

## Community approaches- real and virtual - to stealing

### David Epston and Fred Seymour

#### Genealogical source for this approach

My approach to the problem of childhood stealing owes a great deal to the intriguing ingenuity of my father and how he contrived the means for me to substantiate my claim as an honest young person. In addition, I had the added bonus of a conviction that endures to this day that I have a talent for finding lost objects.

I stole fifty cents from my father one day when I was about eight. Not too long afterwards, he came to me and said: 'Son, I've lost fifty cents. Would you help me find it?' I said nervously: 'Oh, yeh, yeh, I'll help you but how?' He advised me: 'Right, well, you go into the laundry room and look there and I'll go into my work shop and look there and then we will meet back in the kitchen and see if either of us has found the lost fifty cents.' So I followed his advice - of course unsuccessful in my search for the lost money - and returning from his quest, he asked: 'Did you find it?' I replied: 'No! Did you find it?' I was really hoping he would turn up some fifty cents or other and save me from admitting my theft. 'No,' he said and before I could confess, he eagerly proposed the next step: 'Right, okay, well you go and look around the back yard and I'll go and look in the front yard and we'll meet back in the kitchen.' Perhaps he noticed my dismay because he added: 'Don't worry. One of us has to find it somewhere!' So I went out to the back yard, dutifully searched and he went to the front and we met back in the kitchen with no better results than last time. He said: 'Right, well, you go to your bedroom and I'll go look in your mother's and mine and we'll meet back in the kitchen.' There nestled dead centre on my pillow was what looked like the very same coins adding up to the fifty cents that I had stolen. I was bewildered but immediately returned to the kitchen. He came back and asked: 'Did you find it?' I said with relief: 'Yeh, I did!' He accepted it appreciatively and thanked me more than once for finding the lost money.

The very next day, he came up to me and said: 'Hey, you won't believe this! I've done it again. I've lost some more money. Would you help me find it?' We went through the same sequence until finally he searched his bedroom and I was directed to my bedroom. Again fifty cents lay on my pillow. Returning to our meeting place, I proudly

proclaimed: 'Look, I've found it!' He kindly replied: 'Look, you are getting so good at finding lost things, why don't you keep the money?' I replied: 'Well, thanks ... thanks.' This happened every day for the rest of the week as he seemed more and more upset with himself for his carelessness at the same time as more appreciative of me for my new-found talent at finding things. (1)

Perhaps what follows lacks some of the benefits of my father's approach to my childhood stealing in that many who undergo it never gain the sense that I did that I was good at finding things. However, it did provide me with a prototype from which to fashion a 'community approach' that would not require from the parents concerned my father's humility and generosity of spirit. Many had run out of such sentiments by the time we met, having been 'robbed' on many occasions despite the chastisements, humiliations, recriminations, etc. they had instigated in order to have their children desist from stealing from them and others.

What I was searching for was some form of a 'ritual of re-grading' (2) by which a young person could undertake a purposeful act of moral redefinition that would repair the damage done to his/her identity by their stealing. Most families find it morally reprehensible to be robbed by their own children or to be known in their neighbourhood or school community as the parent of a 'stealer'. I was unconcerned with any kind of 'ritual of degradation' (Garfinkel, 1956), the purpose of which would be to first establish the young person's blameworthiness, to define him as the 'guilty party' and alter one's identity as a 'lower type or grade' of person. A judicial trial would be the prototype for such a ritual. On the other hand, I was unconvinced by the then prevalent psychoanalytic view that young people were 'stealing love'. If one followed the logic of such a premise, one would necessarily be required to respond by loving their stealer. I considered this far too much to ask those parents who had been robbed by their children.

In addition, I was concerned that this should take place before members of his/her community who had been convened for such a moral purpose. Here these young people could seek by specified means to re-identify themselves as competent members of their moral community. Recalling my father's 'finding tests', I conceived of 'honesty tests' as the means for the young person to publicly lay claim to a moral decision between two available identities e.g. an honest or a dishonest/stealing person. Secondly, as a result of asserting such a claim, the young person volunteers to engage in 'honesty tests' fully aware that they are putting themselves in moral jeopardy but not knowing exactly how.

