide both support for the runaway's perspective and ballast during the often stormy initial meetings. After the first few sessions, the Runaway House counselor generally stops coming. By then the young person, as well as the family as a whole, is accustomed to the family counselors and their perspective on "family problems."

Sessions are usually held at nearby churches rather than at the Runaway House: young people frequently experience their parents' presence in Runaway House as an intrusion and their parents often find the House—with its confusion, shabby furniture, and grafitti-covered walls—to be a disquieting reminder of a youth culture that angers and frightens them. Not infrequently, sessions are held in a family's home. These visits are helpful in understanding how a family's home life feels; in some cases—because of lack of transporta-

tion or money or a family's fears of coming into the city—they provide the only possible ground on which counseling can proceed.

Sessions have no time limit or specified frequency. Most often the first few sessions last for two or three hours, later ones for from one to two hours. They generally occur once a week but may be more frequent in times of crisis or less frequent if either counselors or family want it that way. Some families stop and start counseling several times. Sometimes one group of family members will come, sometimes another. The counselors make no rigid rules about who is to come or how often or for how long. Counseling continues for as long as the family—and the counselors—find it worthwhile. Families who wish to pay are asked for a small donation to Runaway House; others are not solicited for a fee. All of these matters are open to discussion, to question.

Over the first year-and-a-half we evolved an outline of a "way-of-looking-at-family sessions" that reflected an attitude toward family counseling and a procedure for facilitating and understanding the counselor's relationship with the family. The language and style of this "way" (which is presented, condensed, in the following paragraphs) are informal, intended to mirror an evolution of understanding based on shared experience rather than a guiding—or limiting—theory.

The counselors begin by identifying themselves as members of an on-going seminar in family counseling, paraprofessionals with experience of young people who have run away and of their families. They thus state without exaggeration or self-deprecation their real experience and qualifications. They note that the family has come together for the session but that they are committed neither to reuniting child with parents nor to separation; family members must make these decisions. The counselors are there to learn about, and then help the family understand, what is happening.

The counselors then ask, "What is going on?" and listen to what the family says and how the various members say it. Who speaks? Who responds? Amplifies? Contradicts? To which family member is what said? Who speaks to which counselor?

Almost always this discussion focuses on why the young people have run from home. It is filled with confusion, questions, anger, incomprehension, sadness, and often with a feeling of futility. In addition to seeing and hearing, to finding patterns of behavior and interaction, the counselors try to feel what it is like to be in the room with this family—participant-observers in, and of their world—what thoughts, emotions, and impulses are aroused in the counselors themselves.

After the family has played out or reproduced its current situation, the counselors may (a) ask more questions about it or (b) point out the patterns of relating they have seen or (c) reveal the feelings it has aroused in them or (d) try to get more sense of how the present episode of running away, with its attendant causes and repercussions, fits into the history of the family. Whichever of these approaches the counselors choose depends on and alters the re-

lationship developing between them and the family, as well as on the family's situation itself. None is necessarily "right," but all tend to help family members find a broader context for this particular episode of running away.

Throughout the first and subsequent sessions, the counselors try at once to understand and be helpful to the family. They have become a part of the situation, people who can help plan for temporary placements, who may offer to meet with probation officers or make medical referrals, but they also must try to understand how the concrete help they give alters the situation and the family's attitude toward the counseling. They must take seriously the episode of running away and its meaning to each of the family members and be willing to discuss and plan the details of a runaway's placement. At the same time, they must be able to share and interpret the feelings of frustration that arise when a family or some of its members becomes fixated on the fact of running away, when parents use their anxieties about the runaway's safety—or conversely, when the runaway flaunts his or her vulnerability—to prevent placement.

As counselors and family members grow more relaxed with one another, the counselors may find it helpful to share their own feelings with the family. Discussions between counselors, or among counselors and family, about difficulties or anxieties encountered, may provide family members with examples of open dialogue as well as reflections of their behavior. The counselors' continual struggle for clarity about what they are doing in the sessions, their willingness to "risk" being less than sure can provide reference points and models for the family's own growth. At the same time, the counselors try to remember that the family—and each of its members—must make its own decisions and choices, even if those choices are to refuse to participate or to change.

