

WORKING AND LIVING IN A RESTORATIVE MILIEU

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ABSTRACT

This is the story of two young Belgian youth workers who were invited to the United States to be trained in restorative practices. For 18 months, they lived in eastern Pennsylvania, where they worked as school counsellors for the Community Service Foundation. What they describe here is what it meant for them professionally and personally to work and live in a restorative setting.



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INTRODUCTION

1 May 2003. Good news from overseas: We have been accepted for an international internship in the United States, the land of opportunities! Our friends were sceptical. What kind of opportunities do you expect to find in the land of McDonald's, wars against terror and 130 million cars? Obviously, they had never heard anything about restorative practices. And we... we could not possibly foresee what an adventure was about to begin. From August 2003 until March 2005 we were immersed in a restorative milieu. It was one of the best things that could have ever happened to us. You will soon find out why. But what made that milieu so restorative? In



Michael Michiels

this article we will discuss the different segments of our humble lives and describe why and how they were restorative to us. We will write about our workplace, training, schools from a treatment point of view, the international visitation programme, and the impact of restorative practices on our everyday life.

THE RESTORATIVE WORKPLACE

The Community Service Foundation (CSF) is a sister organization of the International Institute for Restorative Practices (IIRP). CSF, in cooperation with Buxmont Academy, provides: a day treatment programme (a counselling and education programme for youth with a broad range of behavioural and emotional issues); a residential programme (highly structured, community-based foster group home services for dependent or delinquent youth); and supervision programmes (the Intensive Program and Home and Community Supervision Program, specialized community-based, in-home services for dependent and delinquent youth and their families). We both worked in the Day Treatment Program, each in a different school.

A New Workplace

Entering a new workplace is always a little uncomfortable. Every organization has its own ways of welcoming new people. In some organizations you don't even feel welcome at all! But not at CSF. On the first all-staff in-service day at the start of the new school year, we immediately experienced the power and comfort of the 'Friendly Policy'. Co-workers, coordinators and directors from all remote corners of the organization went out of their way to introduce themselves to these two strangers and the other newcomers. Quite different for the more reserved European. Believe us, it felt great!

Getting adjusted to the culture and philosophy of CSF was a relatively smooth process as well. In a sector with a strong inflow and outflow of people, it is very important that one is offered the chance to grow and to develop their own personal style in dealing with youths. At the same time, it is crucial that everybody on the team is on the exact same page. If not, you

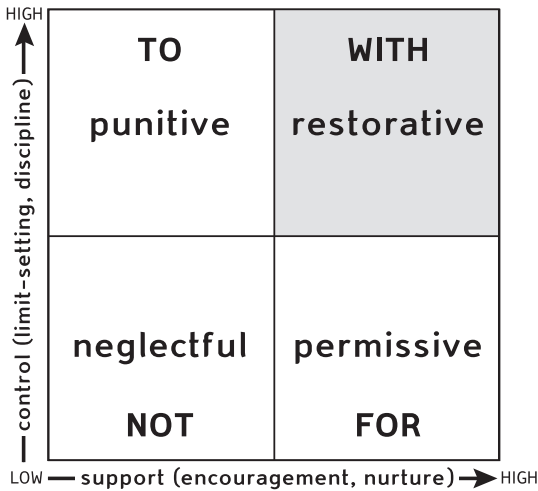


Figure 1. Social Discipline Window

send mixed signals to the clients and you create inequalities among the colleagues. And that's the last thing you need with these smart and often manipulative teen-agers. This is the reason why CSF has introduced its 'Basic Concepts'. These concepts express the philosophy of CSF and the essence of restorative practices. For example: 'We believe that people are capable of growing and learning'; 'Human beings function best in an environment that encourages free expression of emotion—minimizing the negative, maximizing the positive'; 'We avoid power struggles'... If you don't share these minimal beliefs, you are probably in the wrong place and should look for a job somewhere else. Signing on with the Basic Concepts was the easy part. Carrying them out was of another order.

