

To Enter a Sacred Space

By Bob Stoughton



Recently I listened to the inaugural episode of a new podcast from the [Catholic Mobilizing Network](#). Called [Encounters with Dignity](#), it is described as “stories, learnings, and actionable wisdom from people who are doing and living restorative justice.” The first episode featured Fr. David Kelly, C.P.P.S., Executive Director of [Precious Blood Ministry of Reconciliation](#) (PBMR) in Chicago. While discussing the peacemaking circles that PBMR runs for incarcerated youth, Fr. David made the point that **trauma is widespread and its effects are long-lasting.**

He explained that, while the incident that led to a young person’s arrest may have been *fleeting*, such things as racism and the inequities in the neighborhood produce a *lasting* trauma that is most impactful. He recounted two specific examples from the many he has worked with.

Joe is a young man who, upon his release from prison, now accompanies Fr. David to speaking engagements where he talks about his own life, reaching the young people in the audience in ways that Fr. David cannot. One evening during the hour-long drive back home Joe seemed unusually quiet. Fr. David coaxed him and found out that the evening had evoked a flood of painful memories involving losses and abandonments that Joe had experienced. Talking with Fr. David in the car enabled Joe to speak at a deep level about his life. The conversation became a “sacred moment.”

The other involved a group of mothers who had lost children to violence. One day they joined Fr. David for Mass inside a juvenile detention center followed by a circle with some of the young inmates. As the talking piece began to make its way around the circle the women wept as they spoke about losing a child; the young people’s eyes were “wide open.” When the talking piece reached the young people one spoke about not knowing his own mother, another about his mother being in prison, a third about his mother being on drugs. The women, who had entered the detention center rather tentatively, with their guard up, started seeing beyond the “juvenile delinquent” label and realized that the young people had their own trauma and were also victims; the women insisted on returning to the institution and forming a community to support the young men. “A bond formed in this unlikely group of folks who all experienced trauma.”

It made much sense to me that a response rooted in restorative principles could be beneficial for someone experiencing trauma. Fr. David says the Church is called to bring the Gospel message of reconciliation to those “places and spaces” that might be uncomfortable to visit and to help bring about “a new entity and new relationships.” After all, the goal of a restorative practice is to heal. I talked with someone who has extensive

experience with peacebuilding circles and she agreed that a **restorative approach CAN contribute to healing, but she cautioned that it can also cause harm in the hands of someone who is not trauma informed.**

So ... what IS trauma informed care?¹

- Understanding the role that trauma plays in the lives of those who have experienced it
- Avoiding unintended re-traumatization or the creation of more harm
- Facilitating empowerment, participation, and decision-making
- Focusing on strengths and resiliency
- Building security and trust
- Understanding the whole person, providing culturally relevant services

My takeaway is that to enter a circle is to enter a sacred space in the presence of vulnerable people, people who may very well have experienced trauma. Each is a holy vessel. Handle with care.

¹Source: Boulder County DA's Center for Prevention and Restorative Justice;
<https://geiselmed.dartmouth.edu/oaa/wp-content/uploads/sites/56/2021/01/Trauma-Informed-Restorative-Practices-HANDOUT.original.1560403245-2.pdf>, accessed Feb. 6, 2022