

The Clash and the two Bobs

An interview with Graeme Tiffany and Howard Williamson during the Youth Work Convention

Interviewed by Tena Prelec and Darko Markovic



1. If you would pick one metaphor or an image to define youth work, what would it be?

G.T. - I would change the word 'one' in the question. Because if you try to make one image of it, you start to kill the thing itself. I believe youth work has to be fundamentally determined by young people. And I don't know if I could do it in a kind of a picture, but I am really attracted to the ideas of uncertainty and messiness. It is a good kind of uncertainty. It is a celebration of uncertainty. That's what I've started to think good youth work is.

H.W. - A stray dog. A dog that doesn't seem to have a home. A dog eager to find a home, but not sure if this home should be in relation to wider society and the government, or if its home should be with young people. Where it used to be is with young people, but the place to feed it is the government. Yet, governments increasingly want it to do just one thing, which is, as I put it, 'fetch and carry': go and find the excluded kids, go and find the challenging behaviour, anti-social behaviour, and that kind of controlling agenda, which is actually not what youth work is about.

Our primary duty, as youth workers, is to establish solidarity with young people. And that means we have to be the advocates of young people and we have to promote their self-advocacy. Graeme

2. In today's world, do young people need more autonomy or security?

G.T. - Young people need autonomy and security. I always remember my French colleague's joke: 'Which would you rather have - a good book of philosophy or a potato?' The answer was: 'I would rather have both' and everybody laughs. And I laugh, because this is a beautiful response to a question that tries to take you in one direction. I think the autonomy and security are two sides of a coin. And I would do both at the same time.

I talk about autonomy as a social practice. Security can mean safety, but it can also mean something quite oppressive. I learnt a lot from my French colleagues about words which make more sense in French than in English. There is a beautiful word *proximité*. In English it means only to be close and not more; in French it means something like solidarity. And when we say *la sécurité* this creates a kind of identification with this social reality that I am not happy with.

H.W. - There are different groups of young people. Kids who are already included will always ask for more autonomy. That's what they want, they want space, they want direction, and they want resources to do their own thing. But disadvantaged young people, those coming from pretty difficult backgrounds, want greater certainties in their life, about education, about employment, sometimes about their own safety.

So it's not about autonomy or security: 'discipline without freedom is tyranny, and freedom without discipline is anarchy'. It is about finding a path between the two.

'HOLD YOUR HEAD'
(WRITTEN BY A FRIEND AND AS YET UNRECORDED)
BOB MARLEY - 'REDEMPTION SONG'

It's not about autonomy or security: 'discipline without freedom is tyranny, and freedom without discipline is anarchy'. It is about finding a path between the two. Howard

3. What could be the alternative use of the mosquito box?

G.T. - This is a very good question. It has original uses already. It came originally from the test that we use to test our hearing. Now we use it against people?!

Yesterday I talked about it as one of the interventions that are made to stop 'anti-social behaviour' of young people, and I believe that these interventions are anti-social themselves, they stop people being social!

So, I like to think how we can turn this around and use it for good. I am always interested in pro-social interventions; about what makes something good and what can make people be more social.

H.W. - I would have no alternative use than destroying it.



Graeme Tiffany
Vice-Chair of the UK Federation for Detached Youth Work

VS
Howard Williamson
Professor of European Youth Policy, University of Glamorgan, UK

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4. There was a statement in the convention saying that 'youth work reflects the society it is in'. To what extent do you agree with this?

G.T. - Who decides what society is? Perhaps you can talk about the norms of society. Youth work should reflect the norms of society – that makes a bit more sense to me. Some people may get me wrong on this, but I have always believed that youth workers must be on the authoritarian side. You ought to be as close to the young person as possible, but still on the authoritarian side. Do you understand the difference?

So, you ought to teach young people about the norms of society as they experience them, but in a democratic tradition. You have to teach them that they have power to affect and to change those norms, just like they have the power to affect and to change those laws. And when we get that mosquito box banned that will change the law. And I want to get that done and young people will help us in that campaign.