Control and Support

Most essentially, restorative practices can be typified as doing things *with* people instead of *to* or *for* them. As the Social Discipline Window (Figure 1) explains, being restorative also means being high on control (limit-setting, discipline) and high on support (encouragement, nurture).

This is how CSF operates toward students, but the same principles also apply among staff. As a new counsellor, who is expected to do individual and group therapy, child and family counselling, crisis intervention, drug treatment and a pile of paperwork—all this on a very tight schedule—you need both control and support.

One thing is for sure. Without the support of our co-workers and coordinators, directors and other supervisors, we would have been back home in no time. That support had numerous faces, ranging from informal supportive questions to more formal feedback groups. At one end of the spectrum, there are the casual questions or statements from one colleague to another. *‘How are you feeling?’ ‘Do you need help with something?’ ‘The way you handled that situation was excellent!’* We are still not sure if that is common, typical American friendliness or the unique tone of a restorative milieu. But we do know it was more than comforting!

At the end of each school day at CSF there’s a staff meeting. Typically, a staff meeting gives the staff the time to reflect on the day, make a game plan for the next day, discuss specific approaches, schedule for the next week and things like that. At CSF it is most importantly an opportunity to share all kinds of feelings, struggles, frustrations or even personal problems that might interfere with your work. We often started our meeting with a go-around. We took turns answering a question like ‘How did we work as a team?’ or ‘What was one positive/negative thing for you today?’ This definitely helped us to cope with the stress of the workday and to leave our work at work.

Sometimes, however, people struggle with something more fundamental. Initially, for example, Michael’s non-confrontational nature regularly clashed with the expectations of a counselling job. At one point, for instance, Michael had a really hard time with Andrew, one of the students on his caseload. At the time, Andrew was a heavy drug user who kept denying, very convincingly by the way, any drug use. However, his behaviour did not match his words. When

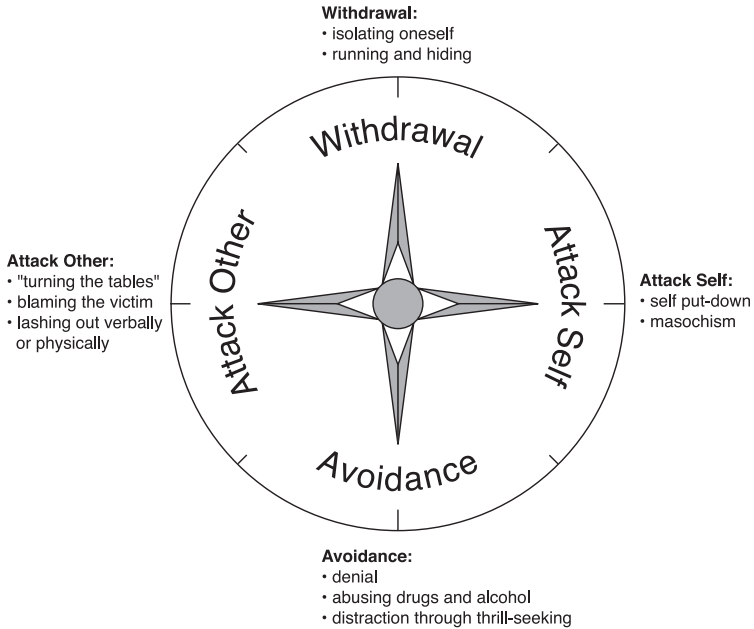


Figure 2. Compass of Shame
Adapted from Nathanson, 1992

Michael repeatedly confronted that behaviour and shared his concerns, Andrew attacked his counsellor with the most denigrating words in his vocabulary. Later that day Michael felt safe enough to express his repeated difficulties with persistently confronting students' negative behaviour. His supervisor told him to bring this up in the staff meeting and ask for feedback. Michael soon found out that every counsellor had experienced similar feelings.

Elisabeth had her struggles too. Every now and then the kids were extremely rude to her. In the beginning, she did not know how to react. She felt completely helpless, until she asked for advice from her colleagues. Some of them had gone through similar experiences. Knowing this was in itself comforting, but the feedback she received from every member of

the team contained so much support and practical tips that the situation started to change very quickly.

