

CREATING A PAUSE IN THE SOCIAL FABRIC: The Restorative Process

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In this article we will give an overview of both the process and restorative system from our experience in working with it since 2010, when we met Dominic Barter, founder of this approach he named “Restorative Circle”. What attracted us initially to this systemic approach to conflict was its egalitarian aspect that allows people to meet beyond roles and functions and without the intervention of “experts” holding any form of structural authority. We learn to work with conflicts by perceiving them as an energy that permeates our interactions. This energy contains a potential that generates progress towards balance and harmony in the community. The restorative process, which is experienced in a sharing circle format, facilitates learning to live with the conflict rather than ignoring it or attempting to delete it or “fix-it-and-finish-it-once-and-for-all”.

We will attempt to illustrate how this process functioned for both of us in a circle where we were involved as actors in the situation. Our understanding of the restorative process is of course strongly influenced by our practice of Focusing because for us, sitting in a circle does not happen without having access to our own experiencing. In addition, for the community, the organization or the group practicing this model, the circle is a time of PAUSE where we can reach the implicit complexity which Gendlin (2004) speaks of. This approach is made possible because we interact from our felt sense, on difficult and sensitive issues as we seek a common understanding that can help us take the next step forward.

THE RESTORATIVE PROCESS

Untreated and/or unrecognized conflict constitutes a restrained energy that may cause fragmentation or exclusion. Conflict is inherent in any community, and it is wise to recognize and honor it in order to be able to access the huge potential contained there: unmet needs, differences in values and visions, and some discomfort due to unequal access to resources and power. When a conflict appears, we assume that there is a “root” cause and that something, somewhere has not yet been named. The conflict is only the symptom, the tip of the iceberg of something that is not going well. The conflict is manifested by an event, which seems significant for a person who cares about it. There is, therefore, a physical place, a time and an action between people (it is the concept of Instance Of Itself (IOFI) elaborated by Gendlin (2004) that we worked with). Anyone in the community may initiate a “Circle”. This person, the so-called “Initiator”, indicates what the event (or “the Act”) consists of and who is involved in it as Author, Receiver and Conflict Community members. These people are listened to individually, or in their respective groups, by one or more “facilitators” who are Conflict Community members designated to accompany the process in a Pre-Circle in order to ascertain the facts from the point of view of each participant. The facilitator will also

listen to the meaning of this event for those involved (emotions, feelings, needs) and ensure both the members' understanding and their commitment to the restorative process and the dialogue process. Anyone invited to participate in a Circle must come of their own consent. The process may appear to be easy, but practice has taught us that this is not the case.

The Circle is the actual meeting of persons affected by the conflict in the presence of facilitators. Research and observation has identified three phases that those gathered tend to pass through. To support the first phase of the Circle, everyone is invited (without obligation) to say how he or she is currently experiencing both the consequences of the subject event and their participation in the Circle. In a second phase everyone looks at (always without obligation to speak) what motivated him or her to act as they did in the course of the event and/or the process that preceded or followed the event. Unmet needs can then be identified. In a third phase (length of time will vary depending on the issues), the group attempts to see what can be done to restore harmony. Commonly members will offer ideas and resources. Participants might also ask for something that would meet their needs. This usually results in some kind of agreement that is recorded and published throughout the community and will later be reviewed in what is called Post-Circle.

SYSTEMIC ASPECT

Before initiating any Circle, we must first recognize ourselves as being part of a community that we are “implied in” (in the sense of folded in) and consciously make the choice to set up a Restorative System within it. All community members are invited to take part in this process as the very establishment of a Restorative System is such a distinctive step that can be viewed as a paradigm-shift. (It is of course in the systemic paradigm where we try to cope with the complexity of the phenomena without isolating the people involved from their environment. A Process Model [Gendlin, 1997] and its application in TAE [2004], seems to us to offer important improvements in this paradigm.) Dominic Barter has been very clear that the Restorative Circles are designed to sustain and serve a community that recognizes itself as such and deepens its sense of itself. The Restorative Circle emerges from a systemic structure and from agreements in which all members of the community have contributed. Each system evolves from what people are learning from their practice, hence, each group is unique in its form.

