



LLAMA DEARA RANCH

A Community-Wide Program to Promote Child Safety, Health, and Creative Wonder

Learning to Love More

© Hannah-Leigh Bull, Llama Deara Ranch: September 2005

If a person should conquer in battle a thousand and a thousand more, and another should conquer herself, hers would be the greater victory, because the greatest of victories is the victory over oneself.

-Buddha

Building collaboration among the stakeholders in child safety and creative wonder can be both inspiring and frustrating. In the counties of Rio Arriba and Taos in Northern New Mexico—a complex mix of at-risk rural villages, the key community components include formal partners such as parents, schools, clinics, agencies, and the children themselves. Informal partners, such as the alternative educational and health-care contributors Synergy Holistic Healing and Llama Deara Ranch (LDR), add to the continuum of care and approach the challenges of child health and safety holistically, balancing many factors within the person's experience, including physical, emotional, mental, spiritual, social, and political. Our collaboration has enjoyed a boost through two grants, first to create caring community, and second to intervene in and prevent truancy, both community-wide programs seeking to enrich the educational environment and provide a kind and respectful alternative to human relations.

This story briefly describes some personal and professional challenges of uniting disparate components of a multicultural community and discusses strategies to address post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), resistance to collaboration, and self-care, with an emphasis on love and the organic process of resolving circumstance. I originally wrote this to supplement the slideshow I presented at the 2005 conference of the National Association for Rural Mental Health and much more detail appears in it. With key roles at Synergy, Llama Deara, and the Mesa Vista School District, I've learned a little about what moves us through the night into the light. This story seeks to share some of that.

About PTSD and Healing the Injury

The incidence of PTSD in its complex and regular forms is high in this area. Because the staffing of mental health and other health care professionals is challenging in New Mexico and particularly Rio Arriba county, we are learning to manage services with fewer people. Therapeutic modalities that involve groups of people are favored, not only because they serve more people at a time, but also because participants learn from each other.

Additionally, suspicion of mental health services and cultural prejudice are also significant factors. The dominant culture generally considers itself Spanish, and denies Mexican heritage, whereas, interestingly, Mexicans deny Spanish heritage considering themselves natives of Mexico, proud of their Indian blood. Both ethnic groups within Northern New Mexico reject their origins, live in relative isolation from the outside world, and prefer to keep issues private. Add to this Northern New Mexico's minorities today—the Pueblo Indians and Caucasians—and the prevailing poverty, and we have a recipe for injustices, acts of prejudice, grief, and loss.

In light of these factors, therapeutic approaches in the form of fun, laughter, and play are more easily welcomed over traditional interventions. Thus, in my work with groups of children and families both in the schools and at Synergy and Llama Deara Ranch (LDR), I have emphasized self-expression through the arts and improvisational and structured play in the classroom and in nature. Artistic pursuits, such as painting, drama, or poetry, help us discover more of who we are inside, as opposed to whom we have decided society and/or our guardians and teachers want us to be. In Expressive Arts classes, children can experiment with color and feelings, masks, safe places, polarities such as love and hate, charity and greed, and finally present their work to their group using words, music, and dance.

The themes revolve around God, suffering (the crucifixion), magic, and hunting and killing, and through this imaginative work and mutual interest, the children are able to release some of the grief of their losses and alleviate the symptoms of PTSD. Similarly, the Allies Stand Up project has allowed children to honor their losses and supportive alliances with others in the form of spontaneous theater and the green circle of caring. Allies Stand Up was initiated this year to allow children to name their own themes and create their own theater and had poignant results in the increase of camaraderie, support, and expressed feeling.

Field trips into nature help children to accept diversity and other living creatures, including humans and themselves! The trips to LDR include segments on the llama family and gentle investigation of the river habitat, through which children learn empathy and insights into conflict management and cooperation from peaceful species. Children instinctively gravitate to other animals, and a number of their parents have accompanied them on these trips and actively participate, too. I have seen increased openness, trust, and friendliness in the children, staff, and parents who have come as a group into nature—a healthy antidote to modernization as opposed to abuses.

Qualitative experiences with people processing grief and trauma show that movement, touch, and food contribute mightily. In my activities with children, I integrate at least one or more of these elements, and am experimenting with bilateral movement, which seems to facilitate laughter and learning. Brain Gym and Theraplay are more formal modalities that employ these elements.

[Managing Resistance to Collaboration](#)

Collaboration requires vision and persistence. I have lived and worked in Northern New Mexico for over seven years and find that change occurs organically, not linearly; bit by bit, trust develops, and collaboration is possible as we drop our agendas.