If you really want to grow, you must also accept the other side of restorative practices. You need support to feel validated and encouraged. However, there have to be limits too. We will definitely come back to this, when we talk about restorative practices from a treatment point of view. Nevertheless, when an employee crosses a certain line, there must be repercussions as well. Of course these have to be applied in a restorative *with* kind of way. Another example will make clear what we mean.

Because our international driver's licences were only valid for one year in the United States, we had to get a Pennsylvania driver's licence. We had to be in regulation to drive the car that CSF had provided to us for the time of our stay. The person who helped us with all our paperwork had sent us several memos to remind us of the ultimate day we could get our permit. Without taking her feelings in consideration, we kept ignoring the nice lady's efforts, probably because we wanted to avoid the stress of the exam. The situation escalated. Almost simultaneously, our respective supervisors confronted us both. They walked us through the 'Compass of Shame' (Nathanson, 1992) and asked some restorative questions (e.g., Who was affected by your actions and how can you repair the harm?). We obtained our driver's licences just in time and painted an apology card for the woman whose feelings we had hurt.

The Compass of Shame

There is a lot to say about Nathanson's Compass of Shame (Figure 2). However, we just want to give a quick explanation of what, to our understanding, has become an often used restorative tool. We believe it was Tomkins who said 'shame is the prime regulator of human behaviour.' Nathanson (1992, p.132) has developed the Compass of Shame to illustrate the various ways that human beings react when they feel shame. The four poles of the Compass of Shame and behaviours associated with them are *withdrawal* (isolating oneself, running

and hiding), *attack self* (self put-down, masochism), *avoidance* (denial, abusing drugs, distraction through thrill seeking) and *attack other* (turning the tables, lashing out verbally or physically, blaming others). In the situation with our driver's licences, we went from *avoidance* (simply not taking the test) to *attack other* ('What are they complaining about?') to *attack self* ('Damn, we're stupid!'). For more information on this theme, we can refer to a paper by Wachtel and McCold (2004) presented at the IIRP's Fifth International Conference in Vancouver (see References).

TRAINING IN RESTORATIVE PRACTICES

The best way to learn something is through experience. That is probably the reason why, at the end of our first workday, we both found ourselves with no experience in the field and a full caseload. We could not believe it! After a while however, once we had some notions of what restorative practices is all about, we went through a series of trainings. The trainings definitely helped us to understand the broader possibilities and impact of restorative practices far beyond the field of child welfare.

Some trainings were only for employees of CSF. Those were trainings on, for example, cases and incidents, suicide and depression, drugs and alcohol, or the history of CSF. Other trainings were offered by the Education Center of the International Institute for Restorative Practices (IIRP) to anyone who wanted to register. Through role plays, examples and a lot of didactic material, these trainings were intended to inform participants about restorative practices in general, and more specifically about, for example, restorative conferences, circles, groups, serious offences or teambuilding. CSF or IIRP training, it does not matter—restorative is the way. That means you can't hide in the back of the room behind another participant, like so many of us love to do. Oh no, you sit in a circle with 10–15 other trainees, totally exposed, and you participate, because every individual's input is important. The group is the expert, not the trainer.

Very unique were the Professional Learning Groups (PLG). Those two series of trainings focused on personal styles and professional growth. They were similar to the trainings we just described. In the first ‘Individual’ PLG, each participant chose a project that helped them to challenge themselves regarding a personal work-related issue. Twice a month the group gathered to discuss everyone’s progress using the following format: One group member started by sharing the steps he/she had taken since the last meeting and then asked for feedback on what he/she could do next. After that, the person took some reflection time and then told the group the actions he/she would undertake by the next get-together. Then the next person took his/her turn. Again, the facilitator limited his/her role to minimal interventions and was mostly a regular member of the group. The second PLG had a little bit different set-up, but basically followed the same restorative concept of doing things *with* each other.

