CRITICAL CONNECTIONS

Trust-building as a Prerequisite to Systems Change

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Abstract

How do you come to trust a person you perceive to be your enemy? Such challenges face communities grappling with troubled racial histories. This paper introduces how two sites of historic conflict have begun to address their complicated and painful pasts in order to heal history's wounds and create a more just and inclusive future. Ordinary residents in Philadelphia, MS, and Birmingham, AL, are making their communities better at building trust in order to tell the truth about their pasts. Both communities are notorious for their racist histories and especially for the collusion of law enforcement in imposing White supremacy through violence. But through a facilitated process of storytelling and historical dialogue, a group in each community cultivated a space of trust and healing that are expanding the possibilities for belonging and equity. Drawing on a first-hand account of my role in community building and race relations as well as placing that work within a larger framework of social movement organizing, I show that telling the truth about the past through stories can transform and uplift distressed and inequitable communities.

Keywords: Community trust, historical dialogue, equity, reconciliation, community building, racial healing

> *We never know how our small activities will affect others through the invisible fabric of our connectedness. In this exquisitely connected world, it's never a question of 'critical mass.' It's always about critical connections.*
>
> —Grace Lee Boggs, *Revolution and Evolution* (1974, p. 44)

INTRODUCTION

Healing divided communities in order to create equitable and inclusive places is no easy feat. Having facilitated three community dialogue processes in Mississippi communities with fraught racial histories, I have discerned key ingredients for acknowledging violent racist histories and changing mindsets to address the legacies of those histories. While my partner and I continue to revise and improve our process as we learn and interact with new groups, there are certain non-negotiables evident in our work with communities that build dialogue, alter mindsets, and create equitable policy and outcomes. These elements are scaffolded as a learning journey or as Reverend John Coleman, a reconciliation practitioner in Richmond, VA, notes: "We must build a bridge of trust strong enough to bear the weight of the truth we have to tell"

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(Corcoran 2010). We first build a foundation of trust in order to seek justice through these mechanisms:

1. Create brave, respectful, and healing circles for dialogue through conversational norms and storytelling which foster trust-building and relationship building by practicing vulnerability; use trained facilitators.
2. Rehearse the ingredients of equity in the circle through confidentiality, ensuring that all voices are valued and heard, leaving titles/status at the door, and having face-to-face conversations.
3. Practice active listening/mirroring as a deliberate process for understanding each other and for truth-telling on an individual level to dispel stereotypes.
4. Reckon with a violent past by centering place-specific historical dialogue and understanding of systemic inequality (collective truth-telling).
5. Collaborate on a democratically determined project for the greater good, such as reclaiming divided or historically freighted spaces, public rituals of healing/ atonement, and public apologies or other community-based ideas to publicize the work and invite others to participate.
6. Employ equity training in advocacy, policy, self-governance, the role/ rights/ responsibilities of citizenship, and organizing.

Where typical projects with goals for equity and justice often begin by identifying preferred outcomes, the work we engage in has been more effective not by beginning with a destination in mind but rather by focusing on practicing respectful dialogue to ground groups in trust and courageous conversations about difficult issues. Such dialogue takes place in a heart space more than in an intellectual space, and the resultant community trust is necessary for purposeful, inclusive, and just social action. We therefore dispense with initial conversations about outcomes, because "shifting our way of being is our tangible outcome. Systems change comes from big groups making big shifts in being" (Brown 2017, p. 216).

PHILADELPHIA, MISSISSIPPI

On June 21, 2005, Black and White jurors in Philadelphia, MS found Edgar Ray Killen—a Baptist preacher, Klansman, and previously arrested suspect—guilty of the 1965 "Civil Rights murders" of James Chaney, Andre Goodman, and Michael Schwerner. On the same day and just two blocks away from the courthouse, a three-day conference launched to teach educators from around the country how to teach the Civil Rights Movement in their classrooms.

Three years later, the Philadelphia-Neshoba County Parks Commission ditched plans to build four baseball fields in the heart of the Black community near the local jail; instead, the commission revitalized an existing community center (formerly a segregated Black high school), added walking trails, and repaired the city's sole public pool. The area's eight Black baseball teams formed a new league with White teams across town, marking the first integrated Little League in the city's history (Associated Press 2008). And, within four years of Killen's conviction, majority-White Philadelphia elected James Young as its first Black mayor, who was re-elected for his third term in 2017.

