

The following is a speech delivered by Jamie Lee Evans, MSW at California CASA's Mental Health convening in October 2007

Permanency, Grief and Loss Speech

I am a product of a lot of lucky breaks, a few caring individuals and a bunch of other things including the Los Angeles foster care system. I have a small and fortunate handful of what child welfare might call "permanent people" in my life and the process from which I have been able to identify them as "permanent" has taken time and has developed over the last 30 years. Today I will share with you a little about my personal journey and also some of the professional things I've learned along the way as well.

I'd like to start out my comments with a memory from Gardena, California. And this is how the memory goes. When I was about 6 or 7, I remember a particular evening when my mother Gloria was getting ready to go out to a bar better known as the exclusive club of the American Legion.

At 6 or 7 I already knew what her going out on a weeknight to a bar could mean...it could mean that she would never come back because she'd leave the bar drunk, drive a few blocks and then get picked up by a cop and thrown in jail.

Or it could mean that she'd limp up the stairs to our apartment after crashing her car into a pole or another car or wall and then we wouldn't have a car anymore.

Or it could mean that she would arrive home drunk but safe without any of these injuries... but then my step-father would follow directly behind her and when they both got back to the house he would start to bully her and she would resist and smart off to him and then he would break her bones or bloody her nose or blacken her eyes and there would definitely be lots of screaming and I would face yet another night when I would have to decide, at 6 or 7, if I had the courage to run past my battering step father and out the door to call the police to stop my "dad" from hurting my mom again.

My mom leaving for the bar could mean any of these things and at 6 or 7 I already knew this and so one night, in the memory that I keep, or the memory that keeps me, I couldn't bear the anxiety of waiting for the next thing to happen, so when my mom started out the door, when she grabbed her keys and purse and opened the door at 8 o'clock and the sun was still shining overhead and I could hear kids outside playing -- I made a bold decision, and I dove for her leg and uncharacteristically I held on for dear life and began to beg her, plead with her to stay home with me.

I, the brave one, the older sister, the good kid, clutched onto my mother's leg as she tried to, at first gently nudge me off... and I held on as she started to get annoyed... and I kept my grip even as she dragged me out the door and down the stairs and finally kicked me off at the bottom step of our apartment hallway, me in a puddle, exhausted, shocked at my lack of success, humiliated by my mother's revulsion to my begging -- my begging her to be my mother and not leave me again and again. And on this night, again.

That night changed me. I remember it in too much detail. I remember wailing on the floor of the cement parking lot until well after dusk, crying and cursing and wishing and trying to become Tabatha or Samantha or Esmerelda or shoot, even Dr. Bombay...I tried to will my mother back, I tried to reverse the sequence of events that led to my mother disgustingly kicking me off her leg and her driving off, tires squealing, with me on the cold cement arms outstretched and begging with a tear drenched wet face. And this was pretty much the end of my magical thinking. After that night, I had no choice but to become hard.

A few years later my mother was drunk again but this time playing on the floor with my brother. My little brother, hungry for her attention, had not become hard. He was still a sponge, waiting to soak in any drop of motherly love the desert of our family would eek out. And so they were playing and good for them I thought as I walked by and then they asked me to play with them. I was maybe 10 at that point. And I looked hard at my mother's face and did not say a word when she signaled to me to come and rough house. I looked around at the dirty apartment, my mother's beer cans everywhere, saw my brother essentially coked up on soda pop, a rare find in our house, and I was overcome with rage. I could tell there would be a beating in my house that night. Didn't my mother know? I stood at the hallway entrance silent and still. I was enraged. My brother tried to coax me too, "come on Jamie, play with us," but I wouldn't, I couldn't move. In the next moment my mother simply announced to my brother and the world that I wouldn't come play because I was a "cold hearted bitch." The outrage and fury inside me mixed with a continent of grief in that moment and all I could do was to turn and walk away. There was no earthly process for me to express to my mother what I wanted from her. There was no safe way for me to become the daughter who wanted nothing more than to have my mother love and mother me. That part in the play ended for me at age 6 or 7 on the cold cement. My mother didn't get me for a minute. I don't need to tell you of course that I would have loved to have played with her. To have let her hold me in her arms. To have been soft and small and under my mother's watch. I was not cold hearted. I was not a bitch. I was wounded. And I was a little girl.

