

# HURT PEOPLE HURT PEOPLE HELPED PEOPLE HELP PEOPLE

by Angie Dornai and Dorothy Vaandering

## Incident

by Countee Cullen

Once riding in old Baltimore,  
Heart-filled, head-filled with glee;  
I saw a Baltimorean  
Keep looking straight at me.

Now I was eight and very small,  
And he was no whit bigger,  
And so I smiled, but he poked out  
His tongue, and called me, "Nigger."

I saw the whole of Baltimore  
From May until December;  
Of all the things that happened there  
That's all that I remember.

On the day we were to examine *Incident* in Grade 12 College English, a student from another class came in and addressed a group of students as "n\*\*\*\*\*s." The response was immediate and volatile. Literature and life collided, setting the stage not only for meeting curriculum expectations, but also for supporting and holding each other accountable to the agreement we had established together at the start of the semester—that as we studied the academic curriculum, we would also work together to improve social, emotional, behavioural and academic outcomes for individuals in class and beyond. As their teacher, I hoped this experience could be another chance to more deeply grasp the necessity of accepting each other as interconnected beings who value and honour one another not for what we do or say, but simply because we are human (Vaandering, 2011). When words cut like weapons and fists clench in response because words fail, such an ideal seems next to impossible. However, it underpins a most important R in education—Relationships—and is core to the shift required for increasing students' sense of safety and belonging, academic achievement and charac-

ter development. Supported by researchers and practitioners across the country, the message rebounds from coast to coast: *relationship problems require relational solutions!* (Morrison, 2007; Pepler and Craig, 2009; Vaandering, 2012). Beyond cries for anti-bullying legislation, beyond the cyber/verbal/physical abuses rooted in racism, homophobia, sexism, religion, etc., is a need to more fully understand what it really means to be in relationship with each other at all times. How do we internalize what it means to honour one another so that the cycle of hurt people hurting people will stop? Cullen's 1935 poem transmits the enduring wounds of weaponized words. I offer a current story of hope that returns us to the young man—we'll call him B—who targeted his peers with the n\* word. This epithet wounded the targets, and those of us who stood by. One responded by promising that he would mete out physical violence to teach a lesson. Others wanted a long suspension. Still others said, "No point doing anything—nothing changes." These default responses challenged our class agreement that promised accountability and support for everyone in the face of harm. When reminded, the classmates considered how these options would produce "bigger picture" outcomes where cycles of hurt upon hurt might not be broken.

## This discussion raised questions:

How would a violent reaction impact family and friends? Does our current system place harsher consequences on physical assault than on the targeted use of verbal bullets? Would those responding with physical violence be suspended for longer than B might be? Would the "satisfaction" be worth it? What punishment would be enough for any student to learn not to use hurtful language, or to stop bullying behaviour? What response could get closest to changing negative behaviour for good?

## Students reflected and shared insights:

Suspended B would have ample time for his anger to escalate while alienated from peers and from where he belonged. B could blame those

whom he had targeted. Exactly because an offender could retaliate for a school imposed consequence, students rarely told staff about various peer-peer abuses. "Telling makes you complicit with whatever punishment gets assigned," they observed. "B's friends could go after those responsible for getting their friend suspended and even after a suspension, the next time this person used that word, they'd say it quietly enough that adults wouldn't hear. Also, suspensions don't get at what makes someone behave the way that they do. Everyone just hopes that time away makes things go away. But it usually doesn't. It just goes underground, online or outside of school."

Whenever we miss the teachable moments with which conflict gifts us, we rob everyone of an opportunity to improve ourselves and the world around us. We lose opportunity to change who we are, and how we are with one another, at school, on line and beyond school doors and seasons. Poor choices demonstrate need—a need for expectation and accountability that every individual can do better and be better, and the need for people affected by poor choices to be supported. High expectation and support staves off the likelihood of repeated harm—caused, and experienced. Doing nothing makes bystanders complicit. Unchecked behaviour continues to cause hurt. And hurt people hurt people.

After listening to everyone's perspective through the now routine talking circle approach<sup>1</sup>, students asked that a similar collaborative dialogic approach be used with B. Would admin converse with the student and me, representing them, using the framework of questions<sup>2</sup> we'd used before?

1. What happened?
2. What was he thinking about at the time?
3. What had he thought about since he addressed the young men as "n"s?
4. Who might have been affected by what he did and in what ways?
5. What did he realize and understand as he heard (from me) the perspectives of those affected?

