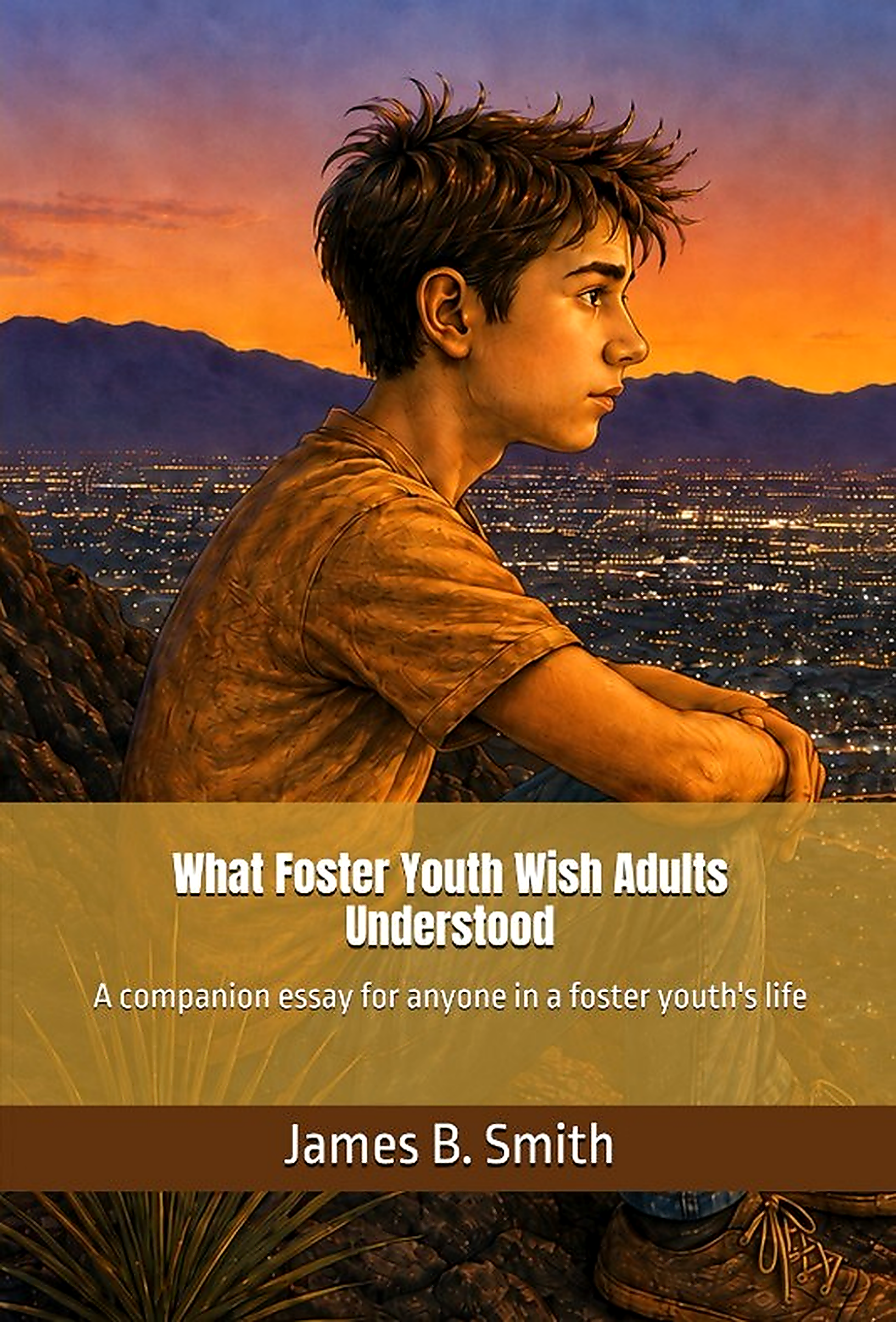


An artistic illustration of a young man with dark, spiky hair, shown in profile from the chest up. He is looking out over a vast city at night, with numerous lights visible in the valleys and across the landscape. The sky is a mix of orange, yellow, and blue, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. He is wearing a short-sleeved, button-down shirt. His arms are crossed and resting on a dark, rocky ledge. The overall mood is contemplative and serene.

What Foster Youth Wish Adults Understood

A companion essay for anyone in a foster youth's life

James B. Smith

DREAMER'S TRASH BAG

What Foster Youth Wish Adults Understood

*A companion essay
for anyone in a foster youth's life*

by James B. Smith

A companion to the memoir, Dreamer's Trash Bag



Dreamer's Trash Bag

A memoir of displacement and survival

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This essay is a companion to *Dreamer's Trash Bag*, a memoir by James B. Smith, and draws on the lived experience and reflections that shaped the memoir. Names, locations, and identifying details have been changed or omitted to protect the privacy of individuals.

