

Restorative Storytelling

The Scottish proverb says that telling a story is 'eye to eye mind to mind heart to heart'.

"The goal of every storyteller consists of fostering in the child, whatever cost, compassion and humanness, this miraculous ability of man to be disturbed by another's misfortune, to feel joy about another being's happiness, to experience another's fate as your own." (Korney Chukovsky)

The ultimate aim of restorative justice is one of forgiveness and healing, the fostering of compassion. By setting up safe spaces for the offender (or person who has caused harm to another) and victim (person harmed by another) to hear each others stories there is the possibility that some kind of understanding or empathy may be reached, the damage can be put right and through receiving appropriate reparation, the harm done to the victim can be redressed.

The goals of storytelling and restorative justice seem to have some remarkable similarities. But how can storytellers foster compassion in our listeners and tell stories which challenge our audiences to question their views of justice and to help rebuild our broken communities?

"You had the sense to see you were caught in a story, and the sense to see that you could change it to another one...and the special wisdom to know you are under a curse - which is also a blessing - which makes the story more interesting...."(Byatt)

The possibility for change in our story is a key similarity between restorative justice and storytelling. We can change, we do not have to remain stuck. Restorative process and storytelling both encourage us to see that things can be other than they are now.

How can we as tellers be as storytellers were in olden times – subversive, challenging and giving voice to the voiceless? What stories do we hear and tell of justice in our lives and our communities. When is it just 'not fair'? Why does it need re-storying and how can we as storytellers help to create change by telling a story in the way it needs to be told. How can we tell our stories in a way that helps to prepare people to think differently about justice and fairness?

Storytelling is absolutely KEY to restorative approaches. The structure of a restorative meeting is based around acknowledgement, listening to the stories of what has passed, reflection on the present and decision making about how we want the future to be. All scripts are based on the past, the present and the future. There is safety in of the structure of a story – the past and present and future is laid out and we know at the beginning that we will be taken to an ending through a pattern that is familiar. There are also past present and future structures with the restorative scripts, structures patterns of conflict resolution – within that safety one can rest and renew, step back and remake decisions, gain courage. Restorative questions ask 'what were you thinking? How did you feel? What do you think now? How do you think you can put things right?' Stories

teach children to know the difference between good and evil, false and genuine, that decisions have consequences.

Retributive traditions once had survival value, if you didn't fight back, you died. These days retributive emotions get us into more trouble, whether individuals groups or nations. Hollywood gives the message that the way to deal with the bad guys is through violence and sadly some political leaders give out the same message.

Offenders need their dignity restoring. Maori are appalled at our placing of the young person in the dock alone, they see it as 'barbaric'. They would have family to share the shame and stand with the youth. Stories also ask us to think to identify with characters and ask questions– what would I do in that place, how would I feel?

As storytellers we already have some understanding of lives being stories, the possibility that a story and a life can change. Our stories can help to show what is morally right or wrong – in the subtle nuances in our voice, our expression we ask children to agree with us on our views of the story. We are not neutral!

Jeffrey Weeks – “When the old stories of group belonging no longer ring true, demand grows for identity stories in which we tell ourselves about where we came from, what we are now and where we are going, such stories are urgently needed to restore security, build trust and make meaningful interaction with others possible.”

The young people I work with were described by a researcher, Lynn Froggat recently as *“offenders in transition between an education system from which they have been largely excluded and a labour market for which they are presently ill equipped”*.

Keeping up morale, especially for children in a world of despair is no easy task. What stories do we tell in order to sustain hope? We must tell harsh stories to those with harsh lives, stories that say even when the unspeakable happens characters can survive.

Can we provide any sense of hope and truth and how? Traditional approaches ask what happened? Who is to blame? What rule has been broken? What punishment should be applied? Storytelling and restorative practices can transform relationships and once you see it working you cannot help but be passionate about it

“Many people learn to unravel the woven stories that bind them to particular confining destinies with the result that they find ways to liberate themselves and weave their own identities, while many others are stitched through closely woven stories to repeat and act out words that are not their own.” Zipes

There is an interface between our own stories and folktales or traditional stories, we can tell stories that young people can identify with for example when I tell the unluckiest man I add in modern extracts, when I tell the pickpocket I add in the story of a prisoner and his mischievous past.

I was struck by Alida Gersie's description of the damage that trauma could do to a child's ability to narrate their story, like the necklace of pearls with no thread, nothing to connect the disparate parts of our experience. Stories offer us some safety.

"Stories provide us with a known completion, a unity of form. Each story has a beginning, a middle and an end. Embedded within this structure are a specific conflict and patterns of conflict resolution. These stimulate the development of possible solutions to our own predicaments".

(Alida Gersie)

Considering the Grimm's brothers for example, many of the stories they collected were the soap operas and cautionary tales of their day. In the interests of German nationalism the Grimm brothers sculpted the stories they collected to reflect the values they wished to teach, including hard work and the triumph of good over evil. When Walt Disney began to work with the Grimms' stories in this century, he cleaned them up and animated them, added music and drastically watered down the content. I have found an excellent way in to working with difficult teenagers who would be contemptuous of a fairy tale is to tell them that the stories were changed and softened to take away the harshness. They want to hear the old stories, the sleeping beauty who did not get a simple kiss from a prince to bring her alive to a sweet new life but the older story where the ravaged Talia awakes to find herself with twins to care for and a relationship with a king who wants to destroy her. The message here is that a just and happy ending requires hard work, patience, persistence and a little good timing!

Hollywood tells us the way to deal with violence is to be violent. It is our duty as storytellers in these times in a violent and angry world to do what we can however little about it.

If we are in tune with ourselves perhaps we are able to tune into the human beings around us and help them to tune into themselves by giving them stories that may in some way help. This does not mean telling wishy washy always happy stories but stories that make us feel something.

"The stories people tell have a way of taking care of them. If stories come to you, care for them. And learn to give them away where they are needed. Sometimes people need stories more than food to stay alive. That is why we put these stories in each other's memory."

Barry Lopez.

As storytellers we must select the stories that are worth telling, the stories that carry messages that support resiliency and hope, stories that promote relationships, trust, truth and honesty. They also can give out the hope of achieving independence and growing up.

I would like to end by encouraging you to be bold and tell stories where they are most needed and to share a line from storyteller Shonaleigh *"Not every story has a happy ending but every story should begin with outrageous hope"*.

Group exercises for creating stories

- 1) In small groups, everyone states a moment from their day so far. The moments are described to one another and the group creates an introduction to a new story. These are exchanged and another group finishes the story.
- 2) In groups of four or five, each person writes down a word, unseen by the others. All the words are then put together and the group task is to create a story to link them.
- 3) Individuals share mischievous moments from their childhood, these are then incorporated into a relevant story of your choice e.g. the pickpocket, lazy Jack etc
- 4) In two's or threes. Individually imagine walking into a place you love meeting a character and see what he or she looks like. Describe to one another. Choose one or combine the characters. Create a story that includes at least four of the following: snow, fish, gold, treasure, wise man or woman, forest, bird, knife, feather, journey.

In small groups, everyone shares a special moment from their lives, eg. Scoring a winning goal, seeing a child achieve something, playing with friend – any significant memory that can be described to the group in detail. The group creates a story linking the moments and decide how to present the story to the whole group. The facilitator then weaves the stories together and tells it.