

CORE STORIES

AN EXERCISE OF UNDERSTANDING

“PEOPLE ARE HARD TO HATE CLOSE-UP. MOVE IN.”

– BRENE BROWN

WRITTEN BY SARAH KURTZ MCKINNON

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ADAPTED FOR USE IN SUMMER CAMP STAFF TRAININGS, MAY 2018

PURPOSE

To learn about each other as humans and share about ourselves.

MATERIALS

Regular-size stickie notes (3”x3”) – Approximately 10 per person

Additional regular-size stickie notes (3”x3”) – 1 pack

Small-size stickie notes (1”x3”) – Approximately 25 per person

Paper (8.5”x11”) – 1 piece per person

Pens – 1 per person

TIME REQUIRED

3 hours

PHYSICAL SPACE NEEDED

A quiet area where the entire group can assemble in a circle

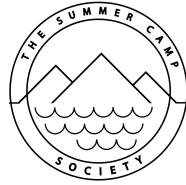
Various, private, quiet breakout areas for small group conversations

TIMING

- This should not be the first activity of a staff training.
- The group should have already have had some time to get to know each other and get comfortable with the environment. In a weeklong staff training, this is a nice experience for the third day.

SETUP

- Know in advance how many participants you will have.
- If possible, set up chairs or benches for participants to sit.



- Make sure there is space for you to walk both on the inside and outside of the circle.
- On each seat, place a piece of paper, a pen, and ~10 sticky notes.
- Divide the number of participants you will have by 5. That is how many breakout groups you will have (we will call this “x”). If your group does not divide perfectly into 5’s, it is better to have a smaller group of 4 than a larger group of 6.
- On your pack of sticky notes, write the digits 1 through x each on individual sticky notes. Do this five times, so you have one sticky note with a number for each participant expected.

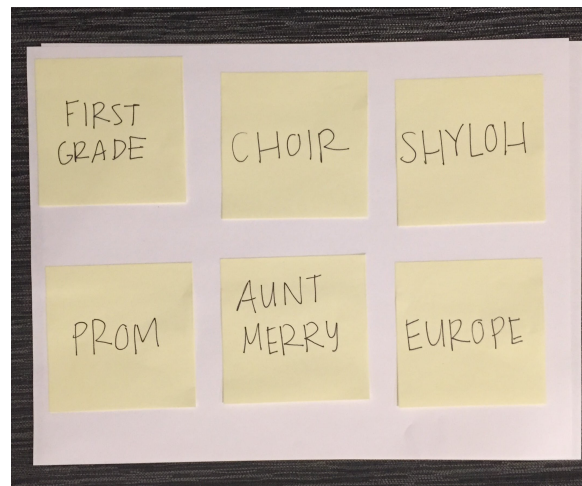
FACILITATION: INTRODUCTION (PART 1) – 10 MINUTES

- Invite your participants into the room and ask them to have a seat anywhere they would like.
- Ask them to hold on to their materials.
- Once everyone is settled, begin describing the activity:
 - *“All of us come to this room as camp staff, but we also come to this room as individual humans.”*
 - *“Each of us has our own unique set of stories and experiences—those that have shaped us and shaped our lives.”*
 - *“Our life experiences and how we have responded to these experiences have turned us into the people that we are today.”*
 - *“Yet, we can often spend years and years working alongside of other individuals and not have any idea what stories and experiences have shaped them.”*
 - *“So, I want you to think back in your life and think about what are your Core Stories. What experiences, instances, moments, or years have shaped you?”*
- Then, consider sharing a couple of your own Core Stories as examples. Avoid stories that are especially traumatic or and especially avoid stories that you would consider your “deepest darkest secrets”, but make sure you show a certain amount of vulnerability in your stories.
 - When I facilitate this exercise, I like to talk about being raised as a vegetarian in the 80s and 90s in a conservative Midwestern town; my struggle accepting the realities of puberty.
 - Make sure the stories that you tell are 2-3 minutes each. Consider a balance of sentimentality and humor.

FACILITATION: PERSONAL REFLECTION (PART 2) – 15 MINUTES



- Tell the group that you want them to think of 5 to 6 Core Stories of their own. These stories can be from any time in their life—they could be very far in the past or very recent. The only criteria is that each story tells about a time that has shaped them.
 - Then demonstrate that as they think of each story, they should write down a “title” for each story on a single sticky note. For example, for my three stories, I might write down “vegetarian” and “puberty.”
 - They can arrange their stories on their piece of paper, so their final product should look like this:



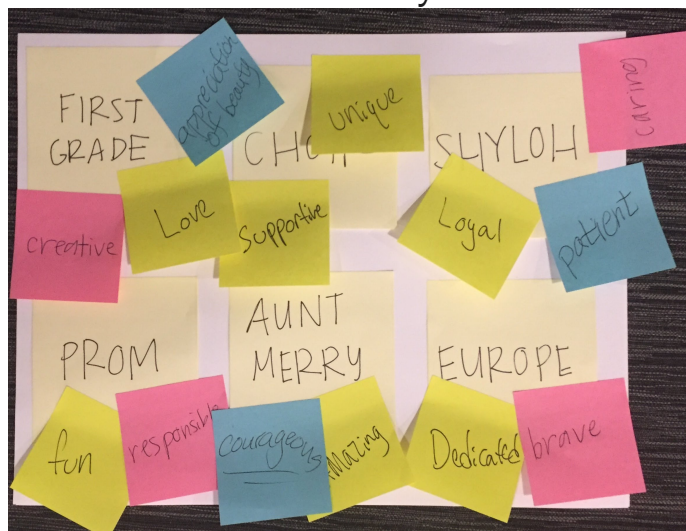
HINT: It is very helpful to have an example page like this to show participants

