THE POWER OF STORIES

Director's Brief: INFO 287, Spring 2021

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OBJECTIVE

The 'why' of this brief

Using the power of stories to help bring library patrons closure over the collective traumas of recent years

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

For now, it's good for you to know

For those unable to receive therapy, due to emotional or financial reasons, support groups have always been a commendable alternative in supporting mental health (MHA, 2021). Harnessing the power of stories, support groups –either held by private citizens or directed by licensed professionals- have provided a way for those suffering through trauma and its aftermath to share their struggles, and in that way ease their burdens.

From the years 2019 to 2021, the world has been mired in extraordinary collective traumas.

Even with equally impressive blessings mixed in, the legal orders to isolate due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Blanco & Bellack, 2020) have made it harder for people to find a safe space to discuss in their own words what has been happening (Prideaux, 2021; Kaiser Permanente, 2021).

Providing a round-robin storytelling method where people need not meet their collaborators –thus, keeping responses anonymous- will make this Community Support Service an open and welcoming event that will give library patrons an outlet to perform the catharsis they need to find closure by being encouraged to understand their feelings are worth consideration (Staley, 2016).

INTRODUCTION

Beginning, again

Healing begins with understanding, and language is still the most accessible technology towards that end (Shera, 2018). It is the reason why therapy and support groups are recommended by mental health professionals, because the methods "bring together people who are dealing with similar issues or concerns in a safe environment… potentially helping you to increase… self-awareness and… gain a sense of community" (Gifford, 2019). As a public institution, it is well within the library's mission to provide a similar service for our patrons to process and celebrate these past years.
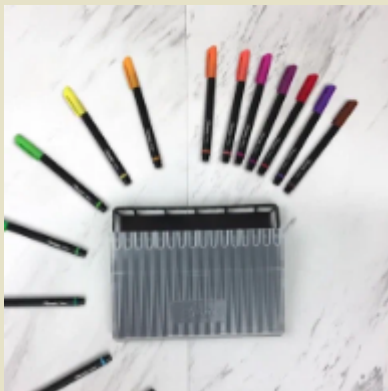

Even the darkest night will end and the sun will rise.

- Victor Hugo

BODY

getting into it

This Community Support Service requires mostly elementary technologies: paper (presentation boards and index cards), tape, string, pens, and language. By writing/printing out 10-15 of the most impactful international collective traumas and blessings from 2019 to 2021 on the presentation boards and mounting them at head height on bare walls, visitors can contribute their responses on index cards and tape them directly to a topic, or use string to connect to another card, indicating a reply to someone else. Further instructions will be to keep responses respectful and anonymous, to feel free to use as many cards and answer to as many topics they would like, and to express in any language they can. For those who do not wish to share their thoughts, they are still welcome to take their time reading the response chains building up through the day. At the end of business hours, for 14 days, a member of library staff or a volunteer will take the accumulated responses and type them up onto the library's blog. Once Community Support Service ends, a book will be made of them all. A half-dozen hard copies will be printed to join the library's collection, a few of which could be displayed in the front lobby for the next year, until we provide the Service again.

Users should understand that there is no pressure to write anything in any way. All the Service asks for is a response of any length participants find comfortable. There is only one negative issue I feel is worth mentioning: there may be unkind or radical responses that could trigger people already made introspectively emotional by the presented traumas and blessings. This is something to be discussed with our community outreach coordinator and those within our staff and volunteer corps who interact often with patrons. That way, we can measure a baseline of what is inappropriate and task someone to loosely monitor responses (once an hour seems reasonable) for the blatantly inflammatory.

