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Reframing the Past¹

Introduction: If you've ever spent time in a frame shop picking out a frame, you know how different frames around the same painting can create an entirely different effect or mood. Re-contextualizing our life is very much like reframing² a picture. Our memories of past events carry with them a context. We can change the context by expanding our view. We can free ourselves from painful burdens as we realize the many powerful ways in which events that we had interpreted as negative, may have brought us some positive things: i.e. expanded wisdom, new opportunities. By re-looking at old, painful events we can find pearls of wisdom, new learning. We can heal ourselves.

Aim of the Exercise: To assist participants in grasping the idea that by changing how we see our past, we can, change our relationship to the events, circumstances, people, that caused us pain.

Materials:

- Pictures: You will need a picture (painting or drawing) that including 2 or more people as its subject matter. The picture should be realistic enough to suggest "people" but abstract enough to allow for creative interpretation of who these people might be. Do NOT use a photograph. FREE clip art is a very good source for pictures. Size the picture to fit in an 8X10 frame. Print out two copies of the picture.
- Frames: Purchase 2 frames with mats, and two easel stands. I found both the frames and the easels at a "Dollar Store". One frame and mat should be "cheerful and light", the other "dark and gloomy".

Lesson Plan³:

- Divide the group in half. Physically separate the groups in the room, so that each can have a private discussion. Have each group sit in a circle.
- Pass out one of the framed pictures to each group. Instruct the group members that they are NOT to allow anyone from the other group to see their picture.
- Each group should pass their picture around to each member in their own circle.
- Each group member should tell their own group their impression of the picture, for example:
 - Who are the people in the picture?
 - What are they doing ?
 - What is their relationship to each other?
 - What is their gender, age, race?
- Ask one person in each group to act as scribe. The scribe's job is to jot down each person's response to the picture. Most important: Who are these people? What is their relationship to each other? What are they doing?
- When the scribe of each group has notified you that each person's response has been recorded, collect the pictures from each group.
- Reconvene as one group. Do NOT let either group see the other group's picture.
- Ask each scribe to give a report of what their group members thought about their group's picture.
- When both scribes have reported to the group, place the two framed pictures on easels in front of the group, so all can see both pictures.
- Ask for comments about the pictures.

Points for Discussion:

- The pictures were identical, only the frames were different. By re-framing a picture we can change the way we think and feel about it
- We can not change the “facts” of the past, we can change how we relate to those facts
- Reframing the past is NOT fantasizing or twisting the facts
- Reframing the past IS: Looking at the facts with new eyes
- Reframing the past can be an aide to forgiveness. We do not “forget” the painful event, we look at it from a broader perspective.
- You may wish to introduce the following quotes, as discussion prompters as well

“When you are young and vulnerable, you see the world as being either for or against you, and this view is reinforced when people do hurtful things or betray you. When you approach old age and climb the platform of broader understanding, you can reexamine and contemplate your foundational view of the world and re-contextualize what happened to you from a more objective less impulse-driver philosophical position. In this way you do not have to remain imprisoned in your earlier conclusions about life “ — Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi

“If you look at the world in a new way, you will see a new world, and you will be a new part of that new world.”— Dr. Robert C. Sohn

Endnotes

¹ This lesson plan was created and developed by Lorri Danzig CSL of Let it Shine Journeys.

² I have found that the concept of “recontextualizing” the past is difficult for folks to grasp. Instead, I use the term “reframing” the past, and have met with greater success in conveying this important concept.

³ I begin the exercise without introduction, so as not to influence the participants thinking or responses to the picture.