

CELEBRATING HONESTY:
A Community approach to childhood stealing

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Abstract

This is a story of my involvement in a school that had problems with stealers. The principal asked for my help with a “gang” of boys who have been stealing together since pre-school. In an attempt to move beyond their initial reaction of: “It wasn’t me, it was him”, we started speaking about reputation. At that stage I consulted with David Epston and implemented his ideas of honesty meetings, honesty tests and honesty parties. A community of concern was gathered involving parents, family members, neighbours, teachers, friends and classmates. The opportunity to restorative justice and the redemption of reputation was made possible for the stealers. The whole school participated in honesty celebrations.

In my presentation I will tell and illustrate the story while explaining the ideas and practices used. I will also share examples of questions, documents, letters and rituals that formed part of the work.

Alternative stories which developed from this work, created hope on many levels. Personally, I often feel overwhelmed and hopeless when confronted by the problems of poverty, crime and violence in South Africa. Through using narrative ways in this community project, I have become much more hopeful about the difference therapists can make. I hope my story will add to your hope for your work.

CELEBRATING HONESTY

A community approach to childhood stealing

While working as a psychologist in private practice I have been confronted, through the media, by the pain and suffering of the vast majority of South Africans who do not have access to the type of services I provide. I desperately wanted to reach out and make a difference, but became overwhelmed and intimidated by the problems as I attempted to address them from my personal and professional experience. While the fees excluded most people from my practice, more frustrating handicaps seemed to be my professional training and the isolated, privileged life I lead as white South African. Learning about Narrative Therapy and the community work done by Narrative Therapists filled me with hope. At last I seemed to have discovered ways in which to work creatively and respectfully in disadvantaged communities where the people were often from cultures different from my own. The question that remained was how to take that first step out of my comfort zone into this unknown territory.

An Opportunity:

In 1999 a school psychologist, Bridget Hamley-Wise, challenged me about the disproportionate psychologist-client ratio in the privileged community versus that in the disadvantaged community in our area. On meeting me she said: "So, you are one of the more than sixty private practitioners working with the twelve percent of the people in our area who can afford private services. As school psychologist I am responsible for thirteen thousand learners in this community - that makes individual work impossible". I jumped at the opportunity to make a difference. I eagerly offered to donate my services to a school for one morning a week in exchange for the chance to network and experiment with ways of working in the wider community.

The very next day Bridget took me to a school ten kilometres from my home in an area I had never visited before. The principal, Mr. Van Dam, explained the problem with six boys between the ages of ten and twelve who had been stealing together since their pre-school years. "They are not afraid of punishment or the police. Nothing puts them off," he said. He was concerned that this could be the beginning of gang activities and serious criminal careers for these boys. We decided that I would meet with the boys and their parents the following week to explain my involvement. There was no space for me to work at the school, but the Community Hall, a block from the school, was available as a "consulting room".

Children who steal:

Excitement and fear joined forces to rob me of sleep. As I frantically searched through all the Narrative Therapy literature I had, I stumbled upon a chapter by Seymour and Epston, 1989,¹ reporting their work with 45 children who had been stealing. This introduced me to the idea of focusing on reputation rather than investigating the "truth". It also helped me to stop looking for psychological explanations for childhood stealing. Stealing is a criminal act and needs to be boldly named and defined as such. I bought into the idea of the task at hand being that of regrading a child from 'stealer' to 'honest person with a good reputation'.

¹ SEYMOUR, F.W. and EPSTON, D. (1989) An approach to childhood stealing with evaluation of 45 cases. In EPSTON, D. and WHITE, M. (1992) *Experience, Contradiction, Narrative and Imagination*. Dulwich Centre Publications, Adelaide.

At the first meeting with the boys and four of their mothers, I was struck by the state of the clothes of some of the boys. It was torn, either too big or too small and often not in the colours of the official school uniform at all. They sat with bowed heads, waiting for the adults to speak. Some mothers had babies and toddlers with them and looked tired and troubled. As we sat in a big circle I tried to find out their understanding of why the principal had referred them. It turned out to be a confusing, passing-the-buck activity of "It wasn't me, it was him". Even the mothers spoke very little about their own children, but expressed grave concern about the bad influence wrong friends were having on them. Judging by what I heard that day the principal obviously sent me all the good guys by mistake! I realised that I would have to speak to each family separately and scheduled times to meet with them accordingly.

