

Getting Beyond the Wall

Public Voice goes behind the wall with a 12-week storytelling curriculum

Jenny Phillips was passionate about bringing programs that promote healing and wellbeing to the incarcerated. As a psychiatric nurse whose own healing experience had been deepened by a meditation practice, Jenny started giving back by teaching meditation in prisons. In 2008, she captured the incredible experience of creating a ten-day sangha in a maximum-security prison in Alabama in an award-winning documentary, *The Dhamma Brothers*. Our own paths first overlapped in 2007 when Jenny volunteered to provide therapeutic support to an ongoing Public Voice storytelling project I was facilitating with the formerly incarcerated. As a psychologist and director of City Mission Boston's Public Voice Storytelling for Social Justice program, I had been integrating story into my work with the formerly incarcerated and homeless. Some of the offerings with larger groups required additional emotional support, and I was fortunate to have many professionals volunteer their efforts. Watching the relationship between participants and their stories change over the course of the program, Jenny became intrigued with the power of storytelling to change lives. By the close of the program Jenny was hooked on healing story as a medium for the incarcerated to provide self-reflection, insight and the opportunity to move forward into a different story. Wanting to know more and do more, Jenny convinced me to join her in combining our passions for meditation and storytelling in a joint program we offered within prisons. Over the years our partnership and mutual expertise grew through several trial and error sessions conducted with our captive participants in both maximum and minimum correctional facilities.

In 2015, Jenny immersed herself in filming a second documentary, *Beyond the Wall*, following the divergent stories of six men through their process of trying

to rebuild their lives post incarceration. At a screening of *Beyond the Wall* at the International Community Corrections Conference in Canada, an engaged re-entry specialist asked Jenny whether there was a curriculum to accompany her film. “We can’t leave them with this dire message but need to give them the skills to do it differently and the hope that they can succeed.”

In true Jenny style, she replied, “I’m working on it. I hope to have a curriculum to accompany the film available soon.” And that’s when she contacted me. “I want the incarcerated to move beyond the perpetrator role they are cast in and feel empowered to envision a new and powerful story for themselves.” That began my own journey of putting pen to paper to create the 12-week storytelling curriculum, “*Getting Beyond the Wall*”. It brings together the best of what Jenny and I tested out in the years we worked together.

In establishing a working vision for what we hoped to accomplish through the curriculum, we arrived at the following:

“Getting Beyond the Wall” Curriculum Vision

- Working with the documentary “*Beyond the Wall*”, this accompanying 12-session storytelling workshop is designed to support participants to:
 - Gain insight into internal processes and resources to maximize skills towards successful re-entry, including:
 - Have easier access to internal strengths and resources
 - Increase ability to manage self-sabotaging challenges and negative projections of self.
 - Build self-confidence and resilience
 - Positively experience the power of group while building relationship skills of:
 - Increased awareness of mind and body.
 - Increased awareness of self in relation and response-ability.

- Emotional intelligence
 - Listening and witnessing
 - Empathy and compassion
 - Being part of a supportive community
- This workshop consists of exercises that lean on three important components:
 1. Mind/Body: through meditation, movement and journaling
 2. Personal Story: exploring the story of one's past to take control of one's future story
 3. The Group: being in relationship with peers in new and different ways.
- Why story?
 - Deepen insight into personal stories through “re-authoring” skills in order to:
 - Shift constrained or limited stories of self to sustaining/supportive stories.
 - Develop ability to move forward in positive ways and self-discipline to create appropriate goals and boundaries.
 - Learn the difference between habitual reactions and intentional responses.
 - Choose future responses with greater awareness of possible outcomes.
 - Move forward with increased respect, compassion, and forgiveness for both self and other.
 - Create a realistic vision story that incorporates strengths and challenges as a means of guiding each member toward a successful re-entry.

- Move forward with greater clarity of direction, motivation and purpose.
- Why Meditation?
 - There are both psychological and physical benefits to meditation.
 - **Awareness:** Meditation can increase awareness of both oneself and others. It helps you take a step back so that you can gain clarity on how to hold and respond to stressful situations.
 - **Presence and concentration:** Meditation can help you focus on the present and achieve a greater capacity for relaxation so that you can tackle problems in a calm manner.
 - **Stress reduction:** Meditation is a discipline that allows you to calm and self soothe. Meditating for even a short time every day can help you to let go of stress and achieve a more relaxed state of mind.
 - **Mood regulation:** Meditation reduces negative emotions, leading to reduced anxiety and depression.

When it came time to design the sessions themselves, I based them on the hero's journey. Each two-hour session explores some aspect of a participant's life story. Exercises and prompts encourage self-reflection and group sharing that might lead to informed choices of what one would bring forward into a vision story to guide them successfully into the future. In order to create safety and build comfortable familiarity, each week follows the same basic structure:

- Each session begins with a check-in of highs (peaks), lows (valleys) and anticipated future (vistas) followed by any reflections from the previous session.
- A short guided meditation and movement (stretching) followed by journaling time to capture reflections that may have come up.

- Introduction of new theme for the week and the place where it rests on their larger story arc. (i.e. setting the context, challenges and obstacles, helpers and tricksters, character motivation to achieve the goal, what's at stake, learning, transformation, etc.) See graphic.
 - Each week we provide guiding questions to help participants explore the themes we are introducing. These questions often provide the basis of homework exploration to reflect on over the week.
- Exercises and story prompts to explore the theme as it pertains to each individual's life story
- Time to debrief the session; what was learned, what was helpful, what was hard, what more is wanted.
- Homework assigned to capture and deepen story insights. Additionally, participants are encouraged to meditate and journal daily.
- A closing quote or poem
- Close the circle with ritual, usually a one-word reflection of thought or feeling.