The volunteering of the young person is premised on what I think of as 'understandings' that are agreed upon by all the parties to it before we proceed any further. Firstly, how the young person contends with such trials and tribulations e.g. honesty tests, constitutes a durable statement of who s/he is and can be e.g. an honest person. Secondly, the publication of the results of the 'tests' stands at the

same time as a disavowal of his 'reputation' as a stealer, thief, or more generally, a dishonest and untrustworthy person.

This approach does not formally concern itself with the establishment of stealing or not, although in many instances, that had been established by the young person being 'caught red handed' either by the family, shop keeper, neighbour, school teacher, etc. Rather it settles for a far different concern: whether you are stealing or not, do people believe you are a stealer? Whether you are stealing or not, have you now got a reputation as a stealer? This by-passes at this point any requirement the young person might feel to defend their innocence and any requirement others/therapist might feel to establish the young person's guilt. A community-wide moral dilemma is substituted for any quasi-legal concern for his/her guilt or innocence.

This approach as described in the following was contrived for referrals from the Youth Aid section of the New Zealand Police and as such these young people had 'long' records of stealing and had come to the notice of the police. An abridged approach was then developed for young people referred by their families for stealing which was often restricted (as far as the family knew) to themselves.

### **The Moral Dilemma**

Are you interested in providing evidence to one and all that you not only can be but are an honest person or would you rather become known as a stealer?

The effects of both proposed moral statuses can now be surveyed without getting caught up in a debate of 'you did it' versus 'no, I didn't' or any kind of pastoral (moral) care e.g. preaching. The effects on other relationships can be surveyed, especially those who allege they have been robbed by the stealer e.g. parents, siblings, grandparents, aunts, uncles, siblings, friends, class-mates, team-mates, neighbours, shop keepers, etc. Such questions can be addressed to absentees either indirectly or by means of internalized other enquiries (3).

### **Direct Enquiries**

If you become known as a stealer, do you see that having any effect on your son-father relationship? Son-mother relationship?

Do you now find your mother watching out for you more than loving you?

Have you found that your father no longer turns his back on you?

Have your parents have started keeping their valuables under lock and key in their own home?

Do you think they have lost their sense of security when you are around?

If you bankrupt your mother, are you concerned that you might bankrupt your son-mother relationship?

## **Indirect or Internalized Other Enquiries**

(Indirect) Do you think Mr. Jones (next door neighbour) still welcomes you to watch rugby at his place now that you robbed him of his DVD player?

(Internalised Other) If Mr. Jones were here today and I asked him this question: 'Is Johnny still welcome to watch rugby at your place now that he robbed you of your dvd player?' What do you guess he might say?

(Indirect) Do you think your granny and grandpa are as willing to have you around and sleep over at their place as much now that they believe you are a stealer?

(Internalised Other) If your granny was sitting right there (pointing to an untenanted chair) and I asked her this question: 'Is your grandson still welcome to sleep over at your and his grandpa's since you became convinced he is a stealer?' What do you guess she might say?

## **The Injustice of Being Known as a Stealer**

Inserted into this set of enquiries is what has turned out to be a very significant question, one which almost all stealers have answered strongly in the affirmative, even if they have seemed indifferent to any of the above mentioned.

Have you ever been accused of stealing something you hadn't even seen or thought about stealing?

Does the fact that people believe you are a stealer give you a bad reputation? Stain your reputation?

Are you finding that people don't want you to play with their kids believing that about you?

Do the neighbourhood shopkeepers not allow you on their premises knowing your bad reputation?

Similar enquiries can now forecast the 'injustice' of being known as a stealer for the young person's future:

Do you think it will be easy as a well known thief to get the kind of girlfriend you want?

Do you think as a well known robber you will be able to get any other job than either in a gang or in a prison?

## **The creation of compassion all round**

Parents are most often and very obviously aggrieved, humiliated or outraged by public concern over their children's activities that have involved them with the police (Youth Aid) and a referral to a government or non-governmental agency. Such outrage is in addition to the insult they have often have experienced to the moral integrity of their family by their child's stealing from them and others. It is hoped that the

'relative influence questions' structured around the effects of the problem (stealing) on the young person and the members of their family may have reunited them as sufferers rather than as perpetrator (stealer) and the victims (those who have been robbed). In a manner of speaking, they are on the 'same page'.

