

## NOTES FROM THE FIELD

# Unmasked stories: witnessing ‘Then what might happen?’

*Gilbert Salazar\**

### SETTING:

Middle school, corner of building in the back end of campus

### TIME:

Mid-morning

### CHARACTERS:

**GILBERT:** First-year restorative justice coordinator, constantly ready for the next intervention or challenge.

**ANDRE:** Seventh grader, easily annoyed and frustrated by others and very vocal about that frustration.

GILBERT is walking around a corner of campus to find ANDRE walking around the same corner. It is a warm morning.

GILBERT

Andre, Good morning. I see you're not in class right now-can I ask why you're making the choice to not be in class?

ANDRE

Mister, I'ma bring a gun and shoot up the school.

GILBERT pauses, breathes.

GILBERT

Where you gonna get the gun?

ANDRE

I'm gonna steal one from a store.

GILBERT

How you gonna steal one from a store?

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ANDRE

I'm gonna say I want a gun and if I don't get it, I'm gonna grab a gun and shoot the person.

GILBERT

What you gonna do later?

ANDRE

Uh ... I would need to get away.

GILBERT

How you gonna do that?

ANDRE

Uh ... I would steal a car.

GILBERT

Okay, where are you gonna steal a car?

ANDRE

Uh, I'ma steal a police car.

GILBERT

Okay, then what might happen?

ANDRE

Uh ... the police would be chasing me.

GILBERT

Why would the police be chasing you?

ANDRE

Cause I stole a car!

GILBERT

Is the person that you shot dead?

ANDRE

Yeah, I think so.

GILBERT

So you told me you stole a gun, you shot and possibly killed the person at the store, you stole a cop car to get away, and now you're being chased by cops? Then what might happen?

ANDRE

Mister, I'ma just go to class.

How do we hold and create 'containers' for discussions of violence? How do we hold 'containers' for those that inflict violence and those impacted from violence done to them to understand consequences and choices? In my time as a restorative justice practitioner (an on-site coordinator at a middle school, a trainer and coach for school site implementation teams, and in my previous work with schools and communities) I had to create these 'containers' for many young people and teachers. An example of a 'container' is a conversation or dialogue. What has supported me in this work has been both the paradigms of restorative justice and theatre.

Theatre, particularly the applied theatre of 'Theater of the Oppressed', provides techniques to create such a container with play and possibility centred around the concept of 'I am the protagonist of my own life'. When combined with the frameworks and concepts that restorative justice upholds, relationships, community and impact, this container is deepened to create opportunities to explore accountability. I have relied on both frameworks to create such spaces for dialogue and communication.

This essay centres on the intersection of language and communication informed by both these paradigms by providing examples of how the concept and idea of 'witnessing' and being 'witnessed' through storytelling has been a liberatory action in my work, in creating these containers and having transformative interactions. These examples will be described through script dialogue from conversations I have had with students and teachers utilising both restorative justice principles and the techniques from 'Theater of the Oppressed'.

Storytelling is setting up events and framing them in a sequence that essentially engages the listener or receiver with the desire to know what will happen next. The central question at the centre of my conversation with this student is, 'and then what might happen?' This question came after a series of questions I asked, without judgment, based on the detail that he had named before. I motivated the flow of the story with these questions but kept up with him, and once there seemed to be a deeper escalation to the story with the police car I challenged him with the question to think further into the story. I relied on another theatre technique from improvisation, namely 'say yes,' or 'yes and', where you play with what has been given to you by someone else, accepting it and exploring it further. This tenet is often the beginning practice and praxis in developing and preparing for theatre.

I had multiple conversations with this student that whole year, including conversations in partnership and collaboration with the 7th-grade counsellor. Yet hearing his initial statement was something I had not heard from him before, and although alarming for me, I leaned in, wanting to hear more of what he had to say or could think about. In my interaction with him I held the values of curiosity, possibility, attention and play. All values of theatre. But for me this interaction is also rooted in restorative justice paradigms through the framing statement that 'everyone needs to be seen, heard and understood'. It might be noted that I 'wore' him down, that he decided to go back to class, but what I did, when I was not asking him questions, was listening, actively listening, making sure what I was hearing was correct and responding to what he was sharing by asking him questions. Through active listening, done without judgment, and offering questions, I was engaging him in storytelling. This conversation, through his story, set up

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expressions of explorations of consequences, impact and possibility. I invited him to explore what he said he wanted to do, and I listened.

‘What can I do to help you be ready for school today?’

‘What do you need to be ready to be at school today?’

‘Mister you talk funny.’

These are the questions I asked all students, including the student in this story at the start of the day and at the beginning of the year. The statement/observation below, is how students responded to me and these questions. Later in the year many students responded to these questions or engaged with me in conversation. For the student, ‘Andre’, I asked him if I could walk him to class, and he said yes. I asked him if I could check in with him later in the day to see how he was doing, and he agreed and I did. I walked him to class. After I did that, I walked over to the principal to let him know of the conversation and that I was going to follow up with the student. Which I did. And nothing of what he described happened that day or any other day that year. He continued to have challenges remaining in class, but that day he stayed for that period.

Does this technique of dialogue have such an impact as to transform choice? Does this paradigm or praxis have the ability to function as a learning tool when there is a challenging or resisting response? How is ‘exploring possibility’ an engaging tool? I have played more specifically with the tools of ‘Theater of the Oppressed’ with the challenging population within a school: teachers.

