

THE IMPORTANCE OF PLACE: *USING SANCTUARY TO INFLUENCE ENVIRONMENT*

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WE WERE TOLD THAT WE MIGHT WANT TO HAVE “ONE OF OUR SECURITY PEOPLE” SIT IN ON OUR FIRST MEETING WITH THIS MOTHER. SHE HAD BEEN VERBALLY AGGRESSIVE AND HAD MADE THREATS TO OTHER SOCIAL SERVICE WORKERS. THE COURT HAD MANDATED THAT WE MEET WITH HER TO ASSESS WHETHER VISITATION WITH HER SON WOULD BE APPROPRIATE. HER SON AND DAUGHTER HAD RECENTLY BEEN REMOVED AFTER ALLEGATIONS THAT SHE HAD STABBED HER 14 YEAR OLD DAUGHTER WITH A KNIFE IN FRONT OF HER 8 YEAR OLD SON, ELIJAH. SHE HAD BEEN RELEASED FROM JAIL PENDING TRIAL AND WAS COMING TO MEET WITH OUR TREATMENT TEAM FOR THE FIRST TIME WHILE HER SON WAS IN OUR CARE FOR PSYCHIATRIC EVALUATION. WE DON’T HAVE SECURITY PEOPLE AT ANDRUS.

THE WOMAN WE MET WAS ANGRY AND MISTRUSTFUL, AND SHE SEEMED TO HAVE GOOD REASON TO BE. HER FIRST WORDS TO US WERE THAT HER SON HAD BEEN UNJUSTLY REMOVED FROM HER CARE AND THAT HE HAD BEEN MISTREATED BY THE FOSTER FAMILY HE HAD BEEN PLACED WITH BEFORE BEING PLACED WITH US. A LARGE AND IMPOSING AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMAN, SHE BRISTLED AND GLARED AT US, ME A WHITE SOCIAL WORKER AND MY COLLEAGUE AN AFRICAN-AMERICAN PROGRAM MANAGER WHO SEEMED TO BE MANY IN A LONG LINE OF PEOPLE WHO WERE TRYING TO KEEP HER FROM HER SON. I REMEMBER FEELING A BIT INTIMIDATED, AND WONDERING WHY EXACTLY WE DIDN’T HAVE SECURITY PEOPLE.

SHE SPOKE FOR SOME TIME, THEN PAUSED AND PURSED HER LIPS, WAITING FOR US TO RESPOND AND LOOKING AS IF SHE WAS PREPARING FOR A FIGHT. OUR FIRST WORDS TO HER WERE, “CAN WE GET YOU SOME COFFEE?” SHE DECLINED AND CONTINUED TO RAIL AGAINST WHAT SHE SAW AS THE RACIST SYSTEM THAT WAS OUT TO GET HER. SHE PAUSED AGAIN, OFFERING THE SPACE FOR RESPONSE. THE SECOND QUESTION WE ASKED WAS, “THIS MUST BE SO HARD FOR YOU AND YOUR CHILDREN TO BE APART FROM EACH OTHER. WHAT HAPPENED TO YOUR FAMILY THAT LED TO THIS SEPARATION?” SHE BLINKED, COCKED HER HEAD AND LEANED FORWARD. HER BODY LANGUAGE DEMONSTRATED A SHIFT IN HER FRAME OF MIND. BEVERLY BEGAN TO SHARE HER OWN EXPERIENCES OF STRESS AND ADVERSITY RAISING HER CHILDREN WITH NO MONEY AND NO SUPPORT AND A CONSTANT FEAR THAT HER SON WOULD GROW UP TO EMULATE HIS “NO GOOD” FATHER. SHE WORRIED ABOUT HOW HE WOULD BE TREATED BY STRANGERS AND EXPERIENCE TOLD HER IT WAS NOT LIKELY TO BE WELL. BEVERLY WAS ABLE TO START HER CONVERSATION WITH US ON HER OWN TERMS – NOT ANSWERING A ROTE SET OF INTERVIEW QUESTIONS, BUT BEGINNING WITH WHAT SHE FOUND MOST IMPORTANT. WHERE SHE BEGAN WAS WITH AN EXPRESSION OF ANGER, WHICH QUICKLY TURNED TO SADNESS, AND FOR ANYONE WHO LOOKED, IT WAS CLEAR THAT FEAR AND TERROR LURKED RIGHT BELOW THE SADNESS.