Ruth (mother), Jim (father) and Johnny, did you all find that was hard to hold your head high at the Parent Teacher's Meeting?

Ruth, Jim and Johnny, is it a concern to you at church that people will find out, if they haven't already, that your family is known as one that has a stealer within it? Ruth, Jim and Johnny, does it matter to you all what has happened to your family's reputation in the community?

Another round of questions can further assist with this. These questions highlight the lure of ready cash and what it can be turned into and how this is a temptation for everyone, even if historically in the case of the parents.

To young person

Do you find the temptation of money sitting around just too hard to resist?  
Do you find that you can readily turn money into all the sweets you want? All the music downloads you can possibly listen to on our Ipod?  
Do you find that when you share out the stuff that the money buys that you get the impression you have a lot more friends than you thought you had?  
Can money buy friends for very long? Or will you have to keep stealing to buy them?  
By the way, how much does a friend cost these days?

To parents

When you were 10 or 11, did you ever give into the temptation to steal money from your parents, especially as it was just sitting there in your mother's purse or your father's pant's pockets?

If either parent is willing to disclose any episodes of childhood stealing (after all, how many of us didn't steal something as a young child), this can lead to discussions around their histories of the moral evolution of their 'honesty'.

What made you turn away from the temptations of stealing- after all wasn't robbing your granny easy money?

What did it matter to you that you and your parents were called into the headmaster's office and you owned up having stolen Sally's lunch money and not only returned that to her but went around to her home with your mum holding one hand and your dad holding the other and apologised to her and her parents?

Another tactic I often follow in any instance of a parent or parents minimizing the stealing e.g. 'it was only coins!', 'what does it matter, we share everything in our family', 'it was only twenty dollars! What's twenty dollars?' etc. I try to introduce the fiduciary advantages of the young person's thefts. How I go about this is to enquire as to the young person's allowance or weekly income. And then I ask an estimate of the family's weekly income. Say the young person receives \$5.00 per week in an allowance and his family's weekly income \$1,000.00 per week, I then suggest the real income of their child's thefts might well be considered as a factor of 200x. Here in the instance of the above mentioned \$20.00, the child would have realised a relative weekly income of \$4,000.00. This relativising of real incomes shows how significant such a theft might be to such a young person.

The proposal for restoration of a moral reputation: a good versus a bad reputation:

I have an idea that has worked 60 or 70 times before today . . . after I tell you about it, your mother and father might like to ring up some other parents of young people who 'turned honest' so they can check this 'honesty approach' out in case they have any concerns or doubts about it.

I regularly recruit family members, after their child's reputation as an honest person has been restored, as consultants (Epston and White, 1992) to other parents 'who will come after you and perhaps feel as desperate as you did four or five months ago about Billy's future'. I have never had known a family who did not willingly offer their services in anticipation to another family.

To the young person:

I can't give you the phone numbers of people your age yet. Why? They undoubtedly will tell you about the 'honesty tests' that you will have to pass to prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that you not only can be but are an honest person. That would mean you weren't being tested. A bit like a test at school where the teacher gives you the test questions a week before. That wouldn't prove anything, would it? Now if you are still interested, I will provide you with some names and phone numbers after your honesty party celebration if you want to compare notes with them'.

But let me assure you of this - I have a way that will prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that either you are a stealer or that you now have proved to one and all that you can be and are an honest person.

Here if the interview has avoided so far the contentiousness of an adversarial discussion premised on parental blame and young person denial and at the same time created some compassion for all concerned, the next stage flows naturally.

Do you trust me on that one? If you do, please indicate that in front of everyone by shaking my hand and giving me consent to go on.

I then formally have the young person say after me, breaking the 'consent' up into easily remembered sections:

I, Billy Jones, hereby give consent to David Epston to provide my parents with information as to how they might 'honesty test' me. I do not expect to know how they will test me; otherwise, it wouldn't be a test and it wouldn't prove anything to anybody.

I offer a last minute confession but without any concern if the young person demurs.

Now that you have decided to prove to one and all that you can be and are honest, are there any accusations of your stealing that you would like to admit to so you can get it off your chest?