6. With this understanding, what did he think he should do in order to make things right?

The administrators and student agreed. Afterwards, I shared the following with my class. B had no idea he was giving offence. B's intention was to connect with a group of guys in a way that he thought was socially appropriate. All he really intended to do was to enter into a conversation. He'd seen it used on TV, in movies and in music videos. He'd actually used the word before, and had indeed been told to shut up by these same peers. He'd been told "Don't use that word again or else!" but didn't think that anybody meant anything by it. He actually thought that through this interaction, he was being part of the group. When he concluded that not only had he caused significant hurt, but that his efforts to engage had alienated others, he wanted to make amends. He wanted all to know that he really didn't understand the offence at the time, but now he did. He promised never to use the word again. He realized now this would increase the likelihood that he'd be less alienated, less likely to be physically harmed by his uninformed word choice and more included by peers in future interactions. In relating this, students' epiphanies around how we all experience intent were profound. B asked me to share with the group how very much he wanted to be a part of things, which is why he came into a class not his own in the first place. I shared how this same young man spent months volunteering with our school's developmentally delayed students, both in and outside of school. As perceptions shifted, my students realized that B was not who they had experienced him to be, and considered ways to be more welcoming to others beyond their group. Some, in fact, decided to also volunteer with our developmentally delayed students, and now work with B.

This way of processing a hurtful incident reinforces the complexity of relational issues as well as the ability within all of us to find effective, relationship solutions. While superficially, punishment might seem to be "fair" in dealing with harm, it doesn't seem to change behaviours, improve circumstances or build support networks. We are learning that a restorative approach helps us find our common humanity. *How* we find ways to make things right strengthens relationships, improves everyone's ability to address harm when and where it is caused, increases academic performance, and ultimately, teaches that *helped* people, *help* people.

<sup>1</sup> Restorative justice in education lays the foundation for the relational, dialogic approach described here. Rooted in an understanding of justice as honouring the inherent worth and nurturing the well-being of all (Vaandering, 2011), it fosters classroom cultures that build, support and repair relationships (Morrison, 2007). Talking circles where all students are given time and space to contribute to a current curricular or social topic promote trust, engagement and support. Though simple in practice, subtle nuances must be attended to if authentic relationships are to grow. For details on how to conduct talking circles see Reistenburg, N. (2012) Circle

in the Square, Costello, Wachtel, & Wachtel (2010) *Restorative Circles in Schools*, or Pranis, K. (2007) *Circle Processes*.

<sup>2</sup> This restorative justice question framework, which the students had been using to address issues previously in various ways, effectively allows for participants involved in conflict to share their stories, the contexts out of which their actions arose. The first two questions address the past, the next three the present and the final question, the future. All involved have time and space to share, allowing for the collective story to emerge and a collective solution to be found. Caution: Employing such a process in serious cases of abuse and harm requires a knowledgeable facilitator with a careful plan that prepares participants for face-to-face contact. For more information on restorative justice processes contact a local restorative justice organization and/or see links and resources below.

## References

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Vaandering, D. (2012). *Relationships first: Implementing restorative justice from the ground up*. Summer institute. St. John's, NL.

## Other Restorative Justice Resources

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Costello, B., Wachtel, B., Wachtel, T. (2009). *Restorative Practices in Schools*. Bethlehem, PA: IIRP

Hopkins, B. (2004). *Just schools: a whole school approach to restorative justice*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Hopkins, B. (2011). *The Restorative Classroom Using Restorative Approaches to Foster Effective Learning* Optimus Education: [weeducation.com/author/belindahopkins](http://weeducation.com/author/belindahopkins)

Zehr, H. (2002). *The little book of restorative justice*. Intercourse, PA: Good Books.

Centre for Transformative Practices  
[thecentrefortransformativepractices.com](http://thecentrefortransformativepractices.com)

Centre for Restorative Justice  
[sfu.ca/cfrj/](http://sfu.ca/cfrj/)

International Institute for Restorative Practices:  
[iirp.edu/](http://iirp.edu/)

Promoting Relationships, Eliminating Violence: PREVNet:  
[prevnet.ca](http://prevnet.ca)

Transforming Conflict  
[transformingconflict.org](http://transformingconflict.org)

Angie Dornai is a restorative practitioner, trainer and teacher. Dorothy Vaandering, Ph.D. is an assistant professor in the faculty of education at Memorial University, NL. This year, they are working with teachers, administrators and community groups in Newfoundland on phase one of Relationships First: Implementing restorative justice in education from the ground, up! This collaborative, co-mentorship model is supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council. Dorothy and Angie are passionate about Canada as a restorative nation where citizens value interconnectedness and work for a sustainable economy and a just society.



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