BEVERLY DIDN'T SEEM TO KNOW WHAT TO MAKE OF US. HER SON HADN'T SEEMED TO EITHER. HE HAD EXPECTED US TO BE AFRAID OF HER, AS HE SEEMED TO BE. ELIJAH WAS VERY SURPRISED WHEN I TOLD HIM LATER THAT I HAD MET HIS MOTHER, AND THAT I LIKED HER. HE LIKED HER TOO, BUT NEITHER OF THEM HAD BEEN TO A PLACE WHERE SHE WAS SEEN AS A LIKEABLE PERSON. THE TRUTH WAS, I DID LIKE HER, AND SO DID THE OTHERS ON MY TEAM. ONE OF THE BASIC ASSUMPTIONS OF THE SANCTUARY MODEL IS THAT WE AS TREATMENT PROVIDERS CHANGE THE BASIC ASSUMPTION ABOUT OUR CLIENTS FROM ONE OF SHAMING AND BLAMING TO A STANCE THAT ASSUMES THAT ANY BEHAVIOR WE ARE SEEING IN THE MOMENT IS AT LEAST IN SOME PART DRIVEN BY THE CLIENT'S EXPERIENCES IN THE PAST. TO OPERATIONALIZE THIS, WE HAVE TO BECOME AWARE OF OUR TONE, OUR BODY LANGUAGE, AND OUR WORDS, SO THAT INTERNALLY, WE CHANGE THE BASIC QUESTION THAT GETS TRANSMITTED TO THE CLIENT FROM "WHAT'S WRONG WITH YOU?" TO "WHAT'S HAPPENED TO YOU?" AS BEVERLY BEGAN TO SHARE THE STORY OF RAISING HER CHILDREN ALONE IN WHAT FELT LIKE A VERY HOSTILE AND UNJUST WORLD, WE COULD SEE THE HOW INJURED SHE WAS. SEEING HER AS INJURED RATHER THAN AS "SICK" OR "BAD" OFFERS MUCH WIDER ROOM FOR CREATING A POSITIVE RELATIONSHIP. ANOTHER CORE BELIEF OF THE SANCTUARY MODEL IS THAT "HURT PEOPLE HURT PEOPLE." BEVERLY WAS IN SOME WAYS SIMPLY INTERACTING IN THE ONLY WAYS SHE KNEW HOW: UNKNOWINGLY REPLAYING WITH OTHERS WHAT HAD BEEN DONE TO HER.

REFLECTING BACK BEVERLY'S LIKABILITY WAS ONE OF THE FIRST STEPS IN DISRUPTING A TRAUMATIC REENACTMENT FOR THIS FAMILY: THE UNCONSCIOUS RECREATION OF A PAST TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCE IN CURRENT SITUATIONS OR RELATIONSHIPS. IN THIS CASE, THE TRAUMATIC REENACTMENT REPLAYED THE EXPERIENCE OF REJECTION AND ABANDONMENT FOR BOTH BEVERLY AND ELIJAH. BEVERLY IMMEDIATELY WENT ON THE OFFENSIVE IN A NEW RELATIONSHIP, TRIGGERING ANGER AND PUNITIVE ACTIONS FROM HELPERS. ELIJAH SAW THIS AS AN ATTACK ON HIS MOTHER, AND SYSTEMATICALLY REJECTED HELP AND BEGAN AGGRESSING TOWARD THE PERCEIVED PERSECUTORS AS WELL. THE ACTIONS OF ALL THE PLAYERS IN THESE DRAMAS PERPETUATED FOR ELIJAH AND BEVERLY THE BELIEF THAT ALL PEOPLE WILL EVENTUALLY LEAVE AND REJECT THEM, AN EARLY CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCE FOR BOTH OF THEM THAT WAS BEING REPLAYED IN ALMOST EVERY RELATIONSHIP THEY ENCOUNTERED.

IT SEEMED THAT BEVERLY HAD FOUND HER PLACE IN THE WORLD TO BE ANYWHERE THAT CHAOS AND VIOLENCE ENSUED, AND TO MOST OF THE HUMAN SERVICE WORKERS WHO HAD ENGAGED WITH HER, THIS APPEARED TO BE OF HER OWN MAKING. SOME EVEN WENT SO FAR AS TO ASSUME IT WAS HER CHOICE. AND BEVERLY GAVE THEM VERY GOOD REASONS TO BELIEVE THAT. ANDRUS WAS NOT THE FIRST PLACE TO GREET HER KINDLY OR OFFER HER COFFEE. WE WERE THE FIRST THOUGH, WHO EMBRACED HER DESCRIPTION OF WHAT HAD HAPPENED BETWEEN HER AND HER CHILDREN AS PART OF A CYCLE OF INEQUITY AND INJUSTICE, AND OFFERED HER THE PERSPECTIVE THAT BOTH SHE AND HER CHILDREN INDIVIDUALLY AND HER FAMILY COLLECTIVELY WERE IN NEED OF A SAFE PLACE TO HEAL FROM THEIR TRAUMAS. WE OFFERED HER BOTH THE LANGUAGE AND THE EXPERIENCE OF SANCTUARY TO DO THAT.