Collective traumas and blessings that could be presented (CNN, 2019, 2020; Wikipedia, n.d.) are:

1. The 2019 US government shutdown
2. Continuation of the Syrian and Yemen Civil Wars
3. The massacres at Linwood and Kilbirnie Mosques in New Zealand and their parliaments subsequent banning of military-style semi-automatic weapons
4. First picture of a black hole, at the center of M87, 55 million lightyears away
5. Overcrowding of migrants at US Border Patrol Stations
6. Hong Kong protests against a controversial extradition bill that was withdrawn
7. Christina Koch does the first ever female spacewalk
8. The COVID-19 epidemic
9. Murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and too many other POCs
10. 2020 California wildfires
11. Death of Ruth Bader Ginsburg
12. People braving all odds to vote in the 2020 US Presidential Election
13. COVID-19 vaccinations (Pfizer/BioNTech) begin in the UK
14. January 6 Attack on the US Capitol
15. The US rejoins the Paris Agreement

In The Library Story –a toolkit compiled by the State Library of Pennsylvania, Altoona Public Library, and the Get Storied team-, their Introduction featured a list of 'Top 10 Ways You Can Use This Storytelling Toolkit', of which I find number 8 the most compelling: 'Educate and interact with community members'. My proposed Community Support Service fits this suggestion most readily. Though, given time, the round-robin storytelling method can be applied to the other nine, especially with numbers 2 (helping patrons get into other cultural holiday spirits), 3 (as user research before launching programs), and 7 (a monthly set-up in the staff room to let my people feel heard).

Also, "The Power of Story" (Segarra, 2018) mentioned how neuroscientist Paul Zak's research discovered that 'well-told stories release oxytocin, the neurochemical that tells the brain it's safe to trust someone'. If the Service succeeds in strengthening our patrons' trust in our abilities to help their connecting with life, then it will show how our use of the low-tech round-robin method could spell clearly to the world that our library –and libraries in general- have a future. Not to mention, according to Steve Denning (2015) in "Do We Need Libraries?", the central goal of organizations in the new(er) Creative Economy 'is to delight the user or customer'. The Service is specifically designed to ease our patrons' collective emotional burdens.

VOCABULARY

or related terms
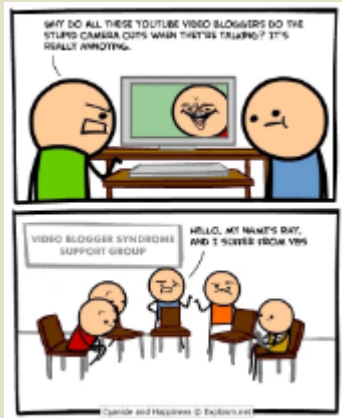
Collective trauma- an event so devastating it destabilizes society and causes a 'crisis of meaning' through a change in collective memory that leads to a society's self-redefinition, which is different between what happens to victims and perpetrators (Hirshberger, 2018)

Therapy- aka. 'psychotherapy' is a treatment that involves talking one's way out of emotional distress and mental health issues (Psychology Today, 2021)

Support groups- where people with similar experiences come together to exchange stories, coping strategies, and/or treatment information (Mayo Clinic, 2021)

Round-robin storytelling- a collaboration between multiple writers who add to the story in rounds. This style originated in the 19th century and is most prevalent in science fiction. It is also popular during sleepovers and over campfires (Wikipedia, n.d.)

CONCLUSION

wrapping up

The power of stories can help library patrons process the extraordinary collective traumas of the past recent years, 2019 to early 2021. Support groups have been proven to provide safe environments where people dealing with similar issues can gather to share stories and coping strategies, a method that can be recreated safely, through anonymous submission, in a library. Through simple crafting, this Community Support Service will encourage patrons to tell their stories and to connect with others confessions of grief, joy and hope.
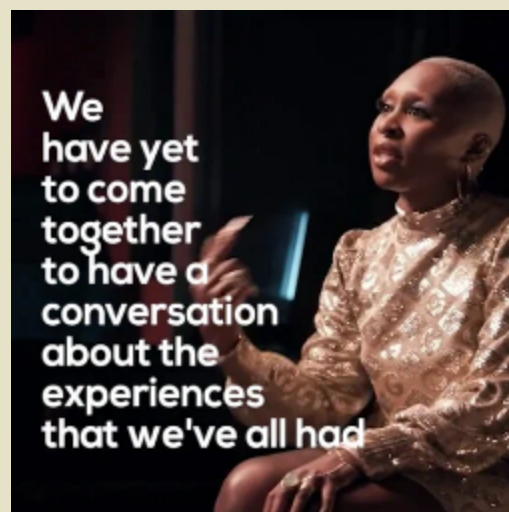
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