



THE METHODOLOGY OF LOVE

By Matthew Wesley

The family meeting looked like it was about to unravel. One of the children claimed the need to confront his siblings about slights and defects real and imagined. Others seemed to think this was necessary as well. Earlier they had all told me that they had no interest in “dredging up the past” and they were adamantly opposed to doing anything “touchy-feely”. But now, in the middle of the family retreat, these concerns were a distant memory and the perception was that no real progress would be made without opening the old wounds and digging into the pain.

In many ways, they were right. The work done to that point in the meeting was polite, considered, and rational. They had developed a set of good nominal agreements to improve communication going forward. This work was clearly important for the family to engage in, but it also wasn’t ultimately sufficient to get them where they needed to go.

As with most families we work with, they were seeking to control the chaotic emotions underneath the surface with agreements and structures. We actually endorse this approach – we almost always start there – but we also find that oftentimes the chaotic dynamics will undo these “structural” fixes. In the cases where structural fixes alone work – and there are some – we don’t need to get into the more emotional aspects of family dynamics. These families can make the structural solutions work despite some messy emotional undercurrents. However this was clearly not going to be one of those families. After creating some good agreements, they realized that they were whitewashing deeper problems. This family was actually ahead of schedule. There was history to be resolved and they wanted to do that work now.

What was most apparent was a degree of latent anger and resentment and waves of thinly veiled low grade hostility that seemed to boil beneath the surface. There was clearly a great deal of love in this family, and a real desire for greater closeness – and pain caused by their separation – but there was also substantial “dynamic”. This dynamic was based on patterns of behavior, roles, and undeclared hurts that had been pent up for a long time. We were aware of all of this dynamic from the interviews we did before we met and I had half-expected what was happening now. It was becoming clear that whatever agreements were developed – no matter

how mutually beneficial they might objectively be – these would not survive the deeper currents of raw, unaddressed emotion. Sabotage was in the air.

Ideally, I would have liked to have said to them that they were not yet ready for this kind of more emotional work; that they needed some solid learning about such things as active listening skills, the art of non-violent communication and the practice of difficult conversations. This was, of course, all true. It was also beside the point. The time was now and the family was demanding something then. This could not be put off.

Because it was late in the day and everyone was tired, I suggested that we wrap up some loose ends, but come back to this in the morning. They agreed.

What this family was asking for is what we have come to call reconciliation work. Reconciliation requires a deft kind of facilitation. While most facilitators talk of the creation of “safe” space, the work of reconciliation requires something else entirely. For most facilitators “safe space” is, roughly speaking, the creation of a social environment where everyone feels they will be emotionally protected and that rules will be followed which allow them to express themselves without blame or judgment. What had been created during the day was indeed “safe” – people felt free to speak their minds in a way that allowed everyone to have a voice. The agreements we had formed were collaborative and positive. People listened to each other and the conversations were thoughtful, engaged, lively, humorous, and productive. Indeed, it has been my experience that if “safe” space is not created and sustained, the issues of reconciliation are unlikely to emerge at all. The past remains buried and “touchy-feely” is held safely at bay. The fact that the family was asking to move in this direction was a clear sign that they had felt “safe”.

The problem, of course, is that reconciliation is inherently unsafe. It is not “safe” for the facilitator and it certainly not “safe” for the participants. From the perspective of the family it seems literally, “out of control” in that anything can happen and that the unexpected will emerge. For the skilled facilitator, while this is dangerous territory, it is also familiar territory and the facilitator knows how to navigate it. Every time we enter this space with a family, we do so with a deep respect for what we all are about to enter.

While the space is not “safe”, we find that, for reconciliation to work, the space must be “sacred”. In the ancient tales, sacred space was anything but safe – sacred space was the threshold of the unknown and it almost always tore one’s world apart. This level of sacred space has always been the point where one leaves the ordinary world and begins to move on into dangerous ground. It involves moving beyond one’s comfort zone. But this movement also carries within it the promise of the hero’s journey – the redemptive turn-around that shifts everything.

