

### **Introduction**

I want to thank Tom Groome and *The Church in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* for the opportunity to converse with you tonight about an initiative known as a Healing Circle. I am quite aware of the quality of the speakers that have preceded me in this forum and I am honored to be here. I also thank all of you who came here on a cold night.

### **What Is My Connection to This Topic?**

For last 10 years, I have been:

- A professional facilitator in Northern Virginia, working with juveniles and those they have harmed in order to repair the harm and restore relationships through a process known as Restorative Justice.
  - These harms have arisen from violations of school behavioral codes that can lead to suspension or expulsion, or from violations of criminal statutes that can lead to prosecution and even imprisonment.
- I have also been a member and leader of Voice of the Faithful, the Catholic lay organization that formed here in Boston out of the urgency by Catholics to respond to the revelations of the Catholic clergy sexual abuse narrative:
  - A narrative that the recent movie *Spotlight* brought into sharp focus here in Boston.
- In the last 3 years, I have been a co-leader of a VOTF Restorative Justice initiative known as a Healing Circle.

My hope tonight is to explain:

- What HCs are and their grounding in story-telling
- Why they are vital to healing the vast wounds from the sexual abuse narrative
- And, if I hit the mark, how this initiative fits into the faith life in our Church, including possibly into each of your lives

### ***How I Would Like to Proceed***

I'd like to spend 25-30 minutes on:

- The background to the formation of the HC initiative
- The RJ underpinnings of Healing Circles, particularly through story-telling (the theme of *The Church in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century's* Fall semester)
- The sexual abuse narrative as seen through the lens of a HC
- The particular model of a Healing Circle that VOTF calls *Broken Vessels*:
  - Symbolized here by the broken vessel we place at the center of each circle
  - The Sufi poet, Rumi, wrote, “the wound is the place where Light enters you”
  - Songwriter Leonard Cohen, in the refrain of his song *Anthem*, writes:

There is a crack, there is a crack in everything,  
that is how the light gets in”

After my remarks, I will invite you to spend 2-3 minutes of talk among yourselves.

The remaining time will be for conversation about your questions, observations etc.

### ***The Background to the Healing Circle Initiative***

Within VOTF, recognition began taking shape during the last several years that opportunities for healing the vast and deep wounds from the clergy sexual abuse narrative have been largely absent in the faith life of our Church, despite healing being a core Gospel value.

- Certainly diocesan victim assistance offices have extended care and support for victims/survivors of sexual abuse, to greater or lesser success.
- Diocesan or parish healing masses have helped some in the pews.

But largely such efforts have been overwhelmed by the widespread oppositional energy generated by press revelations and pushbacks, lawsuits and bankruptcies, and other confrontational engagements.

VOTF leaders discerned that a model of healing based on RJ principles and practices was needed to fill this healing void.

## Story-Telling for Healing

- Truth and Reconciliation models such as those used in Rwanda, and South Africa exceeded the both the reach and also the intention of VOTF.
- But other models of Restorative Justice were feasible.
- Each of them relies on story-telling, and story-listening, as core elements of the process.

So began a pilot of RJ Healing Circles in late 2014 and the first half of 2015, 2 in Boston and 1 in Northern Virginia.

- Since then, another took place in NYC in September and one more in Hartford last month.

VOTF's mission with this initiative is to promote, facilitate, and enable *Broken Vessel* circles, or other healing initiatives, on a widespread basis, as a means of rebuilding the Church out of its wounds from the sexual abuse narrative.

## ***Now I'd Like to Turn to Restorative Justice (or RJ) as the Framework for Healing Circles***

RJ is not a new-age fad but evolved from the way indigenous peoples addressed and resolved harm.

- Their underlying beliefs were that:
  - Harm to any one individual injured the whole community.
  - Harmony could only be restored by the community at large.
- They met in circle to ask what harm occurred, who was affected by it, and what needs and obligations must be met for those affected and by the community in order to make things as right as possible.

This approach is quite different from retributive models, such as our country and others in the First World use, where the focus is on those who violated a law and the punishment the state must impose on the offender.

- A Restorative Justice approach is easier to imagine when, let's say, a juvenile vandalizes some of the houses in a neighborhood. All the neighbors are affected, even if their house was not one that was vandalized.
- Many instances of harm, however, involve many more people than the direct participants in a shared experience.

## Story-Telling for Healing

- Think of the immediate and ripple effects of a Ponzi scheme perpetrated by someone like a Bernie Madoff, or more recently the shooting of a person of color by a white police officer, no matter where it occurred and notwithstanding the eventual merits of the case.

RJ circles can contribute to healing deep wounds that transcend those directly affected.

## *Let's Look at Clergy Sexual Abuse Through an RJ Lens*

First a Disclaimer: child sexual abuse is not unique to the Catholic Church or to churches in general; its greatest incidence is in family life, but VOTF's focus with this initiative is on the Catholic clergy sexual abuse narrative.

What are the harms and who has been harmed?

Consider the following individuals whose names I have changed for this purpose.