In our sixty-member Diffusion Focusing Quebec (DFQ), a non-profit organization founded in 2006, we initiated a reflection process. In May 2012, we invited all members of the community to participate in meetings on the quality and depth of our community life based on questions such as: What do we do when we have to make decisions? How do we react to differences of opinion? How do we react to conflict? During these meetings, we discussed themes such as listening, trust, security, and the possibility of a collective response to any conflict. During a Skype conversation with Dominic in June 2012, we reviewed with him the five preconditions for the establishment of a system which he had referred to in Rochester 2010: (1) Reaching a community agreement, including having the support of people who have influence in the community, (2) Identifying a place where meetings can be held, (3) Identifying people who are interested in the approach and who will eventually

want to offer their services as facilitators, (4) Sharing information widely in the community of the restorative system, and (5) Providing open access to the system. After five meetings involving about 15 people, we were able on Oct. 2, 2012 to inform our members of the existence of the new resource — Restorative Circles at DFQ. From there, our efforts were directed toward our co-learning of the process by listening to videos, practicing Pre-Circles, sharing a common understanding of the steps and of the roles, and being in link with the wider Anglophone and Francophone communities via Yahoo groups.

Dominic had suggested to us that people who are interested in the process first work on conflicts between one another, and that's what we did. To understand and integrate a new and somewhat experiential approach, we must live it as a personal experience. So we had to have the courage and dare to open our own conflicts in a circle trusting our personal and collective resources. It took us another year to organize ourselves enough to initiate a first circle.

THE FIRST CIRCLE

In the first Circle, held in our community in four meetings between October 2013 and January 2014, we were concerned as author (Solange) and receiver (Diane). This Circle was quite long (about 11 hours including the Pre-Circles) and we were able to explore in depth various aspects of our relationship while gaining insight into the impact of our interactions on the community. The starting point was a disagreement on our way of setting up the meeting. Some of us (Solange and others) wanted the group to split into pairs in order to practice Pre-Circles, and some (Diane and others) wanted us to stay together.

Transformational aspect of the circle

In the restorative process, we use a DIALOGUE PROCESS based on AN INTENTION TO REACH THE OTHER. In this process a person speaks, and then asks another person to repeat back what was said, and then check inside to see if what the speaker intended to communicate was accurately heard. We listen in order to hear, to be touched by the words of the other, to understand and to be transformed. There is an opening created that may bring something new and, as in the process of Focusing, one cannot know in advance what it will be or where it will lead. The Circle and the process of dialogue are a means for facilitating the living intention to meet and join with others. The Focusing process is alive in each person, as well as in the group as a whole. There is resolution, harmonization, flattening of some difficulties just by the fact that they have been named, viewed and heard by others.

Diane's experience in the Circle

Solange and I are friends and long-time Focusing partners. Two years ago, I became aware that something had changed in our relationship that I couldn't understand. I addressed the subject with others, and in Focusing together attempted to find the right words to describe my feelings — and understand better what I perceived as *something* uncomfortable in our

interactions. My discomfort seemed to be linked with “power”. (The following account will be described in the present tense in order to more accurately convey the feelings I experienced at the time).

At the October meeting, I do not agree with the proposal to split in pairs to practice Pre-Circles. Trying to explain myself I become more emotional and confused. Solange is sticking to her position. Then I realize that we have a conflict, and I suggest that we make a Circle about it. We begin the Circle, and towards the end of the evening Solange says that she refuses to compromise because she perceives “bad faith” on my part. The evening ends that way, and I leave with a great discomfort and a sense of injustice.