You cannot have a good society without that kind of critical engagement. So, I actually believe that youth work should be supported precisely to facilitate people's criticisms of the state. If I was organising a good society, I want some mechanism in it to criticise it all the time. You know, for a lot of politicians that's just complete madness, but that's actually what civil society is.

H.W. - Youth work often does indeed reflect the society it lives in.

Societies coming out of troubled, divided histories, they want youth work to provide the means of greater social inclusion, greater integration; whereas countries that have recent histories of democratic inclusion and democratic engagement usually want it to provide emancipation, freedom, liberation, to think differently, to do things differently, to challenge and to test. But it's rather difficult to offer this kind of philosophy to countries that had too many challenges and too many tests in recent years. So I think there is some possibility, looking at youth work, to say – well that's why it dominates in that form in a particular place and dominates in a different form in another place. Whether it should is quite a different matter.

Youth work is an act of faith and not an act of science. And we have to believe.

Howard

LE COUP DE BOULE - 'ZIDANE IL A FRAPPÉ'

5. In your presentation you addressed the issue of inclusion of young people, but the question is whether youth work itself is socially inclusive enough.

G.T. - Of course not. We have to work at cultural level and at political level. Sometimes people get confused about what I say about this, but it is absolutely unethical to live your life through young people's lives. Young people should be at the centre of your project; that's what defines it; that's its essentiality and my job is to help them think about their needs and wants and always think without lots of concepts.

I am particularly interested in breaking the idea that we should have 'youth' participation. Maybe we just need to have participation. It's the same with poverty. Why we have a 'child' poverty strategy? We should have a poverty strategy.

So, I don't like this separatism movement. And at the level of community a lot of work that I do is intergenerational.

H.W. - Something broadly called youth work can be wholly socially inclusive. However, the problem with quite a number of forms of youth work is that they are very patently exclusive. Some of the youth organisations, just by their very structures, rule out many, many people! I had many arguments with youth organisations on that front. You need open space; you need an open door where young people can feel comfortable in making the first approaches. It may be a cultural project, or a social project – and be sure that soon enough they will move on to things that are more structured, more targeted, more assessed, more accredited, more measured. But if you only have youth work that can be measured, then you don't get the young people who really need it most. It's the paradox of voluntary service.



What I would like to see in any resolution on youth work is a commitment towards a decision-making process that is as socially inclusive as possible. What we have to do is to reduce the gap between the ultimate decision makers and young people. Graeme

6. What should be the main competence of youth workers today?

G.T. - I don't use the word competence. We are talking too much about skills and methods. If we go back to the ancient Greeks, somebody could be really good at strangling people, very skilful at killing people quickly, but is it a good skill? You cannot have skills without values. For me the most essential thing is that the youth workers are clear about their values and principles. And that's what we certainly don't work enough on.

I ask my students: 'Tell me why you want to become a youth worker?' The most common answer is 'because I care about young people'. Do you know what I say? 'That's bull****!' I tell you why it is bull****, because you haven't told me what you care about. It's meaningless. You ought to say what you care about. If you cannot answer that question, you should not get involved in this, don't get involved in youth work. You ought to say what you believe in. And they hate me.

I am absolutely confident that's why there are many people who are or can be good workers with almost no training, because they have their values straight.

H.W. - LISTENING – careful listening about issues, but also understanding youth cultural language, making sure that you are tuned in properly. HUMOUR – a damn good sense of humour carries you a long way in relationships with young people. But the most critical thing is ETERNAL PATIENCE – young people will be challenging you, it's difficult, especially if you're working with the most marginalised. Even if sometimes you are inclined to say – 'right, last chance saloon mate, don't wanna ever see you anymore', but they are hard to slash, those nuts, you've got to keep cracking away.

7. How do you see the impact of the global economic crisis on youth work?

G.T. - Who are the first victims? The young people. And it's not fair! And this is the time when a good society or state should step in and protect their interests. Our primary duty, as youth workers, is to establish solidarity with young people. And that means we have to be the advocates of young people and we have to promote their self-advocacy. We have to help them advocate for themselves. We need to stop sitting around, we need to go to other places.

