

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.