Often at this point, the young person will take advantage of this opportunity to admit to contested incidents. This is always very encouraging of a very favourable outcome.

### **Community Honesty Meetings**

The first matter of concern is who should be invited. A guest list is reached by interviewing parents, siblings, or anyone else in attendance e.g. police officer, along with the honesty candidate around this enquiry:

Who cares whether you become a stealer or an honest person? (to the young person)

Who cares whether your son/this young man proves to them he is a stealer or an honest person? (to parents, siblings or Youth Aid police officer)

The most obvious candidates are as follows:

- (1) Siblings, grand parents, aunts/uncles, cousins, and other extended family;
- (2) Neighbours and family friends;
- (3) School-teachers/class mate;
- (4) Soccer coach/team-mates; and
- (5) Boy scout leader/girl guide leader/fellow guides/cubs/scouts;

The least likely candidates but equally significant are as follows: victims of the young person's thefts, which of course could be any of the above, but in particular shop keepers. Often here, the young person or family members are reluctant to issue such invitations to shop keepers e.g. 'I am too embarrassed...I wouldn't know what to say', that I will offer to issue invitations to such people on their behalf. I secure a pretty good attendance from aggrieved shop keepers, who often relish such an opportunity to confront those who have robbed them under such circumstances.

The meeting place is a matter for discussion e.g. family home, grand parent's home, church or community centre hall or agency depending on the number of attendees and the family's preferences.

## Invitations

Invitations are collectively prepared and written but most typically I interview the young person and write down his/her responses. Obviously I will change the pronouns. For example, Johnny replies to my enquiry: 'Johnny, are you sick and tired of having a reputation of being a stealer?' Johnny replied: 'Yah, I am sick and tired of having a reputation as a stealer.' I write down his words while uttering them aloud. I would revise that to: 'John is sick and tired of having a reputation as a stealer'. If I have a computer nearby, I type this up and read it back to Johnny asking - 'Do you confirm that, Johnny? Or do you want me to change anything to suit you better?'

Here is a facsimile invitation (I have inserted in brackets the questions that produced the text of the letter):

As you may well know (Do you think many people know about your stealing reputation, John?) I have got a very bad reputation (What is your reputation, John?) over the last year (How long has it taken for you to receive such a reputation?) as a stealer. (Do you know what people call you? Has anyone said it out loud to your face?)

Now people are even accusing me of things I have never done which isn't fair. (John, you mentioned that people are accusing you of stealing things you haven't stolen. Do you think that is fair or not?). But when I think about it, I don't blame you. (John, if you were to think about it, would you blame them for having the idea that you are a stealer?) Also I am sad that I cannot play at some of my friends' homes. (John, your mother mentioned that your friends' parents won't allow you to sleep over there or play there any more. Do you care about that or would you rather not have friends like Jimmy any more?) Grandpa, I am sorry that you won't take me out fishing with you on your boat anymore after I robbed your wallet. (John, is it a good thing or a bad thing from your point of view that your granddad won't take you out fishing anymore? Why is it a bad thing?)

David Epston, a family therapist, has told me that it is possible for me to prove to you I am and can be honest. (How does that sound to you, John? Do you want to add anything or take anything away from that?) I do not expect you to believe me if I just say I will not steal anymore. (John, have you found that most people don't believe what you say anymore?) I am willing to go through the 'honesty tests' that my parents will set for me with David's help. (John, are you willing for your parents to honesty test you? Do you give me consent to tell them how to do it?)

I and my parents wish to invite you to join us at (time/place) for my honesty meeting. I know some of you still care and love me, even though I have robbed you. (John, of

those who you have robbed, who do you guess still love you and care about your future?). Those of you I have robbed that don't know me so well, I want to prove to you that I deserve to get my reputation as an honest person back. (What do you want to prove to those whom you robbed but who don't really know you that well as a person?) I am hoping that then I can buy stuff in your shops again? (Why do you want them to know you are an honest person?)

This document is then produced and the young person signs the following postscript:

All the words in this letter are mine and they were the answers to questions David asked me. And he typed them up into this letter.

Signed by:

Witnessed by: Both parents formally sign  
at The Family Therapy Centre on the        day of 2007 in Auckland, New Zealand....