A month later in November, we continue the Circle. I say that I disagree with the “bad faith” designation and explain why I do not want to go into pairs. I say that to separate into dyads isolates and creates small groups instead of connecting and consolidating, which it seems to me is the purpose of our group. I also say that my reaction was emotional because I had a strong conflict that was so active and delicate that I did not know how to deal with it. This conflict concerns the relationship between Solange and me. While the conflict about dyads is not a major issue, it brings us inevitably and directly into conflict with each other. Then I tell the Circle about a past trauma where a very influential person in my life abused his power over me in a business partnership which also had some echoes of childhood traumas. This trauma was a turning point in my life, primarily because nobody at the time supported me. Now I’m afraid to relive the same thing with Solange and reopen that “can-of-worms”. Then the Circle participants shift the conversation to something else, and I stay alone with my pain. Then, two participants, who were sensitive to my pain, stand up for me with verbal support. I finally feel completely heard.

Solange also tells her story. We are both struggling with our own old wounds and painful scars. The presence of others allows us to get support. There is still a place inside that hears something of the problem of the other. Some meaning is starting to build inside us. We all leave pretty shaken up. Another month passes.

In December, Solange starts talking about her great release following the circle of November. Then she says she thought about our relationship and put the word “rivalry” on it. I sense what the word evokes for me — it is “assertiveness”. Other participants explore what these two words mean for them in their own experiences. There is no consensus, but we end the evening on a positive note. In January, I realize that I am not at all in the same place emotionally — something has changed. The support and guidance have had a healing effect. Something still remains to be explored, but I want to do it from another starting point. I am concerned about not wanting to take more of the group’s attention with my problem. I feel that reasonable time ends tonight. I could not have worked successfully on this issue in my Focusing partnerships because the process would have lacked the contributions of the others: their presence, their personalities, their compassion, and what they carry within themselves. Following this Circle and without having deliberately made a decision to do so, the relationship between Solange and me transformed. This Circle enabled us to improve the understanding of our relationship. Better collaboration has been established between us. Writing this article is a concretization of that new balance.

Solange's experience in the Circle

For this Circle, I agreed to be named "Author". I could sense the feeling of the strength of my inner position. Rather than looking for a compromise, I decided to go toward this conflict knowing that it concerned some disturbing aspects of my relationship with Diane. In the days following the beginning of that Circle, I felt the anxiety of this risk-taking, and I perceived with more acuity the tensions between Diane and me. (As Diane did, I will speak from here in the present tense.)

A month later, at the beginning of the 2nd meeting of the Circle, I realize that I'm not comfortable with the way the story is being retold. I come back to my initial perception of "bad faith", recalling the sentence where Diane said: "Well, go ahead if you want, but we are going to do something else." This opposition has, in my opinion, a broader sense that needs to be highlighted, and I want to talk about it. I think that opening the possibility of a broader sense brings a movement towards more authenticity in the group. I hear Diane say that she has the memory of an inner impulse wanting to say NO and making her say all sorts of things in order not to enter in the problem. For her, talking about conflicts would require facing the one she is living — with me. She said that she felt a fear of being "belittled." She expresses deep emotions about the issue.

Returning to my own inner space, I explore what it's like for me living in an egalitarian group where I can express my needs as a member, and where I am not in charge of other's needs. I love this "selfish" experience where I can object to another person's request and where I can also request being heard. What I mean by "selfish" is a time when I can give myself permission to claim my rights in the community. Other people in the Circle participate in an exchange on selfishness. Diane stays clearly outside of the group until others address this issue, thereby bringing her back into the Circle with testimonies of their appreciation of who she is. Later in the evening, I admit not having heard the suffering of Diane because I was struggling with my own reaction, which didn't leave room for me to take care of someone else. I say to the Circle that I appreciate that others could hear and respond to the suffering of Diane. At the end of the evening, I feel a huge relief at not having to take care of the needs, concerns and anxieties of "the other" when I myself am in so much need. This great discovery will change an old pattern of childhood. My childhood was such that the needs of others in my family were very great, so great that mine could not be heard. Thus, the context of the Circle provides a missing experience for me. Following this meeting, I write in my journal to further explore the issue of my "reasonable child" situation. I also think back to my relationship with Diane and finally put the word "rivalry" to it.