The examples that follow illustrate the range of young people and their families whom we have seen, the kinds of problems they present, the extent, but not the details, of our contact with them, and the way the young people have made use of the SAJA community.

Sally

In her first two days at the House, Sally seemed restrained and quiet. While other young people went off to Georgetown to "truck around" or panhandle, she stayed close to the House. She came in long before the 12 o'clock curfew but stayed up much later, curled on the living room sofa, "thinking about things."

Only when she had tested the counselors in many ways—refusing to give her last name, checking carefully with other young people to see if their confidences had been betrayed—only when she was sure they would not tell her parents, was she able to confide in them. She thought she was pregnant. Neither she nor her boyfriend had "used anything"; her period, ordinarily regular, had been absent for the last two months.

A Runaway House counselor took her to the Free Clinic for a pregnancy test; and when it proved positive, they discussed her "options" with her.

Sally wanted the baby. What scared her was what her parents would think and do. She explained that they were very strict in their morals and behavior. Her father owned a hardware store in a rural Maryland town; her mother was preoccupied with raising seven children, of whom Sally was the second oldest. Her parents thought of her—scrubbed and pretty and polite—as a "good girl." She had always done well in school. Now as a junior, she played on the girls' basketball team, was a member of the Pep Club. She worried that her parents would be "shocked," that they would throw her out of the house. Certainly they would be ashamed of her condition. Still, she wasn't ready to leave home or marry and was herself shocked by the idea of an abortion.

After a few days she decided to call her parents; at her Runaway House counselor's suggestion, she asked them to come to a meeting with two family counselors.

For half an hour the counselors listened while Sally, who sat far away from her parents, next to and even a little behind her Runaway House counselor, evaded her parents' baffled questions. What had they done, they wondered. "Nothing," she answered.

With a final pleading look at her counselor, Sally told her parents about the pregnancy. At first her mother was frantic—hurt and surprised and angry. Why had Sally done this to them. Why hadn't she told them? Her father shook his head, his mouth tight. Sally cried softly and was defiant. It didn't sound to her, she said, "like you care about the baby. If you don't want me or my baby. . . ."

Sally's older sister scolded, but her younger brother and sister were pleased. It would be "nice," they said, "to have a baby in the house." Then everyone was talking at once, crying, arguing, pleading. The counselors had the sense of the whole family assimilating the fact of their daughter's pregnancy, of question and answer and argument as prelude to reconciliation.

When the counselors asked Sally, at the end of two hours, where she was going to go, her mother answered for her, "You're still my daughter. You come home if you want." Sally asked if they could have another family session "in case things don't work out so well." Her parents agreed but wondered if it could be somewhere closer to home. They felt uneasy in Washington, "out of our element," and bewildered by the traffic. The counselors agreed to meet them a week later at a suburban church half way between the District and their home.

In the second session Sally sat between her younger brother and sister. They joked among themselves until her mother spoke. "We're all relieved," she began, "that Sally is home where we can look after her." Sally nodded her head and agreed. It was good to be home. Sally and her parents expressed pleasure that the counselors had agreed to meet them "half way."

The counselors commented on the unity and good feeling that seemed to have evolved in the last week. How did the father feel now about Sally's

pregnancy? Why did they all suppose Sally was so worried about their reaction?

They answered indirectly, not looking at the counselors but at one another. Mr. Latham guessed that Sally knew how concerned he was about the neighbors and how his daughter's pregnancy would affect his standing in town. He had worked so hard to get where he was, remembered so vividly being looked down upon by "the better people." He smiled at his own desire to be socially acceptable. "We'll do all right," he concluded. "We'll stick together." Mother recalled with a blush that it was not unusual for the women in her family to become pregnant before marriage. It had happened to Sally's aunt, to a grandmother, and to several cousins. "Those children—and to tell the truth," laughing again, "I was one of them—seem to have turned out all right." At the end of the session, the Lathams agreed that they wouldn't need more counseling, but both Sally and her mother asked for the phone number, "just in case."