Because the stakeholders generally seem overwhelmed, and some distrustful and exclusionary, many are reluctant to get involved with other components of the

community. Add to this the cultural factors as well as the influence of PTSD injuries in the adult population, including administrators, faculty, parents, and health-care workers themselves. Committed visionary work, insights, and a sense of humor are required. Often collaboration amounts to many one-on-one meetings that the lead person synthesizes into an approach; over time, the energy builds and more individuals begin to express an interest in group consultations and meetings.

Persistence pays. Keep planning the parent nights, the staff inspiration days, the mental health professional meetings. Keep the light burning. The introduction of the caring community concept is a good example of how this evolves at Ojo Caliente Elementary. I gathered non-credentialed staff together to discuss the meaning of caring and asked basic questions: How do you know you are loved? What actions or words show that people care for you? What do you need to hear or feel from another? I ask these questions often in my formal therapeutic sessions at Synergy and Llama Deara Ranch (LDR), and have found that people seldom ask them of themselves or others. Hence, we go on thinking we are caring or loving without asking the recipient whether he or she feels our intention.

The response of cafeteria and custodial staff in this meeting was touching and simple, as they grappled to think and remember what makes them feel special. Meetings such as these can be uncomfortable at first, but as they multiply over time we gravitate more to collaboration and trust. I haven't yet found a magic elixir that corrects our fear of vulnerability over night, nor do I consider that desirable. Collaboration requires the building of relationships over many discrete kind interactions that weave into trust and willingness. Emphasize kindness, given that research has shown that it favorably adjusts the serotonin levels both in the recipient's and in the giver's brain.

[Taking Care of Ourselves](#)

Work and life in many of our communities are challenging and can be depleting. The tools we seek to infuse in our work can be synergistically applied to our own selves to achieve positive personal and professional outcomes. In this way, tools to help others can serve the double purpose of guarding us against the imbalance and illness that often result in the helping professions. The preeminent tool I have found to be love.

How do we learn to love ourselves? Metaphor, spiritual connection, and commitment all figure, with a substantial dose of play and laughter.

Understanding our personal metaphor of life sustains us; this metaphor is formed by our values and commitments. Identify the reason for work and maintain that metaphor in heart and mind. In my life, work repeatedly moves me through my attachment and family issues. When I empathize with an individual and know what to say or do, I promote my own healing and connection with the Divine; I feel lighter, clearer; it is easier to love myself—a corollary to the metaphor of mutual healing.

For millennia, love has been fueled by spiritual connection. The most practical and generally accepted application of spiritual connection is prayer and meditation. Consider what prayer means to you and infuse the Divine in heart and soul regularly. Prayer can be as simple as intention, attitude, or communication with the Absolute. One of the greatest disservices we do is to dispel the Divine from our work.

Finally, be the change you wish to see in the world: Model by example, as Gandhi suggested. This commitment to love then becomes a political act; combined with

personal metaphor and spiritual intention, it becomes the triumvirate that redeems our world. Transformation of aggression and intimidation through empathy and compassion increases. We learn to love one another and self. This does not happen over night; infuse self-restoration regularly through the Divine, laughter, bodywork and affection, sabbaticals, and friendships and alliances with humans and other living creatures; gradually a shift is made.

Lessons Learned, Mores Adjusted

Many of the lessons from the field run counter to the accepted practice in mental health care. Still I have found the following to be essential to the rural work we do:

- Invite colleagues, children and their families into our homes. Let others glimpse who we are as souls and persons.
- Exchange physical affection often with colleagues, children, parents, and self.
- Recognize others: Notice audibly who others are and what they do in uplifting ways.
- Remember that the children are watching: Walk our beliefs consistently so that the children know some adults can be trusted and do walk their talk.
- Love and honor ourselves; in so doing, we learn to love others and we show the children how to love themselves.
- Abandon personal/professional timetables and agendas; the Divine provides a wondrous and organic one; seek it.
- Infuse the Divine in our lives, personal and professional. Let Spirit lead the dance.

Many times in a month of daily challenges and long days, doubt may set in. As human helpers, we are ourselves often re-traumatized by the crises we face; we ourselves face the hallmarks of complex stress: anxiety, hypervigilance, risk, and habitual patterns of response. When we see the Divine as our primary relationship and develop the facility to reconnect with it at will, we can turn doubt around simply through listening. Consider the view of the brilliant Persian scholar and poet Rumi in his poem “Listening” and heed the Spirit who indwells you:

Listening

...
*Listen and feel the beauty of your
Separation, the unsayable absence.*

*There's a moon inside every human being.
Learn to be companions with it. Give*

*more of your life to this listening. As
brightness is to time, so you are to*

*the one who talks to the deep ear in
your chest. I should sell my tongue*

*and buy a thousand ears when that
one steps near and begins to speak.*

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