The stories:

In the sessions that followed, I asked questions about the "bad name for stealing" and how that impacted on their lives and the lives of their families. They told me how they often get falsely accused for things that disappear and other incidents of bad behaviour. Neighbours called them bad names, like "thief". Everybody expected the worst of the boys e.g. a teacher asking, "Have you come to steal?" when one of the boys walked past her classroom. The children told how they were excluded from activities like sport because they could not be trusted and there were fears that they will misbehave or get into trouble. The boys' bad reputations also affected the parents, as their parenting were questioned by others in the community. The parents lived in constant fear of being phoned by the police. It wasn't long before parents and boys agreed that a bad name for stealing was undesirable and was something worth changing.

They shared about their lives in a more open and trusting way. Seeing and hearing about the challenges these families were facing, filled me with sadness and fear for the future of the children. In an attempt to do justice to their struggle I briefly share some of their individual stories:

Dyllan and his younger brother live in foster care with his maternal aunt who is a single parent of one child. He was present when his stepfather murdered his alcoholic mother. His own father has been in jail since his birth.

Yusuf is the only son in a Muslim family and was named after his father. His father, who had spent fifteen years in jail, died of cancer the previous year. His mother struggles financially and his sister, her baby and husband who is a gangster, live with them. The substance abuse and criminal activities create a lot of tension in the family.

Marshall is the eldest of four children of whom the youngest is a baby. His father has cancer and receives a disability grant. His mother is unemployed. Both parents abuse alcohol and the children often don't have food or adequate adult supervision and care.

Alie's mother did not give me much information about the family. She came to the sessions regularly and seemed to want to "cover up" his stealing, not wanting it to reflect badly on her or her family. She was often very angry and blamed the school and others for his behaviour and severe learning problems. Someone else informed me that an older child in the family was in a reformatory. When she could no longer deny the stealing she reacted with threats of severe punishment and violence. "If you do it again, you will never be allowed to go out ! I will get your father to give you the hiding of your life!"

Moosa was experiencing serious family problems at the time. His father was retrenched from a job he had had for twenty years. He was unemployed for a long time and put in jail for failing to pay maintenance of an illegitimate child. During that time the boy's mother started an affair with the

father of her eldest child. She was never at home and the children were neglected. At the time there was a lot of tension in the marriage as well as in the extended family.

Warren comes from a family where both parents abuse alcohol. When I met him his father was unemployed and his mother worked as a char one day a week. This boy has suffered medical problems from babyhood resulting in several operations. He has a serious speech defect. There were reports that adults from his extended family paid him to assist them with their criminal activities.

David Epston:

Just as these problems were ganging up to overwhelm and steal all my hope from me, help arrived in the person of David Epston from New Zealand. He was to teach a workshop in Cape Town. I attended the workshop and had informal discussions with him in which we shared our work. David said that he had recently decided to “re-visit” his own work with stealers which was done a number of years ago. He intended sharing these ideas with other therapists through his teaching and writing. Our informal sharing led to a consultation with me in the Cape Town workshop. He gave a detailed account of the ideas and practises involved in his work with boys who got into trouble for stealing.

I was left with a well-studied transcript of our audiotaped interview. However, self-doubt had a great time spoiling things for me by reminding me that I was not David Epston. These were his ideas, developed over time. Would I be able to do justice to it? He was bold, creative and experienced and had credibility in the community where he worked. I’m a novice to this kind of work and a total stranger in a community of people who have a lot of reason to distrust me and I desperately wanted to prove myself. Besides, David seemed to refer to children from a wide range of socio-economic backgrounds. I was painfully aware of how poverty and crime was firmly entrenched in the community where I was trying to work. What if stealing was the only way for a child to find a meal? What effect does it have on children when their fathers and other family members have been participating in criminal acts?