Efforts to Shift the Community Narrative

While these remarkable accomplishments reflect important transformations in a community long considered a haven for racist murderers, they were made possible by the

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work of the local community to reckon with its violent past, as well as of those, like me, who seek new strategies to transform discriminatory systems and to create an inclusive and just society. The work began in 2003 when local leaders sought to honor the three victims of the Civil Rights murders on the 40th anniversary of their deaths on June 21, 2004. They formed a group to shift the narrative of their community and create new opportunities for inclusive prosperity and improvement, and I was invited to advise this local body.

The community members in the group all knew the details of the murders, and largely knew who the murderers were. Killen was a known KKK kleagle, or recruiter, in the 1960s who, before and after the murders, ate breakfast at a Main Street restaurant every morning. Neither he nor anyone else who was involved with the murders were held accountable by the State of Mississippi for four decades and the community simply didn't talk about it. Young people from the area who left Mississippi were shocked when people from outside of the state told them the story of their own hometown.

In keeping with custom, the initial conversation among the group centered on particular activities for the anniversary rather than on the facts surrounding that fateful day. A White attendee argued for a proclamation, which was not met with resistance by the Black participants but was clearly unsatisfactory. A Black gentleman suggested a march to the courthouse, which the White participants accepted with quiet alarm. There was no consensus at that first meeting, except for cordiality in lieu of disagreement. The organizers stayed behind to delve into the tension and recognized that for the White participants, a march conjured unsettling images of Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton and Birmingham and, somehow, dogs, and fire hoses. For the Black participants, the proclamation would be more words on a page, and there have been several such proclamations that have not been useful to communities of color. Examples were brought up, including the Emancipation Proclamation and the local Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek, which forced most of the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians from their land.

What was clear was that the two groups were there for the same reasons but had different reference points of meaning. They did not know each other well enough to have a conversation about their experiences, much less to discuss action points. There was too much unsaid and not enough courage at that point to be vulnerable enough to share what each person was actually thinking. The initial meeting taught us what NOT to do.

Creating Safe Space for Dialogue

At the next meeting the following week, we stopped planning and stopped focusing on outcomes. It was important just to get people to sit in a circle and to share their stories. We leveled the playing field to ground the group and their conversation. We expressed that everyone was equal in this environment and their unique experiences were valuable and meaningful, and that in this safe space, they'd be heard and respected. They opened by talking about who they were, why they were there and why they felt passionate about this case. Not only were the Black participants frightened to live in their community and angry that the victims and their families had not received justice, they feared that the bold freedom of the known murderers reflected lingering racism and complicity among town Whites, and prevented access to opportunities for Black citizens. They doubted that White residents cared about the murders.

For White participants, the events instantiated other, equally complex emotions. There was hope that the history would stay buried. There was shame and guilt that

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such horrific attacks occurred and that the White establishment had not held anyone accountable, especially when the names of law enforcement officials and Klansmen who committed the crime were known. There was anger and resentment that all Whites were somehow to blame for what many viewed as the actions of a few. And White participants received criticism from others in town who were still glad it happened. Through that initial process to create a safe space, they began to dispel myths about each other and to finally unpack one of the most notorious civil rights murders in American history that happened in their backyards yet had essentially become a public secret in town.

Powerful stories emerged over the next weeks. One participant revealed that her mother and brother were beaten by the Klan the night Mt. Zion United Methodist Church was burned. She eventually became friends with another member, whose father-in-law was one of the trigger-men who killed three civil rights workers. The latter apologized on behalf of her family for the fear that they had caused for the former's family. A Black teacher who had been fired for wearing a Dashiki to class and who mistrusted all Whites, became a trusting member of the group. The White head of the local chamber of commerce received censure and backlash from his White counterparts for his participation in our conversations (his critics viewed it as a betrayal of his race) but maintained his commitment to our work. Two members from the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians broadened the group's understanding of the role race played for their tribe in the cauldron of Black and White relations. And somewhere in that process, the idea of a call for justice in the case emerged, and the group embraced the idea. With that consensus, the Philadelphia Coalition was born, and they called a press conference to issue their call for justice.

The Philadelphia Coalition

On the 40th anniversary of the Civil Rights murders, the Philadelphia Coalition put out a call for action to join them in a show of power to pressure state officials to pursue the case. Members of the victims' families, local citizens, the state's governor, four congressmen, civil rights veterans, and 1,500 other stakeholders joined the Coalition at the press conference. The event made international news and began the narrative shift the Coalition hoped to achieve.

