

Stories THAT *Heal*

BY JONI BOKOVOY, DRPH

Once upon a time in Alaska, I experienced what most people only dream healthcare could be— true, whole person, caring care—and I learned the important connections of my story, my relationships, and my choices.

Several colleagues and I attended the annual Southcentral Foundation’s (SCF) Nuka System of Care conference in Anchorage, Alaska. I had heard and read about the Nuka organization for years. I knew it was a two-time winner of the prestigious Malcolm Baldrige Nation Quality Award®. Attending the conference, I was able to experience what they were doing to change health care to a true integrated health system that focuses on wellness, relationships, and whole-person care.

I was curious and wondered, “Could I learn something that would help me make better choices for my own health and well-being, something I could in turn share with others struggling to make lifestyle changes?” Turns out I could.

Learning Circles

What I experienced in three intense days was a process of learning and sharing my story that would help me be more accountable to myself and help me make better choices. I experienced the power of story in a safe environment and gained more insight into better ways of understanding and interacting with others. It was obvious that valuing and honoring healthy relationships is at the core of everything the SCF does. SCF describes its approach as “relationship-based, customer-owned” and can show that this approach transforms health care, improving outcomes and reducing costs. To do this the leaders developed a way of learning and connecting that is dubbed “learning circles.”

Learning circles are not new and in fact have been used by indigenous peoples for centuries. SCF took this concept of learning circles to create opportunities for people to connect and build relationships through a variety of activities that align with the SCF mission of “working together with the Native Community to achieve physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual wellness.” These circles consist of small groups of six-eight individuals who connect regularly to talk, share story, and learn from each other. Customer-owners and employees alike are encouraged to participate in learning circles.

Sharing Our Stories

So, what is different between a learning circle and any other health or wellness program? Here is what I experienced. It was personal and I felt so honored and respected by each member of the group. Each circle had one person who had experience being part of a learning circle. The leaders helped direct the discussion, but also functioned as a group participant and shared their own stories, thoughts, and feelings.

On the first day we spent time getting to know each other and sharing our thoughts and feelings about personal stories shared by Nuka system leaders, interspersed by simple relationship concepts. The leaders also shared some powerful video stories by tribal members who had participated in the Nuka’s Beauty for Ashes learning circle program. This is a program designed for individuals who have experienced significant trauma. The stories touched my heart and I cried. Some of what I felt was hard to put into words.

On the second day we shared from our own stories, and toward the end of the third day we shared our story in response to one of the following questions:

1. A time I learned something important that helped me grow
2. A time I made an important choice that made a shift in my life
3. A time I contributed to the growth and learning of another
4. An experience that helped shape part of who I am and how/ why I relate to others the way I do
5. Or – any story

We had the option of sharing a story that was not too personal, or very personal. These examples were our guide: 30,000 feet – not too personal, more about facts; 10,000 feet – somewhat personal, such as a work story or story about getting along with someone; or ground level or below – where you share something deeply personal such as a profound moment or memory that affects you today. I felt safe with this group and was able to share my deeply, personal story, including a profound and deeply emotional story I had only shared with one other person.

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about feeling heard, being known."



The Impact of Storytelling

What I experienced absolutely has an impact on choices I am currently making in my own life. It has helped me strengthen several important relationships in my life, including my walk with the Creator God. It has given me important insights into why my relationships and connections with others has such a big impact on my own spiritual, mental, social, emotional, and even financial well-being. There is something very powerful about feeling heard, being known, and also knowing that everyone has a story with light and darkness that has shaped who they are.

Choices figure prominently into each story, even when there were times where for a while there may not have been freedom to choose actions or words, but you could choose your thoughts and how you responded to something bad that happened to you. And it reminded me that at times your only support may come from your Creator God who at the core of His being allows us choice and will give us the strength to make tough choices that will change our lives for the better.

SCF Core Concepts

“[Core Concepts] helps me appreciate people – their personalities and the reminder that everyone has a story,” a Core Concepts participant explained. “It helps me treat others with kindness and understanding. Everyone is fighting a battle at some point.”

Even if you cannot attend an SCF Nuka conference you can learn about and practice the core concepts to improve your relationships with others and create and maintain a healthy outlook of yourself (<https://scfnuka.com/traditional-values-guide-scfs-core-concepts/>).

SCF’s Core Concepts

- Work together in relationship to learn and grow
- Encourage understanding
- Listen with an open mind
- Laugh and enjoy humor throughout the day
- Notice the dignity and value of ourselves and others
- Engage others with compassion
- Share our stories and our hearts
- Strive to honor and respect ourselves and others ■

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