

## The Restorative Community

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*Restoration comes from the choice to value possibility and relatedness over problems, self-interest, and the rest of the stuck community's agenda. It hinges on the accountability chosen by citizens and their willingness to connect with each other around promises they make to each other.*

*Restoration is created by the kinds of conversations we initiate with each other. These conversations are the leverage point for an alternative future. The core question that underlies each conversation is "What can we create together?" Shifting the context from retribution to restoration will occur through language that moves in the following directions: from problems to possibility; from fear and fault to gifts, generosity, and abundance; from law and oversight to social fabric and chosen accountability; from corporation and systems to associational life; and from leaders to citizens.*



**I**n contrast to the isolating effects of retribution, a restorative experience, relationship, or community produces new energy rather than holding us in place. Restoration is associated with the quality of aliveness and wholeness that Christopher Alexander talks about. This quality is not only in the artifacts, buildings, and spaces that he refers to, but also in the gatherings and conversations we choose to create. The energy crisis we face is not so much about fossil fuels as it is about the calcified experience that is too often created by the way we hold conversations, both publicly and when we come together in more private settings.

Restorative community is created when we allow ourselves to use the language of healing and relatedness and belonging without embarrassment. It recognizes that taking responsibility for one's own part in creating the present situation is the critical act of courage and engagement, which is the axis around which the future rotates. The essence of restorative community building is not economic prosperity or the political discourse or the capacity of leadership; it is citizens' willingness to own up to their contribution, to be humble, to choose accountability, and to have faith in their own capacity to make authentic promises to create the alternative future.

This means that the essential aspect of the restoration of community is a context in which each citizen chooses to be accountable rather than entitled.

Accountability is the willingness to care for the whole, and it flows out of the kind of conversations we have about the new story we want to take our identity from. It means we have conversations of what we can do to create the future. Entitlement is a conversation about what others can or need to do to create the future for us.

Restoration begins when we think of community as a possibility, a declaration of the future that we choose to live into. This idea of a communal possibility is distinct from what we commonly call an individual possibility. Community is something more than a collection of individual longings, desires, or possibilities. The communal possibility has its own landscape, and its own dynamics, requirements, and points of leverage. In the individualistic world we live in, we can congregate a large collection of self-actualized people and still not hold the idea or experience of community.

The communal possibility rotates on the question "What can we create together?" This emerges from the social space we create when we are together. It is shaped by the nature of the culture within which we operate but is not controlled by it. This question of what we can create together is at the intersection of possibility and accountability. Possibility without accountability results in a wishful thinking. Accountability without possibility creates despair, for even if we know we are creating the world we exist in, we cannot imagine its being any different from the past that got us here.

## Example: The Clermont Counseling Center

Tricia Burke is the director of the Clermont Counseling Center. She completely understands the destructive power of labeling and categorizing human beings. Rare for one in a leadership position in a labeling industry. One of her programs is for women in abusive relationships who are survivors of domestic violence. She calls this program Women of Worth. What's in a name . . . everything.

The counseling center also runs a mental health facility, and this is the story I want to pay attention to. It contains most of the elements of freedom, choice, transforming language, and small group belonging discussed in this book. In the mental health program are clients who are labeled as paranoid schizophrenic, bipolar, and delusional, and have a history of state hospital stays. For the center to bill Medicaid for their services, the services must be “medically necessary.” This means they are required to certify each client's illness and medicalize all of the center's services in order to be reimbursed.

In the eyes of Tricia and her staff, many of the most effective healing efforts come from actions that are not really medical interventions. What are often most healing are the ways that people in programs like the center's discover to have fun, embraced and surrounded by the support of others like themselves. The sense of belonging that accrues is as healing as traditional treatment. This sort of thing is not a legitimate program activity in the eyes of Medicaid. To keep Medicaid funding, the center is required to name and place a disease on the head of each person.

Despite this, Tricia and her staff decided to change the conversation at Clermont in dramatic ways. They gave up the Medicaid funding for their “partial hospital day treatment” program and put the clients in charge of the day program. Staff were reassigned to other programs. In doing this, Tricia changed the message to clients from one focusing on their liabilities to one focusing on their possibilities. The organizing questions to “members”—no longer patients—were “What do you like to do?” and “How do you want to fill your day?” While the traditional hospital experiences were maintained, these questions were the organizing principles that guided the healing process.

The strategy then was to treat members as if they had the capacity to design and structure a good portion of their own time. Phoenix Place, the

new name chosen by the clients for this effort, became a controlled self-governing program. There was only one paid staff member—Kim Hensley, the director of the program—and many of the governance and program decisions were placed in the hands of members.

In the first year, the members came up with ingenious answers to the question “What can we create together?” For example:

- They formed and chose an executive committee for themselves.
- They organized a wellness activity.
- They volunteered their services to an animal shelter.
- They wanted to travel, so they decided to open a snack shop to earn money.
- When Phoenix Place received a grant to do medication education for other mentally ill folk in five counties, the members did this education.
- When Ohio state legislators were invited to visit the facility, the members wanted time with them to make the point that people who have mental illness are not their illness, they are much more than their illness.
- They were no longer afraid to talk about their lives; they came out of the closet.
- The group started training police on the nature of mental illness—what it is like to hear voices, for example. They taught the police how to approach people having an incident and what language to use.
- They started a journaling process, which they called WildSpirits, to give voice to what it feels like to be in the dark hole of despair and find your way out, and to express their healing by writing about hope, gratitude, love . . .

At the end of the first year of Phoenix Place, its members felt pride in what they had created; they had jobs to do and had regained some of the roles they had lost in the larger society. Most of all, they had begun to once again have hopes and dreams about their future.

