

# Overview of Reconciliation Process Groups (RPG)

## Basic Assumptions of RPG

**RPG is a forum.** A Reconciliation Process Group (RPG) is designed to be a group experience. The overall goal of RPG is to help people heal in areas of wounding through a shared interpersonal process. More specifically, it is a forum for the healing process of reconciliation. Where can you go to safely and constructively work through the volatile issues surrounding reconciliation? RPG is intended to be a platform for that process.

**RPG attends to Wounds.** Fundamental to the RPG design is the notion that if trauma is in the history of people it can lead to a spiritual brokenness. Much of what is “broken” spiritually has to do with disruptions in individual and/or corporate spiritual development. (Emotional, psychological, and even physical health and healing are all addressed in this approach but spirituality is pointed out here because it is often neglected or unrecognized and usually underlies the wounds in each of the other areas.) One way spiritual brokenness can be illustrated is by how we answer the core questions of our lives. Consider questions such as, (1) Am I safe? (2) Do I belong? (3) Do I have a meaningful purpose in life? These are some of the defining developmental questions of our lives. In the course of our lives, if we have answered these questions negatively, or in a self-destructive manner, it may indicate the need for spiritual healing. Consider these examples: (1) *“No, I’m not safe, emotionally, socially, or otherwise. The world is a dangerous place and I am in constant danger. Instead of peace there is fear, instead of contentment there is anger and rage”*. For (2) *“I don’t fit in. Not anywhere. There must be something truly wrong with me”*. And (3) *“My life is meaningless. When I die no one will notice or care. It will be as though I never existed”*. The spiritual “bones” in these examples have been broken. From these broken bones come other forms of brokenness, the brokenness mental health and substance abuse, human suffering from broken health, the brokenness of social ills that we all face.

**RPG assumes as innate healing ability.** Another idea fundamental to RPG is the assertion of an *innate healing process* for spiritual injuries analogous to the physical healing processes we commonly think of. Physical healing is not only familiar; it is a metaphor illustrating the innate spiritual healing process, the God-given capacity to heal. People have long known that physical healing happens and can be facilitated, or hindered, by how we respond to injuries. A broken bone that is properly set and attended to can heal and the injured limb restored to new use. We can readily see how this metaphor might be applied to emotional injuries, but what about applying a healing process to broken “spiritual bones”? We claim (in this model) to have an innate healing drive applicable to all levels of the human experience. Our deepest issues push forward within us and clamor for attention. When we are ready (and have the formerly missing resources in hand) healing can happen within all parts of our being. Inner safety can be achieved. Meaningfully bonding to our world can happen.

**RPG addresses generational trauma.** Often, if not usually, the roots of our deepest injuries go back generations and can affect generations yet to come. RPG attempts to incorporate this generational perspective into its model for healing. One way this is done is to look at seven generations. The seven generations in mind here are broken down into the three past generations, the current generation seeking healing, and the next three generations to come. Taken together, these seven generations form one “footprint in history”. The present generation is influenced by the great grandparents who came before and will in turn have influence on their own great grandchildren who are still to come. This single seven-generation “footprint” in history easily covers 200 years. But this one footprint does not happen in isolation from its past or its future.

Our great grandparents were also influenced themselves by their ancestors who lived in the preceding seven-generation footprint to our own. Our current 200 year footprint links back to the preceding 200 year period through our great-grandparents. Our great grandchildren will link us to the next seven-generation footprint coming in the future. In only three seven-generation footprints, each being 200 years of influence, a picture of 600 years of impact is quickly painted.

When I think of my own great grandfather whom I personally never met I am struck by the impact he has had on my entire family living today. We all carry his Indian name as our surname. He was born into the last generation of our Pawnee Indian Tribe that lived to adulthood in our traditional homeland. In his day we were removed from the land we had lived in for thousands of years. His children (one of whom was my grandfather, whom I did know) was born into the first generation of our tribe making the painful adjustments to living as refugees in a new place that was not their native home. It was a hard time. It was a time of death. The Pawnee nation had dropped in numbers from as many as 25,000 in the late 1700s (the foot print in history just before my own) while still in Nebraska to 604 people surviving the threat of extinction in Oklahoma. My grandfather knew about death. At an early age his mother died. He had younger and older siblings that died before they were old enough to be out of childhood. He saw this as a child himself. He lived and grew up with traumatized people as he tried to make sense of his own traumatic losses. A whole way of life was in a death grip. And out of those times my father was born. He didn't know the life my great grandfather lived because those days were irretrievably gone. He knew them only through the remains of the culture of those times still being practice in his time. Much of those lifeways already were swept away by the onslaught of history that had crashed down on us as a people. When I was born I knew even less of my great grandfather's day and times. But the consequences of all those years of trauma were very present on my landscape. I didn't know where all the hardness (the fear, the anger, the shame, the destructive dysfunctional behaviors) came from. I just knew it was there. If my birth year was year-zero of my seven-generational footprint (year-zero for me being 1951) there is roughly 100 years of history already in play for me at birth. My great grandfather was born in the 1850s. I now