FIRST AND MOST IMPORTANTLY IN THE SANCTUARY MODEL IS THE CREATION OF A THERAPEUTIC NONVIOLENT COMMUNITY IN WHICH BOTH THE CLIENTS AND THE STAFF APPROACH EACH OTHERS AS PARTNERS IN THE TASK OF RECOVERY. THIS BEGINS WITH THE DAILY PRACTICE OF TOOLS (COMMUNITY MEETINGS AND SAFETY PLANS FOR EXAMPLE) AND SOME DIDACTIC AND EXPERIENTIAL INSTRUCTION IN A SET OF SHARED VALUES PRACTICED IN THE COMMUNITY. IT ALSO HAPPENS THROUGH THE REINFORCEMENT OF FOUR BASIC COMPONENTS OF TREATMENT THROUGH THE USE OF A SHARED LANGUAGE, THE LANGUAGE

OF S.E.L.F. S.E.L.F. IS AN ACRONYM FOR SAFETY, EMOTION MANAGEMENT, LOSS AND FUTURE — THE FOUR AREAS OF TREATMENT THAT ARE REINFORCED THROUGH CONVERSATIONS IN THE MILIEU, IN INDIVIDUAL AND FAMILY THERAPY AND IN THE DAILY PRACTICE OF THE ACTIVITIES OF THE MILIEU.

PLACE IS IMPORTANT, AND WHAT CONSTITUTES “PLACE” IS ITS PEOPLE. THE SYNERGY AMONG OUR GROUP OF PEOPLE WAS VERY NEW TO BEVERLY AND ELIJAH. THE ANDRUS DIAGNOSTIC CENTER WAS A SANCTUARY IN WHICH OUR PROGRAM MANAGER, THERAPIST, PSYCHIATRIST, TEACHERS AND MILIEU STAFF MADE DECISIONS TOGETHER AND INVITED THIS FAMILY INTO THE FOLD AS PART OF THE TEAM, RATHER THAN ONLY AS RECIPIENTS OF OUR SERVICES. INDIVIDUAL AND FAMILY THERAPY WERE ONLY SUCCESSFUL BECAUSE OF THE CONTEXT OF THE ENVIRONMENT. BEVERLY AND ELIJAH BEGAN TO TRUST US TO TAKE CARE OF THEM, AND SO BEGAN TO BELIEVE THEY COULD PARTNER WITH US TO TAKE BETTER CARE OF THEMSELVES. THIS MEANT THAT AS THE SOCIAL WORKER, I WAS NOT THE GATEKEEPER TO TREATMENT. UNTIL I COULD ENGAGE ELIJAH AND BEVERLY IN A TRUSTING RELATIONSHIP, I RELIED ON THE TEAMMATES WHO SPOKE WITH HER ON THE PHONE DURING HER SUPERVISED PHONE CALLS TO ESTABLISH THAT EARLY SENSE OF PARTNERSHIP WITH THEM. IN SANCTUARY, THE TEAM IS THE TREATMENT. FOR BEVERLY AND ELIJAH, IT WAS THE ANDRUS DIAGNOSTIC TEAM THAT CREATED THE PLACE FOR THEIR HEALING WORK TO HAPPEN.

THE WIDER SOCIAL SERVICES SYSTEM HAD SERVED AS A PLACE OF PERSECUTION TO BEVERLY, AND THROUGH HER, ELIJAH. THE ANDRUS DIAGNOSTIC CENTER WAS STRUCTURED TO SERVE AS A SANCTUARY FOR HER AND HER SON. AND IN THIS PLACE OF SANCTUARY, SHE AND HE WERE ABLE TO BEGIN HEALING FROM THE TRAUMATIC EVENTS OF THEIR PASTS: DOMESTIC VIOLENCE, POVERTY, DAILY EXPERIENCES OF RACISM, INSTITUTIONAL RACISM, JOBLESSNESS, HOMELESSNESS, MENTAL ILLNESS AND ABANDONMENT. IN USING THE SANCTUARY MODEL, OUR TREATMENT TEAM WAS ABLE TO CREATE AN ENVIRONMENT THAT SERVED AS A BRIDGE BETWEEN THE PAST AND THE FUTURE FOR THIS FAMILY. BOTH BEVERLY AND ELIJAH WERE ABLE TO FIND ENOUGH SAFETY IN THE RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE STAFF AND WITH EACH OTHER TO FIRST ENVISION AND THEN ENGAGE IN BEHAVIORS THAT ADVANCED A NEW FUTURE FOR THEM.