Two months later Sally called to say "hello" and to tell her counselors that things at home were "fine." She was out of school for a while, working in the store, helping out with her brothers and sisters. She planned with her parents' approval—"They kind of like the idea of having a grandchild"—to keep the baby at home; after "a year or two" she would go back to school. Since then there has been no word from Sally or her parents; as far as we know, no other episodes of running away have occurred.

Rick

Rick came to Runaway House at 17, a gangly, blond boy who seemed always to be inserting himself in the middle of things: interrupting conversations, shouting at meetings, reaching for food on other people's plates. He spoke to the Runaway House counselors of voices that told him to leave home and find "a new direction" and of hospitalizations for "schizophrenia." About a week before he left home he had stopped going to school, had lain on the living room couch, watching television. His parents, a "middle-manager" and a government secretary, were about to call the hospital when he left.

For a week Rick refused to contact his parents. He floated from Runaway House to Other House to the job co-op. He engaged dozens of people in conversations, worked a few hours to make pocket money, had sexual experiences with men and women whom he met on the street.

Rick explained to his Runaway House counselor that his older brother was a "mental patient," that his parents thought he too was "crazy." The Thomases were convinced that both of their sons had some biochemical abnormality and insisted that both of them eat special diets and take large doses of vitamins. Rick "didn't know if [he] was crazy or not," but he was pretty sure that being at home made him feel worse. He thought that if the counselors met his parents they would understand why.

After ten days, Rick's Runaway House counselor and two family counselors met with him, his brother, and his parents. The Thomases were attractive, bright, and engaging, relentlessly reasonable even in the face of both their sons' obvious distress. Rick spoke at confused length about needing to leave home, to keep his mind "from being destroyed." Howard, two years older, mumbled darkly about the disharmony between vibrations from the television set and those from the air conditioning.

Sitting side by side, Mr. and Mrs. Thomas smiled at their sons. They discoursed at good-natured length about hypoglycemia and vitamin deficiencies. When one of the counselors protested against this medical definition of their sons' problems, they produced copies of scholarly papers to substantiate their points. Family counseling, they maintained, was "a useless way to approach a biochemical problem." Still they agreed to come to a second session.

Rick came to the second meeting reluctantly, resentfully. He had been "doing his own thing," and was terrified lest his parents "kill" him by convincing him to come home. During the session he said that he wanted to be "somewhere else," but he was not sure where. He claimed that his parents never listened to him. When they insisted that they did, he became incoherently furious. While Rick shouted, harangued, and giggled, his parents smiled patiently. The counselors pointed out the impasse between Rick and his parents, the way that both incoherent protest and determined "understanding" foiled communication.

Rick began again. He felt good being at Runaway House. He knew some of the people didn't like some of the things he did, but at least they said so. He had to admit he liked them even when they got mad. At least he knew where they were at. Still he knew he couldn't stay much longer at Runaway House and doubted that he wanted to live in any of the group foster homes—"too many people, too many hassles, too intense. I have to move on, to be myself." Rick's parents repeated that he needed psychiatric treatment. "After all," they said to the counselors, as if reasonable people could not disagree, "Rick is acting strange—even his talk about moving on is clearly unrealistic, fantasy-laden."

At the end of the session the counselors pointed out the mutual exclusiveness of Rick's point of view and his parents': Rick saw their "treatment" as murderous; they saw his refusal to accede to it as evidence that he needed treatment. Still, a decision had to be made.

Rick took up the challenge. Over the next week, while his parents gathered medical evidence, he contacted an aunt on the West Coast. He remembered her as "sympathetic," her farm as a place where he could "fit in," one where he could just be alone for long hours each day. If she was willing to have him, he would go there for the summer.

At the third session Mr. and Mrs. Thomas tried to argue him out of it. They said they trusted Rick's aunt but were concerned because she didn't "know about psychiatric problems," wouldn't keep him on his diet. Finally, reluctantly, they agreed to let him try.

Four months later the Runaway House counselors received a post card from Rick. Things were fine out West. His parents had visited him and were going to let him stay to finish high school. "No diet!" he concluded, "No vitamins!"

Ellen

Ellen Miller had a soft, pale face, green eyes that moved quickly around the room, then rested on you. When you were with her, she seemed to search your words as if looking for some meaning deeper than speech.

