



William C. Friday Fellowship FOR HUMAN RELATIONS

The Power of Story and Witness:

A Reflection by Sayra Pinto

The William C. Friday Fellowship for Human Relations is a two-year leadership learning community that focuses on building cross-sector leaders that listen, learn, adapt, engage, include, and shape North Carolina's future. *Listening* is a skill that takes time and practice to develop. We are often taught to hear what others say so we can find what we agree on, or more often, how they agree with us. Hearing is a passive act of receiving that which is being said. Listening, on the other hand, demands an active stance from the listener, it involves *relating to that which is being said*. I believe that listening also has to do with witnessing the person that is saying that which is being listened to. When we listen to another, we receive the way they make sense of their world. A person is shaped by their lineage, the land they come from, and the experiences and learning done through their relationship with others. I call this one's *sovereign logic*.

To listen is to witness another's sovereign logic, to relate what they are saying to their personhood. There are two things that happen when someone is witnessed when they share their perspective: they hear themselves, and they discern whether they are met by a listener or a group of listeners that have the capacity to embrace them in their personhood. When someone hears themselves, they re-live and

rediscover their experiences. A narrative emerges from moment of sharing to moment of sharing through which a human being affirms who and how they are and also can change their understanding of themselves. When someone is embraced as a result of their sharing by a listener or a community of listeners, their sense of isolation or difference decreases. Their sense of belonging increases. Their narrative also can shift as a result of this experience of embrace.

An example of this impact on the person sharing their narrative is a woman I will call Maria who is an undocumented survivor of domestic violence from Central America. Maria left her home as a result of sexual and domestic violence in her family and in her marriage. She has little formal education and is largely illiterate in Spanish. She hitchhiked her way throughout Central America and Mexico and crossed the Arizona desert with the services of a coyote, a human trafficking smuggler. As she walked the desert, Maria was again sexually assaulted by her coyote and his crew and was left for dead in the desert. She didn't die and somehow made her way to a church, where she was cared for until she recuperated. Eventually, Maria made her way to Massachusetts and found a boyfriend. She soon became a mother. As can be predicted in this case, Maria's relationship with her boyfriend became violent. By the time I met her, Maria had a three-year old and was part of work I was doing to support the healing processes of domestic violence survivors.

Part of my work involved the creation of support and leadership learning groups with domestic violence survivors. Maria was a member of the Spanish speaking group of survivors. She was always on time and also many times made delicious *pupusas* and would carry them in a tray on top of her head as she pushed her child's stroller on the way to our meetings. She was generous and punctual and extremely reliable as a member of the group. However, when sharing time came around, she would not share even her name. Five and a half months went by before she shared her name. One full year later, she finally shared her story. It was an unexpected event.

I had just come back from a trip to Arizona and had gone on a hike at Bell Rock. Three of us hiked the trail around the mountain a bit too close to dusk. The sun set on us while we were still on the trail. One of us got very scared and began to encourage us to double back. We did double back for some of the hike but then found our way back to the parking lot where our car was parked. I shared that story and talked a bit about how beautiful the desert is at night and also about how scary it was to think of all the wildlife emerging into the darkness as I was completely vulnerable to the night. Maria responded by fully revealing her harrowing journey across the desert, the gang rape, the desperation as she dragged herself across scraggly rocks into the safety of the church she found.

She then backtracked to her journey on the Beast, the railroad leading her from Central America and across Mexico to our border. Then, she talked about her life in her home country and why she had been more terrified to stay than she was to travel alone and unprotected across four other countries to come to the States. Her story was full of violence, rejection, and unimaginable decisions to survive. The group was silent. Many tears were shed as we listened. Our hearts extended in a moment of profound encounter. Many of us could not extend in sympathy or understanding because our lives were too different from hers. Although many of us were survivors of sexual and domestic violence, the depth of despair, desperation, and brokenness Maria shared were too deep for us to fully understand. All we could do was witness and listen. We then extended our care and compassion and our relationships became deeper, as if sealed by an experience of the most sacred kind of vulnerability. None of us were quite the same after that experience, we had been forged, in a sense, into a community of care through a narrative of an incomprehensible suffering. We celebrated Maria's victorious survival and we relished even more the immense gift of her cooking, her punctuality, the love of her child, and her presence in our lives.

It took days for me to be able to sleep well through the night after that night. I was deeply affected by Maria's story and remembered stories of my own upbringing, of women and girls being brutalized and annihilated through this type of violence. Many of those stories were shared in private, between a few trusted people. They diffused through my neighborhood and other networks through whispers and expanded pupils, trauma ravaging my people with total abandon. After many years, I learned that this type of historical trauma lives in all kinds of communities where violence happens. I learned that violence does not look the same in any given community. I also learned that healing the impact of violence on ourselves and transforming ourselves into nonviolent leaders requires processes where we learn the stories of those who are entrusted to us as leaders.

We at the Wildacres Leadership Initiative seek to create cultures of collaboration that are free from all forms of violence and where leaders can thrive by being seen, listened to, witnessed, respected, and honored. We believe that creating conditions of relationship based on the experience of belonging, of being listened to and embraced by the listeners, is the first step in creating a culture where all people belong and bring forth their gifts to strengthen the well-being of our collective selves. One of the leadership practices we endorse to help us practice sharing and listening is the [circle process](#), an indigenous practice of self-governance and community building. Through the practice of circles, people engaged with our leadership education programming have the opportunity to share, listen, explore and learn from their own articulation of their personal narrative while also learning about and from others' whose lives are different in all kinds of ways. By standing squarely in conscious relationship with one's sovereign logic, one can also extend in generous compassion through listening and witness the way others make sense of their worlds based on their life journeys.

Violence occurs through words, power dynamics, historical relationships between communities, individual acts of violence, socioeconomic oppression, and in our most intimate relationships. Violence

is so endemic in our culture that we normalize a lot of it as normal ways of engagement and of arranging power. However, our normalization of violence does not then make violence right. I believe that violence pervades our organizations through our management systems, our policies, and our behaviors. At the same time that this is our organizational reality, we increasingly call for and crave for organizational lives that affirm our humanity. Part of the process of humanizing our organizations encompasses the eradication of violence within our organizations.

As it turns out, we do better in violence free environments. We do best in environments rooted in love and where we are embraced in the full expression of our sovereign logic. We are adaptive relational beings at heart and our social systems help us thrive when they enable relationality and shared experience. When we are not seen, listened to, witnessed, respected, and honored, we are the victims of violence. When we do not see, listen witness respect, and honor others we do violence unto them. As leaders, we are charged with the well-being of others operating within our enterprises, organizations, departments, initiatives. We impact the world and create its future. We must create a world where we thrive and belong.

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