

Telling our stories and changing our lives

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Sharing stories from our own personal experiences, especially stories of pain or struggle or stories reflecting our imperfections, can radically change how we see one another and therefore radically change how we relate to one another. When the way we are relating to one another is harmful, as in many conflicts, personal narrative storytelling may create new ways for the parties to see one another which make resolution of the conflict possible.

In a community in Oregon a sex offender transition house was to be located in a residential neighborhood. As might be expected there was great hostility to the proposal among neighbors. The neighbors were invited to attend a gathering to discuss their concerns. This gathering was conducted using the peacemaking circle process which places everyone in a circle so they can see and hear one another, allows everyone to speak without interruption and takes time to build relationships before trying to discuss core issues. The facilitator of the circle first read a children's story to those who attended. She introduced it as a way to help them relax after a full day's work and to settle into the space of the meeting. The story describes a village of carved wooden creatures, Wemmicks, and their ways of judging and labeling one another. Those with imperfections experienced others putting gray dots on them. After reading the story the facilitator asked if any of the participants ever felt that they had more than their share of gray dots. She then shared stories from her life of behavior she was not proud of, and invited others to share their own gray dot experiences. People shared life experiences with alcoholism, drug abuse, having child protection authorities remove children from the home, feeling inadequate as a child (never smart enough, athletic enough, etc.) – telling stories from their lives. When the group began discussing the sex offender transition house the conversation started with concern about housing values but moved quickly to personal narratives of participants about sexual victimization in the past. After hearing those stories several offenders who were in attendance shared their own victimization, not in a plea for sympathy but in acknowledgment of their understanding of the pain of the victimization. By the end of the evening, the neighborhood residents at the meeting, sixty adults, decided to support the transition house for sex offenders. In the process of examining their own lives and hearing about the lives of others through stories the sweeping judgments dissolved and they related to the sex offenders in the room in a way no one would have thought possible. They related to them as struggling human beings with much in common with themselves. The neighbors also related to one another differently because the personal stories shattered assumptions they made about one another based on appearances or limited knowledge. They expressed more care and concern for one another because they became aware of struggles in each other's lives.

Meeting at our wounded ness

Why is personal storytelling so powerful? In the situation described above the neighborhood meeting produced an outcome no one would have believed possible. The neighborhood response defies everything we believe we absolutely **know** about sex offenders and communities. I believe the outcome would not have been the same without the sharing of personal stories of vulnerability and pain.

"We meet at our woundedness," declared a participant at a peacemaking circle training. When we share stories of pain or mistakes, we drop layers of protection and the facade of having it all together, of being in control, of being right or righteous. When someone drops those shields and reveals him/herself as a struggling, vulnerable human being, it becomes much harder to hold that person as the "other," to hold distance and not feel connected to that person through our common humanity. It becomes more difficult to hold anger or fear or disinterest toward someone who shares pain and vulnerability. Unless we are already familiar with the life history of the speaker, sharing stories of pain and vulnerability usually shatters some assumption we have made about the person telling the story. When our assumptions are shattered there is an opportunity to repaint the picture we have of that person and our relationship to that person.

Pain and vulnerability cut across many other differences among people. Sharing pain or struggles increases our awareness of the common ground, the similarities among us, creating the ground on which people are more willing to look beyond their own personal concerns to solutions which serve the well being of others as well.

Storytelling and personal reflection

Personal narratives are a way to know and understand others more completely. They are also an opportunity to know and understand ourselves more completely. Telling our story is a process of self reflection. In telling our story we articulate how we understand what has happened to us, why and how it has impacted us, how we see ourselves and others. Actually voicing those understandings provides an opportunity to examine the thoughts, assumptions, ideas undergirding our story.

Many people act and react with little self awareness about what internal reality is shaping their actions. Telling our story is like holding a mirror up in front of ourselves - a mirror in which we realize others can also see our reflection. Our way of constructing our story, which shapes our view of reality, becomes more transparent to us when we speak the story out loud to others.

In telling our story we may uncover something of ourselves or our relationships to others that we were not aware of. As we become more aware of our own internal process and its influence on our state of mind, we have more choices about how to react to events in our lives. We can then choose how the story will continue. Through telling our story, clarifying our own understanding of who we are and the choices available to us, we get a chance to rewrite the direction of the story from that point forward. In the sex offender transition house gathering the woman who first shared the story of her abuse as a child and said that the possibility of sex offenders in the neighborhood brought it all back up for her, at the end of the meeting turned to the sex offenders and said, "Thank you. You have been the catalyst to get me to look at myself. I have spent months thinking I hated you and all sex offenders. In reality I have been hating myself. Welcome to our neighborhood." She had decided to find a support group to begin working on her abuse issues. The opportunity to tell her story and hear the stories of others changed the direction of her story.