The counselors at Runaway House liked Ellen but were impatient with her and puzzled by her. She insisted that she wanted to leave home, that she couldn't stand it there, but almost every day she returned to confront her mother's stony silence, her father's cruel taunts about her clothes and her friends. And Ellen seemed to make it harder too, as if she were ensuring her parent's rejection. She arrived home at 9:00 p.m. when she said she would be there for dinner; she couldn't refrain from questioning her parents about their prejudices against blacks and drugs and hippies. It appeared to the counselors that she wanted her parents to love her even as she acted to make them angry. She seemed to need their approval for a decision to leave home that she knew they opposed.

Ellen told the family counselor whom the Runaway House counselors called in for consultation that three years before she had been committed to a psychiatric hospital. She had been staying out late at night, smoking marijuana, hanging around with young people whom her parents considered "undesirable." Her behavior "embarrassed" her father, an Army non-commissioned officer; he had her declared "beyond control" and committed. In the hospital where she was confined for nine months, Ellen was diagnosed as having "an acting-out disorder of adolescence."

Two years later, after a year at home, endless battles with her parents, and arrests for loitering, truancy, and drug use, another psychiatrist revised Ellen's diagnosis. Just prior to her second hospitalization, he found loose associations, autistic preoccupations, auditory hallucinations—the signs and symtoms of schizophrenia. In the hospital, Ellen was forced to take large doses of tranquilizing drugs; to keep her from running away, she was restricted to the ward for long periods of time. Her parents came dutifully to family sessions that Ellen refused to attend; she did not trust the doctors who treated her with drugs that made it hard to think or even stay awake.

Out of the hospital again, Ellen returned to live with her parents. She felt she "had to get things straight" with them. She told her father that she felt bad about embarrassing him but insisted on knowing why he had put her away. She asked her parents, with an ingenuousness which must have shamed and infuriated them, if they had sacrificed her freedom to her father's job. She urged her mother and father to be more loving toward one another, to

try to look at people and things from her perspective, to understand, for example, that it was not really wrong for her to sleep with a boy she loved.

Arguments escalated. In between them, her parents were cold and silent. Ellen began to stay out late at night again. Once when she came home at 2:00 a.m. she was "interrogated all night" by her father. When she fell asleep in a chair, he threw water in her face. She ran to Runaway House, stayed for a few days, and then returned home. Another psychiatrist was called in. The diagnosis of schizophrenia was made once again, tranquilizers prescribed, hospitalization recommended. Ellen ran away. This time she asked the Runaway House counselors to find her another place to live.

While at Runaway House, Ellen visited the group foster homes, had dinner with the people who lived in them, hung around for awhile to get the feel of them. After a week, she decided she wanted to live in one. Before she could live there, before the county welfare agency would supply the money necessary for placement, she had to have her parents' approval. When, at the family counselor's suggestion, Ellen called her parents, they were at once annoyed at the inconvenience of a family session and pleased at her request.

Ellen's poor directions (she told her parents to come to St. Francis' rather than St. Dominic's Church) and her late arrival precipitated the argument that occupied the first hour of the session. The older Millers were stiff, unyielding, and self-righteous, "fed up" with their child, her "promises" and her "attitudes." Under the impact of their anger, Ellen became progressively more confused and tearful. She lost her words in mid-sentence, repeated herself, turned helplessly to her counselor.

"If Ellen cannot obey our rules," her father concluded, "and there is no reason to think that she will, she cannot come home." Ellen summoning her dignity, replied that she would not obey rules that seemed insulting and arbitrary.

When the family counselor observed that no compromise seemed possible, that, in effect, Ellen had not lived at home for three years and neither she nor her parents really wanted her home, all three of the Millers protested. It was "wrong," said Mr. and Mrs. Miller for a 16-year old to be away from home. Ellen admitted that she was afraid that if she left home she "wouldn't be their daughter."

The argument continued. The older Millers wanted Ellen to do the "right thing" by obeying them. Ellen wanted them to believe that the right thing for her was to leave. Everybody wanted to do the right thing, but Ellen and her parents disagreed irreconcilably about what the right thing was.

Every time the session seemed about to end, Ellen or her mother or father would begin the argument again. When the family counselor observed that their angry words seemed to be their last common bond, they all smiled. Yes, that was true, and they could agree on it too.

