

Community healed and transformed

by Bruce Maden

'Spiritual guidance in the Christian tradition is an offering, a bridge, a 'way in' to the Ground of all human life – a 'way in' to shared holy Ground available for all people yearning to touch that Ground more firmly'¹. But when many neighbourhoods are beyond the influence of the institutional Christian Church, how can we help them touch that holy Ground more powerfully?

The solution may be to grow the presence of the *anam cara* – the Celtic word for soul friend.² As *anam cara* in the neighbourhood we can create a milieu, an interpersonal climate in which neighbours become ever more free of fear, spiritually perceptive, generous, able to accept responsibility and take the initiative in the spiritual life³. As Paul Hawker says, we desperately need trustworthy Christian spiritual guides .

One of these *anam cara* is Brad Rapira. Brad works within a community development agency, Te Aroha Noa Community Services, in the lower socio-economic and culturally diverse suburb of Highbury, Palmerston North. Over the last eighteen months, a key concept that galvanised Brad into action is 'disturbance'. One of the first things to 'disturb' him, was observing a group of young teenage girls drinking alcohol during an early evening visit to the local shopping centre.

Inspired by his dream, Brad dared to engage more deeply – to become an *anam cara* to this community.

As Brad watched, a police car drew up. The constables walked past the girls into a shop. They didn't stop. They didn't intervene. Brad saw people peering out from behind the blinds of a local social service organisation. They too didn't intervene. For over half an hour as Brad interacted with the girls, not one parent came searching for their missing daughters. In our neighbourhood he noted: meaningful intervention was in short supply.

Reflecting on the incident, as a father himself, Brad couldn't imagine he wouldn't be out searching for his daughter if she didn't come home. He wondered if turning a 'blind eye' had become a community and institutional response. Asked what this scenario prompted in him, Brad spoke of dreaming about a community full of families who create such a positive environment for their children, being inebriated outside the

1 Edwards T. (1980) *Spiritual Friend, Reclaiming the Gift of Spiritual Direction*, Paulist Press, New Jersey, USA.

2 O' Donohue J.(1997) *Anam Cara*, Bantam Press, UK.

3 Schneiders S. (1976), *The Contemporary Ministry of Spiritual Direction*, Chicago Studies, Spring, USA.

4 Hawker P. (2002) *Spiritual Experience in the General Population*, paper presented in Wellington, NZ.

Whanau by Lisa Ormsby <http://www.lisaormsby.co.nz/>

neighbourhood shops didn't have any pull power.

He spoke too of fathers who'd search for their daughters if they weren't home and strong communities that took collective responsibility for providing a safe, stimulating and aspirational environment for their children and youth.

In short, Brad longed to see this particular community transformed. He dared to ask, 'could we by God's grace, make this journey?'

Inspired by his dream, Brad dared to engage more deeply -- to become an *anam cara* to this community. In his own words Brad writes of further involvement with 'disturbance' since he made that commitment and how he is assisting new life to emerge within community.

'Ko Pukeatua Te MaungaKo te Awakairangi Te Awa Ko Tokomaru Te Waka Ko Waiwhetu Toku Whare Tipuna Ko Te Atiawa Toku Iwi Ko Taku ingoa Brad Paraone Rapira.'

"Kia ora my name is Brad Rapira and I've been privileged to be appointed as a community development facilitator at Te Aroha Noa. As an example of my involvement with 'disturbance' I'd like to share with you my work with a whanau of four children and two parents in their late twenties.

These young parents have grown up regularly witnessing high levels of violence in their homes. Their lifestyle reflects unresolved pain, abandonment, lack of self-worth and a longing for acceptance by others. This is also the foundation from which they parent. It has led to a volatile, soul destroying combination for this whanau that regularly erupts into loud verbal conflict between the two parents.

After receiving a call from a concerned neighbour (this in itself is a sign of change as he has had to break the community rule of 'not narking') I hurry to their home and as I walk up the path I hear a rising crescendo of raised voices. After no-one hears my knock and with the door ajar I walk in with some trepidation. A young baby less than two months old is crying on the floor near to a couple who are heatedly arguing.

My fear is that if the arguing turns to physical violence, the baby could be unintentionally harmed. My vocal attempts to gain some control of the situation fall on deaf ears and so somewhat in desperation I pick up the baby and begin walking towards the door. This dramatic act gets their attention and the fighting stops. My action has at least disrupted their arguing. I ask the couple to sit down and work through what's happening.

A civilised discussion occurs for a while before it again escalates into an abusive conversation. Again I pick up the child and begin to leave. For the second time this disruption has the desired effect. This time we agree to a cool down period during which one will leave. I commit myself to meet with one and come back next day to talk about underlying issues with both.

However the sight of that young baby crying as her parents argued, haunts me. That

evening I'm overcome by deep emotion at the memory of it. I ask myself what I could do tomorrow beyond mediating. An idea slowly forms.

I decide to take my voice and with the power of Atua, stand in the middle of our neighbourhood park surrounded by state houses and declare war on family violence.

A few days later I set up a gazebo and a couple of couches in the park. I use a loud public address system. My message is clear: violence is neither okay nor right, and if we allow it to remain present in our homes we are sowing seeds of destruction and more violence into the next generation.

I speak of my own journey out of violence. My wife comes to stand beside me. I invite people to come out of their homes and join me in sending violence packing from our neighbourhood. A couple of brave young women come out to join me. Even more courageously, they speak to the surrounding homes about never dreaming they'd see the day when a Maori male would speak out against violence in such a public space. Most others only stand at their doorways or lean over their fences to listen.

At the time, I have no idea of the impact of this act. But know the 'disturbance' has begun, and a transformative journey is on the horizon for men, women and their families.

The next day I'm amazed to hear my voice carried over 2-3km. Somehow we were amplified beyond my expectations. A whole community heard my call to stand against violence and to stand up for a safe, stimulating and aspirational environment for our community.

I know the 'disturbance' has begun,
and a transformative journey is
on the horizon for men, women
and their families.

Encouraged by this, I'm at the park every Friday to motivate more people to join the conversation and become part of our movement of change.'

As Brad says, 'God is indeed in the neighbourhood!' and moving beyond the framework of institutional religion. A whole community is participating in a healing process and being transformed. People are involved in something bigger than themselves. They're caught up in a vision of life-changing possibilities and the creation of alternative forms of community. With the assistance of anam cara they're discovering deeper truths rooted in the midst of messy reality. They are being led towards holy ground.