I have spent a lot of money in therapy over the last couple of decades trying to unpack this and other scenes like this from my childhood. Trying to heal the raw wounds left by neglect, abandonment and loss. And it's helped. Some years more than others.

And recognizing my own struggle with depression as grounded not only in trauma, but in complicated grief, has helped me to understand other foster youth too. Not only the overachievers who show some form of quantifiable success. Understanding my grief has also helped me to understand my sisters and brothers from foster care who maybe don't look as put together...the ones cussing out their social workers or getting kicked out of school or defying every simple rule or doing exactly the opposite of what they said they were going to do.

So I have met a lot of foster youth. All kinds of races and mixed races and shapes and sizes and styles, and sexual and gender orientations and throughout all of the diversity, there is one commonality I found...and that is a narrative of loss.

So through my own clarity of my personal loss and the stories of other youth I was driven to write a thesis about foster youth and grief. So here's what I have to say about what we must know about grief and loss in order to do good permanency work. And forgive me if you have heard some of this before, but my assumption is that we need to hear it again and again and I'll tell you why in a minute.

I believe that permanency support work must begin the moment a child or youth is removed from a home. And our understanding of the permanency work must start from even before removal. And what this thing we would call permanency support work is, is actually grief and loss support. A social theorist named Brenda Mallon published a book in 1998 called *Helping Children to Manage Loss*. And in this book, she made a painfully radical observation that Americans are more educated and able to know how to transition a puppy into a new home than they are to transition a child. Let me share with you some of the steps....

First step in transitioning a puppy is to provide it with familiar food.

When I read this I nearly choked on my laughter. Because I remember the first meal I had in my last foster home, and that was now 35 years ago. I couldn't tell of many of the best meals I had over the last 20 years, but I can remember the first meal I received in the last foster home I did time in at age 5.... any guesses on what it was? Tripe with Tabasco sauce.

So anyhow, we could go on and on about foster youth eating disorder issues and why so many eat like there's no tomorrow as adults and where that comes from, etc, but I digress... but Brenda Mallon of course records a true and interesting fact here....puppies need familiar food from their first home to make it into their second home in order to feel safe and like themselves. I asked all 35 members of the Y.O.U.T.H. Training Project if they remembered their first meal and within an hour over ten of them responded with stories and details, and again, these memories are anywhere from 5-20 years old. And all this is telling me, yes, food, comfort, nourishment, it's all important and memorable and for those who replied, those needs for familiar nourishment were not met. In fact, I have continued asking youth and with the exception of some kin care placements, none of them report getting to eat the same kind of food they ate in their house before they entered foster care.

Okay, the second stage: to replace the feel of the mother by placing a hot water bottle inside of the pup's sleeping crate. For youth, Mallon suggests cotton sheets that are warm and fluffy or soft snug fitting clothes to create a physical sensation of being held while sleeping. Girl...please.

And the list goes on...familiar item from home, something with the scent of the mother, something to simulate the heartbeat of the mother, light soft music, soothing gentle sounds, etc. I think you get the point. Many of our best social workers will admit that hey, if it's on a Friday night at 4:45 and my own daughter or son has a soccer game that I have to get to, well, then I'm shooting for a bed and a heartbeat...I'm not looking for

spiritual compatibility, I'm not asking them to make this child some cornbread or vegetarian food or fresh fish that they ate when they were at home... and so while we know what a best practice for a new puppy is and we absolutely collectively believe that children should be treated at least as well as puppies, we also know that it's mostly not doable.

And this means that a child grieves the loss of the mother, the father, the caregiver, the neighborhood, the food, the culture, the home/apartment/shack and what that child needs to be well is for that grief to begin being addressed as they enter care...