This essay was written from the lived experience and personal records of James B. Smith. AI tools were used for proofreading and editorial assistance; all content was reviewed, revised, and approved by the author.

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Welcome

A note before we begin.

This essay is for the adults in a foster youth's life.

For the social worker, the foster parent, the case manager, the teacher, the counselor, the coach, the youth pastor, the supervisor, the trainer, the program designer, the policy writer, the agency director.

For the grandmother called in to take her grandchildren after a removal. The aunt or uncle trying to keep cousins together. The family friend who stayed in touch through three placements. The neighbor who sees a foster youth at the bus stop every morning. The mother of a classmate, wondering how to invite the kid over for the first time. The religious community that wants to welcome a child without overwhelming them. The volunteer mentor showing up once a week, unsure what to say.

For anyone who has ever known a young person in foster care — recently, or many years ago — and asked themselves: what should I have done differently? what can I do now?

Take what applies to your role. No reader is expected to carry all of this. Different parts of this essay will land differently depending on who you are reading it as — a professional, a foster parent, an aunt, a teacher, a neighbor. That is the design, not a failure of it.

This essay does not treat you as the problem. The adults who find their way into a foster youth's life are, almost universally, people who showed up because they cared. What this essay treats you as is the people most positioned to change what foster youth experience at the level where change actually lands — in a kitchen, in a classroom, in a waiting room, in a car ride, on an ordinary Tuesday afternoon when everything is hard.

Built around five themes from my memoir, *Dreamer's Trash Bag*, this essay offers a foster parent's framework alongside a teacher's framework alongside a grandmother's framework — because foster youth move between all of these worlds, and the adults in all of these worlds shape what foster youth come to believe about themselves.

THE THEMES

What Children Carry Into Every Room. Why a childhood of moving teaches a young person to read every room they enter — and what your room is telling them before you speak.

The Sixth School. What happens to a young person who starts over six times, and what one teacher did that the other five buildings never had time to.

The Booklet Didn't See Me. Two rooms where professionals looked directly at me and accepted a smaller version than the one that was there.

Hardly Anyone Came Back. Five hard events, competently handled — and what nobody was responsible for afterward.

The Adults Who Show Up. Why warmth is not the signal you think it is, and what the adults I still remember actually did.

Each theme opens with a piece of my story, looks honestly at what that moment asks adults to consider, and ends with one specific thing you could do differently — small enough to start on Monday.

This essay is not therapy. It is not a curriculum. It is not a clinical training. It is what I wish someone had given the adults in my life — and the people who almost were adults in my life — when I was the foster youth in the room.

It also will not ask you to process your own history. It will ask you to look at your practice and change something in it. If you want the other kind of work — the inward kind — *Carrying It Forward* is the book for that.

If you are working through this in a cohort — a training, a book club, a faith community small group, a staff development series — there are facilitation notes near the end of the essay. If you are working through it alone, those pages will still be useful: they show what a careful reading looks like.

Thank you for being here.

— James

Before You Begin

A note on this material.

The five themes in this essay touch on material that may be activating for you — childhood loss, neglect, family separation, abuse, addiction, the failures of systems built to help. If you yourself have a history with foster care, adoption, or family instability, you may find that this essay surfaces things from your own life as well as the lives of the young people you serve.

That is normal. It is part of why this essay exists.

If you are a professional, you already know that the people who work with traumatized youth carry weight. The material is activating. The caseloads are heavy. The secondary stress is real. If you are not a professional — if you are a grandparent, a neighbor, a family friend, a volunteer — you may not have a name for what you carry, but you carry something too. Anyone who shows up for a foster youth picks up part of what that young person is holding.

I want to acknowledge something directly. Many adults reading this are trying to care well inside systems that do not leave enough time, support, or emotional margin for the kind of attention young people deserve. Caseloads exceed what any single worker can hold. Documentation demands consume the hours that could have gone to relationship. Turnover removes the very adults who finally began to be trusted. Court timelines do not move at the speed of healing. Naming that reality does not remove responsibility from any of us, including me. It does explain why so many caring adults end up operating in survival mode themselves. I cannot fix the conditions you work under. I can name what would change if you had room to do it, and trust you to find what is possible at the margins of a job that has been made harder than it should be.

Take this essay at your own pace. Skip what is too much for today. Return to it. The young people you serve, and have served, have been doing exactly that with their own histories for years. You are allowed to do the same with this.

