



The Power of Setting Intentions, Using Restorative Practices, Theater, and Art for Healing and Social Justice

*A Black Paper by Yvette D. Murrell
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Stories live in every one of us. We often pass by an ocean of stories every day and never hear the moments that ignite us, invite us, entice us toward something greater... our shared humanity.

I recall a profoundly special evening in Milwaukee. I was at the University of Wisconsin Milwaukee and [Playback Milwaukee Theatre Company](#), was hosting a performance for the entire community. The theme of the show was "Stories from the Block". I was the Conductor, which is like being the "MC" of an event. Conductors hold the space, warm up the audience, as well as the playback players – actors, musicians, and visual artists. They guide and conduct the show, in a manner similar to the way that Harriet Tubman was the conductor of the Underground Railroad. As the conductor, I invited folks to join us on a journey toward creative freedom through story while sharing and engaging in deep listening, respect, the arts, social context, and ritual. There were almost 200 people in the audience. We had finished short forms (a space in which audience members share a short statement from their seats), and we had come to the part of the show where I invited someone from the audience to come join me on the stage, sit with me and share a memory/fuller story... a moment that was on their hearts to share.

A young college student raised her hand and I invited her to the stage. Her courage in walking to the stage was met with warm applause.

As she sat with me, the room gently fell to silence and rapt and attention. Everyone offered generous listening as her story unfolded. As I asked questions, the gravity of her story became clear. Just three days earlier, she had witnessed a shooting. Where other neighbors retreated into their houses, she felt compelled to move toward the person who lay bleeding on the sidewalk. She spoke of the stillness that seemed to wrap around her as she approached this young man. She held his hand, looking into his eyes while witnessing his suffering. Another young man came and took his t-shirt and tried to slow the bleeding with pressure until the paramedics arrived and took him away. Though he was alive when she released his hand, she had no idea what happened to him and she carried with her, the look in his eyes and the grip of his hand. She was still wondering about him.



This wonder now lingered within all of us. The playback of her story was profound. It helped us all hold our breath together and breathe into the emptiness of the unknown.

The storyteller left the stage and the audience applauded her gift to us all. The show went on. After the show ended, and a brief circle backstage, the Playback Milwaukee Theatre Company members went out to connect with the lingering audience members.

Students, professors, staff, family, friends, and community members gathered and spoke with each other recounting stories from the evening and moments that moved them. I recall a group of college students mentioning that they shared classes with the young woman who had shared the story of witnessing the shooting. One student said with surprise, "I have a few classes with her. I never knew that she went through that."

We all stood in rapt silence for a moment... then I said, "We never know what stories are walking by us..."

Setting Clear Intentions

Playback is just one intentional space in which to listen generously and creatively be with our stories, our lives, and ourselves ... just the way we are. When done well, Playback Theater is a creative ritual space with just enough invitation, warmth, creativity, and respect for each teller to be willing to share a story.

There are a variety of intentional spaces that can hold the gift of our stories. Restorative Practices, Restorative Justice, and Circle process are wonderful intentional spaces. These spaces push at the boundary of our social normative pressure and call for our shared humanity.

Circle process provides pauses wide enough to hold heartfelt and meaningful stories that carry us to the parts of ourselves that long to be authentically expressed and embraced. We are invited to this place in our lives. When we pause.

Here is what I mean:

When we pause, we stop and focus our attention for a moment. Waiting. In that moment, there is choice. In that moment, infinite possibilities exist. We can now choose to focus our attention. Intention setting is about directing our attention in a very particular way. When we are the leaders responsible for setting a safe, loving, and dynamic learning environment, then it is important that we be the first to pause, reflect, notice, and ask ourselves questions like:



What is happening around us?

What stories are walking by us?

Who do I need to become to create space for those stories to be shared/show-up in ways that are meaningful for all?

We want people to understand the importance of setting intentions as the primary groundwork for creating healing spaces. Before moving into any process for collective healing, intention setting creates the energetic structure for people to navigate through the process.

By setting intentions, you are priming the energy of the room to be able to authentically hold the stories that want to show up wholeheartedly in that space. This activates and attunes the attention in the room to observe and acknowledge the everyday sacredness that will accompany the participants.

In neuroscience, intention setting calms the brain to let it know that the environment is safe. It also prepares the brain to move forward with the process. The amygdala “is the seat of our fear system that is involved in emotional processing. It is designed to react in less than a second at the very hint of a social or physical threat. (Hammond, p. 40).” When creating spaces for people who carry a lot of trauma it becomes particularly important to make sure the amygdala knows that the environment is safe so further information processing can take place. If the brain senses fear, then all opportunity for learning and participating is lost. By setting intentions we can energetically calm and set a tone for the environment where learners are gathering to do the work of healing.

Sample questions to ask yourself to help set intentions and prime the space:

What values am I standing on to create (healing, courage, brave space, etc.)?

Who is at the center? Who is at the margins?

Who am I being as I create this X; how does that inform what will occur with X?

Who am I becoming and how is that aligned with what I am creating for X?

Reference

Hammond, Zaretta. *Culturally Responsive Teaching and The Brain: Promoting Authentic Engagement and Rigor Among Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students*. Corwin, 2015.