FROM A TREATMENT POINT OF VIEW

Now what does it mean for a student to be a subject of restorative practices? What does it mean to be treated restoratively? What makes a school restorative? Is it that different from other placements, detention centres or other institutions for youth at risk? We can assure you it is, from the first minute you walk into the building.

A New School

As with new staff, a new student gets a warm welcome. One thing you will notice immediately is the friendly atmosphere. There will be kids who are quiet, kids who draw attention and kids who are loud. But they are all friendly; that is the policy of the school. It does not matter why or by whom the kids are sent to CSF. Whether the kid had truancy problems, used drugs, broke into cars or was caught in possession of a weapon, they all get treated in the same way. Of course, the focus is different in the individual counselling.

Before the intake interview, new students get a tour of the building, lots of explanation and the opportunity to ask many questions. They are then asked to agree to comply with the five cardinal rules (no drug or alcohol use; no stealing; no violence or threats of violence to people or property; no leaving school premises without permission; and no sexual activity). At this point, they are asked to decide if they want to enter the programme. Yes, you read it right; after they have been referred there by the court, children and youth services or a school, students are given a choice whether to come to CSF or be referred elsewhere. After a new student has chosen to attend CSF, everybody—students and staff—introduces themselves formally in a circle. This is a welcome ritual. From then on, the student is part of the community, equal to everybody else.

The first couple of days, new students get some extra attention and explanation to get used to the programme and to build relationships. The whole process is called ‘orientation’. The best part of it is that their peers do it all. Everything in CSF is done *with* the students, from making the norms to planning activities to come up with consequences (good and bad) for their behaviours.

Support and Control

The norms in CSF may be slightly different to what kids are used to in other placements or schools. Or maybe not. The huge difference, however, is the way they are implemented. Students get a lot of power in making and following the norms, as well as in making things right when norms are broken. As opposed to a punitive approach, the students learn to take responsibility for their behaviours. As opposed to doing things *for* or *to* the students, things are done *with* them. By lecturing or scolding, the only thing you achieve is resistance. By engaging and involving the students, they feel acknowledged and valued. This provides high support as well as high control. By empowering the wrongdoers to meet with their victims and take ownership for their behaviour, they learn how they affected people and how to make things right. While punishment

pushes the student into a corner, restorative practices involve the student in the process of figuring out what happened and repairing the harm. Instead of alienating the student, he/she becomes engaged in an active way.

All the norms are based on safety and respect: respect for oneself, neighbours and property. Some examples: no sleeping, no cursing, no side conversations, no devaluing, participate, confront negative behaviour appropriately, ask to leave your seat. These norms make it a safe environment for teachers to teach, for students to learn and work through issues, for counsellors to work with the kids. It supports those who are positive and sets limits for those exhibiting negative behaviour.

Students are also very much supported in expressing their emotions appropriately. Staff is always there to listen, to let them tell their story and to let them vent. They support the students in what they need and help them understand their behaviour. But this is not unconditional. Inappropriate behaviour is not tolerated. They are always held accountable, no matter what their story is. A fight with mom does not make it right to curse out your teacher. They learn that we might not always be the ones creating the conflicts that enter our lives, but we can always choose how to respond to these conflicts.

CSF has a strong focus on counselling, but does not forget to support the students academically. The educational part is based on individual learning. There is also a tutor for those who need extra help. The students learn in small classes. The reason for that is that they get more individual attention and can build a community easier. When students feel safe in class and feel connected to their teacher, it has a positive effect on their academic performance. Restorative practices teach the students to take pride in their successes. In CSF, students often start to care about themselves again. And just like everybody else, they love getting praise and compliments.

Teachers also get training in restorative practices, but it is not as intensive as the counsellors' training. That's why, when a problem arises in a classroom, counsellors are asked to support. If only one student is giving the teacher or a fel-

low student a hard time, a one-on-one with the counsellor follows. The counsellor always tries to find the underlying reason for the inappropriate behaviour. But as we said before, the student is held accountable too and needs to clean things up with the teacher and classmates. An important part of an apology is the commitment the student makes—'What's going to be different next time?' If it is a continuing struggle for the student, he/she has to come up with a behaviour contract, in which they hold themselves accountable.