And so when a child is removed from her home. She experiences loss. And if we return to our texts from social work...if we open to chapter 14 featuring John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth discussing Attachment Theory and the importance of a child's affectional bonds to a caregiver, and how these bonds help a child to understand herself and how without it the child can grow up afraid, with a sense of psychic homelessness, if we agree with these two theorists then we know when a child experiences separation from their primary caregiver they go through a similar grief process as when an adult loses a partner to death. And if we open our books and turn to chapter 3 we read that children and youth do not generally express this grief through words or emails with frowny faces, they express their grief through behavior.

And so this is why I think we social workers (and since May I think I am legitimately able to include myself in this category) need to hear this information again and again. Here's why we need to be reminded: It's hard. It's hard to see a child's acting out behavior as grief when you have worked a very long day in a building without windows worrying about 32, 46, 65 children and families and then have this grieving youth call you a bitch or smack her foster sister or steal the foster father's new car. It's hard to put into context behavior that causes us more paperwork, extra meetings, more phone calls, and added stress. It's hard to interpret stealing as loss when it happens in just the moment before a legal guardianship is about to become finalized...and that's exactly the scenario that Barbara Waterman describes in her article in the *Journal of Loss and Trauma* entitled "Mourning the loss builds the bond: primal communication between foster, adoptive or stepmother and child." Dr Waterman heard the following story first hand during a parenting workshop on attachment and loss:

Tonya is a 10-year-old in foster care. She has a drug addicted biological mother, in and out of prison, and a biological sister in a high-level group home. Ella is Tonya's foster mother and she is quite attached to Tonya. Ella especially wants to teach Tonya to become a "lady" and leave her gangster ways behind her. She also wants to adopt her. As a pathway to adopting Tonya, Ella decides that she will first become Tonya's legal guardian. Just before the guardianship paperwork was finalized, Tonya was caught stealing. Ella considered putting Tonya into a group home but ultimately decided to keep her. She did however decide to cancel her legal guardianship plans.

This true story is a typical example of a foster child's behaviors being misunderstood or inappropriately punished. Waterman analyzes the situation, clarifying that Tonya's stealing was not an example of deep pathology but clearly an act testing Ella's commitment to her. The test-- Ella sadly failed. Waterman interprets Tonya's behavior through an attachment lens and notes that Tonya's stealing may have been a communication about her internal experience of conflict. Tonya may have been feeling as though her transition to becoming a "lady" was an act of leaving behind her sibling and mother – a loss the stealing may have been protecting against. Waterman suggests that the appropriate response to Tonya's actions would be to specifically punish her for the stealing and then also name her actions and ask if she has any thoughts about the fact that the stealing happened just as Ella's legal guardianship was being finalized. Tonya's actions called out for containment, not abandonment. For understanding, not distance.

Professionals often fail to perceive and respond appropriately to signs of grief in youth. We attempt to treat the symptoms but not the problems, and then we see foster youth receiving medical diagnoses at very high rates. Common diagnoses for foster youth include: Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD), Bipolar Disorder, Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD), Dysthymia, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). In a sampling of 351 children in foster care in Illinois, 41% of the youth were identified with one of the above disorders and 21% were taking psychotropic medications as a result (Bruhn & Hartnett, 2003). Psychotropic drugs are prescribed for many of these disorders. In 1997, Bonita Evans reported that six percent of American school children were being given prescription drugs for ADHD. She further noted that the amount of Ritalin it would take to make a child behave "appropriately" in the classroom would seriously dull their reasoning ability (p.11). Prescribing drugs to children to correct behavioral issues rooted in grief and loss appears to be contraindicated. It is relationships that will provide attachment healing for the majority of foster children.

When a child has the experience of truly moving through mourning and loss, the child will have long-term positive outcomes, which can include learning new skills and discovering new abilities (Riches & Dawson, 2000).

So let me say again, that I think that we professionals need to hear over and over again that foster youth are grieving. And the way many of them show their grief is through behavior. And I'm not talking sweet behavior, I'm talking about confused, angry, rejecting, sometimes aggressive and challenging behavior. We need to hear this developmental theory again and again because then we have to tell it to our brethren, the foster parents. Even the most caring of foster parents will undoubtedly be confused when a child rejects their generosity and warmth. Less caring foster parents, also uneducated to detect and identify expressions of grief and loss may do exactly the opposite of what a child needs when they are showing grief and loss behaviors. It's no surprise then that even the most caring foster parents could misconstrue the behavior of a child like Tonya.