In some cases, I request that the parents take this document to a lawyer and have Johnny swear it as an oath and sign an Affidavit to indicate the seriousness of the matter and its legal significance.

Although his parents go along with him to the Post Office, he is expected to post all the letters himself. If it is more convenient, contact is made by telephone or email, although here parents closely supervise the phone calls or emails. It is commonplace for such young people to quite quickly receive encouraging and congratulatory replies from family and family friends.

From an older brother and sister:

We would like to come to your Honesty Party. It is nice to see that you are grown up enough to be able to determine which is right and wrong, as a lot of people find this very hard to do. We both think that if you try hard enough, you will be able to pass your honesty tests with ease, but remember, you still have to work hard. (A Story in a Story, Collected Papers, p. 106)

From a family friend:

Thank you for your letter. It is really good to hear of someone like you, trying to make a big step forward in their life. Some people seem to have it easy - they never seem to get into trouble, and everyone likes them, and they seem happy with themselves. Other people go through big struggles within themselves, and feel that nobody likes them - but when they win the struggle they turn out to be the best people of all. So I'm pleased to hear that you're sensible enough and grown-up enough to struggle with dishonesty. I look forward to hearing how you get on; and hope to be able to come to your Honesty Party (Ibid, p.106)

## Honesty Community Meetings: Real or Virtual

Seating arrangements:

The young person and I sit at the centre of a circle and we merely rotate in our chairs to face each of the attendees as they speak.

Two rounds of enquiries

Starting with his most intimate relationships, e.g. parents, grandparents, caretakers and then passing from person to person who are encircling us, this question is asked in some form or other:

What will you feel/think/do if John keeps stealing? If his stealing is contested?  
What will you feel/think/do if John keeps his reputation as a stealer?

John, is requested to face each speaker, although admittedly it is difficult at times for him to look the speaker in the eye. In this round, the tone of voice of the speakers is often gloomy and their comments are dismal as you might expect. The young person is often visibly upset and will cry. There is no attempt to console him at this point.

Straightaway, the next round is initiated following the same route around the circle.

What will you do/think/feel if John passes his honesty tests with flying colours and proves to one and all that not only can he be honest but that he is honest?

Not surprisingly, the mood lifts as those most concerned people e.g. parents, grandparents, uncles and aunts, etc. prophesy about how they will respond to him after he substantiates his claim to be an honest person. It is often the case that some of the victims of the young person's stealing spontaneously propose some 'restorative justice' projects. For example, a neighbour and close family friends might suggest:

Johnny, if you pass on those honesty tests, you might give me a hand on some concreting work around the deck you gave me a hand with building last summer and some other jobs I've got planned. And since the dvd you stole was worth about \$200.00 and I think you are well worth \$10.00 an hour, if you work twenty hours, I figure you and I are quits. And then you can come over and watch All Black Tests at my place like you used to with your dad. How does that sound to you, son?

Honesty Tests and Testing

I explain only in principle the honesty tests to this young man's moral community informing them why I cannot tell them the specific details. e.g.. If he knew any more than merely agreeing to risk being honesty tested, it couldn't or wouldn't be a test at all. For example, if a young person at school knew all the answers to tests at school and passed with an A average, it wouldn't prove anything at all about how much they had learned so far.

### Re-performance of the Consent Procedure

John and I stand before his moral community and re-perform the consent procedure:

We keep a firm handshake (John, do you trust me enough to tell your parents how to set the tests which will prove beyond a shadow of a doubt whether you are a stealer or an honest person?)

If he consents to this, I ask him to repeat after me:

I, John Hopewell, give David Epston consent to tell my parents how to set honesty tests without me knowing how they are going to do it. If I knew when and how I was going to be tested, it wouldn't be a test at all and you wouldn't believe I deserve to be known as an honest person when I pass them..

Before I and his parents go off together to order to inform them how to set the tests, all the attendees are advised of the following:

Each and every one of you will be informed either by letter, email or telephone call immediately after each test. If it is a letter/email or phone call, it will read or Johnny will inform you that - 'I passed or failed my honesty test today . . . Johnny.