If several students are causing problems in class, the teacher will 'group them up'. Again, the counsellor is called for support. The students, including the teacher and counsellor, form a circle. One student starts telling what happened and runs the circle by asking the fellow students to own their part in the problem. The next go-around would be 'How can you fix it?', and in the last part they come up with individual or class plans. In this process, it is important that everybody can express how he/she feels and what he/she needs, without getting offensive or inappropriate. And the focus is always on those who were most affected by the behaviour. If somebody reasonably feels unsafe, hurt or disrespected, we don't move on until that is resolved. The kinds of problems that lead to a circle vary. This can go from constantly being extremely disrespectful to cursing, not doing work or having side conversations. Sometimes the class is grouped up for a minor problem, but it is a routine way to resolve problems. In CSF kids don't get away with negative behaviour. Rituals like these circles bring structure to the kids' often chaotic lives. They create a steady, safe environment in which people can learn and grow.

Circles as a reaction to negative behaviour are quite formal responses. During the course of the day, there are lots of confrontations that are more informal. These are always based on feelings and are responses to misbehaving students. For example 'You really hurt my feelings when you behave like that. You usually don't act like that. How would it make you feel if somebody treated you the way you just treated me?' It is always important to separate the deed from

the doer; negative behaviour is confronted, but the person behind the behaviour is validated and supported to do the right thing.

So staff supports and holds the students accountable. But when you pass through classes or in the hallways, it is not unusual to hear students reprimand and confront each other. They might be tough kids, but they are concerned about each other. By the way, it is their responsibility to confront as much as it is the staff's responsibility. That is the philosophy of a community that fosters a strong sense of safety. CSF provides a culture in which it is acceptable to let each other know when somebody is making them feel unsafe. And it is sometimes so much more effective when they hear it from peers. Didn't you as a teenager pay more attention to what your friends said than your teacher?

So there is the element of motivation and support, of giving the students a voice and ownership for addressing their own behaviour, and there is the element of control. The kids are not enabled—they are expected to think for themselves and come up with their own answers and responses to their behaviour. Giving them that power is not lowering the standards but is teaching them what healthy standards are. It is about positive support with strong limits. It is about being firm but fair.

Community and Relationships

If you spend a day in CSF, you will find yourself in circles most of the time. Everybody, including staff, sits on the same level and is an equal part of the circle. It is an opportunity to share feelings and thoughts, to give each other feedback and to relate to one another. Everybody has to participate and all opinions count.



There are proactive as well as reactive circles. Reactive circles are meant to solve problems (e.g., class groups, as described above). Proactive circles take place at fixed times during the day and are intended to build a sense of community. Every day starts, for example, with a morning check-in to give people a chance to share what is on their mind. Most teachers start their classes with a circle of this kind to go over norms, check feelings and/or set goals.

In the afternoon students take part in more therapeutic groups. By discussing drug and alcohol problems or family issues, through participating in trust activities, or simply by playing games, the sense of community is made even stronger. People relate to one another on a very emotional level and learn that they are not alone with their problems. A very moving group is feedback group. Students get an opportunity to give a peer positive and/or constructive feedback in a safe environment: 'When you... I feel...' Instead of articulating their anger, frustration or sadness with badly chosen behaviour, they learn to communicate and express their feelings appropriately. CSF encourages the kids to feel what they feel and supports them in learning to handle their emotions. A feedback group fits perfectly with the restorative approach.

You cannot form a community without relationships. And the relationships are the basis of positive change. Many of the kids come from broken families. As a result, they often don't feel connected or cared about. Many of them need to regain a lot of trust and be taught how to be real and honest about their feelings. Getting to know the kids and bonding with them is essential. CSF staff approach the students in a respectful, human, empathic way and expect the kids to do the same with each other. It is beyond the mind; it is in the heart. And it is so much harder to disrespect or break trust with somebody you feel connected to. Relationships with families and referral sources are not forgotten in the whole process. They are constantly updated, included and supported during the kid's journey at CSF.

