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Restoring Community in a Disconnected World: The Inaugural Address of IIRP Graduate School Founding President Ted Wachtel

After a preamble acknowledging those in attendance and acceptance of his new responsibilities as president, Wachtel began his speech.

Thirty years ago my wife Susan and I, both public school teachers, were looking for solutions to the increasingly challenging behavior of young people in schools, families and communities. We left public education, founded the first of several non-profit organizations and developed schools, group homes and other programs for delinquent and at-risk youth. As time went on we realized that the successful strategies we were using with the troubled young people in our programs had implications for all young people, and for adults as well.

We and our colleagues also got involved with an innovative approach in the field of criminal justice, called "restorative justice," which provides opportunities for victims, offenders, and their family and friends, to meet and, to the extent possible, repair the harm caused by a crime. This development in criminal justice, giving people an opportunity to express their feelings and ideas and have a say in resolving the conflict, matched parallel developments in other fields.

Primary school educators were using talking circles and morning meetings to improve classroom climate, secondary educators were adapting restorative justice to address discipline problems, social workers were organizing family group

conferences to bring together extended families to solve problems of abuse and delinquency involving their own loved ones, and business managers were using horizontal management strategies to empower their employees to solve problems in the workplace.

Known by different terminology, all of these developments share a common

premise, that people are happier, more cooperative, more productive and more likely to make positive changes when those in authority do things with them rather than to them or for them. This premise is part of a unifying conceptual framework that helps to explain human motivation and social behavior, from families and classrooms to workplaces and communities.

Building on the momentum of the restorative justice movement, we decided to name this emerging multidisciplinary social science "restorative practices." We conducted research in restorative practices, provided trainings, produced

videos, published articles and books, created websites and organized international conferences.

In 2000 we incorporated the non-profit International Institute for Restorative Practices, the IIRP, to consolidate all of our research and educational activities. In 2006 the Pennsylvania Department of Education authorized the IIRP as a degree-granting graduate school, and in doing so, recognized restorative practices as a social science worthy of graduate study. During that six-year effort, from incorporation to authorization, only those who climbed the mountain with us can fully appreciate how steep the slope, how disappointing the setbacks and stumbles, and how joyous it was when we finally reached the summit.

But the journey ahead will be even more arduous. We must now thoughtfully re-examine and change many of the practices that govern how our modern societies run schools, administer justice, organize welfare systems, manage workplaces and even how we raise children.

I'm a pragmatist. If it's working, then why change it? But it's not working. Most people seem to share a growing concern that things in general are not going well.

We are living in an unprecedented social experiment. We have systematically changed the patterns and connections that have characterized human life as long as there has been human life. Never before in the history of the human race have so



Ted Wachtel gives his inauguration speech, applauded by Mr. George Southworth, representing the University of Pennsylvania; and Dr. Vivian Nix-Early, dean of Campolo School for Social Change of Eastern University.

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many lived so far from their extended families. Never before have so many lived outside of traditional neighborhoods in which all the adults served as the collective parents of each other's children. Never before have so many marriages ended in divorce and divided families. Never before have so many elderly grown older among the elderly in unfamiliar surroundings. Never before have so many children left their hometowns for other places.

These developments have reduced our social capital—the relationships and the connectedness that bind people together and create a sense of community.

From the founding of the United States, when more than 90 percent of us worked on farms to less than 3 percent of us at present, technology has transformed our nation and our world. My 92-year-old father, who is here today in the audience, remembers the crackling sounds of the first radio broadcasts, the first refrigerators, the first commercial airlines and as a soldier expecting to participate in the invasion of Japan, the first use of nuclear weapons. Driven by technological change, family farms, neighborhood stores and local factories have given way to agribusiness, national discount store chains, fast-food franchises and multinational corporations. Globalization and the relentless growth of government have dramatically altered our lives.

William Irwin Thompson wrote, "At the edge of history the future is blowing wildly in our faces, sometimes brightening the air and sometimes blinding us." He said, "In straining our industrial technology to the limit, we have, in fact, reached the limit of that very technology. Now as we stand in the shadow of our success, there remains light enough to see that we are approaching a climax in human cultural evolution."

I'm not a doomsday prophet and I know that we cannot turn back the clock. Rather, we must find ways to adapt and



The founding faculty of the International Institute for Restorative Practices, left to right: Margaret Murray, librarian; Beth Rodman, professor; Dr. Patrick McDonough, vice president for academic affairs; Dr. Paul McCold, professor; Dr. Tom Simek, professor; Carolyn Olivett, professor; and Dr. Frida Rundell, professor.

to compensate for our profound loss of social connectedness. And I know that restorative practices can play a critical role in doing just that—in restoring community and fostering relationships in an increasingly disconnected world. But to do so, we are going to have to re-examine why we do things the way we do them.

A boy gets angry, curses at his teacher and she sends him to the assistant principal who suspends him from school for three days. This kind of occurrence is commonplace in schools today. We lament the lack of civility, the loss of behavioral boundaries, the irresponsible parents who have raised this child and we explain the punishment as "holding the student accountable for his behavior."