Theme One: What Children Carry Into Every Room

I was eight years old when I was removed. I was given a black plastic trash bag and told to put my belongings in it.

That bag became the symbol I built my memoir around, and it earned that place. But it is not the thing I carried longest.

Let me give you the shape of it first.

In the space of two months, I moved through five different homes. Five sets of front doors, five kitchens, five sets of house rules, five arrangements of adults with five different tempers and five different ideas about what a child was for. Then I was moved to a city hours away, to another home. And a year after that, I left that house for school one morning and came back in the afternoon to a different one.

I want you to notice what is missing from that account. No reasons. I did not have them at the time and I do not have most of them now. There were reasons — there are always reasons, and they are written down somewhere in a file — but nobody sat down with an eight-year-old and explained the logic of any of it. The moves simply happened, the way weather happens.

A child cannot make sense of that. But a child can learn from it, and what a child learns is this: the room you are in is temporary, the adults in it have not been explained to you, and the cost of misjudging them is high.

So you learn to read the room.

I want to be precise about what that means, because it sounds like a metaphor and it is not. It is a specific, practiced, exhausting skill, and I built mine before I was ten.

You read the room's temperature before you read anyone's face — whether the air in the house is loose or tight, whether things have been calm here or whether something happened before you arrived. You read the doorways: which ones are open, which stay closed, which one an adult positions themselves in. You read the other children, if there are any, because they already know the rules and their bodies will tell you what those rules are before anyone says a word. You read whether the adult's attention is on you or past you. You read what is on the walls and what is not. You work out, within minutes, where in this house it is safe to be, and you go there, and you stay quiet.

None of this is conscious. It runs the way breathing runs.

And here is the part that matters most for you, because it is the part that lasts.

That skill does not switch off when the placements end.

I read the room in every classroom I entered afterward. I read the room at every new school, and there were many. I read the room walking into my first job site. I read it in waiting areas and offices and meetings. I read it standing in a doorway at nineteen and at twenty-five and, if I am honest with you, I read it this morning. Thirty-some years after the last time anyone moved me anywhere, I still do a full scan of a room before I settle into it, and I still know within seconds where the exits are.

That is what children carry into every room. Not the trash bag. The bag gets replaced eventually by a duffel, then a suitcase, then boxes or nothing at all. The room-reading stays, because it was built during years when it was the most useful thing they had, and skills built under those conditions do not get retired. They just get quieter.

So when a young person walks into your space for the first time — your classroom, your office, your living room, your car — understand that an assessment is already underway and it started before you spoke. They are not being suspicious of you. They are doing the thing that kept them intact. It would be strange and slightly alarming if they were not doing it.

Which means the room is talking to them whether you intended it to or not.

That is not a comfortable thought, but it is a useful one, because it puts something within your control that you may not have realized was yours. You cannot talk a child out of reading the room. You should not try. What you can do is make sure the room has something worth reading.

Put something in the room that says you were expecting this particular child.

Not a tour. Not the house rules. Not the intake questions — all of that can wait an hour, and none of it will be retained anyway. One object. A book that suits their actual age. A sketchpad, if somebody told you they draw. A jacket in the right size. A note with their name spelled correctly. A snack that a person chose rather than defaulted to.

It costs almost nothing. It takes fifteen minutes of thought the day before. And it is doing work you will never see, because it is being read by a very good reader who has been doing this since they were eight.

A room with nothing personal in it says: *we knew someone was coming, we did not know it would be you, and it does not especially matter that it is.* A room with one right thing in it says something else entirely, before anyone has spoken a word.

It says: *we knew it was you.*

Theme Two: The Sixth School

I attended six high schools.

There was the teal one first, carved out against the dusty tan of the hills. There was one in the city. There was the school at Boys Town. There was one on the east side. There was a technical school. And then there was the last one.

Six sets of hallways to learn. Six sets of unwritten rules about where you sit and who you do not sit near. Six offices where a secretary read a transfer file and decided which classes to put me in. Six first days.

A first day looks like paperwork and a schedule from the outside. Here is what it actually costs.

You arrive with no history in the building. Nobody there has seen you do anything. Every teacher forms their entire impression of you in the first ten minutes, from a folder and a glance, and whatever they conclude becomes the operating assumption until something forces a revision. Meanwhile you are working out which adults are safe, which students are dangerous, where you can sit at lunch, and what happens in this particular building if you get something wrong.

The first time, I introduced myself. I made an effort. I answered questions about where I had come from with something close to the truth.

By the fourth school I had stopped.

Not out of anger — it was arithmetic. Establishing yourself takes weeks, and I had learned I would not be there long enough to collect on the investment. So I went quiet, kept my grades adequate, found a corner, and waited. I found the library at more than one of those schools, and it was always the same relief: a place where I could sit without being corrected.