The family counselor stated the obvious: Ellen and her parents could not work things out in one session; at the present time living together seemed doomed to failure; changes in their relationship would undoubtedly take

time. Since none of them really wanted to live together, perhaps the change would be most likely to happen if they lived apart. He then asked Ellen and her parents to talk about where Ellen could go. When Ellen brought up the group foster home, the Runaway House counselor helped her describe it to her parents and offered to introduce the Millers to the counselors there and to help them with the court action that would necessarily precede Ellen's placement.

Mr. and Mrs. Miller agreed. The group foster home seemed like a better idea than another mental hospital. Certainly it was better than the constant fighting that took place at home.

After three weeks more at Runaway House, Ellen went to live in the group foster home. She lived there for a year before she moved out to her own apartment. Though she was sometimes anxious, bewildered, and unhappy, I never saw evidence of the "schizophrenia" for which she was about to be hospitalized. In the house she was something of a loner. Sometimes she stayed away for a few days at a time, but she told the counselors where she was. The other people in the house respected her independence though sometimes they teased her about her self-righteousness. At the house, she enjoyed the weekly house groups at which people talked over their individual, as well as communal problems.

Out of the house now, she is doing office work and organizing with a group that advocates for young people's rights. She is thinking of getting her high school equivalency diploma and of going to college to study psychology and sociology. She periodically visits her parents who are soon being transferred away from the Washington area. Recently her mother told her that her younger brother is becoming a "problem."

Benjy

When he first came to Runaway House almost two years ago, Benjy was 13, a slight, dark, tough-talking boy who "couldn't hack it any more at home." During the previous eight months he had often been truant from school. More recently he had run away from home three times—once for a weekend, twice for a single night—to friends' houses. Benjy hung out till late at night, smoked grass, took "downers." On weekends he came home long after his parents were asleep. Twice he had been arrested, once for possession of marijuana and once for shoplifting.

He told the Runaway House counselor that his father was a night watchman, a sick old man. His mother was a "boozer" who worked irregularly. His father nagged him to do well in school, to get ahead, to make friends. "Don't be like us," his parents constantly warned. Benjy's older brother, Dwight, had left school the year before. Now he hung around home and watched TV all day. When irritated, he slapped Benjy around, threatened darkly to "really work you over." His younger brother Maurie was "doing OK, I guess; nobody gets on him."

After a few days, Benjy went home to "give it another try." A month later he returned to Runaway House. He reported, less sure of himself now, that things had gotten worse at home. His father's health was declining. The nagging had increased. His parents fought continuously; the sound of their voices startled him awake in the middle of the night. Dwight had escalated his threats and teasing. The week before Benjy and a friend had broken into a house "just to fool around"; arrested, he had been menaced at training school, held overnight at a detention center.

The day after he arrived at Runaway House Benjy agreed to a family meeting: "Nothing else is working."

In the first few sessions Mrs. Levine alternately pleaded with Benjy to come home and threatened to have him locked up again. "A boy should be with his parents"; "How can you want to live with strangers?"; You can't be trusted outside of the house"; "You'll become a criminal"; "Your father is sick," his mother concluded, "and what do you do, you act like a bum." Mr. Levine was quiet and thoughtful. "Your education, Benjy" he said several times, "Your education is what worries me." Benjy sat hunched over in stubborn silence while his mother's words rained on him. At the end of the session he told his parents he couldn't live with them.

Slowly, irritably, the Levines became resigned to Benjy's living apart from them. They had to admit he was doing pretty well at Runaway House. He looked happier when they saw him at family sessions; he was going to a new school and making friends. Their anxiety and their sense of betrayal yielded slowly to their genuine concern for their son.

In his first weeks at Runaway House, Benjy rarely spoke with his parents outside of family sessions. Once he was accepted in Other House, however, he began to call them often. After a few months he was going home to visit on weekends. Away from the snare of their arguments and their expectations, he seemed able to express his affection and concern for them.