The night after the call for justice, the Coalition resolved to do more than just put an 80-year-old man in prison. It would be a failure for the community if the Coalition didn't teach the children how to engage in nonviolent communication and justice. They embarked on two complementary paths—retributive justice that sought a criminal trial and restorative justice in the form of an educational summit on civil rights history to address the larger systems that made the murders possible. The Coalition hoped that curriculum could be developed and implemented in the local schools that not only taught the accurate history of the murders and the town's role in them but also to teach students conflict resolution skills and civic engagement.

Within seven months, the Coalition convinced the attorney general and district attorney to convene a local grand jury, which indicted Killen for the murders. Exactly one year after the community's call for justice, a biracial jury of his peers convicted Killen on three counts of manslaughter, and he would later die in prison after serving thirteen years of his sixty-one-year sentence.

Sharing What We Learned

The call for justice and subsequent conviction electrified communities in the state with similarly violent racial histories; other racially divided Mississippi towns reached out

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and I shared this process of storytelling, acknowledgment of past harms, and action with their local leaders. The community in McComb, MS, known as "the bombing capital of Freedom Summer," underwent a two-year process centered on historical dialogue that resulted in a public ceremony to recognize and offer diplomas to Black students who walked out in protest of segregation in 1961 and were subsequently kicked out of school. In Tallahatchie County, another two years of courageous conversations led to a public ceremony in front of the Sumner courthouse, where the murderers of Emmett Till were found innocent. A biracial group apologized for the miscarriage of justice to the Till family and to Simeon Wright and Wheeler Parker, who were with Till when he was kidnapped from his uncle's home.

We then began to capture the key ingredients of the work in order to create a series of scaffolded, deliberate exercises to further operationalize the process of "humanifying" as organizer Taj James calls it, using best practices from leaders in our field (Brown 2017). These exercises work in three phases: 1) relationship and trust building, 2) truth telling, and 3) action. In general, they can be described as "who are we," "how did we get here," and "what are we going to do about it?" We have used the process in more than twenty communities in Mississippi and have now introduced it in more than twelve states throughout the country in every region. Now, we're using the process to address one of the most intractable issues of our time—racially-charged police violence.

BIRMINGHAM, ALABAMA

In 2016, my partner Charles H. Tucker and I began Sustainable Equity, LLC a consulting firm that shares our lessons from these reconciliation projects and modifies a version of our process to focus on public safety. This iteration of the process was used during our work with the National Network for Safe Communities, an effort initiated by the Department of Justice that aimed to build community, trust, and justice in six pilot cities in 2015. In addition to training in procedural justice and implicit bias, the project hoped to promote reconciliation between police and marginalized communities.

We advised that they begin the process by having an authority figure from agencies responsible for past violence offer an apology to those harmed in order to soften hardened stances and create a willingness to engage in dialogue. Birmingham's police chief, A.C. Roper, a Black Birmingham native, was particularly sensitive to the history of the area and the degree of mistrust between marginalized communities and the police. Birmingham had a notorious civil rights history including the bombing of a local Black church in which four young girls were murdered and the violent use of fire hoses and dogs against civil rights demonstrators. In August 2016, Chief Roper offered an apology over the course of two nights to the main groups identified as the greatest targets of the BPD's behavior: civil rights activists past and present, youth, the LGBTQIA community, and Black Lives Matter (BLM) local leadership. His apology encouraged rank and file officers and marginalized community residents to commit to a three-week session of deliberate dialogue that my partner and I facilitated.

Working Toward Reconciliation

Over three weeks in October 2016, we used our curriculum to guide a conversation with twenty participants, including ten community leaders (two of whom are local BLM leaders) and ten rank and file officers. The hostility between the participants in the first meeting was visually apparent. The circle they formed was segregated, with

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armed and uniformed police officers on one side and the community leaders on the other. We led them through a short breathing exercise to stimulate the vagus nerve—the body's source of relaxation—to relieve the tension wrought by fear or perceived threat. We introduced our Guideposts, the conversational norms we ask a group to use to help create a respectful and courageous space for dialogue and began exercises that solicit personal stories. A timer was passed around the room to welcome all voices and ensure that each person had an opportunity to share. The tension eased. Participants began to laugh and open up, and by the end of that first evening they were feeling encouraged and inclined to return.