It just seemed so risky to try these ‘weird’ ideas which David suggested. Will I be able to adequately explain this way of working? Will people really be interested in participating? How will everybody react to the exposure of speaking so openly about behaviour that is often referred to in euphemisms when children are involved? Added pressure came from the fact that, through the workshop, my work became known to David Epston and a large group of my colleagues – I knew I would feel terribly foolish if this failed!

A student who attended David Epston’s workshop was applying the ideas with a young boy she was seeing and her enthusiastic sharing of her work really helped me. I went back to the principal and struggled through an explanation of David’s visit and work. David’s recommendation to involve a community of concern to assist each boy in getting back their reputations for honesty, was accepted without any resistance. More appointments for the boys and their parents were scheduled.

Preparation for Honesty Meetings:

This time I met with each boy and his parent(s) separately. I will use Dyllan’s session as an example to illustrate what took place in each of the five sessions with Dyllan, Yusuf, Marshall, Alie an Warren and their respective parents, as I used the same procedure for all five sessions. I asked more questions about the effect the bad name for stealing had on Dyllan and his family. I also listed

the scenes of the crime, the victims and the names of those who care about the fact that Dyllan has this bad name for stealing. Some examples of the questions are:

What do people believe it is that you steal?

What have you been accused of?

Do you find that your bad name make people keep their distance from you?

Are people watching over you all the time?

Has this bad name resulted in your being accused of things you are innocent of?

Do you want a name for honesty or a name for being a thief?

Do you want to make it up to those that you have stolen from?

Who cares whether you have a bad name for stealing or a good name for honesty?

I then went on to explain that I had learned of a way in which Dyllan could retrieve his good name for honesty. It involved honesty testing. I wanted to know whether he would be prepared to take part in this in order to prove that he was honest. *Who would care to know about Dyllan's intention to undergo honesty testing?* We consulted the list of caring people as well as victims. I wrote a letter in close collaboration with Dyllan. He was responsible for handing it to everybody concerned to invite him or her to an honesty meeting.

Example of Invitation to Honesty Meeting:

Dear Auntie Sarah

Unfortunately I got a bad name for stealing, because I have taken things which did not belong to me. I don't like this bad name. It makes my mother unhappy and gets me into a lot of trouble. My mother worries that I might land up in court and jail one day. She wants to be proud of me when I grow up. She would like me to be honest and trustworthy.

Elize Morkel told me about her plan to help me get my good name for honesty back. She needs people who care about me to help with honesty tests. You are invited to a meeting on 20 July 1999 at the Community Hall in Gordon Road.

I would appreciate it if you could come.

Your nephew
Dyllan

In my session with Moosa and his parents I learned that his parents were filing for divorce and were unable to talk about much else. I decided to attend to their marital problems and his Honesty Meeting was postponed until such time that I was able to get their co-operation.

During these five sessions lists of victims emerged, showing great overlaps that confirmed that the boys did a lot of the stealing together. They stole from family members, classmates, neighbours, shops, schools and welfare organisations such as the Society for the Blind and the Cancer Association. I also learned that Dyllan, Yusuf, Marshall and Alie were in the same class and their teacher, Mr. Reiner, was also the rugby and cricket coach. At some stage Yusuf's mother asked if I was married to a certain lawyer who happened to be my husband's cousin. It turned out that her late husband had worked for him. He had helped the family during her husband's illness. I was able to take the story back to him and, although he was unable to attend an Honesty Meeting, he was keen to support Yusuf in his honesty quest. He encouraged me by relating some of his experiences in court and said that it would be worthwhile doing this work even if one boy was saved from a

criminal career. He sent his best wishes as well as a reminder to Yusuf of how proud his father had always been of his only son.

The Honesty Meetings:

At each Honesty Meeting I sat with the particular boy next to me while facing a circle of family members, the principal, teachers and people who were invited. I interviewed each person in the circle about the effect the stealing had on them. Victims were asked if there was anything that the boy could do to pay back what he had taken from them e.g. help with chores in the house or garden. A moving response came from a girl in Alie's class, who said that she was afraid of him and his friends. She added that she doesn't expect anything from Alie in return for the watch that was stolen from her, but she said that "he must stop stealing, swearing and fighting with other children – that will be enough pay-back for me."

