

THE LIFE FORCE PROJECT

The Stories We Tell



*“To be endured and accepted, suffering must be given a meaning.”
Donald Sandner*

**Laura Simms
814 Broadway
New York, NY 10003
212 674 3479**

www.laurasimms.com

storymentor2010@gmail.com

The LIFE FORCE PROJECT that I have developed combines Engaged Story listening, creative narrative explorations, and personal storytelling that empowers young people to tell their stories with trust and reflection. My process of *Imaginative Restitution* and *Narrative Transformation* provides a strong and safe context and container for reframing difficult and complex life stories without retraumatizing participants. Shared stories are followed by SPEAK OUTS where young people talk together about the effect of listening to each other's stories. Beginnings and endings, akin to ritual activities, provide protection and physical involvement that engenders a sense of presence, and boundary, completion and structure, open communication and deep listening, to explore events that are fraught with strong emotion and have rendered individuals helpless, isolated or frustrated.

Such engaged storytelling, based on understanding the process of turning memory into story, brings immediate relief to young people and provides a dynamic template for long-term personal and group transformation. The exercises devised strengthen capacities to construct and share stories to generate compassion and healing, and encourages the possibility to imagine a wholesome future. The recognition of meaning in one's suffering and a deep abiding sense of innate goodness promotes resilience, community awareness and increased life force.

EXAMPLE: 2009 NEPAL (working with ex combatants and youth effected by the civil war) sponsored by Search For Common Ground

For two days we moved through a series of developing storytelling activities, interwoven with dialogue, deep listening and physical activities. On day three, I asked for true stories that expressed transformation in the thirty young people's lives. We were in a large long room in stifling heat and no air conditioning.

1. We explored a series of mythic writing processes where they practiced how transformation works. It provided a template for going deeper. and for seeing that one can tell a story from different perspectives. Then, I created a structure for sharing in which they could tell their stories based on a traditional call and response tradition that they had shown me the night before.

IN temperature over 110 degrees and a background sound of suffering elephants and a Maoist demonstration in the distance, they patiently and generously listened to each other's stories for over six hours. To watch them listening to each other, to see their faces, as they shared tales of immense suffering that was at last revealing form and meaning, was unforgettable. They created these tales in the context of starting with a memory of something "good" in their childhoods and moved into the traumatic event with enough distance, honesty and personal integrity to go forward beyond the transformation to their present lives, It was stunning. The mutual respect and excitement that arose during this long day of storytelling culminated in their developing narrative based projects that they wanted to develop in their villages, or camps. They then spoke about what storytelling means to them and revealed incidents of storytellers in their villages that they did not recall at the start of the three days. They had ultimately told their stories in a context of no blame or self-hatred. They had been heard and

not forced to find meaning or solutions. It was remarkable. I felt we all left changed and heartened.

Afterwards, the director of Search asked, “Why does this work?” and “What is a story? “ We talked together about the images that engage and those that are sound bites or explanations; what skims the surface of memory and does not provide penetrating transformation without blame or shame; and about what constitutes a living story that has effect and meaning.

WINNIPEG, MANITOBA 2008-2009, (sponsored by the Arthur Mauro Peace and Justice Center at University of Manitoba) 26 refugee Youth from Liberia, Sierra Leone, Afghanistan and Iran came together with Canadian and Aboriginal Youth to share their stories.

1. Meeting One - I told stories and listened to each participant talk about their lives. We engaged in a series of physical presencing activities and discussed the stories that they had heard.

2. TELL IT OUT LOUD - We began with childhood memory and listening to each other in pairs.

3. TRUST IN THE TELLING - Creating a ritual (they create the boundaries and agreements) to begin to tell the stories of their most difficult experiences. We worked with description, landscape, emotion and retelling the stories back to each other that were spoken out loud. This retelling was powerful offering someone the distance to hear their own story without being swept into trauma or rage. And, to know that they had been heard thoroughly.

4. TRANSFORMATION - How we tell our story makes the difference from it becoming a source of strength, medicine and benefit to self and others or a weapon of self-doubt or aggression.

This process was successful and is now being conducted for the fourth year by two students who I trained at the University under a government grant. It not only allowed young people who had lived through unimaginable suffering and loss to tell their stories and be heard, but became a means for increased emotional intelligence and healing for Canadian and Aboriginal students. It was an all out community healing. Performances were given by youth storytellers in schools, civic centers, Churches and community centers promoting tolerance, antiviolence and awareness of the root causes of war, conflict, hatred and sexual violence.