- Give the group a few minutes to think about and write down the titles of their Core Stories. As they do this, move around the room with your numbered sticky notes. Place a single numbered sticky note on the back of each person’s chair. These notes will determine their small group.
 - Try to manipulate the placement of the sticky notes so that the groups have a nice balance of people (background, experience) and so that you do not have any people already extremely close to each other in each group (sibling pairs, couples, etc.).
 - As you move about the room, try to gauge how much more time people need to write down their stories.
- When most people are finishing up, describe the next steps:
 - “Now, we are going to divide into groups. In your group, each person will have the opportunity to tell their Core Stories. I encourage you to



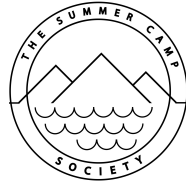
tell all of your stories, but it is up to you if there are some stories you would rather not share or would rather replace with another story.”

- “One person will go first. She will share all of her stories at once. As you listen to this person share her stories, you will use your smaller sticky notes to write down values or traits that you hear about the person as she tells her stories. Write down one value on each small sticky note.”
- “For example, in my story about _____, what traits or values did you hear about me?”
 - People might respond with words like “family,” “loyalty” or “honesty”
- “Once the first individual is done telling all of her stories, the other group members will share their small sticky notes with her. They will describe what they heard and when they heard it.”
 - For example, someone might say, “In your story about _____, I heard a lot of perseverance when _____.”
- “As fellow group members share their small sticky notes with the person sharing her stories, they will pass their small sticky notes to her. She will then stick the small notes around each story.”
- Emphasize stories stay in the circle. It is the story owner’s decision whether or not to share his story with others.



HINT: Again, have this example up to show the participants.

- Pause and ask if there are any questions.



FACILITATION: DIVIDING INTO GROUPS (PART 3) – 5 MINUTES

- Then say, *“In a moment, you will look on the back of your chair. There will be a sticky note with a number on it. That number is your group number. There should be approximately 5 people who have each group number.”*
- *“You will find the other members of your group. Once your group is together, decide where you would like to go to share your stories. I recommend that you find a comfortable place on camp (and give some examples).”*
- *“Once you determine where you will go, you will meet me at the door. You will let me know where you are going to be. I will give you a stack of small sticky notes that you will take with you.”*
- *“You will have 2 hours, total, for this exercise. Please meet back here at (a certain time). This means that each person in your group of 5 will have plus or minus 20 minutes to share their stories and receive the group’s insights. Please ensure that someone in your group has a watch and plan accordingly. At the (certain time), we will meet back in this room for the debrief.”*
- *“I will be circulating about camp and checking in on your groups. If you need additional sticky notes, you can come back to this room to get some.”*
- Pause for questions, then dismiss them to get into their groups.
- Position yourself at the exit with a piece of paper. Write down where each group will be and hand them a stack of sticky notes as they exit.

FACILITATION: SHARING OUR STORIES (PART 4) – 120 MINUTES

- Mostly keep a low profile during this time. It can be awkward for a facilitator to intrude on the sharing of stories.
- At the beginning of the 2-hour period, circulate throughout the site to each small group. Make sure they are all good to go with the exercise and that they understand the instructions. Bring some extra pens and small sticky notes.
- Circulate again about 1/2 way through the time period and make sure groups are on track with their timing. Make recommendations to speed up or take more time, depending on the situation.
- Make your final round when there are about 20 minutes left to give the group a warning that they are in the last bit of time.
- When you approach a group, stand quietly on the periphery of their circle or area. Wait to give them any instructions until there is a natural break in the discussion, such as after a person is done sharing a story.



BREAK – 10 MINUTES

- Some people will be late! So, if you plan on meeting back at the original space at 3 p.m., do not plan on starting the debrief until 3:10 p.m.
- Consider having some drinks and snacks available to participants as they file back into the room.
- Give them a little time to shake out, use the restroom, etc., before the debrief.

FACILITATION: DEBRIEF (PART 5) – 20 MINUTES

- Have the group members position themselves in a circle. It is a nice time to do a standing debrief.
- I consider this to be a short debrief, although people will have a lot to say, because they have been talking and will have some talking fatigue.
- First, welcome them back and thank them for all of their participation. Tell them that you witnessed some amazing stories and saw some amazing listening and compassion during their time together.
- Ask the group to go around the circle and give a “one word debrief.” This means that each person says a single word about how they are feeling in this moment. Ask for a volunteer to start, and then whip around the circle in one direction.
- Then, consider asking the group the following questions:
 - **Part 1: What happened?**
 - How did it feel to reflect on your own stories, and share them with the group? What was it like to get their responses?
 - What was it like to listen to others’ stories?
 - **Part 2: What is the impact?**
 - What does this experience mean for us as a staff team?
 - What does this experience mean for the kids we work with this summer?
 - How does this experience impact how you think about other people you encounter?

NOTES

- Make sure to consider confidentiality and challenge by choice in this exercise. Do not forget that you are in a workplace.
- This exercise may stir up emotions or trauma in individuals. Be prepared for some potential tears or for some people to need to take breaks.
- Individuals cannot “come and go” during this exercise. They must be present for the entire experience to participate.



CREDITS

A special thanks to Professor Noel Tichy and the Sanger Leadership Center at the University of Michigan who first introduced me to the exercise of “timelining”, from which this activity was inspired.

CONTACT

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