- Jeremy, a 40-year old man, abused as a child, whose life as a victim-survivor was marked by rage and depression, substance abuse, and, as with too many others, ended in suicide
- Megan and Richard, a couple in their 70s who stay in the pews but feel betrayed by the priest who abused their daughter and further victimized by the dismissiveness of Church leaders when they brought the abuse forward
- Jim, a cradle Catholic who does not know anyone who was abused but remains incredulous and embarrassed about his trust in hierarchical leaders who engaged in denial, blaming, and cover-up despite records in their files that substantiate what victim advocates or the press reported
- Sally and George, a young couple in a new parish who are afraid to let their children near any clergy given the years of disclosures, even though they both had nourishing relationships with priests in their own parishes as children
- Martha, a 40-year old Catholic for whom this narrative was the last straw in her efforts to cling to a faith in which doubts left her in a state of disillusionment
- Fr. Tom, a faithful priest for 40 years who discovers that one of his classmates has been an abuser and who himself is subjected to disrespect when he wears his collar in public

## Story-Telling for Healing

- Susan, a 30-year old employee at a diocesan office, who is shunned when she raises questions about the corporate responses and actions of diocesan officials in response to lawsuits brought by survivors
- Peter, a 50-year old lifelong Catholic and lawyer who is scandalized by the treatment of survivors that he represents in seeking justice from a diocese or religious congregation

These examples represent specific individuals, but:

- What about the ripple effects on those connected to them, be they family members, fellow parishioners, or colleagues and friends?
- What about the impact on the whole Body of Christ, the painful exposure of wounds in public view for the past 14 years, in North America, Europe, Australia and elsewhere?

An RJ approach asks what is needed to heal the wounds? What are the needs and obligations?

- The first answer from most is justice; however, its pursuit has largely resulted in pitched battles in public forums: press, courts, and the public square.
  - Struggles for justice have rarely resulted in healing, including for those who reached financial settlements.
- Those directly harmed often express a need for acknowledgement of harm; validation that the abuse was not their fault; protection of other minors, assistance in recovery; and accountability.
- Those in the Body of Christ might need full disclosure and ownership by Church leaders; witness of Gospel repentance and accountability instead of corporate defenses; systemic reforms that prevent continuing abuse or cover-up.

## ***How Does Story-Telling Lead to Healing?***

- Howard Zehr, dubbed by many the grandfather of the reawakening of RJ in the U.S., quotes another author, Robert Schreiter, who says, “We each construct a sense of identity and safety to keep from feeling vulnerable. We place our symbols and critical events in narratives—stories—about who and what we are. These are our ‘truths’.”

## Story-Telling for Healing

- Zehr adds that “suffering ... is essentially an attack on [our] narratives ... To heal, we have to recover our stories ... that take into account the awful things that have happened.”
- Perhaps we can infer a similar meaning from Chapter 12 of Luke’s Gospel where Jesus says, “Everything that is now covered will be uncovered, and everything that is now hidden will be made clear.”

## *Now Let’s Look at the Broken Vessels Model*

It is a facilitated conversation in which participants speak and listen deeply about their stories of harm and healing in a safe space that promotes connection and validation.

Prior to the circle:

- A trained facilitator interviews those who self-identify as people harmed or affected in some personal way by the abuse narrative and who are looking for, or are open to, an opportunity for healing; or perhaps who are drawn to contribute to the healing of the wounds even if not directly harmed.
- The facilitator also ensures that their expectations are aligned with those of a healing circle and that they are ready, willing and capable of participating without causing further harm to themselves or others.
- The facilitator guides the circle conversation according to very specific protocols that are counter-cultural.

During the circle, a “talking piece” governs the flow of conversation. As a participant, you:

- Speak only if you hold a talking piece, which is passed from one participant to another in circle.
- Speak for as long as needed to speak your truth in response to specific questions posed by the facilitator.
- Listen if you are not speaking.
- No interruptions, no cross-talking, no commentary or follow-up questions allowed on others’ sharing.

This is a very difficult challenge for us in 21<sup>st</sup> C Western and American cultures.

Questions move from truth about harm to truth about recovery and healing.

1. Describe your experience as a Catholic before the abuse scandal broke into your life.

## Story-Telling for Healing

2. How has the sexual abuse narrative personally harmed or affected your faith life?
3. How has the harm spilled over into the lives of others in your life experience?
4. What has been your experience in seeking or finding healing from the wounds of the sexual abuse narrative? Have there been people or events that have moved or obstructed your journey?
5. What kind of healing do you yearn for at this time of your life? What do you need in order to move towards it?

The stories are powerful. Participants report a deep sense of being heard, validated, connected, and drawn into an experience of healing.

Here are quotations from those who have participated:

- Bishop Thomas Gumbleton, a participant in the initial circle, wrote in his homily the following day: “[the healing circle] was the people of the church reaching out to other people in the church who have been so traumatically affected.”
- A victim/survivor wrote: “The Healing Circle planted a seed that will grow ... because it is based on truth, fueled by people quickly establishing trusting relationships within the circle.”
- Another participant wrote: “I have come to realize ... that I have experienced hurt in varying degrees on different levels as a result of the clergy sexual abuse crisis. The circle gave me the ability to share another layer of harm and, in sharing my story, I healed a bit more.”

Healing Circles are not magic wands, just opportunities to address harm and continue or begin a journey of healing, individually, and through ripple effects, as friends and family members, faith communities, and the Body of Christ.

Healing Circles are not about closure, forgetting or forgiving—although these outcomes might occur for some participants—nor are they a substitute for therapy or criminal or civil suits in the pursuit of justice.

Before I conclude my remarks and move into conversation, let me read a short poem that we use at the beginning of the Healing Circle to signal the shift from ordinary conversation to Circle conversation. It is called *When Someone Deeply Listens To You* by John Fox.

When someone deeply listens to you  
it is like holding out a dented cup

## Story-Telling for Healing

you've had since childhood  
and watching it fill up with  
cold, fresh water.  
When it balances on top of the brim,  
you are understood.  
When it overflows and touches your skin,  
you are loved.

When someone deeply listens to you  
the room where you stay  
starts a new life  
and the place where you wrote  
your first poem  
begins to glow in your mind's eye.  
It is as if gold has been discovered!

When someone deeply listens to you  
your bare feet are on the earth  
and a beloved land that seemed distant  
is now at home within you.