have grandchildren. They all know me. They certainly know my children, their parents, who are raising them. My influence as a parent in shaping my children is likely the single-most impactful influence in their growing up years. Now that impact (for better or for worse) is in play for my grandkids. In many ways I had become like my father as I raised my kids, just my dad did when he raised me. The impact of the former generations upon me had powerful and direct impact on my kids. Now they are raising my grandkids. God willing, in the next 15 years or so I will likely meet my first great grandbaby. I will be the great grandfather. I will be 75 years old. As I stand in my place in history it is obvious to me that the great grandbaby I await will have a lifetime of experience just as I have had. I fully expect that child to live to be a great grandparent too. So, from my year-zero (1951) this future person will live to be my age, placing that person's death 150 years from year-zero of my seven-generation footprint. In my own personal example, from 100 year before my birth (1851) to 150 years after my birth (2201)—250 years—lies an unbroken chain of impact. That is just one footprint.

I can't think about my own healing without knowing that the wounds within me started before I was even born. The healing of my wounds must be in a process that looks honestly at the wounds of my elders to fully understand my wounds. The healing that I hope to achieve in my lifetime is not something just for me to take to my grave. It is the soul of the legacy that I hope to leave to those yet to come. It is my hope that whatever healing I experience today will not stop with me but will roll across the generational lines for many years to come, ever expanding as God blesses those who are yet unborn. It is this same hope that is the soul of the RPG model—healing the past in the present to heal the future.

Following is a brief outline of each phase of implementation of the RPG model.

## How RPG Works

**Introduction to RPG:** RPG is designed around a three-axial system of principles. Each axis must be balanced to bring overall balance to the whole system. Attention is given to each axis in sequence. **Axis-One** (the principles of Truth and Listening) begins with the need for acknowledgement of the full Truth. Acknowledgement is in tension with denial. Acknowledgement verses denial is the first polarity to resolve in the task of balancing the system. As the Truth is identified a pressure is built to have appropriate dialogue (the principle of Listening) about the Truth. Truth is now being balanced with the principle of Listening; Listening to the Truth. But having dialogue successfully has a tension of its own, the tendency to isolate from each other in groups of *us versus them* as a pseudo form of safety. Dialogue verses isolation is the second polarity to resolve on axis-one. Acknowledgement with appropriate dialogue brings balance to axis-one.

Balance on one axis creates a need for balance in other parts of the system. **Axis-Two** (with the principles of Change and Vision) begins with grieving. Grieving is the natural response to Listening to the

Truth. Axis-two will remain out of balance until grieving is joined by acceptance. The polarity between active grieving and avoidance of grief (the first polarity on the Change/Vision axis) is the next polarity to resolve, which when resolved puts the principle of Change into motion. When acceptance emerges from healthy grieving it puts axis-two into balance. However, acceptance is in tension with dysfunctionally coping with grief, making acceptance verses dysfunction the second polarity to resolve on axis-two. Dysfunction is meant to cover a very broad range of behaviors. Dysfunction at this point in the process is disastrous. RPG sees much, if not most, of what brings people into counseling as having its roots in unresolved trauma and ungrieved grief. Out of unresolved trauma and ungrieved grief come depression, anxiety disorders, addictive coping mechanisms, and all types of unhealthy ways of coping with pain that just won't go away or heal. Achieving a healthy outcome to active grieving (acceptance of a new future) can help us avoid lots of dysfunction and implements the second principle of axis-two, Vision. Vision is a new way to see a future with hope in it.