The meeting is then ended by my assisting Johnny thank everyone for coming along 'to help me prove to myself and to you that I not only can be but I am an honest person'. The parents reiterate their thanks to the attendees as they see fit.

Chairs are left vacant for those unable to attend, but who would have wished to have been there if their circumstances were different e.g. siblings overseas, grandparents out of city or on some occasions if this is considered appropriate protocol, the deceased. We would have contacted these people ahead of time with the same two rounds of enquiries and Johnny's mother or father would be asked to be their proxy and read out their answers to the two enquiries. Still, John would be asked to 'face' the chair left for them. Or I would have interviewed the deceased in an internalised other format ahead of time:

If Johnny's grandfather knew all about what has been going on over the last three years regarding how John has lost his reputation as an honest person. But on the other hand, he knew too that Johnny now wishes to regain it and is willing to undergo honesty testing, what do you guess Johnny's grandfather would say if we asked him the following questions?

And here I would go through the two enquiries and record his putative answers in writing and have say his daughter/Johnny's mother's elaborate on his reasons for his opinions. I would then ask Johnny's mother if she would like to read his (her deceased father's) thoughts 'from beyond the grave' aloud or would she like someone else to do it for her.

### Post-meeting Meeting with Parents

Parents are provided with careful instructions immediately after the real community meeting regarding the setting of the tests. Specific examples are provided. And they are advised to set tests at as many sites of stealing as they can judiciously arrange. I would have got some information as who believed Johnny had stolen from there and where. Most of the young people who warranted such a community approach had stolen from most everyone they possibly could have e.g. parents, siblings, uncles and aunts, family friends, school teachers and class-mates, shops and breaking and entering neighbourhood homes.

### Car and Groceries

Here is an example I might use:

Say you just got home from going to the supermarket and you had a car-full of bags of groceries. Count out a specific sum of change and leave it in that depression by the gear shift, knowing Johnny would have to see the money if he were to get the groceries. Lock the car so only Johnny and no one else possibly could have taken the money. Then give him the car keys requesting he bring in the groceries in. The moment you observe all the groceries have been brought in, say: "Johnny, you have been honesty tested! Let's go to the car and see if you passed or failed."

### Staying Over at Grandmothers.

Here is another example:

Can you arrange with your mother when Johnny stays over at her place to phone you at a convenient time. Tell her to leave a five dollar note right beside the telephone. Then tell her you will phone back in a few minutes. Your mother answers the phone and then goes to find Johnny to tell him you wish to speak with him. You talk to him about picking him up for a few minutes, knowing all the time he will be tempted by the five dollar note which is conspicuously right in front of him. When your mother hears the phone call end, she enters the room saying: 'Johnny, you have been honesty tested. Let's see if you passed or failed?' Then she is to phone you and put Johnny on to let you know the results of the honesty test. Any number of other examples are

provided if the parents suspect they need detailed advice. However, most parents soon get the gist of an 'honesty test' and can contrive their own.

When they learn how scrupulously the tests are set and how rigorous they are, their opinion is sought as to the 'limits of the tests':

(1) How many tests do you think Johnny would need to pass before you could be convinced of his honesty?

(2) And over what period of time?

The usual conclusion of such discussions is ten tests over a three to six week period. Others than call for a kind of moral cease-fire for several more months to be sure and seek the right to spontaneously honesty test if they have any suspicions that their young person has reverted to stealing. All this is negotiable but the important thing is that their decisions are communicated clearly and fairly to Johnny.

(3) Accordingly, they now can propose a date for the honesty celebration/party and attendees are asked to put this into their social calendars in Johnny's first communication (e.g. phone, letter, email) to them announcing his pass/failure on his first test.

It is important that the moral jeopardy that the 'testing' implicates is fairly conducted. Care should also be taken that Johnny could be the only one to be tempted. That means that considerable care is taken in planning the test and that the test is decided almost immediately. In one family in whom I did not place full responsibility for administering the tests, when I rang to find out the results of a test having gone over the setting of that particular test with them, they replied that they couldn't say as their daughter hadn't stolen the test yet. And it seemed they were determined to leave it there long enough so she did. In some families, other siblings have either joined in the stealing or are stealing under the cover of their well known stealing sibling. This must be guarded against.