Here is where adults got me wrong.

A teacher meeting me in that fourth building would have seen a student who did not participate, did not volunteer, did not join anything, and did not seem to want to connect. Every one of those observations would have been accurate. And the conclusion an adult naturally draws from them — that this kid is disengaged, or resistant, or does not care about school — was wrong every single time.

I was not disengaged. I was depleted. There is a difference, and it is not visible from the front of a room.

Add to that the fact that no adult in any of those buildings had me long enough to see it. That is not a criticism of them. It is arithmetic again. Seeing a young person requires accumulated time — you notice a change from a baseline, and you cannot notice a

change if you never had the baseline. Every time I moved, the counter reset to zero, for me and for every adult around me at once.

There is also a cost to that moving that nobody was tracking, and I want to give you the clearest example I have.

Late in high school a counselor slid a form across a desk toward me and waited — she waited until my eyes came back to her before she kept going, which I noticed, because not everyone did. The technical school had an Emergency Medical Training program. I read the page and something in me settled. Skills that mattered. Work that meets people at the moment everything else has already broken. For the first time in a long while I could picture myself moving toward something instead of away from something.

Then I saw the date. It was not the school's deadline. It was the program's, and it had already closed.

It had closed during weeks when my life was in motion — between houses, between rules, between who I was allowed to be — and before I had any idea the program existed.

Nobody did anything wrong. The counselor was helpful. The deadline was reasonable. It is simply that opportunities have dates attached, those dates do not pause when a child is moved, and nobody in that system had the job of carrying a young person's future across a placement change.

I took construction instead, because construction was still open and I had learned what waiting for the right moment usually cost me. It turned out to matter enormously. That is not the point. The point is that it was chosen by a calendar.

Then, at the sixth school, Mr. Calloway.

He taught biology. I had been in his class long enough for him to have a baseline, which is to say longer than I had been anywhere else. My grades had slipped, and I had reasons, and I had not offered them to anybody.

I was walking from the library toward the parking lot one afternoon when I felt the floor change under me — the particular vibration of someone moving fast behind me, purposeful, aimed. I turned.

Mr. Calloway was coming, and he was already pulling Miren along with him. She was my school interpreter, and she had that unhurried expression she carried into every hallway and every classroom she entered on my behalf. His white mustache was set in a straight line.

He had noticed something. He had decided to do something about it that afternoon. And he had understood, without anyone explaining it to him, that doing something about it required Miren. So he went and got her, and then he came across a parking lot after a student who was leaving.

He offered me a way through. One project. A specific, concrete path to passing his class.

The grace on the project sounds like the story. It is not the important part.

The important part is that he went and got the interpreter.

He did not try to manage it with gestures. He did not write a note and hope. He did not wait for the next scheduled meeting where an interpreter would already be present — which would have been the reasonable, professional, everybody-would-understand choice. He decided the conversation needed to happen now, in a form I could fully receive, and he went and got what that required before he came to find me.

That is the difference between good intentions and access, and it is the whole of this chapter.

Do not try to make do. Go get what is actually needed, and go get it now.

Effort will be noticed. I want to say that plainly, because a lot of adults are trying hard with tools that were never going to be sufficient, and I remember every one of them. But being remembered is not the same as being reached. The teacher who tries valiantly with a method that does not work has still not communicated. The kindness registers. The information does not.

And if you are meeting a young person who seems shut down, closed off, uninterested in connecting with you — consider that you may be the fifth adult in that chair, and that they are not refusing you. They are conserving. Consider also that you may be the first one who will be there long enough to see anything at all.

You will not know which. Act as though it is you.

Theme Three: The Booklet Didn't See Me

I asked to take AP English.

What I was handed instead was a thin booklet, stapled together as though the pages had been thrown into place without much care. *Dracula and the Werewolf*. Four or five words per page. A child's rhythm. A child's expectation.

I sat there with heat rising in my chest — not from embarrassment, from insult. Because they were not offering support. They were offering a smaller version of me.

I pushed the booklet aside and said I wanted the real class. That took more than one conversation. My friend Marcus stood with me in the hallway beforehand, while my hands shook, and then I went in and asked again. Eventually somebody said: one quarter. A trial. We'll see.

The next week I sat in AP English holding *Of Mice and Men*. A real book with real weight in my hands, and my shoulders came down — not because the story was comforting, but because it was honest. These pages did not pretend I was a child.

I passed.

