

To: Spring 2020 Restorative Justice Group #33

Title: *The Power of Story*

As a participant in Restorative Justice circles at Fox Lake over the last five years, one of the things I have carried with me is that our stories have transformative power. And one of the things giving me peace in this strange, unsettling, and unsettled time is the faith that we will all emerge from this time with powerful stories. Stories of what we did to keep ourselves sane. Stories of plans made and plans disrupted. Stories of what we did to improvise. Stories of what we did to help others. Stories of what others did to help us. Stories of times we simply fell apart, and what it took to come back from that. I'm trying to be more intentional these days in recording the things I see and feel, the places I've gone both geographically and emotionally, and the things I've experienced.

Some of these stories may feel big and some may seem small, but even the small stories can have an outsized impact on someone. Five years ago, I was sitting in a Restorative Justice circle in New Lisbon and it was still very new to me. We had started the fall session in the heat of mid-August, but as the program went on week by week, the seasons had started to change and one week in late October, the temperature dropped significantly, there was a punishing chill in the wind, and what had started as drizzle, turned to sleet, turned to snow flurries.

That morning, I was sitting next to a guy who had been pretty quiet during previous weeks, and in an effort to make conversation before the session started, I'd started talking about how much this time of year always made me a little sad. He perked up and replied that he actually loved the colder weather and missed all the time he would spend outside in the winter, hunting, hiking, and ice-fishing up north. That day in the group, he seemed more open and talkative than he had been previously.

Maybe it was the weather. Maybe it was his excitement and nostalgia for his time spent outdoors that opened him up, or maybe he was just having a good day. Regardless, he'd made me aware of how easy it was for me to take something like simply being able to go for a walk in the woods for granted. In a way, I felt I owed it to him to at least try to embrace the idea of going outside in the winter, and in the time since, I have found that I truly love tromping around in the woods in the winter, even in the bitter cold.

I hear more. Because the trees are bare, I see more. I'm more careful and conscious of my steps. Everything feels wider and clearer, quieter and more intimate in the winter. My guess is that, to the guy I was making small talk with that October morning 5 years ago, our conversation was only that – small talk. But his words, his openness, his enthusiasm, had a huge impact on my life.

As the days are getting shorter, I've been arriving at work just as the sun is rising and getting home from work shortly before it starts to set. I'm fortunate enough to be able to take a lunch break in the middle of the day and go for a walk. I'm even more fortunate that there are beautiful places nearby for me to go walking.

This week, I walked in a place that I go because of how spacious it is. I've described it to friends as "What if the serenity prayer were a place?" It's an old farm that has been turned into a public park, although its fields are still farmed. You can walk trails around them. It sprawls over hills and offers long views of the surrounding area. At the perimeters of the various fields, some of which still have crops standing, but many of which have been harvested and chopped down, are lines of trees – mostly oaks, but also elms, maples, birches, ash, and pine, all in various states of fall color – maroon, brown, bright yellow, sunny orange, and pine green. Because the trails are around fields, there's an expansive view of the landscape. On these chilly October days, anyone walking these trails is exposed to the wind, which is greedily grabbing the leaves off trees and blowing them all over the place. You really get a sense of your own smallness, but also a vivid sense that you're part of something infinitely huge. That's a story that I'm carrying with me out of this time.

It's a story that was given to me by a man in prison, and it's a story I carry with me and share now. The serenity I feel when I go to this spot, I owe to a bit a small talk with a man I sat in circle with 5 years ago, who I haven't seen or spoken to since.

We often talk about ripple effects in restorative justice, and when we do, we mainly talk about ripple effects of harm. But one of the things I love about the image of ripples is that even the tiniest pebble tossed into a still pond will create ripples that expand and grow far out of proportion to the pebble that started them. Many of us can think of the bigger stories that have shaped the way we live our lives – stories of the places we grew up, the schools we went to, the friends or mentors who loved and taught us, the families who raised us, the loved ones lost to illness or age or crime. Right now feels like a time of big stories: a global pandemic that's changing how we live and work and relate to each other, a racial reckoning that is opening people's eyes and hearts to injustice in a way many have never thought to consider, a big election.

But every day is also full of small stories and sometimes it's good to remind ourselves of those, and take a moment to actually see and record them. Some of my stories this week:

- My friend is recovering from shingles. She's a writer, and she's on a painkiller that makes it hard for her to process language. We exchanged emails joking about living in a world without nouns.
- Having already voted, I decided to watch football instead of the presidential debate and got to see quarterback Daniel Jones take off running 80 yards to a near certain touchdown, only to trip and fall short of the endzone.
- While walking my dog throughout the neighborhood last night, I saw a neighbor had decorated their house for Halloween with scarecrows, witches, and jack-o-lanterns, all wearing masks.

Maybe nothing important here, but they're things I want to remember. It's wonderful to climb to the top of a hill and get a terrific view of the land around, but it is just as wonderful and important to consider a single leaf fallen on a path in front of you, its colors, the complex geometry of its veins, the way it lays flat against the ground or curls and contorts, or blows away in a breeze. Small stories can take us out of the big ones for a moment, like a meditation, and make us see the big stories in a new way.

- What are your big stories, the ones that have shaped you or changed the course of your life?
- What are the small stories that you remember, and what about them sticks with you?
- How do we see, recognize, record, and share our stories, both big and small?
- How might the way we share our stories impact others? What's your story for today?

I'm always grateful for the stories I've heard or witnessed in Restorative Justice, and I look forward to such a time when we can share them in person again.

~ Mr. Lorentz, Restorative Justice volunteer