BY ENTERING THIS COMMUNITY OF SANCTUARY, BEVERLY AND ELIJAH WERE ABLE TO GAIN RELATIONAL SKILLS THAT HELPED THEM TO CHANGE THE OTHER PLACES IN THEIR LIVES AS WELL. WITH A GREAT DEAL OF COACHING AND THE PHYSICAL PRESENCE OF ONE OF OUR TEAM MEMBERS AT HER CRIMINAL PROCEEDINGS, BEVERLY WAS ABLE TO MAINTAIN HER COMPOSURE, ARTICULATE HER VERSION OF EVENTS AND DEMONSTRATE EVIDENCE OF HER INNOCENCE. BEVERLY’S COOPERATION WITH LAW ENFORCEMENT ALLOWED FOR DISCOVERY OF EVIDENCE THAT INDICATED THAT HER DAUGHTER’S STABBING INJURIES WERE SELF-INFLICTED. BEVERLY’S PRIOR PRESENTATION IN COURT HAD SERVED TO REINFORCE HER IMAGE AS A VIOLENT WOMAN WHO APPEARED TO HAVE BEEN CAPABLE OF THE CRIME AGAINST HER DAUGHTER: CURSING AT THE JUDGE, YELLING ALMOST INCOHERENTLY AT THE ATTORNEYS, AND FIRING HER OWN ATTORNEY IN THE MIDDLE OF THE PROCEEDING. WITH NEW EMOTION MANAGEMENT SKILLS AND AWARENESS OF HER OWN TRIGGERS, BEVERLY WAS ABLE TO AVOID RECREATING HER PAST ABUSES IN THIS PUBLIC FORUM.

FOR ELIJAH, THE DISRUPTION IN THE PATTERN OF VIOLENCE AND ISOLATION WAS LIFE CHANGING. IN THIS PLACE OF SANCTUARY, HE WAS ABLE TO PARTICIPATE IN RESTORING SAFETY TO HIS FAMILY BY ENGAGING IN A DIFFERENT WAY WITH PEOPLE WHO WERE CARING FOR HIM, INCLUDING HIS MOTHER. BEFORE ENTERING OUR PROGRAM, HE WAS REPORTED TO HAVE BEEN AGGRESSIVE TOWARD AND DESTRUCTIVE TO PEOPLE AND PROPERTY. EARLY ON, WE SAW SOME OF THIS BEHAVIOR, BUT IT QUICKLY SUBSIDED. ELIJAH WAS ABLE TO

GRIEVE SOME OF THE LOSSES IN HIS LIFE, INCLUDING THE LOSS OF THOSE COPING SKILLS WHILE HE REPLACED THEM WITH NEW ONES. HE LEARNED TO MANAGE HIS EMOTIONS IN WAYS THAT PROMOTED HIS OWN AND OTHER'S SAFETY AND ENVISIONED A NEW FUTURE FOR HIMSELF. THE STAFF AT ANDRUS WERE ABLE TO CREATE A PLACE OF COMMUNITY AND PARTNERSHIP AMONG EACH OTHER USING NOT JUST THEIR SKILLS, BUT MORE IMPORTANTLY, THEIR RELATIONSHIPS WITH EACH OTHER WHICH TRANSFERRED TO THE CLIENTS. IT IS AS IF THE RELATIONSHIPS CREATED THE PLACE, AND THE PLACE THEN CREATED NEW RELATIONSHIPS.

ELIJAH LEFT OUR PROGRAM FIVE YEARS AGO. HE WAS RETURNED TO HIS MOTHER'S CARE, AND HIS SISTER REMAINED IN FOSTER CARE WITH A GOAL OF INDEPENDENT LIVING. ELIJAH'S MOTHER CALLED ME LAST MONTH, AS SHE DOES FROM TIME TO TIME. ELIJAH IS NOW IN MIDDLE SCHOOL, AND HIS LAST REPORT CARD WAS EXCELLENT. BEVERLY LAUGHED WHEN SHE TALKED ABOUT HOW SMART HE IS AND HOW HE ENJOYS HIS TIME WITH HIS FRIENDS. SHE STILL STRUGGLES WITH FINANCES, HER RELATIONSHIP WITH HER DAUGHTER AND HER OWN FAMILY OF ORIGIN. THE PAST WILL ALWAYS BE PART OF HER PRESENT. BUT SHE NO LONGER STRUGGLES IN ONE VERY IMPORTANT WAY. SHE SEEMS TO HAVE FOUND HER PLACE IN THE WORLD AS A MOTHER TO ELIJAH. SHE HAS INTERNALIZED THE SENSE OF SANCTUARY ENOUGH TO CREATE IT FOR HERSELF AND HER SON IN THEIR HOME. AND NOW A YOUNG MAN, ELIJAH HAS TOO.