I talk about seeking out difficult conversations with a lot of ministries, police officers; anywhere where anybody listens to young people I'll go. Seek out difficult conversations, because at least it's a conversation. That's what we need to do.

BOB DYLAN - 'BLOWING IN THE WIND'

H.W. - I think it will have a significant effect on public resourcing of youth work. Stable, well-resourced youth work, however, has been until now a story only for some European countries. Many countries, such as Serbia, have already been working in precarious economic circumstances and great uncertainty to do youth work. I think western European youth workers will have to learn lessons from central and eastern European youth workers about how they managed to sustain youth work. And I also think that youth workers may have to look to some of those 1960s youth community models, where you engage with local people: you can't do youth work on fresh air, but you don't necessarily need to have huge public resources to make it happen. And I think that one of the problems of the recent days is that – like everything else in the last few months – people are living in a kind of delusive world: none of these cuts have happened yet, but when they do, it will be really horrible.

CHUMBAWAMBA - 'HOMOPHOBIA'
THE CLASH - LONDON CALLING

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8. What are the main challenges with regards to gaining more political recognition for youth work?

G.T. - The main challenge is, and I heard it in Ghent today, 'politics'. Because when political administrations change, political opinions change.

So, what we have to do is to make the case that the things that we contribute are of value [...] draw a political argument with politicians as well. I say 'don't hold your breath, because you'll look dead' what you have to do is to get on with it. If you are the civil society, don't hold your breath in front of politicians!

For sure, it is worth working on political recognition, but never forget that the first thing you have to do is to work with credibility, and when you work with credibility, and you get the credibility, it is not just you speaking to the politicians, it's everybody. And that's politics also. And if you go to communities where youth workers are doing a good job and the Council says 'we are going to take the youth workers out'. You know what happens? They can't do it. Because the community would kill them. And that's where you've got to be as youth worker.

H.W. - As it says in the declaration, the strength of youth work is diversity, but its weakness is the very fact that it is diverse - and it is very difficult for politicians to understand exactly what it is.

Now, politicians want youth work that delivers on the labour market, on formal education and on complementing formal education; politicians want youth work to be highly connected to wider youth policy. If you can prove that you have done that, and there are youth work projects that claim that and they keep getting funded for serving that aim, then you will get political recognition for that youth work. But some people would argue actually - it's not youth work anymore, it's doing something pretty different, it's a pre-vocational education programme, pre-employment programme or something like this.

I think that it is extremely difficult to find the kinds of criteria that politicians understand to demonstrate the value of youth work. I once said that youth work is an act of faith and not an act of science. And we have to believe. What we have to do is to take youth work to all young people, if we think that it is an important contribution to development, autonomy and maturity.

Sorted-out young adults have had a package of opportunities in their lives. And one of the more rewarding opportunities is a youth work experience of some kind.

Howard

9. One thing you would really like to see in the future EU resolution on youth work.

G.T. - I spoke yesterday about the Open Method of Co-ordination. Some people might think that I said that for political reasons. And perhaps I did but I also did it because I believe it. And what I would like to see in any resolution on youth work is a commitment towards similar kinds of process and that decision-making processes are as socially inclusive as possible, inclusive of the voices of young people, inclusive of the voices of those that work with them and the other stakeholders. And what we have to do is to reduce the gap between the ultimate decision makers and young people, that's the most important thing. So, I am less concerned about the specificity of the things that we talk about, the problems that we see and more concerned about the processes with which we work. You cannot get good outcomes without good processes.

H.W. - I have one simple view on youth policy, which has been my view my whole life and it comes from being a youth work practitioner. 'Sorted out' young adults have had a package of opportunities in their lives. One of the more rewarding is a youth work experience of some kind - an international exchange, involvement in a project, some kind of thing that we would recognise as youth work. Whereas challenging young people in poor communities, from unsupportive families, from shitty old schools, they never have any youth work experiences, they don't want to: they don't want to go somewhere else, they feel comfortable and safe in their own patch. We have to think much harder about how we take that offer to the young people that are clearly not getting very much out of this package. Because if we don't, what we do is increase the youth divide. More included, confident, educated, supported young people will join youth work organisations. Because that's what you do, you join the scouts, or you join the young liberals or you [...] but a shit bag on the street does not even know that those organisations exist!

