

## Face to Face: Spaces for Reflective Community Dialog

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*"Face to face one tries to find one's better nature - because one can see the soul."* Andre Codrescu

One of the most important contributions being made by restorative justice programs is the creation of public spaces in which questions of our expectations of one another and our feelings about those expectations being violated can be spoken and heard. Beyond the questions of a particular crime this public space opens up possibilities for dialog about larger community issues and the development of shared understandings about boundaries on behavior that everyone can live with and commit to.

### Loss of widely accepted community standards

For hundreds of years community standards for behavior were passed to succeeding generations through interaction between adults and children in the community and change in those standards was slow. Conformity to those standards was enforced through many informal social mechanisms as well as by the law. For instance gossip and social exclusion operated to send messages about expected behavior and the consequences of failure to comply.

Because some of the prevailing standards enforced by communities were racist, sexist and classist, and some of the standards had nothing to do with the well being of others or the community as a whole, the rebellion of the sixties and seventies overthrew the potency of existing informal social control mechanisms and turned to more reliance on legal mechanisms for those standards that are essential for safe and fair communities.

### Creating new community standards through community dialog

After 25 years of relying on legal mechanisms it is very clear that legal standards are not sufficient to create healthy, ethical community behavior. The legal system is too distant from daily life to be effective as a reminder of our obligations to one another. It is too complicated and abstract for citizens to feel they are a part of setting those standards or have any responsibility to clarify or enforce standards in the community. And because it involves coercion and deprivation of liberty, the legal system can only set minimum standards of behavior. Processes that encourage cooperation and voluntary engagement can establish standards for maximum behavior.

So, we overthrew the community standards of the fifties, and we have learned that we cannot have strong, healthy communities without some boundaries on behavior based on shared values and shared commitment to the well being of all. How do we construct a new set of standards that will not bring back the oppressive excesses of the past and will respect differences in culture, lifestyle and beliefs that do not harm others? Achieving that goal requires community dialog that is both extensive and continuous. Every point of view needs to be in the dialog and there can never be a final set of boundaries. It must always be open to change as knowledge and capacity grow. It was

the failure of communities in the fifties to respond to changing understandings of equity and fairness and new information about the limitations of punishment as an effective strategy for managing behavior that triggered the massive social movements of the sixties that dismantled many prevailing community norms.

Because those norms were passed down from generation to generation without question, communities did not have in place a mechanism for creating a new set of norms to fit the new knowledge and understandings. Consequently, a period of 'every man for himself' ensued. There is now a resurgence of interest in the common good and in the need for mutual responsibility for each other and for our collective welfare.

The global economy, environmental issues, and the growing recognition in biology that humans evolved through cooperation more than competition are all bringing into sharper focus our interdependence and, therefore, the urgency of paying attention to our impact on one another and our need for shared commitments concerning behavior.

#### Respectful, reflective atmosphere critical for good community dialog

Every single discussion about individual behavior, the impact of that behavior on others and the expectations those affected have for that individual can contribute to the process of stitching together a new set of community standards that will help us live productively with one another - if that dialog 1) allows everyone to speak and be heard and 2) encourages reflection.

Both "spoken" and "heard" are critical elements of constructive dialog. The space for constructive dialog must first give opportunity for people to speak and second must create an atmosphere of respect for all parties in order for the spoken words to be heard. If people do not feel respected it is very difficult for them to hear clearly and meaningfully what is said to them. For communication to be effective the space must be respectful for everyone.

Ours is a fast paced society. We have few quiet spaces in our lives. Those that we do have are usually personal. The creation of quiet spaces for reflection on public questions is not a part of our culture. Most public discussions are noisy, involve talking more than listening, discourage quiet people from contributing, allow a small number of people to dominate and are uncomfortable with silence. Reflection entails listening deeply, hearing the perspective of another, thinking about what was heard, connecting things, opening the space for new thoughts and understandings. Reflection, like gazing in a mirror, requires looking inward. Outward distractions need to be kept to a minimum to allow the possibility of reflection. Without reflection the exchange of information or the commitments made may be shallow.

#### Characteristics of restorative dialog

Restorative face to face dialog processes are based on allowing each participant to speak, respect for all participants and consensus decision making. These processes encourage people to think about how they feel, why they acted as they did and how other people are affected. In other words they encourage reflection by all participants. They allow time for all participants to reflect not only on what happened but also on the decisions now being made by the group and how everyone will be affected by those decisions. The pace of dialog in these processes is unhurried and silence is welcome. Space is allowed for participants to look inward as well as toward others in the group.

Restorative processes like conferencing, circles, mediation and neighborhood panels create spaces for people to explore behavioral expectations and why those expectations matter, how others are affected when they are not met. All of these processes emphasize the importance of communicating to one another how we are affected by each other's actions and words. They require us to be explicit to ourselves and others about our expectations and our needs and to give clear reasons for those expectations.

Restorative dialog processes do more than address the offender's behavior. They establish expectations for all the other participants as well. When we articulate an expectation for others in a public process, we are in effect also committing ourselves to that standard. Discussion of an offender's behavior in a circle sets the standard, not only for the offender, but for everyone sitting in the circle.

Respectful dialog processes allow people to question expectations which are not grounded in concern for the well being of others and to explore whether those expectations are appropriate. The standards desired by some community members may be harmful to other community members. The process of establishing community standards must involve all voices and be open to new information about negative impacts. The task is never complete. It is always temporary (the best we can do for the moment) because new information may alter the conclusion that a particular standard serves the well being of all.

Because restorative processes initiate around the issue of crime they often bring together very diverse perspectives. A restorative face to face process typically does not consist of a group of like-minded folks. The involvement of many perspectives enriches that search for meaningful standards of mutual responsibility.

We need community dialog about issues other than crime, but crime is a good place to start because it constitutes a clear challenge to community standards and because it can generate action more readily than most issues. Face to face restorative processes can transform the negative energy activated by a crime into positive energy for collective action toward the well being of all.

The cumulative effect of the many, many conversations being held in mediations, conferences, circles and panels is a growing community conversation about our standards for behavior, our responsibilities to one another and our possibilities as citizens to shape the quality of our community life.

It is through face to face reflective, respectful community dialog that we can touch one another's lives, feel one another's pain and find a path that serves both ourselves and others. In those spaces, informed by the wisdom of all present, we can, as Codrescu says, "see the soul," and know from the soul the right thing to do.

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