In December, at the next meeting of the Circle, I want to talk with Diane about the "conflict" underlying our relationship. I ask her to reflect back what I say. I say that, in my thinking, when I wanted to name what I felt between us, the closest word that came to me was "rivalry". I simply want to deposit the word in the group without being attached to it. Following this first movement, Diane advances its reflection. She wants a listening reflection from someone else in the group so that "it does not just become an issue between two people." The key word for her is "assertiveness". The rest of the evening is devoted to an exchange on these two words, the whole group participating in a dialogue where a sense of

balance is already noticeable. We are not totally aware of that yet, but an important threshold has been crossed.

Changes in the collective

At the next meeting the climate of the group is more relaxed. We can build a proposal together. We review the original situation and recognize the importance of Pre-Circles and decide to do Pre-Circles between our meetings in order to focus in the meeting on group processes, circles and conversations. We both also testify to the profound changes in our perceptions of ourselves, of each other and of the group. All members of the group felt that we were in reorganization, and there was a fluid and harmonious functioning. A passage was made towards collaboration.

OUR NEXT STEP

We have been developing programs and projects for our local Focusing community. This particular circle-group, formed for integrating the approach of Restorative Circles in our mode of operation has been developed because we have experienced some very explosive and confusing group episodes. We have learned that conflicts are inevitable and predictable whenever we attempt a group project and are connected to an edge or a “murky zone” that needs to be open for reaching the source from which new steps emerge. While the issues that were put forward may seem minor, they may conceal larger issues because they point toward the *implicit complexity*. Therefore they must be welcomed and examined carefully and with consciousness.

Experiential knowledge is developed through practice and reflective space. In the Focusing community we also have an additional tool, Thinking At the Edge (TAE), which allows us to create new models from the study and observation of a phenomenon over a long period of time. For both of us, our experiences have been accumulating for the past four years. Among the DFQ members, only 15 people were interested in the restorative process and in the creation of a system within the community. Only 7 of us have had the experience of participating in the Circles. However, we can already say that the influence of our work is much wider. We see an interest in our small French circle, and even in the international community of Focusing. Gendlin himself has already expressed interest in the process. He met Dominic Barter in 2012. In a recent conversation, Dominic said to us that this meeting with Gene Gendlin and Mary Hendricks was an important event that allowed him to situate his work beyond the context of restorative justice where it was most known. The time he spent with Gene and Mary reminded him of the humanist roots from which his work emerged. There is a genealogy that makes sense and helps him to understand why and how the restorative process works. He anticipates, in the environment of humanist and experiential psychology, where concepts are developed in relation to process, there will be a new host site for Restorative Circles. He is happy to see crossings between the approaches of Focusing and of Restorative Circles.

We continue to carry forward our integration of the approach. In our apprenticeship group, we have an agreement saying that to become a facilitator of the process, we are committed to living it among ourselves. Each aspiring facilitator must experience at least one Circle in each role: author, receiver, initiator, facilitator and conflict community member. There is no specific order for taking a role. We have however seen that it takes time to get used to this new approach. People mostly show up spontaneously as observers or as members of the community. To get involved as “an actor” is a step that few people are willing to take. We also document and videotape our Circles for our reflexive practice and for possible implementation in the Focusing Institute and wider Focusing community. We hope the interest that people have in the restorative process will assert itself over time. Our intention is to see this practice rooted in each of our working groups because, according to Dominic Barter, “If any group of people come together and start collaborating, living together, working together, then very, very soon there will be an organized response to conflict among them.” We would like this response to be based on our positive experience because we can see that the benefits of this approach are immense, both for those who live it as actors and for the community.

The Restorative Circle is a space of UNDERSTANDING of relationships. According to Krishnamurti: “Action has meaning only in relationship, and without understanding relationship, action on any level will only breed conflict. The understanding of the relationship is infinitely more important than the search for any plan of action.” We feel that *right action* — which in the restorative process means an Agreed Action Plan — emerges from *right understanding* between us. We consider the Action Plan as obvious when the transformation is experienced with a depth that allows the Focusing process to unfold. It is possible, in Gendlin’s words (2004), to see in this plan a “carrying forward” direction that can be perceived by the entire community as “fair”, that is to say in profound agreement with the felt sense of those who developed it.

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