So, the one thing I would like to see in the resolution is a notion of entitlement for all young people in Europe. What is the minimum entitlement, whether that's formal education, whether that's safety and security in family life or substitute family life, in the public care system, and it would also include youth work. It would also include access and learning about new technologies. Otherwise we will have more and more division between European societies and within European societies.

10. Top songs to include in youth worker training?

G.T. - I will never forget the experience of trying to use music to awaken political sensibility of young people and one of the songs that I used was from band called Chumbawamba and it was called 'Homophobia'. I know that band since they come from my hometown and this is the true story about one of their friends who was murdered because of homosexuality.

I am of an age where I would say there is a problem of de-politisation, so I would take political ones from history. For example, the Clash. But I have found stuff more recently and there is a band completely unheard of called the Dastards whose song about Shami Chakrabarti, director of Liberty which is the most powerful civil liberties organisation. The Dastards produced this song 'Shami Chakrabarti should be ruling the country' and it is absolutely fantastic. Also the French rap band, the guys who produced the song about Zinedine Zidane from the last World Cup ('Zidane il a frappé'). I am not advocating violence, but sometimes you have to go to a place which is uncomfortable and it is my belief that Zinedine Zidane made a judgment that there was something more important in that moment than winning the World Cup. I have a little bit of respect for people who are prepared to take few risks and youth workers have to get there as well.

H.W. - 'Hold your head' - most people do not know it because it was never recorded. It was written by a friend of mine who grew up in divided Northern Ireland and it is really about peace in Europe. It has three verses and the chorus is: 'watching those people die', 'watching these people die', 'watching our people die'. So it's bringing Europe together, Kosovo and lots of other places. 'Redemption song' - as a sort of symbolic song about redemption, about emancipation, about release, about freedom.

'Blowing in the wind' - it reflects my generation I suppose, but it is also a song that I played in Tallinn, in Estonia, when it was still a Soviet country. It is meant to be a symbol of freedom again.

I have to pick something somewhat happier [...] 'Wonderwall' - some years ago, I spent three months learning all those Oasis songs to impress some kids who thought that my repertoire was boring and outdated. So when we turned up for the next weekend away, they were all going like: 'Oh here is that old boring blowing-in-the-wind chap again' and I said: 'Well, I can do "Wonderwall"! I can do "Don't look back in anger", I can do "Stand by me", and I can do "She's electric"! 'Wonderwall' has this significance for that particular generation of kids.



For sure, it is worth working on political recognition, but never forget that the first thing you have to do is to work with credibility, and when you work with credibility and you get the credibility it is not just you speaking to the politicians, it's everybody.

Howard

11. What do you value the most about each other?

G.T. - I have valued his questions always and I always will. Whether we agree on the answers is another matter, but actually, especially in youth work, the questions are the most important things. And I value and respect his contribution to that enormously.

H.W. - About Graeme? That he's different. That we have different views and we can amicably battle around for hours. That we can challenge each other, question each other and disagree with each other. It's the beauty about people - would you really like to meet somebody who was exactly the same as you? You would wear the same clothes, would have the same values, like the same food... Come on I mean, what a nightmare! That would be awful!

Graeme and me have got a great and constructive tension, and that's what the human condition is about, in terms of enriching it. That's why I do the odd things, because I go into different circles of people. It's exactly one of the challenges about this convention, as always: where is the police? Why didn't we have a couple of policemen among us? Where are the bishops? Where are the businessmen? They'll tell you what they think of youth work, they don't know anything about it! We can talk to each other and we can have even violent disagreements inside the box, but we are still in the same box, and we need to talk to people who are outside of that box.