Below is a list of the sessions with some of the questions and story prompts to give you an idea of the overall flow and focus:

Session 1: Beginnings

Questions to explore:

- Why are mindfulness techniques and storytelling part of a re-entry support program?
- What does it mean to be “safely uncomfortable”?

Story Prompt: Tell the story of your name

Session 2: Watching the Film

Questions to explore in Session 2

- What can we learn from watching a film about others whose experiences/stories might be similar or different from our own?
- What characters do you feel most drawn to? What part of that character's personality, situation or story stands out for you?

Story Prompt: Tell about a time when you were in a situation that reminds you of one of the characters in the film.

Session 3: Introduction of the story model

Questions to explore in Session 3

- What are some of the guiding beliefs that have shaped your view of the world? How did you come to learn them?

Story Prompt: Brainstorm ten things you know are true. Tell a story of how you came to know one of these true things in your life.

Session 4: Skills for the Journey

Questions to explore in Session 4

- What are your triggers and what is your habitual response when triggered?
- How do you take control of your reactions to respond in the way that best serves you as well as those around you?

Story Prompt: Tell about a time you were triggered and reacted without thinking. Tell about a time you managed your trigger and chose your response. What made that possible?

Session 5: Your Story Journey Begins

Questions to explore in Session 5

- How do your early life experiences influence the stories you tell about yourself now?
- How have you changed since childhood? What have you left behind? What do you still carry with you?

Story Prompt: What is the story you were born into? Tell the story that was in progress on the day you were born.

Session 6: Looking Back: The journey to here

Questions to explore in Session 6

- What have been the important change moments in your life?
- What have been your greatest obstacles and challenges?
- What have you learned through these experiences?

Story Prompt: Tell a story about a moment in your life when you surprised yourself with something you were able to do; a moment about which you are still proud.

Session 7: Looking Forward with Vision stories

Questions to explore in Session 7

- What is the future story you want to be able to tell about yourself someday?
 - What do you need to put in place to be successful in reentry and recovery?
 - What sustains you and brings you peace/contentment/joy?

Story Prompt: Meet yourself on the road five years from now. You are doing well. Tell a story about where you are, what you are doing and who you are spending time with.

Session 8: Looking in: Strengths and Abilities

Questions to explore in Session 8

- When have you done something that you are proud of?
- What are the strengths and values that enabled you to do it?

Story Prompt: Tell a story about a moment you have seen another stretch or challenge themselves in this group.

Session 9 Looking Out: Challenges and obstacles to progress

- What people, places, or activities do you need to avoid to maintain forward progress?
- What resources, supports, programs or guides could be helpful in meeting the challenges and obstacles that await?

Story Prompt: Speaking to addiction, create a story that includes:

- A sassy statement towards it (anger)
- A truth about it (reality/perspective you now hold)
- A learning from it that you will take with you (accrued wisdom)
- A commitment to yourself in how you will move forward in relationship to it (shifting relationship/stronger boundaries)

Session 10 Looking around: Who walks with me.

Questions to explore in Session 10

- What does it mean to get help? Why is it sometimes hard to do?

- Who might be a support in this process

Story Prompt: Tell the story of a person who is on your “Internal Board of Advisors”. How did this person become important in your life?

Session 11 Getting Beyond the Wall: Creating a plan

Questions to explore in Session 11

- How can you sustain and grow the work that you have begun in this group?
- How might your story help others?

Story Prompt: Tell a story that illustrates ways you have changed since being incarcerated.

Session 12 Staying Beyond the Wall: Endings and new beginnings

Questions to explore in Session 12

- What have been your main takeaways from this workshop?
- What activities or ideas will you take away and use in the future?

Story prompt: A memory you will take with me long after this group is over.

My last conversation with Jenny was in early July of 2018. She was headed off on vacation with her family. We made a date to talk two weeks later to review final changes for the curriculum and pursue funding to bring this healing story curriculum accompanied by her documentary to correctional facilities across the country. Just a few days later Jenny died in a drowning accident. Although Jenny’s death has been a devastating loss throughout the correctional community, many are stepping up to keep her legacy alive. A new director of her foundation, Freedom Beyond Bars, is determined to obtain evidence-based research to substantiate measures of progress created in this story-based intervention. As I

write now, I am poised to deliver an updated version of the 12-week curriculum on a young adult unit at the Middlesex House of Corrections in Billerica, MA. My goal is to continue to learn from participants' experience about what is most helpful, and through the process continue to refine the arc of the program and the exercises within to maximize sustainable change. Stay tuned for updates. Lastly, I want to extend my gratitude to Jenny for seeing the power of storytelling as a healing modality, and for her determination in bringing this curriculum to life. I hope that it might continue to sustain the growth and well being of others long after we are both gone.

JOSEPH CAMPBELL

We have not even to risk the adventure alone
for the heroes of all time have gone before us.
The labyrinth is thoroughly known ...
we have only to follow the thread of the hero path.
And where we had thought to find an abomination
we shall find a God.
And where we had thought to slay another
we shall slay ourselves.
Where we had thought to travel outwards
we shall come to the center of our own existence.
And where we had thought to be alone
we shall be with all the world.”

If you are interested in learning more or accessing the complete curriculum, please contact Lani@Lanipeterson.com.