This brings us to the final axis in the RPG model. **Axis-Three** (and the principles of Dignity and Power) begins with forgiveness. Because there has been a profound process at work, this is not a superficial or easy forgiveness. It is a healing forgiveness. Perhaps obviously, forgiveness is in tension with unforgiveness, the next polarity. RPG sees forgiveness as healing for the forgiver and a powerful means of securing an internal sense of personal Dignity. People suffering from trauma have so often been robbed of their sense of Dignity. Successfully grieving (on axis-two) does not automatically mean forgiveness will happen. Forgiveness is its own process. However, even Dignity, once achieved and grounded in forgiveness, will remain out of balance if it can find no outlets for expression. All the work done in this tri-axial journey comes to a head on axis-three. A person on this journey is now in touch with a sense of their personal Power, the final principle. How will this Power be used? Action within healthy and appropriate boundaries (solidarity) brings balance to axis-three. This also brings us to the final polarity, solidarity verses conflict. Unforgiveness can produce tremendous volumes of conflict. We need only to look at world history, one seven generation footprint following another, to see that this is true. In the light of what was said and done on axis-one (Listening to the Truth), forgiveness on axis-three can lead to a powerful solidarity in a community. The RPG model sees, in healing, a redirection of energy that once fueled war now empowering peace. How will personal Power be used? Will we invest in conflict, or in empowerment for wholeness in the world around us? The character of our impact within our spheres of influence is shaped by that choice.

## **Phases of RPG Implementation**

The program of RPG is distributed over three phases. Recall that group interaction is built into the design of RPG. People that are bonded in community can experience tremendous healing and support for ongoing recovery. Action taken alone is good. Action taken in community can be even better. The following segment is a very brief outline of each of the three phases of the RPG process.

### Phase-1 “Fundamentals of Change”

To attend a process group<sup>1</sup> designed to meet the following goals:

1. Goal: To learn the reconciliation healing model as taught in this project
  - a. Principles in Balance
  - b. Polarities in Tension
  - c. Positive and Negative Resolution
  - d. Generational healing
2. Goal: To identify with and bond with a diverse group
3. Goal: To learn and practice essential interpersonal communication skills that facilitate a robust and successful process group
4. Goal: To experience the potential for healing that can be found in a functioning process group

### Phase-2 “Stations of Healing”

To attend a focus group<sup>2</sup> designed around reconciliation. Six additional goals of positive resolution are incorporated into this phase:

#### Axis-one: Balancing **Truth**-telling with true **Listening**

1. Goal: Breaking the silence by resolving *Acknowledgement vs Denial*
2. Goal: Building a safe “culture of healing” in the group, resolving *Dialogue vs Isolation*

#### Axis-two: Balancing the need for **Change** with a new **Vision**

3. Goal: Group support to face the emotional pain, resolving *Grieving vs Avoiding Grief*
4. Goal: Developing a personal and communal vision of peace, *Acceptance vs Dysfunction*

#### Axis-three: Balancing **Dignity** with **Power** that supports and empowers lasting change

5. Goal: Finding personal and collective freedom, *Forgiveness vs Unforgiveness*
6. Goal: Common bonds in action, resolving *Solidarity vs Conflict*

These six additional goals mark crucial developmental achievements along a pathway to healing. The healing process is guided by the six key words (bolded) above, the principles of healing that the RPG model is built upon.

### Phase-3 “Community Health and Healing”

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<sup>1</sup> By “process group” it is meant a therapeutic group that shares feelings from unresolved wounds, but in a structured and safe environment. It differs from a didactic group, which is more structured around lesson plans. However, it can periodically include educational segments important to the support of the group process. In a process group, value is placed upon the journey (the process of healing), in addition to the final outcome.

<sup>2</sup> A “focus group” is simply a process group targeting a specific topic such as racial reconciliation. This same format could also be used to address healing from past sexual abuse, grief and loss, trauma, etc.

This phase takes the RPG skills and goals and uses them in service to others on an ongoing basis. Active solidarity is central to this phase. Putting social and spiritual values into action through individual and collective efforts will aid in creating the changes needed in our communities. Phase 3 is about finding creative outlets to exercise new healing and new growth grounded in a sense of community that links us to each other. In this phase the group meets periodically to share progress and give support to ongoing projects.

## **Summary**

Many people have unmet needs around personally painful issues but do not have access to a safe and structured forum to address their issues, especially issues stemming from historical trauma. This program outlines an attempt to provide the missing forum. *Phase-1* is designed to help people learn the skills needed to safely and successfully engage with unresolved and troubling issues. *Phase-2* is designed to put these new “skills” (learned in Phase-1) to work on targeted issues, in the context of a safe supportive community (the RPG group). *Phase-3* is a means of helping other people to deepen their healing, by meaningfully sharing and deepening our own healing journeys.