Initially the Levines had accepted family counseling because it might bring Benjy home; they looked forward to the sessions "because Benjy will be there." Within several months, however, they had come to depend on them. The counselors felt as if they were being "taken into the family." They were to be the children ("You're like a daughter to me." Mrs. Levine said to one of them in the fifth session) who could give the Levines the support and understanding that their biological offspring, struggling confusedly to be independent, could not.

Having people who listened to her, who appreciated her pain and cares, seemed important to Mrs. Levine. Instead of drowning her grievances in alcohol, she tried to save them up for family sessions. When she did drink, she would call up one of the family counselors. Mr. Levine became reflective. In one session he recalled that he himself had run away from home at 15, that after a month he had returned. "It was a mistake to go home," he said ruefully, "The biggest mistake of my life. I got in a rut and never got out."

With the counselors to "depend on," both of the Levines could loosen their anxious grip on their children.

After four months Benjy was placed as a foster child in a commune not far from Runaway House and Other House. He still lives there, more than a year later, with two men and two women in their twenties. He feels close to them, particularly to one of the men. One of the family counselors meets with Benjy and others in the commune and discusses whatever problems come up. Benjy is still in school and drops in at Runaway House occasionally.

The Levines have continued to come to family counseling sessions. For more than a year they had time and energy only to deal with the crises of health and economics that seemed every few weeks to beset them. Slowly the counselors have helped them to learn to "depend on" themselves and other people. During an exacerbation of Mr. Levine's illness, the family counselors encouraged Mrs. Levine to look to a few friends and relatives for support; together they and the children and the family counselors planned for Mr. Levine's convalescence. Instead of continually trying to "prove himself," to push himself beyond his endurance, Mr. Levine is struggling to make peace with his illness.

Now, in sessions, the Levines are embarked on the terribly difficult task of learning, perhaps for the first time, to see one another as "people," to find and appreciate the affection that has sustained them in the thirty-year quarrel of their marriage.

Meanwhile, Dwight, who has never come to sessions, seems to be summoning his own energies to leave the house; he has a girlfriend and has begun to look for work. With Benjy gone, the Levines sometimes turn the force of their aspiration on Maurie, the youngest. But now in sessions they are able to learn from his protests against their behavior, to smile sheepishly at the way they "expect so much," at how they "take things out on him."

CHANGING PERSPECTIVES

All our work with families is reviewed in weekly two-hour meetings of the seminar. In a typical session two counselors may "present" a new family, and several others may pose questions about their ongoing work with other families. In addition, meetings among three or four counselors to discuss particular families are arranged to deal with difficult or baffling situations. All of us try to be available in a crisis to help out with a family, to provide fresh perspectives and emotional support for the counselors. Sometimes this involves impromptu meetings or phone calls; occasionally, with a family's permission, a third counselor is invited as an "outside observer" to a family session. We often have the feeling with families who are seen over a period of time that all of us are counseling with them.

Our work together has slowly given rise to certain shared perspectives that in turn inform our ongoing counseling. The more we get to know the young people, the clearer it becomes that the physical act of running away is often

only the outward and visible manifestation of an inner withdrawal that has long been under way. Many young people, like Ellen and Benjy, spend gradually increasing amounts of time away from home before they finally "run away." Others disappear while they are physically present, "tune out," with or without drugs, while the activity of the house goes on around them. Many young people who eventually run away have spent the previous weeks or months sitting in their rooms stoned; tripping or down or speeding, they were already somewhere else. The Beatles' song is appropriate: "She's leaving home/After living alone/For so many years."

We have come to understand that running away is often a desperate assertion of selfhood on the part of a young person, the undeniable protest of an objectified child against familial constraints, attributions, and confusions. Like Sally, Ellen, and Benjy, many young people no longer can be, or wish to be, the "good" (sexless, conforming, hypocritical) child their parents seem to insist on. Others—Ellen and Rick and Benjy are all examples—resent being defined and treated as mentally ill or delinquent. In running away the young person is escaping as much from familial definition as he or she is from physical control. It is this definition that they describe and experience as murderous and prisonlike. Again and again the young people who come to Runaway House repeat the same phrases: "I couldn't be myself"; "They were killing me"; "They kept pushing me into a corner."

Running away ruptures the family circle. It denies, at least for a time, socially sanctioned definitions, the power of parents over children. The runaway is no longer the child-object-thing. He or she is active, a subject who leaves, who defines his or her own experience.

