Bringing our hearts and setting our sights on liberation

By Debs Erwin

As someone who is not an academic, I have to be honest and state that the Journal of Youth Studies 'Stop the Clock' conference was more than a little intimidating initially. While I regularly draw on theory to inform and influence my day-to-day work and I'm a keen proponent of the need for ongoing dialogue between theory and practice, there were times when my brain was struggling to find room for all the new ideas coming its way, while also trying not to confuse epistemology, ontology, phenomenology or ethnography!

That being said, it was also a wholesomely energising experience to give my brain a healthy workout and be in the same room with so many people from different disciplines, contexts, and parts of the world sharing their distinct sets of expertise and insight. From the interaction in each session, it was evident that each person brought a deep commitment to understanding what is going on for young people and to making a contribution to change for the better. As one of the delegates tweeted, *"being in a big room full of people who like teenagers is SO fun"*.

One of the highlights for me – and not for the reasons you might think – was the conference dinner. Kudos to the organising team for ditching a stuffy formal dinner and providing all the ingredients for a good shindig – a laidback and relaxed venue where the open seating arrangement enabled people to move around as they wish, spend time with each other and simultaneously feel part of the wider collective, as well as tasty food and liquid refreshment, and of course great music that got the feet tapping and – for a good many – our whole bodies moving.

I found this moving in another way, profoundly so in fact. Coming off the back of Dr Tania de St Croix's 'heart-full' exposition of youth work and what it means to bring our whole selves to our work – both in terms of the gains and the losses, the successes and the disappointments, the clarity of purpose and the turbulence, the liberation and the oppression, the joy and the cost – that moment to be enjoying each other's company, to let our hair down and shake it all out, to celebrate – all of that meant something. I now understand why ecstatic dance is a thing, because we need those kinds of moments, they may be few and far between, but they act as fuel, a binding agent, a chance to be more fully present, to reconnect with ourselves and others, to know that we're part of something bigger, this collegial family full of care and passion that knowledge is used for good. Dancing might not be everyone's cup of tea, but it's one way of looking after the heart.

Tania's keynote provided an anchor point in the middle of the conference and this is what is vitally needed at a time when news outlets tell stories of wilful devastation and destruction of people and planet, when colonising is still a verb in the present, when it seems like there is no safe harbour – particularly for people of colour, people with disabilities, LGBTQ+ communities, indigenous peoples and so many other minorities, when we're weary of the constant battle to get voices heard – our own, and the voices of those we work with who so often are pushed to one side. We are embattled by compounding scandals and corruption, power-plays, funding cuts,

short-sighted and greedy decision-making that strips life away from people already on a cliff-edge adding insult to injury (‘as if life wasn’t hard enough!’ we wail). Our ethical and moral codes are violated time and again, yet the dominant paradigms seem too powerful.

All this matters, it’s not about burying our heads in the sand. Many of the speakers and presenters paid attention to the need for contextually informed approaches to show how wider structural factors shape young people’s lives rather than individualistic narratives because – as Dr Maryssoun Sukarieh noted, *“there isn’t one simple story of youth”*. Prof Ken Roberts provided a bird’s eye view of the constant evolution of youth studies which bookended Dr Siobhán McAlister’s reminder from the very start of the conference of the value of noticing – observing what is changing, identifying what might be portrayed as change amidst complex realities, and bringing to light what lies underneath the surface that acts to constrain change.

So, this is the landscape we navigate, there are no guarantees, there is plenty of risk and volatility in a world seemingly hell-bent on self-destruct mode – this is the place of struggle and resistance as Tania articulated. Prof Steven Roberts pointed out that hope is a radical act and an essential one, and that requires us to roll up our sleeves daily and get stuck into our research, our writing, our learning, our imagining, and in doing so we are asked to hold the wonders and the horrors together. We will bring our hearts and continue our work, for and with and on behalf of young people, to find the chinks of light, the opportunities to do work that is generative, seeking out those little nooks and crannies where we might lever some movement for change. We will keep setting our sights on liberation – for all of us.

“*Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don't be afraid*.”
- Frederick Buechner