So if we believe Dr. Bowlby, then we agree that insecurely attached children do not believe they are lovable. And when this same child is given a seven-day notice for acting

out (whether it be criminal or not) they get yet another message that there is something inherently wrong with them. Toddlers build a core of fury. Young adults feel an immense black well of emptiness. And the cruelest part perhaps is that when they finally reach a home where a caregiver with an iron clad sense of clarity about what the child's negative behavior does and or does not mean...when they get to the caregiver who speaks softly to them, who wants to hug them, who wants to hang out with them, who wants to actually make a real connection with them....the cruelest part is of course that the child doesn't believe them. And when the child is willing to ever so gingerly dip their toe into the possibility that they can be loved by this person, well, they express that growth through testing....and that testing might be stealing or it could be something worse.

If we understand this youth, if we recognize that the behaviors of the worst behaved youth are signs of tragic loss and of need that is yet to be filled, then we see that there is no youth who is inappropriate for permanency. Probably the youth who resist it the most are the ones who, like me at 10 standing in the hallway refusing to play with my mother, are the ones who want and need it the most.

And in order to withstand the pain of witnessing another adolescent's pain, I have to keep reading...keep talking about what I see these young people up against. And I have to keep on opening my heart.

From the moment we remove the child from her or his home, and along every step of the way, love seems to me to be the most hopeful solution to the deprivation. For love to truly become a social work ethic, a child welfare best practice, we may need to re-word it, connect some evidence based outcome language to it. As incomprehensible, as naïve, or simple "love" sounds, I keep coming back to it. What saved me was love. The deans at my school cared for me. My big sister let herself love me. My sixth grade teacher who gave me hundreds of dollars for college broke the rules and loved me as his own daughter. And I in turn, open my heart to the youth with whom I have the privilege to work. And that means that my "employees" sometimes come to me in tears and I listen and witness and share in their grief and try to understand and sometimes cry myself.

And when I feel the best about my work with them I feel like it's because I have opened my heart to love. And the great thing about love is that to stand in love is a glorious place to stand. The weather is beautiful and the skies are clear for days. Let us remember love as we continue challenging the structure, the lack of a container, the inadequate systems we're up against. Love inspires patience. Encourages playfulness. Generates warmth and resilience. And, at this point, to me, seems the safest bet.

Biography

Jamie Lee Evans spent the early 70's in a few different foster homes in Los Angeles County. A scrappy girl, who went from the frying pan of alcoholism and domestic violence in her bio family, into the fire of child sexual abuse and spiritual abuse in her state funded foster homes, Jamie spent most of her early and late adolescence dodging child welfare services. She succeeded in staying out of child welfare by making friends with the feared deans at her high school in Downey, California and ultimately taking shelter under the roof of her "big sister" Claudia, who took in Jamie in spite of the fact that this was a violation of rules set out by the big sister/little sister YWCA program.

Jamie as a child was described as an "unusually determined girl" who began doing crisis counseling and medical advocacy for a community rape crisis hotline at age 16 and achieved more than 10 years of perfect attendance in school despite the chaos going on in her family life. In 1985 Jamie left southern California to attend college at UC Santa Cruz and after an energetic bout of homophobia and reactionism, Jamie found her place amongst feminist activists fighting violence against women. For nearly two decades Jamie worked as a volunteer coordinator, a community educator, resistance organizer and an executive director in organizations fighting to end rape and violence against women. A natural talker, Jamie began teaching anti-oppression workshops, facilitation skills and critical thinking to adults and young people in the Bay Area in the 1990's. Ignoring the invisible line that is supposed to divide youth and adults from each other, Jamie now happily leads the Y.O.U.T.H. Training Project, and since 2001 has experienced much joy, friendship and comraderie in the company of ambitious and empowered current and

former foster youth. She does not consider herself an alumni of foster care, preferring to save such academic phrases for more pleasurable activities. Jamie nonetheless is a survivor of the foster care system who, at age 40, this May, received her Master's in Social Work. She is now an alumnus of the University of California at Santa Cruz and San Francisco State University.