I want to be careful about how that lands, because it is easy to read as a triumph and it was not one. Nobody in that building had assessed my reading. Nobody had asked what I had read on my own. The booklet was not the result of an evaluation; it was the result of a category. An English class labeled for Ameslan students, a stack of materials sized for the label, and a student sorted into it before anyone had looked at him. I did not overcome a hard judgment. I overcame the absence of one.

And here is the part that should worry you more than the booklet. If I had not pushed, no one would ever have known. There would be no record of an error. The file would show a young person placed in an appropriate setting, receiving services. Everything would have looked correct, permanently.

That is the visible version of this failure. Now the other one.

During those same years, the agency required me to come in once a month for counseling. I never chose it. I just went. The building smelled of old paper and industrial carpet, and I would sit in the waiting room with the metal chairs pressing stiff against my legs until someone came for me.

I gave those sessions almost nothing.

Not because I had nothing. I had a great deal. I stayed shallow on purpose, because I had worked out that anything I said in that room could travel — to the home I was living in, to the agency, into decisions I would not be consulted about. Disclosure had a cost

and no visible benefit. So I smiled and gave them the surface and kept the rest where no one could reach it.

Every one of those sessions was documented as attended.

Then there was the session with the psychologist. She had square glasses and a folder that never left her hands. No interpreter came that day. Instead, the woman I was placed with slid into the chair beside me and lifted her hands to interpret — a person with her own stake in what got said, and no training for the role. Her eyes stayed on the doctor.

The psychologist opened the folder and worked through it. When something came to me, the answer was already moving before my thought was finished — hands dropping mid-sentence, as though she already knew what I would say. As though my own hands were not needed in the room at all.

The psychologist nodded and wrote on her pad. *Let's add this one. Zoloft. It should help with depression.*

What reached me was fragments. *New pill. Help feelings. Take it.*

I was medicated for depression in a meeting where I was not able to participate in the conversation about my own depression.

And I need to tell you when this was happening, because the timing is the whole point. This was shortly after the worst night of my life — a night I write about in the memoir and will not describe here. I had come very close to not being here. I was, at that time, attending mandatory monthly counseling and sitting in front of a psychologist with my file open in her hands.

Not one of them knew.

They were not negligent people. They were doing their jobs, in their professional capacity, with me directly in front of them. They had a folder, a diagnosis, a treatment plan, and a medication. What they did not have was any idea what had happened, because the environment I was going home to made honesty expensive and nobody had noticed that either.

Counseling assumes you have somewhere stable to go afterward and do the work. Medication assumes a nervous system that is misfiring rather than one responding accurately to an unstable place. Both are reasonable interventions for a young person with a base underneath them. I did not have a base. I was given the interventions instead of the base, not alongside it, and then documented as receiving services.

So here is what both halves of this share. In the classroom, an adult accepted a lowered version of my ability. In the session, an adult accepted a lowered version of my interior — one I supplied myself, because supplying it was safer than the truth. In both rooms a professional was looking directly at me, on purpose, and took the small version as accurate.

When a young person hands you a smaller version of themselves, do not assume it is the real one.

In a classroom that means testing the ceiling rather than confirming the floor — give them the harder book first and find out. In a session it means the smooth, cooperative, nothing-much-going-on answer deserves more suspicion than the difficult one. A young person who is managing you well will look exactly like a young person who is doing fine. And check who is interpreting, in every sense — who is standing between you and the child, what they have at stake, and whether the child has any way to say something the interpreter would rather not carry.

I sit at the head of tables like that now. I have spent years as an educator and an administrator, in the rooms where decisions about Ameslan students get made, and I have signed my name to documents that will outlive the meeting. I know exactly how the booklet gets handed out. It is never malice. It is a category, a caseload, and a Tuesday.

Which is why somebody in the room has to be the one who asks whether the person in front of them is actually who the file says they are.

Theme Four: Hardly Anyone Came Back

A man in a tan uniform came to talk to me. His badge caught the fluorescent light. There was an interpreter, Rivera, who was careful and faithful — and even so, his questions arrived to me already shaped by someone else's hands, already one step removed from whatever he actually meant.

I'm here to ask you some questions. Is that alright?

I shrugged.

He asked whether my mother had ever done things to me that were inappropriate. Whether she had ever crossed boundaries that should never be crossed.

The question landed between us, solid and strange. Rivera hesitated before she carried it.

I searched every memory I could reach. Every room, every bed, every night. Nothing matched what he was describing. What I found instead was my mother's arms around us, and her Ameslan across the space between us — school-taught, awkward, alive with love anyway.

None of that was what he was asking for.

And he did not leave room for it. He leaned forward, elbows on his knees, eyes fixed on me with a kind of focused certainty. He was not asking. He was waiting for me to confirm something he already believed.