The students at CSF learn that, whatever they do, the community will always be affected. The community might not be the primary victim, but it is affected by negative behaviour too. And parents, who were not even at the school at the time of an incident, are affected as well: they may be scared, angry, disappointed, sad. The students learn how to take all that into consideration and to think before they act.

Kids at CSF are given a lot of tools for when they leave. When they go back to a big public school, to a not-so-structured home or to independent living, they will know how to handle situations differently because they have done it over and over again themselves. They are used to it. They become experts. We hope (and know) that many students will take the restorative way of treating people home with them.

THE VISITATION PROGRAMME

Another interesting aspect of the organization is the visitation programme. Everybody with an interest in restorative practices has the opportunity to visit the different programmes of CSF and the IIRP. Some combine a visit to one of the alternative schools with one or more trainings in restorative practices. Others explore the residential programme or spend a day with one of the Intensive Program counsellors. Still others are more interested in how restorative practices are implemented in a public school.

Again, all this takes place in a restorative manner. As a visitor, English-speaking or not, you do not have the chance to be a fly on the wall. For instance, when visiting one of the CSF schools, you will find yourself participating in circles and all other activities, just like everybody else. And in the afternoon staff meeting, you will definitely be asked to share your thoughts and opinions about the way things are run. In the end, we all learn from one another.

Just like the yearly IIRP conference, the visitation programme is intended to spread the restorative word and to build global alliances among people and organizations with similar ideals and objectives. For us, it was just great to stand

in the middle of it! As international trainees we had a chance to meet visitors from all remote corners of the world. Since CSF had provided us with a beautiful and spacious apartment, we often were the host for these visitors. The incredible life stories we listened to back then still inspire us today.

IMPACT ON OUR PERSONAL LIFE

All the previous things mentioned obviously had an impact on our everyday life. Wittingly or unwittingly, as human beings, we change constantly. But sometimes, as we are floating along in the regular, calm current of our lives, we find ourselves swept into the rapids. And then you have two options. You either row against the stream, persistently trying to stay within your comfort zone, or you go with the flow and you discover an unknown and even better zone. For those who know Spencer Johnson's popular book *Who Moved My Cheese* (1998): Move with the cheese! That's what we had to do during the 20 months we lived, worked and travelled in the United States. We won't lie to you; life in the US wasn't always a bed of roses. Learning to be restorative is very confrontational. Getting feedback from our co-workers, having our weaknesses exposed to co-trainees, searching for new ways to grow both professionally and personally, or working with youth from all kinds of troubled backgrounds—it was all very challenging in numerous ways. It was rafting on rapids of the highest grade.

Often more than we realize, we are determined by our culture. Although Belgium and the US are both democratic, capitalistic Western nations, the cultural differences cannot be underestimated. Because we didn't want to live from one frustration to another, we had to make some minimal efforts to get integrated into the American melting pot. Europeans are often critical of American politics and lifestyles. But we will always remember Americans as very friendly and open-hearted people, who, like everybody else in this world, are simply looking for happiness in life. We must say that the people and culture of CSF are at least partly responsible for this renewed view.

But we feel we've changed in other ways as well. As a couple we always got along well, but this whole adventure, and more specifically restorative practices, has brought us even closer together. Quite logically we were each other's biggest support person. It felt great to vent about our work-day to someone who literally and figuratively spoke the same (restorative) language. We didn't only understand each other perfectly, but we had also mastered some insights and techniques to ask each other the right supportive questions. Were we so much conditioned by our jobs then? Who knows? But for us, it was simply impossible, even on the most terrible day, to treat our students and co-workers in a restorative way on the one hand, and to be a self-centred, disrespectful person at home on the other hand. And it did not harm us. We left Belgium very much in love and came back even more in love and strongly connected.

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