I was once at a very large high school facilitating an Affective Statement workshop training. In the workshop, I presented the skill of Affective Statements; we read the handout, and I modelled the use of an Affective Statement and intervention conversation. I was about to move into the role play practice with teachers when:

TEACHER RESPONSE IN WORKSHOP

You expect me to say that to a student?

I froze for a second, but then flashes of talking pieces being thrown, teachers bringing in students for Circle but refusing to sit and participate, students almost fighting in Circle and various conversations and interactions streamed through my mind, and I took a breath. I leaned into all this and asked:

ME

Can you tell me what you would say instead?

TEACHER AS TEACHER

Put your phone away now!

An empty chair is in the middle of the Circle of teachers in this classroom.

ME

And then what might happen next? Can I ask for someone to come up and show us what might happen next?

Another TEACHER volunteers to come up and sits in the chair to act as the STUDENT.

TEACHER AS STUDENT

Fuck you!

ME

And then what might happen?

TEACHER RESPONSE IN WORKSHOP

Campus security would be called in.

ME

Can we have somebody come up and play campus security?

Another TEACHER volunteers to play CAMPUS SECURITY.

ME

What might campus security say to the student?

TEACHER AS CAMPUS SECURITY

Come on!

ME

And then what might happen?

TEACHER RESPONSE IN WORKSHOP

The student would react.

ME

How might the student react?

TEACHER AS STUDENT and OTHER TEACHERS

The student would walk out.

ME

Can we see that?

TEACHER AS STUDENT walks out.

ME

And then what might happen?

TEACHERS' RESPONSE IN WORKSHOP

Campus security would then have to chase student.

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ME

What might happen the next day?

TEACHERS' RESPONSE IN WORKSHOP

The student eventually would be back in class.

ME

Okay, can we see the day when the student returns to class after this incident?

TEACHER AS STUDENT walks back to the chair, with phone in hand. There is laughter and approval from teachers in the workshop.

TEACHER AS TEACHER

Put your phone away.

TEACHER AS STUDENT

Why?

TEACHER AS TEACHER

Because that is the rule.

TEACHER AS STUDENT

I don't care.

TEACHER AS TEACHER

Put your phone away!

TEACHER AS STUDENT

Fuck this!

TEACHER AS STUDENT walks away from the chair.

ME

And then what might happen?

TEACHERS' RESPONSE IN WORKSHOP

Campus aide would be called in again.

ANOTHER TEACHER IN THE WORKSHOP WHO HAD BEEN WATCHING BUT QUIET THE WHOLE TIME

You know, Gilbert, I was timing both scenarios, and in the one you did with the Affective Statement, the student stayed in the classroom and did the work, and it took less time than this role play.

In a Forum Theatre workshop run by 'Theater of the Oppressed', the facilitator poses a question to the audience, and a response is asked to be shown, not described, as an intervention or choice in the scene. The scene is a scenario of conflict typically involving a struggle with power with an antagonist representing a larger system of

power. Various choices or responses are tried on through physical action or verbal play within the performative setting.

This technique also relies on an audience or a workshop of people to be witnessing what is happening and to respond and engage with the facilitator who embodies curiosity by asking questions to the audience. The audience giving witness is therefore an immensely important element, while the facilitator acknowledges their expertise in their experience, knowing that although this performative setting represents the setting or situation of their conflict, their conflict and struggle is real.

This technique, through its performative nature, uses play as a potential release of power or actualisation of power offering the spectator opportunities to make observations and also to witness various responses tried on by others. Any of these interventions are then tried on through play to test their effectiveness as a potential means of action to the real struggle or conflict. The facilitator does not influence the outcome but only provides questions and curiosities to the observations. The teacher who spoke at the end of the occurrence gave a beautiful offering with his observation, which allowed the opportunity for all to note what was not working, including the initial teacher who expressed doubt that Affective Statements can be impactful. For me, the truly transformative part of the workshop was the way in which some teachers recognized that the manner in which they speak with their students is problematic, which gave more credibility and motivation to proceed with the technique that I was really there to facilitate: Affective Statements.

What I chose to do in this workshop was, rather than shutting down the initial critical question, to staying curious and asking about the experience in the room with the chosen response, playing with that response and taking it to its next occurrence. This, in turn, gave the opportunity for observations to be made by the group, while using questions and curiosity and the techniques of play and performance. We then went into a discussion of the impact of Affective Statements and their use and went on into the role play practice in pairs, finishing the workshop with no further outward displays of resistance.

At the core of both stories lies curiosity and engagement, choice and agency. Andre could have walked away from me, as he did with adults at times, but he did not; he stayed in the conversation with me. The teachers, bound by professional development and time and contractual hours paid, technically had to stay in the workshop, but the more I went into the technique, the more responses and engagement there were and the more they agreed to get up and play a role or respond to a question. The concepts from restorative justice work and Applied Theatre come together as an invitation to give story. However, asking 'and then what might happen' may be a challenge for us as adults in a moment of heightened activation when we are the practitioner. Yet this question, at its best, requires pause and the use of it as an authentic response. The use of this question may be the only tool to use or offer a student or colleague when they are in a heightened state of activation. If we consider this question in its function as a story development technique, it can be a tool that most captivates attention by disrupting a moment of heightened emotion and inviting storytelling and listening.