

## Mediator's Corner



Marissa Wertheimer

# Walking Towards Conflict

by Marissa Wertheimer

These are the questions we ask when we want to talk about Restorative Circles and Restorative Systems. We have been asking these questions in Marin County at Juvenile Hall, a large High School, a Latino Community whose youth comprise the largest population in our county's Juvenile Hall, middle schools, and a minority community. This conversation is happening all over the world, in hospitals, prisons, schools, universities and families. Many Occupy communities have asked these questions, as have churches and homes for the aged. Asking folks to think about these questions (we call them the Conflict Inquiry) is the first step towards creating a Restorative System and Restorative Circles: a particular practice of Restorative Justice that started in Brazil in the shantytowns and slums where youth crime was out of control.

Restorative Circles, [restorativecircles.org](http://restorativecircles.org), like mediation, is a different way of responding to conflict and harmful incidents. It is grounded in the belief that we are safer when we move towards conflict rather than away from it. By moving towards conflict we create an opportunity to understand it and the people with whom we are in conflict. And even though I believe deeply in this premise I still notice that often my first response to conflict is to avoid it. If my feelings are hurt my avoidance instinct is even stronger than normal. Since 2004, when I began working as a mediator and restorative justice facilitator, I've tried to shift my default setting from avoiding conflict to welcoming it and being curious about it. It's a work in progress.

The most inspiring part of this work is the opportunity to introduce it to young people. At schools where we are offering Restorative System building, the adults are often worried that their students won't be interested or able to embrace this approach. Yet every place we've asked the conflict inquiry questions, the students answering them offer very similar answers: that punishment doesn't work to change behavior or repair harm. Their dream of how it could be is to create a response to conflict in which everyone affected by a harmful incident has the opportunity to speak and to be understood.

*“Please remember, it is what you are that heals, not what you know.”*

Carl Jung

\* Experienced Mediator, Trainer and Coordinator with a demonstrated history of working in community based organizations and government administration. Skilled in Training, Employment Mediation, Restorative Justice, Youth Development, Coaching, Government, Mediation, and Program Evaluation. Strong professional graduated from University of Denver College of Law.