Care Not Cure: Insights from the Family Foster Care System in Geel, Belgium

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Location: Geel, Belgium

- In the 6th century St. Dymphna – the patron saint of people with mental illness, incest survivers, and mental health clinicians – fled to Geel to escape from marrying her father; he followed her there and decapitated her in an act of insanity for refusing to marry him.
- In 1364 the St. Dymphna Church was erected in Geel and those with mental illness across Europe would make pilgrimages to Geel to take part in 9-day novenas in the church in order to cure their illness. When this cult comes to the church it could be quite considerable. The high volume of pilgrims, farming families in Geel hosted pilgrims in exchange for help on their farms.
- Geel is a small town with a population of about 40,000 in the Belgian province of Antwerp and has a 750-year history of family foster care originating from the pilgrimages made to honor St. Dymphna.

Social Work Project:

- Having first heard about Geel from the Incredibly podcast “The Problem with the Solution”, I sought to learn more about how this de-institutionalized model of psychiatric care developed, how it has been sustained for 750 years, and if and how it could exist in America.
- I followed an anthropological dream of interacting with social workers, psychologists, nurses, doctors, foster families, and boarders (the term used for those with mental illness) to determine their relationship to and experiences with the family foster care system and Geel.
- In comparing this model of care to that in America I wanted to explore the reasons and mechanisms for such divergent approaches to, attitudes towards, and systems of mental health care.

Findings on the Family Foster Care System in Geel:

- Essential to the humanizing approach towards those with mental illness is the belief that every individual has contributions to make to society and the perspective that difference is valuable rather than pathology.
- The spirit of Geel is so embedded in the culture that the community does not see itself as exceptioanlly altruistic, but rather practices deep humility in taking in boarders as this is their cultural tradition.
- Structural and institutional support, established from Belgium’s welfare state, has allowed for the preservation of the family foster care system as families have the pro-social and financial means to support and therefore can continue their practice of hosting.

Skills Utilized:

- My curiosity and ability to make connections between all things provided me with many insights into how the model of health care in Geel formed based on the social and political forces throughout the 6th century in Belgium, how the system has been sustained for three-quarters of a millennium, and why this system despite efforts to replicate it in America, has not been duplicated elsewhere.
- Flexibility and adaptability were integral skills that allowed me the opportunity to engage with influential figures in Geel and visit much of the country, as I was willing to accept a range of invitations and participate in all aspects of those invitations.
- My drive to find meaning in and to grow from every situation gave me both personal and professional self-reflections. One of the most profound introspective insights was that my trip to Geel came to fruition and was so transformational due to my enterprising, open, and adventurous nature.

Lessons Learned:

- In valuing difference, exemplified in how the foster families saw the contributions their boarders could make as invaluable to the family unit and the functioning of the home, mental illness was treated as a gift rather than a curse.
- Having a model of government in which the population has its basic needs met, and where the model of family foster care is supported both financially and through the assistance of the hospital medical professionals, makes hosting not only a possibility but also incentivizes intrinsically and extrinsically.
- The culture of hosting boarders passed intergenerationally within the familial and societal spirit of Geel normalized foster families to a level in which hosting was not seen as unique or even generous, but rather as something that families in Geel do when they can. Comparing this practice to mine, as I was to that in America, makes the rarity of this system salient.

Career Connections:

- SW 504 - Diversity and Social Justice in Social Work: Applying the theories of hegemony and social constructionism, I learned how within the cultural practices that become so normalized they are invisible until compared to another context and of mental illness within the construction of its value as opposed to its pathology, which occurs in an American context.
- SW 721 - Attachment Theory with Adults in Clinical Practice: Geel was my first exposure to a community-wide adult attachment and understanding the highly healing power of giving vulnerable people a home in which they are cared for and accepted as they are and have a safe base and safe haven to find comfort and refuge in, just as Dymphna did.
- SW 695 - Field Instruction: I developed strategies to foster clients at my field placement – The Women’s Center of Southeastern Michigan – that has built my skills in understanding people from the lens of their context, like their environment and what they have lived through, so in Geel I was connecting the felt sense of acceptance and generosity to previous lived experiences of yearning for such comfort.

Advice for Engaging in Global Social Work:

- Stay open-minded and be willing to embrace senescence, as do so pay off when pursuing global social work since different cultural norms are practiced in regards to planning and time flexibility.
- Remain in the field during global projects as a reminder from success for my project, as it took nearly every week of researching and finding my trip to Geel.
- Remember that global social work is worthwhile as it places value in all people and all situations, allowing us to use every opportunity as a learning and growing experience.

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