I did not have clean signs for what that felt like. I only knew his questions did not match anything in my life, and that the way the adults in that room were watching me made the air wrong.

Then it ended, and everyone went back to work.

No one came back.

Not that afternoon, not that week, not ever. No adult sat down with me afterward and said: *that was a hard thing, and here is what it was, and here is what happens now*. I was left holding an accusation about my own mother that I could not evaluate, at an age where I had no framework for any of it, and the professional judgment appears to have been that the interview was complete.

The interview *was* complete. That is exactly the problem. The system had gotten what it needed.

I want to be careful here, because I am not describing negligence. That man had a job and did it. Rivera did her job well. Everyone in that room was competent and

appropriately present for the event. What nobody was responsible for was the day after the event, and so nobody did it.

This is the pattern I most want you to see, because it repeats through my entire childhood and it is the failure that costs the least to fix.

At fourteen I sat in a courtroom for a hearing about my father's parental rights. He was there. At one point he looked across the room and gave me an expression I had known since I was small — not quite a smile, more a warning, the same face I used to watch for from underneath a bed frame or from behind the edge of a door. The judge spoke his final word. It was, by any measure, one of the largest days of my life.

The courtroom folded into the past. Months, then a season. Nobody asked me about it. Not the week after, not the month after. There was a hearing, and then there was school on Monday.

A year or so after the court, the man in the household where I was placed had left. He had been the buffer — without him the house lost its pause, and there was no longer anywhere for pressure to land except on me. *He couldn't handle things here*, I was told. *It's better this way.*

Better for who?

That was a structural change in a child's living situation, and as far as I could tell it triggered no assessment of any kind. The placement was still the placement. The address had not changed. On paper nothing had happened.

There was also a camp, and something that happened there with a counselor, which I write about in the memoir and will not describe. What matters here is that no adult ever asked me about it. Not once, not in any of the many rooms I sat in with professionals over the following years. The absence of the question was so total that for a long time I understood it as evidence that the question was not askable. And years later, when there was a teacher whose conduct in a classroom I might have reported, I did not — because I had already worked out that reporting would cost me more than silence would. I engineered my own way out of that room and told no one.

And when my grandmother died, nobody told me. I found out standing on a hillside in front of a marker with her name on it, some time later. There was no bad actor in that. There was a chain of adults, each of whom presumably assumed someone else had passed it along.

So: five events. Five moments where the adults around me were mobilized, informed, and appropriately present at the time. And in not one of those five did anyone come back afterward.

I do not want to overstate this. A few people did come back. There were adults in those years who noticed something afterward and said so, and I will get to them, because they are the reason I am able to write any of this. But they were rare enough that I can still

name every one of them, thirty years later — which is its own kind of evidence. Coming back should not be memorable. It should be routine.

Here is what I have come to think about that. Systems are built around events, because events are what can be scheduled, documented, and billed. The interview happens. The hearing happens. The placement change happens. Each has a form attached and a person assigned. The days afterward have no form and no assignment, which means they belong to nobody — and the days afterward are when a child is actually alone with what happened.

You already know this from your own life. Nothing hard has ever been over when the meeting ended.

So the whole of this chapter comes down to one thing, and it is the smallest ask in this book.

Go back three days later.

Not during — during, there are people. Three days later, when everyone has moved on to the next case, the next hearing, the next crisis. It does not require a plan or a script and it should not be a session. It can be a car ride. It can be four minutes in a hallway. *I've been thinking about Tuesday. I'm not going to ask you about it. I just wanted you to know I remembered it happened.*

If you say that and the young person shrugs and says nothing, you have still done the entire thing. You are not there to extract a response. You are there to be evidence that the event was real and that somebody noticed, which is the exact thing I did not have and have spent a great deal of my life reconstructing on my own.

Put it in your calendar if you have to. Three days out. That is the intervention.

Theme Five: The Adults Who Show Up

There was a teacher at my technical high school who announced one afternoon that the class was going to learn the Ameslan alphabet.

She looked at me when she said it.

So I became the teacher. A — I showed her, and her fingernails curved away from each other before her fingers could form the shape, the nails hitting air instead of palm. She adjusted. Tried again. Closer. B was better. C was easy, an open curve, no problem. D would not come at all; the nails met at their edges before the fingertips could close, leaving a gap exactly where the shape needed to seal. She tried to spell her own name and what her hands produced did not resemble it.

I want to be fair to her about that part. She was trying, in front of a room, at something she was not good at, and she had thought to include my language in her classroom at all, which most teachers never did.

She also had a habit of moving down the rows while students worked, dragging those fingernails lightly across the shoulders and upper backs of the boys. One by one. Slowly. As though she had a schedule.