The act of running away communicates this subjectivity and independence in a powerful way. It is impossible for parents, even if they deny the importance and meaning of the behavior, not to know that their child is missing. Whether they accuse the child of betrayal, belabor themselves with guilt, or are secretly pleased, they feel the loss and uncertainty. The balance in the struggle between parents and child has shifted. Even if they may "wash their hands" of their children, the parents are, for the moment, helpless. Even though its confirmation may be only in their imagination, the young people have the feeling that their absence has rendered their parents helpless.

Sometimes, in the early sessions with the family, counselors are able to help the young person articulate the content of the protest that has been expressed in the running away, to help the parents and other siblings to hear its meaning. More often, they must begin by simply creating a safe place for the family to be together in all its mystified contrariness. Slowly the counselors try to help the family members find a common language of understanding in which habitual, often incoherent, quarrels can become mutually intelligible.

Sometimes, as with Ellen's family, formal counseling lasts for only one session, understanding for just a moment. We have learned to value that moment, as an example of the possibility of communication and closeness,

one that may later be referred to and enlarged upon. Sometimes, as with Rick's family, there is only the sharpening of conflict; here the session pr vides a safe place for disagreements, the opportunity to clarify them. he family discovers that impasses may be broken, that choices are possible, that differences do not necessarily spell disaster.

With increasing experience, counselors have grown more comfortable in sessions, more relaxed about the runaway's immediate situation and its relationship to the life of the family as a whole. Slowly we have begun to understand the particular episode of running away in the context of the family's history over many years and generations and of its economic and social situation.

In summing up our activities at the end of the seminar's second year, we noted that most of the families we had seen either were, or seemed, socially marginal. Many of the parents lacked both close friends and close ties to an extended family. They saw themselves as obedient to social norms rather than participants in creating them. With frightening consistency these parents tried to shape their children's lives to fit ideals and ideas that had haunted their own childhoods, to make them behave in accordance with the demands of a social world from which they themselves were isolated, one that often had treated them badly.

As we grew to understand that the parents' angry and confused imprecations were reflections of their own bewilderment and betrayal, that they often tried to order their own lives by controlling their children's, we found we could be less judgmental and more helpful to all the family members. The distance the child had run away from home turned out to be no greater than the alienation of the parents.

We had to understand that the Lathams' concern for Sally's "appearance" was shaped by pressures on them to be, and appear to be, "respectable." The Millers' angry preoccupation with the shameful and threatening aspects of Ellen's behavior—with what other people would do and say—made sense in the context of their vulnerable position as a low-rank Army couple, as part of the heritage of having grown up "white trash" in a rigid and judgmental Southern town. In order not to dismiss Mr. Levine's preoccupation with Benjy's education, we had to understand his own situation. He grew up virtually illiterate among Jews who valued education; he suffered from being a failure and desperately wanted his son not to be one. To understand the difference between his calm acceptance and his wife's agitation, we had to realize that he may have hoped that Benjy would stay away. He half suspected that the only way for his son to escape from a drowning family was to run from it, to take the step that he had not.

Concurrently, as trust developed among seminar members, we grew more able to discuss our own reactions to the family, to help one another with the anxieties that kept us from being open to, and helpful with, their concerns.

For one of the counselors to work effectively with Rick's family, she had to discuss, in the seminar, the weight of psychiatric authority in her own life: For several years she had been labeled and treated and locked up as mentally ill. Only when she could accept—not argue anxiously, as if her own fate were at stake—the Thomases' opinion about the biochemical basis of mental illness, could she help them to understand its place in their relationship with Rick. Her work was to help all of them to understand the consequences of their theories, not to prove them right or wrong. Before another counselor could work effectively with Ellen's family, he had to come to terms with his own anger at her father's rigidity, with the annoyance and confusion that her father's cold logic—reminding him of his own father's—called up in him.

Over the last two and a half years the seminar has become a kind of family. More than half the original members are still present; many of the others have been with us for as long as two years. At monthly dinners we speak about the future of our work, discuss readings that interest us, and share personal experiences. We celebrate holidays together with traditional foods, visit in each other's homes, are available to one another in personal, as well as work-related, crises.

