

Towards Understanding and Healing

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Quarterly Newsletter

Visit our website: www.thejunction-ni.org/towardsunderstandingandhealing.htm

Storysharing: Widening Our Circle of Compassion

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It has been nearly eight years since the Good Friday Agreement marked the official end of "the Troubles" and the advent of "peace." Yet, anyone who has lived here in

Northern Ireland can attest to the hard truth:

peace is not just the absence of open violence. Peace is as complicated as conflict, if not more so. In light of this, TUH's dialogue residencials have attempted to challenge participants to deal with the complexities of living together, identifying "next steps" and obstacles still left to tackle.

With the laying down of arms, it seems natural to plough ahead

towards a "shared future," taking on concrete issues like education, youth violence, drug abuse, and housing. These are problems that can be measured, quantified, and

compared. In an age where success is measured on graphs and charts, what can storysharing and dialogue offer Northern Ireland? Can a process that recalls the past facilitate the forward momentum of this society?

A human being is a part of the whole that we call the universe, a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings, as something separated from the rest -- a kind of optical illusion of his consciousness. This illusion is a prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for only the few people nearest us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living beings and all of nature.

Albert Einstein

The direct impact of storytelling is, at best, difficult to measure. The transformative power of sharing stories lies in the imagination of the listener—the ability to see events from a different perspective. After participating in

Upcoming Events

Storytelling Residential

Storytelling residencials are for both men and women in Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland, and Great Britain who have been affected by the Troubles.

Currently, our only upcoming residential is scheduled for

15-17 May, 2006

This will be a mid-week session at Lusty Beg.

Contact Keli or Nikki for more information.

**Due to high demand, TUH must now give preference to individuals who have never attended TUH storytelling events.*

Past participants who wish to attend again are invited to place their names on a waiting list, in the event that a space becomes available.

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Storysharing: Widening Our Circle of Compassion (continued from page 1)

a TUH dialogue residential, Eamon Baker reflected on the boundaries imposed upon his own sphere of compassion. In an article published in the *Derry Journal*¹, he recalled his memory of the Coshquin bomb:

I remember the [widow of the victim from my community], her powerful dignity. I struggled to imagine the horror for her, for her three children.... But I thought very little of the horror for those five dead soldiers and their families. They were far away...I knew little of where the British soldiers came from. I had a steep failure of empathy, of compassion for those who were from outside my community. I didn't wish them dead. I simply didn't care enough...So much of this had happened. So much silence. So much failure of empathy, of compassion.

By actively, willingly sharing our stories, we offer up, and find in others, the pieces of ourselves that we all hold in common. Our stories humanize both the storyteller and the listener, and in the process, expand our circle of empathy to embrace a broader concept of "us".

In his research on TUH, Stuart Mullan² writes:

In the transition towards peace, society must attempt to come to terms with the horror and brutality of conflict. Communities that were traditionally alienated from each other...are beginning to ask questions about their role, both personally and as a group, in the conflict, and their responsibility to those that they perceive as 'other' in securing lasting peace. As has been seen in other countries emerging from similar periods of conflict, such as Chile or South Africa, questions of truth, justice, history and story are of vital importance. All parties to the conflict, including those within society who do not consider themselves as having been involved directly in perpetrating violence, must face challenging questions about their role in the conflict, if they wish to contribute to the process of reconciliation....

Peace requires the negotiation of new relationships amidst the same ancient backdrop that has created centuries of conflict. The essential elements remain the same. What must change is our perspective. In sharing our stories, we give one another the tools to "free ourselves from [the] prison" of age-old prejudices and hatred. Let the impact of storytelling be measured in the ever-widening breadth of our circle of compassion.

¹21 October 2005

²Excerpts from Stuart Mullan's Thesis, "Storytelling and Reconciliation in Northern Ireland" can be found in the Fall 2005 issue of the TUH newsletter.

As many of you know, TUH received its original core funding from the EU Peace II programme, which ended in August 2005. Since then, we have been operating through a grant from the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust, while awaiting news on our application for Peace II Extension funding. In December, we learned that our bid for the Extension funding was unsuccessful, resulting in a mild infection of bahumbugs.

Though this turn of events is disappointing, it is not surprising, given the current climate within the community and voluntary sector. As we move further away from the open violence of "The Troubles," funds for such organizations are disappearing, resulting in the sad demise of many "small" projects, whose deep impact is often overlooked and undervalued.