We took the group to Montgomery's Equal Justice Institute, and with its sobering jars of dirt from sites of lynching serving as the backdrop to our conversation, we discussed the complexity and sometimes decades-long process of community change. We pointed to immense time and effort that led to the success of the Montgomery Bus Boycott in the mid-1950s and the commitment it took from those invested in the boycott. The group's trip away from their comfort zone in Birmingham and the growing comradery and increasingly shared outlook was instrumental to the work moving forward.

Back in Birmingham, the officers divulged why they were drawn to law enforcement as well as their regular tasks, the duties upon which they are evaluated, and the measurements by which they get raises. We found that there was no alignment across the categories. This was revelatory for the community leaders, who saw clearly the scope of what was expected of police officers and their lack of resources to fulfill their duties. For example, there were insufficient mental health resources for officers who often transition from horrific crime scenes to routine traffic stops. One powerful image that still resonates is of the two BLM leaders sharing self-care strategies with a Birmingham police officer. The group understood that the larger community had unrealistic expectations of Birmingham Police Department (BPD). While the community wanted sensitivity and understanding, the police had little training or resources to meet these needs.

The community leaders then shared what they loved about their neighborhoods and they shared moving stories of neighborhood parties and community watches. The officers admitted that they didn't know the communities in this way, and that their interactions with the community were initiated when problems arose. They acknowledged the biases that those limited and negative interactions created and reinforced. The group began to brainstorm ways to interrupt those cycles with community meetings or by reinstating positive community policing. Through this dialogue, their project for a common good began to form.

Their plans took more shape when they were asked: How do you define public safety? What are you as a community leader or a police officer willing to do to achieve that vision of public safety? And, what do you need from each other to achieve that vision? We noted that nothing on their list cost money. They called for love, leadership, patience, empathy, communication, responsibility, accountability, trust, consistency, transparency, coming to the table to talk, proactiveness, and small victories to create the larger change. And they wanted to focus on how this work could continue in our absence.

From here, they formalized a mission statement and next steps, and adopted the name "Birmingham Equally United" or "BE_U." They would continue to meet and exchange information between the community and the police department, especially when tensions flared. To date, they meet weekly, go on community walks, and hold small group discussions with local school children to promote more effective relations with the BPD.

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In 2017, BE_U asked for our support in creating a pilot BPD training for its cadets that focused on the civil rights history in Birmingham, the role the department played in the harms in that history, and its responsibility to reset relationships with the community. A year of planning and consulting experts at the Nashville Civil Rights Reading Room, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, and the Montgomery Police Department resulted in a training that included trust-building, active listening techniques, civil rights history, and a tour of the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute. In a post-assessment of the pilot, twenty-two of the twenty-three participants ranked the training as highly valuable for law enforcement and BPD now plans to include this training in all three recruiting classes in 2019.

REIMAGINING

It's not too late to reimagine everything, as activist Grace Lee Boggs said. We need to take a breath. We need to grieve for our own wounds and for those wounds we have caused in others. We need to take a break from the false urgency of "progress" and unremitting competition, and begin to do the hard and messy work of connection, understanding, repair, and mercy. When we have a chance to examine our attitudes within the safety of a trusted relationship, we begin to see more clearly. When individuals are able to sit together, to share their stories, and to listen to each other, a power from within emerges. As they are vulnerable with each other, trust builds. And as they begin to hear perspectives that are new to their own experiences, they begin to see the world differently. When they are able to discuss difficult topics in this way, they begin to question the barriers that society has erected and they begin to discern together what they can do about them. Before such a process happens, we have to realize how little we actually know—especially those of us who society advantages. When we speak differently and understand differently, then we do differently. Boggs noted that since "we have all been damaged by this system," we must engage in "growing our souls," by which she meant "the capacity to create the world anew, which each of us has. How do we talk about that with one another? It's not only important to act, it's important to talk because when you talk you begin to create new ideas and new languages" (Boggs 2012, pp. 45). To be able to "reimagine justice,"[1] we will truly have to reimagine our humanity and do the soul work that such a vision will require.

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NOTE

1. This is the rallying call of the Square One Project, which organizes The Roundtable on the Future of Justice Policy, "a series of public, live-streamed forums that bring together a cross-section of leaders, community members, academics, and other experts to consider discussion papers authored by leading researchers. They are designed to spark transformational thinking about what we can expect for our communities and our justice system." For more information, see https://www.squareonejustice.org/

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