Aunts and uncles expressed concerns for the future of the boys and reminded them of the hardships their families had had to endure as a result of the criminal careers of other family members in the past. I was also able to evoke the memories of the deceased parents by asking family members what they thought these parents would have said had they been there that day. Yusuf, his mother and aunts cried as his aunts reminded him of his father's suffering in prison. They spoke about how his health deteriorated, leading to his death. Again Yusuf's aunts were able to speak on behalf of their late brother, reminding Yusuf of his father's special love and the hopes he carried for Yusuf's future. Dyllan's aunt told him that his mother would have been proud of his excellent scholastic ability and the way he, Dyllan, helps her with household chores. His aunt said that his mother was murdered because of alcohol abuse and mixing with criminals. She felt convinced that that was not the lifestyle his mother would want for him. There was much remorse, and many tears shed as genuine concern for the boys was expressed. Mr. Reiner expressed sincere compassion with Marshall and shared some of his own life story of being raised in that same community and struggling with poverty and limiting life circumstances. He challenged Marshall by saying: "I know that it takes guts to rise above such circumstances, I know you can do it." Warren's father, who works as a caddy to golfers, said that he had hopes of his son becoming a golfer one day. Mr. Reiner reminded Alie and Dyllan that they are good rugby players who stood a chance to go to New Zealand with the school team.

After everyone had had the opportunity to speak in each session I asked the community of concern what they would judge to be a fair time to give the boys to prove their innocence. There was about four months left till the end of the school year and it was generally felt that it would be a fair "test period." I then turned to the boy next to me, took his hand and asked him whether he would give his permission to be tested for a period of four months to see if he can get his name for honesty back. This was a very serious moment and I urged each one to think carefully, as the test would be very difficult. They had to shake my hand to indicate their consent.

The Honesty Tests:

The boy then left the room and I explained the Honesty Tests to the community of concern. They had to test, under very controlled conditions, whether or not the boy stole again when given the opportunity. Immediately after a test he should be told that he had passed or failed a test and the news would be shared with others in the community of concern. They should then congratulate and honour the boy for his courage.

The principal, Mr. Van Dam, announced in assembly at school that Dyllan, Yusuf, Marshall, Alie and Warren committed themselves to winning back their good name for honesty. As time went on he also made announcements about their progress with Honesty Tests and congratulated them in front of the whole school. The four boys who were in the same class received tremendous encouragement from Mr. Reiner, as well as the whole class. He assisted the boys when they needed money and encouraged them to participate in sport. The Muslim boys were also encouraged to attend Muslim classes. The four boys started monitoring and policing each other. I was thrilled to hear that members of a “gang” who were accused of their bad influence on their members, was turning into an “honest gang” supporting each other to regain a reputation for honesty! I checked the progress by phoning the school regularly and writing letters of congratulations.

At that stage I visited New Zealand and was able to give David Epston some feedback on the work concerning the boys. I also learned that Mr. Reiner, the teacher I got to know well, was planning a rugby tour for pupils of the school to New Zealand the following year. I brought back information and pictures, which I shared with him, the principal and the boys.

After four months, three of the boys, Dyllan, Yusuf and Marshall had proven, without a shadow of a doubt, that they had deservedly regained their reputations for honesty. Alie had slipped a few times, but was still determined to work at a name for honesty. His test time was extended by another three months. Moosa and Warren were in big trouble as they became truant and were caught stealing on several occasions.