Eventually they outgrew the small house for Phoenix Place, so they set about raising money for a bigger one by working the concession stands at the Reds and Bengals games—and years later their dream came true. When it did, they wrote a grant to make a video to tell their story.

Of course the story of Phoenix Place, and others like it, is not all about success and victory. Along the way, Tricia says, it took patience and encouragement to help Phoenix members shift their thinking to believing that they could run their own program. In the beginning, they were angry and felt they were being abandoned. They even picketed the center. Helping them break free of their dependency was difficult.

Here is a part I especially like: One exercise was for individuals to complete a questionnaire about their strengths as part of a program on positive psychology. The members noted that this was the first time in their lives they had ever taken a test and gotten good news from the results.

The transition from patient to citizen is always difficult. For all of us, not just labeled people. And the trajectory is not always smooth. When the original director of Phoenix Place left, it caused anxiety and worry. The member-led executive committee began to act superior, controlling, and judgmental, and some of the spirit of community waned. In other words, they started to function like most traditional executive committees.

The group rediscovered their balance when a new director was selected, and the members mostly became friends once again. But their temporary fall from grace shows that we can never forget how fragile is our ability to hold our freedom and stay whole in hard times.

## Lessons from Restorative Justice

Phoenix Place gives us a powerful model of what a restorative community looks like. When I say “restorative,” I am not talking about returning to a prior time, fixing up an old building, or seeking to recapture a culture that we think once existed. Restoration is about healing our woundedness—in community terms, healing our fragmentation and incivility. It is only out of this healing that something new can emerge.

I have been attracted for some time by the way *restorative* is used in the criminal justice system, which I learned from Barry Stuart and others who have created the restorative justice movement. They have given a powerful structure to restoration, and they have done it in a most unlikely place. The intent of restoration in the criminal justice system is to provide a more healing

path for both the offender and victim of a crime. This becomes an option for the victim to choose and for the offender to agree to. It also gives a voice to the community, for the community is also wounded by a crime.

There are several steps to restoration: The offender admits to the crime, the offender and the victim and their families talk of the cost and damage the crime has caused to all their lives, the offender apologizes for the offense, the offender promises not to do it again, and the offender agrees to some form of restitution for the damage caused.

Finally, the victim and their family decide whether to forgive the offender and accept the restitution. If they decide to forgive, then the representatives of the community have a voice in deciding whether to allow the offender to go free and rejoin the community. If the victim and their family decide not to forgive, then the offender goes through the regular criminal justice process. On a global scale, restorative justice is similar to the practices of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa.

These steps contain many of the elements of community building. It is not so much the methodology that concerns us here, but rather the context and spirit that these movements offer us. They show that an alternative to retribution is possible and has worked in the world. This spirit of restoration promises a different future for our communities.

## Community as Conversation

The idea of community restoration becomes concrete when we grasp the importance of language. When we understand that, we can see how our language, or conversation, is the action step that makes creating an alternative future possible. Suppose we begin to think of our communities as nothing more or less than a conversation.

Every community has its buildings, leaders, schools, landscape, but for the moment let us say that these are not what make a community unique or define its identity. Instead it is useful to declare that the aspect of a community that gives it a new possibility is simply the conversation it chooses to have with itself. Jane Jacobs, world expert on neighborhoods, understands this. When she was asked why she thought Portland, Oregon, has been so successful in

creating a habitable community, she said the only thing unique about Portland is that “Portlanders love Portland.” In our terms here, it was the conversation Portlanders had with each other about their town that made the difference.

Thus if we speak of change or transformation in our city or town—in my case, Cincinnati—we are referring to the conversation that is occurring in that town. We do this not because it is the whole picture, but because it is the part of the picture that is most amenable to change.

This means the alternative future we speak of takes form when we realize that the only powerful place from which to take our identity may be the conversation that we are. We begin the process of restoration when we understand that our well-being is defined simply by the nature and structure and power of our conversation.

The future of a community then becomes a choice between a retributive conversation (a problem to be solved) and a restorative conversation (a possibility to be lived into). Restoration is a possibility brought into being by choosing that kind of conversation. And with that conversation it becomes real and tangible, for once we have declared a possibility, and done so with a sense of belonging and in the presence of others, that possibility has been brought into the room, and thus into the institution, into the community.

The key phrase here is “in the presence of others.” A possibility, when declared publicly, heard and witnessed by others with whom we have a common interest, at a moment when something is at stake, is a critical element of communal transformation. This public conversation creates a larger relatedness and transcends a simply individual transformation. Conversations of possibility gone public are not all that restores, but without them, personal and private conversations of possibility have no political currency and therefore no communal power.

## The Shift

To summarize the story line to this point, our conversations and gatherings have the power to shift the context from retributive community to restorative community. This occurs through questions and dialogue that move us in the following directions:

- From conversations about problems to ones of possibility
- From conversations about fear and fault to ones of gifts, generosity, and abundance
- From a bet on law and oversight to a preference for building the social fabric and choosing accountability
- From seeing the corporation and systems as central to seeing associational life as central
- From a focus on leaders to a focus on citizens

What these have in common is the movement from centrism and individualism to pluralism and interdependent communalism. This shift has important consequences for our communities. It offers to return politics to public service and restore our trust in leadership. It moves us from having faith in professionals and those in positions of authority to having faith in our neighbors. It takes us into a context of hospitality, wherein we welcome strangers rather than believing we need to protect ourselves from them. It changes our mindset from valuing what is efficient to valuing the importance of belonging. It helps us to leave behind our penchant for seeing our disconnectedness as an inevitable consequence of modern life and moves us toward accountability and citizenship.