

## Project History

Towards Understanding and Healing is a relatively new project, which resulted from the collaborative work of several organisations over a number of years. Launched in 2000 by Derry City Council and Holywell Trust, the project looked for ways to allow people to come to terms with, and make sense of, the legacy of conflict and its consequences in Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland and wider Great Britain. In order to do this, a diverse range of people were brought together for a series of dialogue-based residentials and conferences. The format was simple, but effective—participants shared their stories with people representing all aspects of the Troubles in an atmosphere that was both safe and respectful. Guest facilitators from a variety of international conflicts and post-conflict situations provided insight into personal and collective healing. What resulted was powerful and effective. As one participant reported, **“Sometimes the only way to respond to the truthful telling of a story is with your own story.”**

## Project Aims:

- To facilitate the coming together of individuals from diverse groups to tell and hear stories in a safe environment.
- To facilitate a dialogue that allows people to be listened to whilst creating opportunities



for the exploration of each other's ideology, perceptions, attitudes and sense of history.

- To develop strategies that enable individuals to access further support structures which allow them to move forward.
- To maintain ongoing links and create new links to look at ways of sharing ideas, models and structures at local, national and international levels; and to continually learn from other people's post-conflict experience.

## What People Are Saying About Storytelling

**“I had discussions with people who I never thought I would have access to meet and it was a very moving experience.”**

*“I was touched at a deep level hearing other people's stories and relating my own experiences, some of which remain surprisingly raw.”*

***I took away great learning about what people were living with and how many stories have been silenced.”***

**“I found it very harrowing, but also enlightening—I gained a better understanding about people's loss and suffering.”**

Contact Towards Understanding and Healing

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Towards  
Understanding and Healing

## The Storytelling Process



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## Storytelling as a Healing Process

The Northern Ireland conflict has hurt and damaged many people, not only in Northern Ireland but also in the Republic of Ireland, the United Kingdom and wider afield. Because of this, it is important for those affected by the Troubles to begin a personal healing process.

For healing, people need to be given space to tell their stories; remember their hurts and be accepted, respected and heard. Towards Understanding and Healing emphasises the need to listen to each other and to open our minds to other perspectives, encouraging understanding and healing of hurts.

Community healing should acknowledge the existence of two kinds of trauma: the kind caused by suffering, but also the kind caused by hurting others. It also requires listening to,

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*“Healing means the creation of an empty but friendly space where those who suffer can tell their story to someone who can listen with real attention.”*

*- Henri Nouwan*

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and acknowledging, the traumatic experiences within communities as well as between communities (for example, between factions within nationalism/republicanism, unionism/loyalism and the security forces). It is also crucial to create spaces for victims/survivors such as mothers, wives and children of victims and perpetrators.

Towards Understanding and Healing focuses on healing communities and individuals by providing a safe space in which the healing process can begin and participants are empowered to move forward with their lives. The organisation provides space for sharing within communities and between communities. It breaks down traditional notions of what a “single identity” community is by bringing people together around commonalities that cross community lines.

## Why Storytelling?

Since the first years of the ceasefires in 1994, people have had time to reflect on thirty years of conflict and suffering that has affected and destroyed communities, families, and individuals from all over Northern Ireland and beyond.

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*“Listening is a gift we can give to people. Listening is also hospitality. It is the offering to someone of space in which to feel welcome, safe, free to be him/herself, to be listened to and to be heard.”*

*- Fr. Michael Lapsley, South Africa*

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Some were actively involved, others onlookers; many were bereaved or injured. All communities, in one way or another, have been affected. It is therefore important for us, if we are a society committed to rebuilding and redesigning that which has been destroyed or damaged, to hear and respect the different voices that are emerging from the conflict. We need to acknowledge that we still live in

a fragmented society with differences that still divide us, and we need to find a way of hearing and respecting each other’s differences if they are not to destroy us again.

All of us our born into our respective traditions and cultures so that they become a part of us and we apart of them. If the challenge of rebuilding and renewal is to be realised, then it is important that we find the openness and courage to listen to each other. Storytelling is important, not just as testimony to, and affirmation of, our individual and collective experience, but because it is the process through which we come to know ourselves and other people. Stories shape our identity, our emotions, our dreams, our hopes, and our desires. As we struggle to shape our future society, now is the time to explore these overlapping stories, ponder their meaning, and share with each other. Storytelling is the way we do this.

## How Does Storytelling Work?

Towards Understanding and Healing uses a very straight-forward, no gimmicks methodology. In small groups of about six people, participants are given the opportunity to talk about their life experiences in as much or as little detail as is comfortable. Each person can generally take as much time as is needed and speaks without interruptions. At the end, the speaker can decide whether or not to take questions or have any discussion about what they have shared.

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### Towards Understanding and healing commits to:

- Maintaining confidentiality from staff, volunteers, facilitators, and management.
- Using safe, neutral locations for all events.
- Using proper vetting procedures for all facilitators, staff, and volunteers.
- Supporting programme participants during and after events.
- Providing information about the organisation and its events to all programme participants.

### Storytelling in small groups can have a number of outcomes:

- It breaks down isolation
- It helps us get to know ourselves better learn about other stories
- It helps us to see our own uniqueness and our common humanity.
- It give us a more complete picture of the hurts caused by the conflict.
- It breaks down the fears that often are at the root of prejudice.
- It allows us to see each other as individual human beings and to detach the labels we use in conflict, such as “victim” or “perpetrator.”