

RESTORATIVE PRACTICES: A VISION OF HOPE

TED WACHTEL
President, IIRP
Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, USA

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PAPERS

I first came to Budapest in 1999, at the invitation of Maria Herczog, to speak about restorative practices. I have since been back many times, and we have had many Hungarian guests visit our programmes for delinquent and at-risk youth in Pennsylvania, USA. I feel an emotional connection to this country because both my father's parents and my wife's mother's parents came to the United States from Hungary.



Ted Wachtel

The International Institute for Restorative Practices has been actively involved with training programmes in Hungary and in founding the Community Service Foundation of Hungary, under the leadership of Vidia Negra. For two years we sponsored a model school, which demonstrated the power of restorative practices in helping young people improve their behaviour and which fostered a great deal of interest among professionals in Hungary.

The IIRP is dedicated to restoring community in an increasingly disconnected world.

ences allow victims, offenders, and their respective family members and friends to come together to explore how everyone has been affected by an offence and, when possible, to decide how to repair the harm and meet their own needs (McCold, 2003). In education, circles and groups provide opportunities for students to share their feelings, build relationships and problem-solve, and when there is wrongdoing, to play an active role in addressing the wrong and making things right (Riestenberg, 2002).

If our fundamental premise is valid, then we must all thoughtfully re-examine and change many of the practices that govern how we run schools, administer justice, organize welfare systems, manage workplaces, and even how we raise children.

A boy gets angry and curses at his high school teacher. She sends him to the school administrator, who suspends him from school for three days. This kind of occurrence is all too commonplace in schools today. We lament the lack of civility, the loss of behavioural boundaries, the irresponsible parents who have raised this child, and we explain the punishment as ‘holding the student accountable for his behaviour’.

Accountable? How so? The punishment is passive. The student doesn’t have to do anything. He stays angry at the teacher and the school administrator. He thinks he’s the victim. He doesn’t think about how he’s affected others or about how he might make things right. And he returns to the classroom with nothing resolved.

Nils Christie, the distinguished Norwegian criminologist, wrote a landmark essay entitled ‘Conflict as Property’. (Christie, 1977) He argued that our conflicts belong to us and that courts and lawyers steal our conflicts, taking away our opportunity to resolve them and robbing us of whatever benefits might come from that. Schools and administrators do the same.

The restorative justice movement was founded by people who were experimenting with meetings between victims and offenders to negotiate restitution agreements. They learned that the encounter was more important than the restitution — that both victims and offenders valued the opportunity to talk to each other and resolve their conflict.

I was speaking about restorative conferencing to an audience in Philadelphia when an African woman who was attending a local uni-

versity said, ‘What you’re describing is exactly what my father would do. As a chief, he would always bring everyone together to deal with a crime or a conflict.’

Bonnie George, of the Wet’suwet’en First Nation in British Columbia, Canada, was a plenary speaker at our conference in Vancouver (George, 2004). She explained that the Western system is adversarial: Strangers make decisions on behalf of others, without emotional involvement. ‘With our system, because of our relationships and our kinships, we’re all connected to each other one way or another, and those are the people who are making the decisions. Our goal is to restore balance and harmony within the community.’

If the school administrator wanted to ensure that the angry student would return appropriately to that teacher’s classroom, he would organize a restorative conference to bring the offending student and his family together with the teacher and other students who were affected by the incident. Although it may surprise those unfamiliar with restorative conferencing, such meetings almost always produce positive outcomes, allowing the student and teacher to be returned to balance and harmony.

So if restorative practices are the wave of the future, we may take comfort in knowing that they are also as old as the hills.

In the area of child welfare, I remember a woman reporting on a family group conference for her grandchildren. The child welfare agency was planning to put them in a foster home because the woman’s daughter had serious depression that was impairing her ability to parent responsibly. Instead, someone suggested a family group decision making conference. The grandmother and her extended family devised a plan for the grandchildren to stay with their depressed mom, but with rotating support from aunts and uncles and grandparents, to ensure their well-being. Not only did the government save money by avoiding another foster placement, but the children were able to stay with those who loved them the most.

There is a growing body of research supporting the use of restorative practices, which Dr. Paul McCold will review with you shortly.

Research is one of the three roles the IIRP will play in its efforts to change the world.

The second role is education, at our graduate school in Pennsyl-

vania, USA, and through our training and consulting division, with its affiliates and licensees, now in twelve countries. And the third role is communication, through our films, print publications, internet resources, and professional conferences like this one.

I say ‘change the world’ unabashedly. We must not be embarrassed by our optimism. Who would have believed thirty years ago that the IIRP would be training probation officers in Romania, police in Iceland, law professors in Costa Rica, child care workers in South Africa, prosecutors in Jamaica and educators in Hong Kong. Or that our training of trainers would assist the Thai Ministry of Justice, one of our licensees, in carrying out more than 17,000 restorative conferences diverting young people from incarceration.

Or that Hull, England, a city of a quarter million, would be using IIRP programs to train 23,000 educators, social workers, and others serving children and young people to create the world’s first restorative city. Or that the IIRP would become the world’s first degree-granting graduate school wholly dedicated to restorative practices.

So don’t let the naysayers get you down. The world needs a vision of hope. The human race now holds in its mortal hands the power to tinker with the genetic underpinnings of life, to alter the climate of our planet, to extinguish whole species, and to wield, as weaponry, the awesome energy of the stars. Our technological skills have outpaced our social skills, but restorative practices can correct that imbalance.

We are not pursuing an unrealistic utopian dream. We recognize that conflict is integral to being human. What we propose, however, is to get better at managing conflict. And to minimize conflict by proactively restoring community in an increasingly disconnected world.

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