At the same time, stimulated by our work with families, strengthened by the new family of the seminar, many of us have become more interested in our own biological families. Seminar members who haven't seen their parents in years have contacted them, visited their homes, and begun to reestablish continuity with a history they had denied or rejected.

The anxiety experienced in this effort has helped keep us from being judgmental about the struggles of runaways and their families. The pleasure of moments of closeness, the enrichment of recovering a piece of history or a feeling lost for many years, has made all of us more hopeful about eventual possibilities for reconciliation, about simply helping parents and children who cannot now be close to "keep an open mind" about one another. We share these experiences with each other and try to understand them together. In addition, we have made more formal attempts to understand our own families and their effects on us: Several people have "presented" their families to the seminar; others have brought relatives in to visit.

Our perspectives in the seminar are continuously shaped and amplified by the community in which we work. Much of what we are able to do with families is made possible by the facilities we have and by those we have improvised and created to fill the needs of the people we see. Runaway House and Other House provide continual support for all the young people I've described. They are separate places from which young people may draw strength in their dealings with their parents, where they may feel secure while they explore the alternatives for more permanent living situations.

The group foster homes and the foster-placement program offer viable alternatives to both parents and children for a more permanent placement. Their very existence makes unnecessary the extremes of "home on our (par-

ents') terms" or "you have to be locked up." Neither the runaways nor their families—nor, indeed the family counselors—need feel compelled to make decisions immediately or to "settle things once and for all."

The whole SAJA community and the neighborhood that surrounds it provides a matrix in which people like Rick and Ellen and Benjy and Sally can be sustained and supported while they work out plans for their future and their relationships with their family. What elsewhere is labeled and dismissed as sick or deviant or delinquent is accepted and dealt with here.

In recent months the seminar has broadened its concerns to include the "new families" that have been established by young people who have come to Runaway House and who have lived in Other House and the group foster homes. Seminar members have begun to work with the couples and the communes that they have formed, with the children they are beginning to bring up, as well as the foster families with whom they have been placed. We have also begun to reach out from SAJA to other groups in the communities that surround us. Some seminar members have been helping other runaway houses start family counseling programs. Others have worked with parents' groups in local schools. We have consulted with mental health clinics and probation departments that are concerned with their inability to "reach young people."

CONCLUSION

The creation of SAJA's family counseling program reflected both the failure of communities and traditional social service agencies to provide support and help to young people and their families and the success of Runaway House in dealing with those young people who had already left their homes. At the same time it represented a step in the evolution of the counter culture and its alternative services, a willingness to deal on a micro-social level with the kinds of problems that originally precipitated the development of the counter culture—denial of the rights of young people, fragmentation of communities, dehumanization of personal relations, generational conflict.

At its best the work that seminar members do represents a blending of the close, phenomenological analysis and introspective self-criticism of a therapeutic tradition and the interpersonal openness, political analysis, and structural flexibility of the counter culture.

The structure and philosophy of Runaway House and of SAJA—a functioning living and working community—give concrete support to runaway young people in times of crisis and transition and to their counselors as workers. The family seminar is part of that community, evolving with it and helping to shape its evolution. The non-hierarchical structure of the seminar, its openness to criticism and change, the trust and intimacy that have developed among its members all reflect both the growth of the larger SAJA community and are in turn reflected in the way individual counselors work with families.

Like the children who have fled to Runaway House, the families of runaways are accepted on their terms. In place of the condescending and categorizing attitudes with which mental health professionals often armor themselves, the family counselors try to remain open to, and respectful of, the uniqueness of each family, willing to work with them in whatever way makes mutual sense, self-critically sensitive to their own tendencies to judge.

In counseling sessions, they apply the lessons of ongoing seminar discussions, admitting to subjectivity, risking intimacy and vulnerability. In reaching out to people who are often isolated and mystified in their communities, blindly trapped in the net of their family relationships, the family counselors transmit both the hope that fills their own community and its model for change.

Bibliography

Over the last two and one-half years seminar members have read a number of books and articles relating to understanding and working with families. Some of these have been discussed in meetings; others simply form a base of knowledge and shared understanding on which we draw in our work with families.

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