Conflict is often closely aligned with a sense of identity. To change positions may feel, in some way, like a loss of identity. Learning more about ourselves through personal narrative, we can construct a new identity consistent with a new story which might lead to resolution of conflicts in our lives.

Empowering through listening

Listening respectfully to someone's personal story is a way of giving that person power and a sense of personal worth. Generally, in our culture, the degree to which people will listen attentively to your story is reflective of your positional or economic power. The President of the United States will experience rapt attention nearly anywhere he goes about any aspect of his life. A poor person may never experience being fully and respectfully heard. To listen respectfully to a person's story is to honor that person's intrinsic worth and to empower him/her in a constructive way. Many conflicts arise out of a sense of powerlessness. Empowering an individual through attention and respect for his/her story may give the person room to let go of other harmful or destructive ways of trying to gain a sense of personal power.

In victim/offender dialogs both victims and offenders typically feel very disempowered. Victims feel powerless over what happened and often feel further disempowered by the way the criminal justice system handles the case. Offenders typically come from marginalized populations which feel powerless over the forces shaping their lives. For both victims and offenders the process of telling the story and being respectfully heard is an important step in regaining or constructing a healthy relationship with personal power.

Importance of the storytelling environment

The potential for personal storytelling to advance peacemaking or conflict resolution by reinforcing a sense of personal connections, fostering self reflection and empowering participants depends upon creating a respectful, reflective environment for the storytelling. In order to share stories of pain or vulnerability people need to know that they will not be looked down on or ridiculed. To remove the masks of daily life and speak from a deep truth about themselves, most people need to be in the presence of someone who accepts them and will support them through any struggle. Even in the presence of unconditional regard it takes enormous courage to share our pain and vulnerability.

One of the most important responsibilities of facilitators of processes of sharing personal narratives is the creation of a safe, respectful space for all participants. Storytelling can engage people on many levels – emotional, spiritual and mental, so the safety of the space needs to address emotional, spiritual and mental safety as well as physical safety. In the sex offender transition house peacemaking circle the facilitator helped create a safe environment for sharing stories of vulnerability by exposing herself first with stories of actions she was not proud of.

If someone shares his/her personal story and listeners are disrespectful or create interruptions, that person is further disempowered. Stories told or heard with hostility or disregard for the feelings of others will further separate people rather than helping them find their common humanity. Storytelling without respect can do further harm. Storytelling without reflection can miss the opportunity for deeper understandings of the self and others.

Changing our lives

Sharing our personal story is simultaneously an inward and outward experience. By sharing our self we open places for others to connect to us, to find common ground with us, to know us more completely. In a respectful speaker/listener relationship both are opening to a deeper connection to the other. In both listening and speaking we are giving something of ourselves to the other. At the same time sharing our personal story requires going within, facing the self, looking at the self and trying to find coherence in our own being. It helps us get in touch with who we are and how we make meaning of our lives. Both the inward connection to self and the outward connection to others promote healing of inner wounds.

The exchange of personal narratives from a place of deep truth is much more than a process of reconciliation around a conflict. It is a reconstruction of place in the universe through the mechanism of narrative with one individual or a few people and may generalize to other parts of our lives. What the personal narrative reveals, for self and others, is greater than just questions of the relationship to the event or conflict prompting the exchange.

Uncovering the core of our humanity, openly revealing who we are to one another is healing for both ourselves and others. In ordinary life we walk around wanting to touch one another, but with our arms bound to our sides. The crisis of crime or serious conflict sometimes tears those bindings off and we are able to reach for one another - often tentatively, awkwardly, stiffly - but reaching and connecting authentically. Sharing personal narrative is the mechanism by which we reveal ourselves, uncover our core humanity, allow others to feel us, know us and touch us. We cannot walk through those spaces and emerge as we were. We are deepened by those encounters of personal narrative.

As the story unfolds
The labels fall away
Tears blend
The "other" becomes one of us
We cannot hold the "other" separate
We are inextricably intertwined in a combined story

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