Be that as it may, TUH is still operating and working creatively to keep our doors open and our work on-going. We are currently exploring several funding opportunities, including an application to the EU Cross Borders Initiative

Please continue to check the website for new information on our funding situation and future plans. We expect the results of our latest application sometime in April, and will post any news on the site.

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Gusty Lusty Beg



November's residential marked the changing of the guard, so to speak, with Keli and I embarking upon our first TUH residential as Coordinator and Underling (respectively). Lusty Beg welcomed us with gale force winds and driving rains that rattled the windows and banged the doors. Seldom had we seen a spot as inviting as the pub hearth on that first afternoon.

Despite this auspicious beginning, the weekday residential went well, thanks in no small part to the hard work and support of the staff and facilitator team. The weather calmed down after that first night, and we even saw patches of sunshine, on occasion.

In January, we returned to Lusty Beg for a weekend residential. Unlike the November tempest, this

January Sunrise at Lusty Beg. -K. Harrington

Hope begins in the dark, the stubborn hope that if you just show up and try to do the right thing, the dawn will come. You wait and watch and work: you don't give up.

Anne Lamott

time the island treated us to a taste of spring, with mild temperatures and almost constant sunshine. We had yet another great residential, thanks to our facilitators and the courage and commitment of our participants.

Though both residential were a bit smaller due to funding, the feedback from participants was overwhelmingly positive. The small group sizes remained the same, but the slightly smaller number in the large group seemed to facilitate interaction amongst everyone. Participants at both

residential remarked upon the level of intimacy achieved by the group as a whole.

We are looking forward to the next residential in May, with its promise of sunshine, flowers, and the inevitable bride and groom sightings.

Please note: *The May residential is currently our only scheduled residential for 2006. If you know of anyone who is interested in participating, but has not yet had the opportunity to attend, please share this information with them.*

Greetings from Sara Cook!

"Hello" from Boston! I think of those of you involved in Towards Understanding and Healing often, so I was delighted when Nikki asked me to send an update for the newsletter.

It's difficult to believe that I left Northern Ireland almost six months ago! The time following my departure has been busy, indeed. After spending several weeks with friends and family in Indiana, I moved to Boston. Being a Midwestern girl, I had much to get used to regarding life on the East Coast. The crazy driving and fast pace of life were a new experience, and were certainly different from what I had grown accustomed to while living in Northern

Ireland. However, I quickly found that there are many people from Northern Ireland living in Boston, and I am frequently running into people who are from your part of the world who are fascinated to hear about the work of Towards Understanding and Healing "back home."

As many of you know, I am studying for a Master's degree in social work at Boston University. Although I have often missed the work of coordinating Towards Understanding and Healing, I have really enjoyed getting back to school. As a part of my studies, I am completing an internship with the Massachusetts Office for

Victim Assistance, an independent state agency that provides support and funding for agencies who work with victims/survivors throughout Massachusetts. My work allows me to speak often of the innovative approaches being taken to provide services to victims/survivors in Northern Ireland and of the courage so many people in Northern Ireland are showing in coping with their experiences of the Troubles.

So, keep up the good work! Your courage and vision in engaging in storytelling and dialogue are providing inspiration to people in other parts of the world.

Sara can be contacted at saracook5@hotmail.com.

Funding... *(Continued from page 2)*

(the results of which should be announced in April). In the meantime, we have decided to reallocate our Joseph Rowntree funds to allow for another three months of operations. Unfortunately, that has forced us to postpone the winter dialogue residential indefinitely, but we have scheduled an additional storytelling residential for May.

We are optimistic about the future of TUH, and we believe that the "magic" that

is storytelling still has a part to play in creating something better for all of our futures. The Management Committee and staff remain committed to the mission of TUH, and are making every effort to ensure that this work continues.

As always, thank you for your continued support, participation, and dedication. We will let you know as developments arise.

Towards Understanding and Healing is an organisation that recognises the individual experience in the context of the larger story of conflict in Northern Ireland. TUH offers a safe space for people to begin to articulate personal stories, and also to listen to other stories or truths in a way that does not diminish their own experience.

We Want To Hear From You!

Do you have some news or thoughts to share with the TUH community? The newsletter is a way for all of us to keep in touch with each other. Write to Nikki via email (see right) or post (see front page).

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Special Thanks to Sara Cook and Eamon Baker