The Honesty Celebration:

An Honesty Celebration was scheduled for the three successful boys. Everyone who had attended the Honesty Meetings with the three boys was invited. The principal addressed all the pupils and staff members at a special assembly. Mr. Van Dam reminded the school of how Dyllan, Yusuf and Marshall used to spend many hours in front of his office for the trouble and stealing they were involved in. He said that Dyllan had changed from a “trouble maker” to a “model child” who had not only changed his own life, but also helped his friends to do the same. He called Dyllan, Yusuf and Marshall to the front and congratulated them saying he knows that the tests were tough, but that he was impressed by their honesty. I could hardly recognise the troubled, angry and shameful faces of the first meetings as they stood tall, looking me in the eye and shaking my hand firmly. I presented them with their Honesty Certificates which they received with broad smiles and nodding heads. The staff and pupils applauded. My eye caught Alie’s eye, as he was standing on his toes in his line with an eager expression on his face. I then told the school that this was not a small achievement. Six boys made a promise to become honest, only three succeeded. I added that while two of the boys have almost given up on school altogether, there was Alie who was still tying hard and that I hope to hand him his certificate in the next year. The proud boys, and those who cared about them, celebrated with tea and cake. Mothers and aunts and sisters laughed and talked while we poured tea and served cake. Although shy, and a bit overwhelmed, Dyllan, Yusuf and Marshall basked in the glory of praise and congratulations from staff and family members. They were very pleased when there was enough cake for them to take home and to their class to share with their classmates. Mr. Van Dam and Mr. Reiner commented on the boy’s transformation saying that they have gained a completely new sense of self, becoming confident and positive about their lives in general.

Hope:

A colleague who had accompanied me to the Honesty Celebration, reflected on what she had witnessed that day. The pride and joy of the people who celebrated, the real involvement and care for the boys, the support they received and their happiness and joy, touched her deeply. She was so

impressed by the many lives that had been touched, and urged me to share the work with colleagues at the SAAMFT Conference. Her response inspired in me an appreciation of the value for this work, and the hope that flows from it.

I shared my story with members of a Rotary Anns club in our community in a letter asking them for sponsorship for Mr van Dam, the principal, to attend the SAAMFT Conference, enabling him to learn from, and network with, colleagues.

I quote from the letter:

“Obviously I’m very pleased about the positive outcome of this work for these boys, the school, their families and their community. More than that, however, I’m moved by the way my own life has been enriched through my involvement with this school. I worked very closely with Mr. van Dam, the principal, and was touched by his sincere caring for each of the boys. He knew them and their families well through taking the time to talk to them, sometimes getting into his car to fetch them or to speak to them at their homes. He arranged all appointments for me and made sure that everybody (sometimes up to twelve people at a time) was present at the meetings. He totally supported every “weird suggestion” I made and gave his full co-operation. I was impressed by the way he understood the process (not your normal, regular counselling, I can assure you) and participated, no matter the time and effort involved. The spirit of community and caring in that school where many children come from homes where poverty, crime, violence, abuse and death form part of everyday life was remarkable. The staff members I met and worked with demonstrated the same concern and love for the children. I soon stopped noticing the limited facilities and lack of space as I started to enjoy the warmth of the people of the school.”

A picture and article appeared in our local community Newspaper, spreading the good news into the community. The student who applied these ideas with a young client presented her story at a Conference in Stockholm in 2000.

The three boys were soon joined by their friend, Alie, who had been able to complete the extra months successfully. In the meantime Moosa is attending school regularly again. His parents have reunited and we held an Honesty Meeting for him. He is doing well and will soon receive his Honesty Certificate. A group of boys who caused a lot of trouble and unhappiness has managed to become part of a success story that they can be proud of. Families who have seen the devastation of crime for generations can now look to this generation with hope. Problem-saturated stories have been turned into success stories. Scolding, punishment and despair were replaced with celebration and applause.

I now have hope that there are ways in which I can make a difference even in the face of poverty, crime, violence and abuse. I have been inspired by the resilience of the children in extremely restricting and challenging circumstances. If they could do what they did, there is hope for many others. The community way of working has become a wonderful enriching experience. Not only was I impressed by the contributions of the community that participated in the work, but also by the support and interest of my colleagues and friends. I have made real connections with people whose lives had been separated from my own.

Crime and violence are crippling our country. A small project has shown me that there is hope for us – and that there are ways in which I too can contribute to that hope.

