
Dominique, a foster child, has a tattoo of a butterfly on her left hand. "I think they symbolize freedom," she said, "because I've never seen them standing still; they're always flying." The first time she saw a butterfly, when she was in second grade, it was in a box: "I felt like that," she declared. "Like I always had an obstacle surrounding me, keeping me from moving. I got this tattoo because I wanted to set down the box. Set down all this pain, all this hurt. Just let it go, so I could move on with my life."

Dominique's mother, an abusive parent, was the first obstacle she encountered. A series of foster parents, however, kept her in a box as well. And so, Dominique sometimes wants to turn the clock back: "I've been in the system a long time, always looking for someone who could replace my m-m-mom, and no one has yet to. So now, I'm like maybe she was what I needed in the first place."

These days, more than 400,000 children in the United States are in foster care. Between $15 and $20 billion a year is spent on their health and well-being. Nonetheless, Cris Beam, who teaches creative writing at Columbia University, New York University and Bayside Correctional Facility, and is herself a foster parent, points out, nobody thinks the system is working. Foster children, Beam claims, are "the most vulnerable members of society." They are twice as likely as soldiers in combat to develop posttraumatic stress disorder. In some states, more of them are abused in foster care than in the homes of biological parents.

In *To The End of June*, Beam analyzes foster care policies, past and present, and provides detailed narratives of the experiences of several foster families. The book, Beam acknowledges, "is more descriptive than prescriptive, placing the why above the what next." Informative, poignant, passionate, and persuasive, *To The End of June* is almost certain, however, to generate a sense of urgency in readers to fix a broken system that has sometimes managed to fly beneath the radar.

Beam demonstrates that every few years the political and policy pendulum has swung from a model based on keeping the biological family together to one based on child safety that results in intervention and removal. Neither approach has worked. In 1980, Congress forced states to move from foster care to preventive and family reunification programs in the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act (AACWA). By the end of the decade, an epidemic of crack cocaine kept hundreds of thousands of kids "hovering in a purgatory state:" the homes of their biological parents were unsafe but under AACWA they were not eligible for foster care. In 1997, to counter "foster care drift," the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) mandated that courts terminate parental rights in unstable families after fifteen months. An unintended consequence of ASFA, Beam notes, was that many kids "were left without anyone."

A fundamental problem with child welfare policies, Beam claims, is the assumption that a single model can address "the divergent needs of abused or neglected kids in all of their divergent places," when, in fact, "every child is different." And yet, Beam does identify some principles that should undergird foster care. "Attachment theory" is the most important of them. Confirmed by decades of empirical studies, attachment theory posits that children who connect deeply with an adult in infancy are far more likely to develop normally than those without "secure attachments." Attachment theory lends support to policies that keep kids in their homes whenever possible and assist biological parents as they work within the system. It reinforces the view that a core problem with foster care is that it is "a temporary solution." In New York, for example, kids stay in foster care, on average, for two or three years, decreasing the odds that they will have "a lifetime parent to attach to."
Determined to end her book on an optimistic note, Beam takes some solace in the troubling truth that poverty (which between 2000 and 2008 ensnared an additional 2.5 million children in the United States, an increase of 21 percent) defines and undermines a foster care system "made by fallible people with fallible families." Poverty, she asserts, is a wide, wide road with many on-ramps for improvement."

Providing better school lunches, libraries, school care, and neighborhood resources will reduce the number of children in a foster care system we don't yet know how to fix. Beam is also heartened by Congress' decision in 2012 to launch a listening tour for its Caucus on Foster Youth. Listening, she concludes, "is a good place to start." We assume she agrees with us, however, that acting, to reduce the number of children living in poverty, would be a whole lot better.

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