Parents have my phone number for emergency discussions if they run out of ideas for tests. This has rarely been called upon. People don't have too much trouble getting the idea and implementing it to their satisfaction.

### Honesty Party/Celebration

When the time comes as agreed with the family, this is organised with John at its centre. Once again, I assist Johnny write the invitations. This is done in a very similar fashion to the invitation letter to the honesty meeting.

Dear x:

Although I want you to know that I was tempted to steal on two or three occasions, I didn't. I was honest instead and left the money where it was. Mum and dad say that I can now start thinking of myself as an honest person but that I still have to prove it to you because you weren't there at the tests.

I want you to hear my honesty speech at my honesty party at (time and place) and have a piece of my honesty cake that mum said she would teach me to bake. If you are interested, it will have chocolate icing and 'honesty is the best policy' ('honest as the day is long' or 'Johnny . . . an honest person') on the top of it in silver balls.

There will be food and drinks so don't bring anything but yourself. This is my way and my parents' way to say thank you for helping me to prove I am honest to you. And for the fact that you were willing to give me a chance, even though I had robbed some of you.

Yours for Honesty,

Signed by:

Witnessed by: parents

The Honesty Party is convened as a pleasant social gathering with its highlight the young person's honesty speech. Those who cannot attend often send letters that are read aloud by Johnny or other family members. At the appropriate time, all the party goers are called together for Johnny to read his honesty speech aloud. Once again, we (I and his parents) often get together to help him with this ahead of time, if he requests such assistance. But as often as not, although offered, this was turned down by the young person. The young person was happy to assume full responsibility for his/her speech-writing. Afterwards, many of the attendees pass their congratulations on to him through hugs or hand-shaking. Attending such meetings have been some of my most pleasant memories, especially being taken to one side and thanked with a few words but a very telling bone-crunching handshake from young men.

Here is a transcript of twelve year old Jimmy's honesty speech, which due to the fact that his revered grandparents were unable to attend, it was audio-taped so they could have their own copy:

You are all aware of what I did earlier in the year. I now realise what I did was not only stupid but selfish. And I am sorry for that. Since the incident occurred, my mum, dad, John (sibling) and I went to see Mr. Epston, a family therapist who suggested I go on a programme of honesty testing which you all know about. I did this to prove to myself and my family that I could withstand the temptation of taking things that did not belong to me. I have now successfully completed the tests which have led to this gathering. I'd like to thank you all for your support which as certainly made me realise what I did was wrong. And in the future, I will be earning my money and not taking it". (Freeman et al, 1997, p. 142)

## Virtual Community Meeting

I regularly convene virtual meetings in instances of minor stealing, especially where the stealing has remained within the family - as far as they know. In fact, the vast majority of the meetings, apart from referrals from Youth Aid/Auckland Police where the incidence of stealing was widespread and had come to the notice of the Police, are virtual. The real community meetings are rare and exceptional. The meeting is still conducted as in the above but with family members in attendance only, much like a typical family therapy meeting. As you can imagine, it would be impossible to ensure attendances at community meetings if people knew that the parents' eight year old daughter had stolen ten dollars from her mother's purse or her father's pants' pockets. In virtual meetings, we still make up the list of 'all those who care if you become a stealer or an honest person' and may proceed through the same set of enquiries but here by way of internalised other enquiry.

If Mrs. Staples, your school teacher who said in your last school report that you she loves teaching you, were with us now and I asked her this question (insert question such as - 'what do you think if Julie keeps stealing money from her mum and dad?' What do you guess she would say? If your sister, who is at University in Dunedin were here and I asked her this question....., what do you guess she would say, etc.

In memory of Hatu (Hayden) Barlow (1973-1985), the fifth session (seven months later) describes in far less detail than in the above how I proceeded 'virtually' with Hayden's restoration of his moral identity as an honest person through the virtuality of his 'community' e.g those people who loved him and cared about him so they were concerned whether he regained his reputation as an 'honest person' at the same time as disavowing his reputation as a stealer..