None of us liked it. We did not have language for it either.

That is what I need you to sit with before anything else in this chapter, and it is the hardest thing in this essay to hear: an adult can be doing a warm, inclusive, well-intentioned thing and a harmful thing in the same hour, in the same room, with the same hands. If someone had walked past that door they would have seen a teacher learning her student's language. That is what it looked like. That was even partly what it was.

Some of the adults who showed up in my childhood came to take something. I write about them in the memoir and will not describe them here. What matters for you is what they were like on the surface, which was: warm. Encouraging. Interested. Several of them were, by any outside measure, the good ones.

So foster youth build an appraisal system, and it runs constantly. Every new adult is sorted against every prior adult. It is not fair to you. It is not personal. It is a system built out of evidence, and you are being measured against people you never met and would probably despise.

Which means the adults I remember are not the ones who were kindest. They are the ones who wanted nothing.

There is a moment I still turn over. An adult in my life had drawn a line about where I could go and what I could do — the kind of rule that gets stated flatly, the way you'd state a policy. I looked toward one of my Young Men advisors, searching his face for

some sign that a grown man might say no, might draw a line of his own, might protect the space he had offered me.

He didn't.

He was not a bad man. He had been good to me for months. But in the one moment when a word from him would have cost him something and given me a great deal, there was no word. I have thought about that more than I have thought about most of the people who were actively cruel to me, because he is the one who could have gone the other way.

That quorum, though. Every Sunday after sacrament meeting, the class where I had sat week after week — it was the one place where my presence was expected, and not because a caseworker had assigned it. Nobody had placed me there. No paperwork produced me. I was just expected, the way the other boys were expected, and when I turned up nobody documented it.

I did not have words for why that mattered until I was much older. Everything else in my life was arranged. That room was the only one I entered as a person rather than as a case.

And then there was a night I turned up at a bishop's house in bad shape. I will not describe how I got there — the memoir has it. What I want you to have is his wife at the door.

She opened it and studied my face. She read the strain in it, the exhaustion, the weight I had not set down anywhere. And she did not question or hesitate. She did not ask what happened. She did not ask whether my caseworker knew where I was. She did not ask me to account for arriving at a stranger's door in that condition.

She guided me inside and settled me on the couch.

That is the whole scene, and I have carried it for thirty years.

And there was my aunt, who did something less visible than any of that. Without her signature on the right form, I would not have been allowed back into the town at all. The system needed a licensed home. She had one, because she had gone and gotten licensed — the paperwork, the inspections, the questions from strangers about her own house. She put her name on a document, and a door that would otherwise have stayed closed to me opened.

I doubt anyone thanked her for that. It is not the kind of thing that reads as love. It reads as administration.

What the advisor did not do and what she did are the same skill, pointed in opposite directions. Both moments turned on whether an adult would take on a cost so a child would not have to. She did. He didn't. Neither of them was thinking about it that way at

the time, and neither will you be, which is why it is worth deciding now what kind of adult you intend to be in a moment you cannot see coming.

Here is the action, and it is smaller than it sounds.

Stop making them account for themselves.

Not as a rule about paperwork — you will still have paperwork. As a posture. The child who arrives late, arrives upset, arrives at the wrong door, arrives when they were not scheduled to arrive: the reflex is to ask why, and the asking is reasonable, and it costs more than you think. She did not ask. The quorum did not ask. In both cases what I received was the same thing, which was the experience of being somewhere without having to justify being there.

You can give a child that this week. It requires no training, no budget, no approval. It requires only that you notice the moment you are about to ask a young person to explain their own presence, and let it pass.

One Last Thing

Before you close this essay.

I want you to sit with one image for a minute before you put this down.

It is eight-year-old me, on a porch I have never seen before, holding a trash bag with the rest of what I owned. The caseworker is at the door. A new adult is about to open it. I do not know who they are. I do not know how long I will be here. I do not know if they are safe. I am about to read their face — what their eyes do, what their mouth does, what their hands do — and I will know more about them in the next sixty seconds than they will know about me in the next six months.

The eight-year-old on that porch was paying attention. Closely. With everything he had.

Some adults opened the door well. Some did not. Most, I think now, were trying with whatever they had. The ones who got it most right were not the ones with the most training. They were the ones who let themselves be changed, slightly, by what they saw.

That eight-year-old grew up. He read his files when he was old enough to request them. I will tell you what that was like: I sat in a kitchen at twenty-three, with a folder a relative had helped me request, and I read paragraphs that had been written about me when I was nine. Some of what was written there was not what I remembered being. Some of it was. I had to spend years deciding what to do with the difference. The young people you are writing about today will, in twenty years, do the same with what you write today. That is true even when you cannot picture it. That is true even when you have moved on to a different caseload. The words outlast the encounter. The young person grows up and reads them. That is part of the work, too — what you do now is partly for an adult you will never meet.