When families enter this space, there isn't the security of safe space – rather, in the beginning there is deep anxiety that charges the atmosphere. People circle warily. Fear swirls. Danger is close at hand. That fear and danger must be contained – and it is the facilitator's job to provide that container. Fortunately, there is a great deal that has been learned about this work. The facilitator has tools to create sacred space and while this will not make the space “safe” in the traditional sense, it does make it transformative.

Most of what we know about these containers comes from reconciliation that has occurred in the aftermath of civil violence in war torn or despotic states. Here reconciliation happens in the aftermath of genocide, death squads, mass political rape and a host of horrors beyond our imaginings. If some degree of reconciliation is possible in these extreme circumstances, then the same techniques can be applied to families.

While there is a great deal that can be learned from these processes, we would like to focus on two aspects in particular. Both rely, at their heart, on storytelling. The essence of reconciliation work lies not in a linear process of planning and agreements, but in a kind of recursive and aggregative recounting of personal experience tied to the broader social context.

The first movement of this process has to do with a kind of witnessing. This is fundamentally a “masculine” move. Matt has been privileged on occasion to be with men when they have shared deeply with one another – and we are not speaking of the occasional problems they face – but the deepest pains of radical doubt and existential alienation that are not amenable to easy solutions. Every time this has happened, the men who were listening didn't console, didn't intrude, didn't problem solve, didn't joke and didn't advise. They simply witnessed – they respected the person enough to simply let the pain stand as pain that belonged to that person. They served as witnesses to the story. These levels of vulnerability are rare territory for most men but they do exist.

This witnessing, we have found, is the first movement of the reconciliation process. Each family member must tell his or her story and the family must simply witness that story, no matter how painful or angry it might be. These stories must be in the first person – fundamentally they are stories of self-disclosure. Each story must be allowed to be as it is, without any attempt to intervene or manage or fix or even address. Those family members who want to avoid the pain by not speaking cannot be allowed to get away with it – it is the facilitator's job to confront evasion and elicit deep candor.

As people tell their stories, and as these stories circle one another, inter-penetrate and weave themselves in recursive patterns, something remarkable begins to occur. What started as anxiety and anger and sadness begins to become something else. Pure witnessing begins to give way to compassion and understanding (literally to “stand under” in support of another rather than stand over them). The pain becomes evident and the more “feminine” move to embrace and reintegrate that pain emerges. This recognition of common ground – common pain – gives rise to a kind of “communion”. As this emerges, the room is often quite still. A palpable sense of

peace descends as if the participants have been drained of their negative juju. Often that is followed by a kind of cathartic release with lots of laughter and even joy.

This process is not technically therapeutic (though it may feel like a kind of healing). It is, instead a temporary affective state – a short lived experience of a particular kind of sacred closeness or collective redemption. The experience, by itself, solves none of the family’s problems. It doesn’t necessarily result in any immediate breakthroughs in the issues the family is dealing with. There is still a great deal of the more linear work to be done.

What it does do however, is change the nature of the conversation. The “flavor” of family dialog changes. There is more patience, more openness, more understanding, and more honesty. It makes these conversations more adaptive and more resilient. And it turns out that these changes can be remarkably durable. The experience is seared into the memory of the family and gives them both hope and fortitude to move forward.

The following day we turned such a corner with the family. They spoke candidly with one another. They told stories and people witnessed before we had a breakthrough. For the first time they spoke as a family about some issues that had long been ignored. We didn’t resolve much of anything that day in the sense of coming to conclusions – we had come to some agreements the day before – but we actually did the work that was necessary for those agreements to be kept. The family still needs to learn skills of active listening and how to have difficult conversations, but the context for that training has now radically shifted. The shared experience of the family is now flavoring what they are doing together.

Matthew Wesley is the founder of The Wesley Group. He graduated from Stanford Law School and practiced as an estate planning attorney with successful families for over 20 years. Matt left active practice to help families do what estate documents alone could not - help to ensure successful intergenerational wealth transfer. In addition to his legal background, Matt has extensive consulting experience and a deep background in psychology, personal development and family systems, and organizational communication and development. Matt works closely with his wife, Marcia, who is a licensed psychologist with over 20 years of counseling experience.

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