## Failure

I have had remarkable success with this approach and can recall only one young man, aged fifteen with very limited intellectual abilities, who ever failed a test. And I might add he successfully completed the rest of the nine tests. I suspect being required to contact each and every member of his virtual community to report his failure on his inaugural honesty test was a very salutary experience. However, in two notable instances, this approach was not taken up by the young person. Both were in their mid to late teens and were running professional stealing-on-commission rings. For example, you would apply with a request say for a certain brand of Ipod and an 'agent' on a commission would be assigned to steal it for you. Both young men were particularly brazen about their criminal prowess. They were running very successful financial operations with many part-time agents. In fact, they were more than satisfied with the reputation they had acquired in their school communities. Some

parents have been unable to co-operate because of their illegal activities and for the fact that their young people were more or less black-mailing them. In either case, they felt too morally compromised to seek a moral community to oversee the honesty testing of their young person. However, in one instance, I was required to do a home visit early one evening by a family to find myself in a most unusual set of circumstances. The young person, aged thirteen, who had been caught 'red handed' stealing from his mother's purse sat between his parents in their living room. In every corner of the room stood a very sinister, brawny man with his arms crossed across his chest with the most intimidating demeanor. Strangely, they were never introduced to me but they remained on guard throughout our meeting. I proceeded as normally as did the young man and his family. He passed his honesty tests with flying colours. I always wondered about this and my curiosity was only satisfied some years later when I was teaching a workshop on this approach to stealing to a special training day for Youth Aid/Police people. In conversation, I was to learn that this family was a notorious criminal family and had been so for several generations. Nonetheless, they obviously could not countenance a young person stealing from his family.

## Research

In the mid to late 1980s, this approach or discrete elements of it were researched, providing evaluation support for its efficacy. Certainly at the time, there were surprisingly few studies of clinical procedures reported in the literature. The two research studies were developed and conducted at The Leslie Centre, then a family counselling agency sponsored by the Presbyterian Social Services Association in Auckland, New Zealand. In 1984, almost 5% of the families seen had nominated stealing among the presenting problems. Indeed, the incidence of stealing, as discovered in community surveys, is surprisingly high (between 4% and 10%) (REFS). A further concern, according to Patterson (1982) was that the parents of stealers were the most difficult to engage in treatment, seldom carried out their assignments and furthermore, had a high drop out rate.

The Leslie Centre approach that was an evaluation of 45 cases of reported stealing over a three year period was based on many of the ideas in this chapter, most significantly the 'regrading to an honest person with a good reputation (p. 188). For almost half the children, stealing was the sole presenting problem. For others, presenting problems typically included oppositional behaviours such as aggression and non-compliance with family rules. For half, parents reported the stealing having persisted for two years or longer. Parents' detection of stealing was estimated as being daily for a small number, and for 42% detection occurred at least weekly. 80% of the young people were under the age of 13.

Therapist reports indicated that the vast majority of families (84%) were successfully engaged in therapy, which lasted an average of 3.3 sessions, which would have also included therapeutic letters and progress phone calls. At follow-up

telephone calls six to twelve months later, 81% of the 45 children were reported by parents to not be stealing at all, or that stealing was 'substantially reduced'. We believe that this re-grading approach as substantiated by 'honesty testing' led to a very high rate of engagement compared to researchers at the Oregon Social Learning Center (Patterson, 1982).

Seymour supervised and was the therapist for Michael Hamilton's MA thesis (Auckland University), once again at Leslie Centre in which the then Department of Social Welfare was approached for young people who were considered to be intractable stealers, several of whom were in care of the Department. A rigorous single case design involved four families with more sophisticated and detailed measurement procedures revealed similarly strong positive results. The follow-up measurements were as incontrovertible as we can imagine. Six months after the completion of the honesty testing, sums of money were displayed in the surrounds of the young person and rejected by him/her.

### Conclusion

This community approach to stealing, in both forms - complete and abridged - has been very successful in at least 40 occasions other than the 45 cases reviewed at Leslie Centre over the years. As far as I know, the only failures were those mentioned above. For a notoriously difficult problem to 'treat', the results, both researched and anecdotal, highly recommend such an approach.

### Footnotes

1. This is slightly altered from Epston, 1989, p. 117.
2. Ibid, p. 115.
3. Internalised other questioning are a format for enquiry developed in the first instance by David Epston and developed by Karl Tomm (Department of Psychiatry, University of Calgary). See references below.

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