Accountable? How so? The punishment is passive. The student doesn't have to do anything. He stays angry at the teacher and the assistant principal. He thinks he's the victim. He doesn't think about how he's affected others or about how he might make things right. And he returns to the classroom with nothing resolved.

Nils Christie, the distinguished Norwegian criminologist, wrote a landmark essay entitled "Conflict as Property." He argued that our conflicts belong to us and that courts and lawyers steal our conflicts, taking away our opportunity to resolve them and robbing us of whatever

benefits might come from that. Schools and administrators do the same.

Both courts and schools miss a critical opportunity for people to resolve things with better results.

The restorative justice movement was founded by people who were experimenting with meetings between victims and offenders to negotiate restitution agreements. They learned that the encounter was more important than the restitution—that both victims and offenders valued the opportunity to talk to each other and resolve their conflict.

I was speaking about restorative conferencing to an audience in Philadelphia when a woman from Africa said: "What you're describing is exactly what my father would do. As a chief, he would always bring everyone together to deal with a crime or a conflict."

Bonnie George of the Wet'suwet'en First Nation in British Columbia was a plenary speaker at our conference in Vancouver. She contrasted her people's indigenous justice system with the adversarial Western system in which strangers make decisions on behalf of others, without emotional involvement. She said, "With our system because of our relationships and our kinships, we're all connected to each other one way or another, and those are the people that are making the decisions. Our goal is to restore balance and

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harmony within the community.” So if restorative practices are the wave of the future, we may take comfort in knowing that they are also as old as the hills.

If the assistant principal wanted to ensure the angry student would return appropriately to that teacher’s classroom, he would organize a restorative conference to bring the offending student and his family together with the teacher and other students who were affected by the incident. Although it may surprise those unfamiliar with restorative conferencing, such meetings almost always produce positive outcomes, allowing the student and teacher to be restored to balance and harmony.

In the area of child welfare, I remember a woman reporting on a family group conference for her grandchildren. Child welfare was planning to put them in a foster home because the woman’s daughter had serious depression that was impairing her ability to parent responsibly. Instead, someone suggested a family group decision-making conference. The grandmother and her extended family devised a plan for the grandchildren to stay with their depressed mom, but with rotating support from aunts and uncles and grandparents to ensure their well-being. Not only did the government save money by avoiding another foster placement, but the children were able to stay with those who loved them the most.

There is a growing body of research supporting the use of restorative practices. In child welfare, restorative practices either avoid placements altogether or produce better outcomes. In criminal justice,

restorative practices reduce offending and help victims heal. In schools, restorative practices reduce disciplinary incidents and improve school climate. In our own demonstration programs run by the Community Service Foundation and Bux-

tial of restorative practices with others so that all of us may collaboratively change the world.

I say “change the world” unabashedly. We must not be embarrassed by our optimism. Who could have imagined

30 years ago that we would be educating probation officers in Romania, police in Iceland, law professors in Costa Rica, child care workers in South Africa, prosecutors in Jamaica and educators in Hong Kong? Or that our educational efforts would assist the Thai Ministry of Justice in carrying out more than 17,000 restorative conferences diverting young people from incarceration? Or that Hull, England, a city of a quarter million, would be using our programs to educate 23,000 social workers, educators and others serving children and young people to create the

world’s first restorative city? Or that I would be standing here today, accepting responsibility for leading the world’s first graduate school wholly dedicated to restorative practices?

So don’t let the naysayers get you down. The world needs our vision of hope. The human race now holds in its mortal hands the power to tinker with the genetic underpinnings of life, to alter the climate of our planet, to extinguish whole species, and to wield, as weaponry, the awesome energy of the stars. Our technological skills have outpaced our social skills, but restorative practices can correct that imbalance.

No, we are not pursuing an unrealistic utopian dream. We recognize that conflict is integral to being human. What we propose, however, is to get better at managing conflict. And to minimize conflict by proactively restoring community in an increasingly disconnected world. ☉



The first Master’s Degree class (June, 2008) of the International Institute for Restorative Practices, left to right: Christine Meyers, David Suesz, Julie Vitale, John Bailie, Jolene Head, Steve Orrison, Pam Thompson, Craig Adamson, Elizabeth Smull, John Infantino, ML LaSalvia-Keyte, and Samantha Heyman. Not pictured: Judy Happ, Paul Langston-Daley

mont Academy, empirical research found a particularly impressive outcome—those delinquent and at-risk youth who spent three months or more in our restorative milieu were half as likely to offend.

So we have created the IIRP Graduate School and it has three critical roles. The first, of course, is education. We offer master’s degrees to help educators, youth counselors and other professionals meet the challenge of today’s world, because all too many have been prepared for a world that no longer exists. The fact that we now teach about restorative practices at the most advanced level of professional development will benefit not only our own graduate students, but will influence other institutions of higher education to pay attention to this new discipline. The second role is research. We will strive to meet the highest standards of scientific inquiry. And the third role is communication. We will generously share the exciting poten-