He is also somewhere right now, that eight-year-old — in your life or in a life within reach of your life. Maybe you have not met him yet. Maybe he is in your home, your classroom, your office, your congregation, your block. He is paying attention to you the way the eight-year-old on the porch paid attention. With everything he has.

You will not always know what he is seeing. You will not always know how it is landing. You will not always be the one he remembers. None of that is a failure. The only thing the eight-year-old on the porch ever needed from the adults around him — though he could not have said it then — was for them to show up like the showing up mattered.

This essay has been my way of saying it matters.

The next part is yours.

— James

For Group Use

Facilitating this essay with a cohort.

This essay can be read alone. It can also be read together — in an agency training, a foster-parent cohort, a classroom of social work or education students, a faith-community small group, a kinship-care support circle, a book club, a professional development series, or any room of adults who share an interest in foster youth. These notes are for whoever is leading that room.

PACING

One theme per session is the right pace. Five sessions, one theme each. Reading the whole essay in one sitting tends to be too much — for the same reasons reading a memoir in one sitting is too much.

Allow ninety minutes per session at minimum. The first half is reading the theme aloud, or having read it in advance, and talking about what it surfaced. The second half is where the session earns itself: each theme ends with one specific thing the essay asks an adult to do, and the group should spend real time on what that would actually look like in their own building, their own caseload, their own home.

WHEN PARTICIPANTS ARE THEMSELVES FORMER FOSTER YOUTH

Many adults working in or near the foster care system are themselves former foster youth, adoptees, or kinship placements. This essay may surface things from their own lives as well as the lives of the young people they serve. Name this possibility at the start of the first session. Make it explicit that participants are allowed to step out, take breaks, skip sections, or stop entirely. The young people you serve have been given fewer of those permissions than they should have. Do not replicate that pattern in your own training rooms.

AFTER THE FIVE THEMES

If the cohort has done the work, the fifth session should not end with a summary. It should end with a question: what are you going to do differently on Monday? The answer can be small. I am going to put one thing in that room before the next placement arrives. I am going to stop trying to make do and go get what is actually needed. I am going to hand a student the harder book and find out. I am going to put a follow-up in

my calendar for three days out. I am going to stop asking a kid to explain why they're here. One thing. Specific. Achievable. Followed up on at the next gathering of the same cohort, six weeks out. The point of this essay was never the essay. The point was what changes after the essay is closed.

Continuing the Conversation

If this essay opened something — let's keep going.

If this essay has shifted something in how you see the foster youth in your life, and you would like to bring this work to a wider group — an agency cohort, a foster parent training, a classroom, a faith community, a school staff development series — I am available.

I offer virtual and in-person sessions, both as a standalone training and as the closing session of a cohort that has worked through this essay together. A live session at the end of a cohort's reading often becomes the moment the threads of this essay come together.

RELATED MATERIALS

Dreamer's Trash Bag — my memoir, available in paperback and ebook. The five themes in this essay draw directly from moments in the memoir. Many readers find that reading the memoir alongside this essay deepens both.

Carrying It Forward — a companion workbook for foster youth, foster youth alumni, and anyone carrying trauma, whatever its source. While this essay is for the adults around foster youth, *Carrying It Forward* is for the foster youth themselves and for anyone carrying something forward from a hard place to a more hopeful one.

FREE DISTRIBUTION

This essay is available as a free PDF download at www.dreamerstrashbag.com. Agencies, schools, faith communities, and training programs are welcome to distribute the PDF freely for educational and training use with attribution to the author. Paperback and digital editions are also available on Amazon for those who prefer to purchase a physical copy.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

James B. Smith is an Ameslan author. He grew up in the foster care system, carried from the mountains to the city, moving from home to home with everything he owned in a black trash bag. They called him a dreamer — not as a compliment, but as a warning to stop reaching for things that weren't coming.

He never stopped.

He holds a Master of Education in Deaf Education and has served as an educator in schools across the West.

He is the author of *Dreamer's Trash Bag*, a memoir, and its companion works: *Carrying It Forward*, a reflective workbook, and *What Foster Youth Wish Adults Understood*, an essay written for the adults in a foster youth's life. His writing explores what it means to build a life from scratch — deliberately, one decision at a time.

He lives with his wife and children.

REACH ME

All inquiries, speaking requests, training requests, and bulk-order questions can be sent to the mailing address below, or initiated through the website.

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**Dreamer's
Trash Bag**

A memoir of displacement and survival