

Cultural Daily

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An Affirmation Circle

Phyllis Cremer · Wednesday, January 24th, 2018

“Blacks aren’t good enough.”

Between the record heat of the summer’s evening or dealing with this little white boy for three days, I’m about to lose it. This is the worst affirmation circle that I have facilitated in three years!

My big brown eyes locked into his baby blue eyes, through a toothy smile, and somehow I managed to ask, “Patrick, did you really believe that I’m not good enough?”

An affirmation circle is usually done as a final activity after a significant group experience. The significant experience was a Jesus Camp for Roman Catholic Youth. In the circle, each group member shares a compliment, a note of appreciation, or words of encouragement. Patrick wanted to be the last one to say something to me. Everything was going well, until I heard his comment about me.

The theme for this year’s camp was “Make a Difference.” My role was simple. I was to lead a group of six participants ranging from fifteen to thirty years of age, including a mom of three, through three days filled with team building activities, leadership development exercises, and small group discussions about our talents and gifts.

My group was white and I was their black small group facilitator. In fact, it didn’t surprise me that I was the only black facilitator of out of twenty facilitators. The other five black participants were a part of the group of one-hundred sixty. Within twenty-four hours of leading my group, we discovered the things that we had in common: Catholic, lived in California, loved to go to Disneyland, anything Star Wars was perfect, eating popsicles, and dancing in a sudden rain shower on the second day of camp.

The irony of the theme, however, didn’t escape me. It kept my emotions in check for most the time until I heard Patrick’s confession. I thought to myself, “Not again!”

Patrick tried to get out of every activity and discussion. “Yes, I do have to go the bathroom again!” Or “I forgot my journal in my room!” After his third excuse to leave the group, I realized that he would be a problem. So, within a few minutes after he left, I sent a group member to bring him back. Of course, the group member that I sent to find Patrick never found him going to his room or the restroom. They found Patrick wandering around the camp talking to other people.

Patrick realized after the Trust Walk on the second day, I wasn’t going to back down. I purposely

paired myself with Patrick to guide him blindfolded through an obstacle course.

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Patrick fought me every step of the way. He didn't want to hold my hand, so I pulled him by his t-shirt. While we were walking he decided to move ahead of me, until I broke a fall by pulling him back. After a moment to gather ourselves, I calmly and gently whispered in his ear and asked him, "Stop fighting me and just work with me." I'm not sure if it was the fall or being tired of me, but Patrick took my hand and relaxed it in mine. We completed our walk in silence.

Being a Juvenile Hall counselor and parish youth minister, I expected Patrick's attitude. What surprised me was feeling an undercurrent of anger from him. "What did I do to him and why was he here?"

"You can't say that!" shouted Betsy through her tears. She was a perky, five-foot blonde cheerleader from a small town in the Central Valley. "Phyllis is the best group leader because I asked all my friends and their groups weren't as good as ours." The others just shook their heads in agreement.

"I know that she's the best leader, and I'm sorry for what I said and did." Patrick's tall, lanky body couldn't stand any longer and he just fell to his knees on the soft green grass. Somehow as he fell to the ground, in one graceful movement, Patrick grabbed my hands and held on to them as we sat together on the ground. Patrick's voice started to stammer while holding back his tears, "Oh no, not now. That's what I thought before I met you, and definitely not after what we've been through these past few days."

I can't believe he really said "after what we've been through." Did I hear him correctly? "Okay, I heard what you said, but Patrick what did you do?"

Patrick blinked his eyes and tightened his grip on my hands. "I went to other groups to see if they would take me. Honest, I really thought this was going to be a bad group. The black people I know can't do what you do."

"Ok, so you stayed with the group because no one else wanted you?" I asked him.

"Yeah, I guess you can say that, but I was glad that they made me stay with you." Now the rest of the group had sat down around us, making the circle tighter and closer. Patrick was holding my hands tighter, bringing me closer to him.

"Both my two brothers and I used to run home as fast we could after school, so we wouldn't get beat up by the black kids on our street. What did we do to them, but move on their street?" Patrick's mom, he said, had moved to a predominately black neighborhood after she divorced their dad.

After a while things got better for them, and Patrick told us how he made friends on the block and got a best friend named Charles. Patrick had then fallen in love with Charles's sister and shortly after she became pregnant. A few months ago, they got in a big argument and now she wouldn't let him see his little 18-month old daughter, Aleya.

“If anything, black people don’t seem to like me. But I never met a black person like you before. I just didn’t want to be pushed away again.” After a few hugs from the other group members, Patrick seemed exhausted, but relieved. The next day, I knew things were different for Patrick by the way he said good-bye before boarding the school bus that was taking him and his group back to San Francisco.

On the way back home from camp traveling on the I-5 with my group, I had a lot to think about. If I had let every negative experience that I have had with a white person shape my world view, I would have been lost in a circle of hate. I was fortunate to have a few “Patrick” moments with some trusted white people who gave me opportunities to build on the strengths that were deep inside me. And I used those strengths to help begin the healing process for an angry young man. I called Patrick a few weeks after we got home. We spoke briefly. He was able to see his daughter.

Maybe, just maybe, my affirmation circle was the best one that I had ever facilitated.

*Patrick, Betsy, and Charles are not their real names.

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