BEAUTIFUL, DIFFICULT, POWERFUL

Ending Sexual Assault Through Transformative Justice

The Chrysalis Collective

The Chrysalis Collective formed when a friend and member of our community experienced acquaintance rape by another local activist. "Diane" was a woman of color involved in several local organizing projects. Through her activism, she befriended "Tom," a white male grassroots organizer working full time in primarily poor, people of color communities. As their friendship grew, Tom expressed his romantic interest. Diane made it clear to Tom that she was both unavailable and uninterested. A few months later, Diane felt that Tom betrayed their close friendship by manipulating her into sexual situations that she did not want. Their friendship abruptly ended. After several months of confusion and anxiety, Diane painfully realized that she had experienced acquaintance rape.

Aware that the state and its prisons are the biggest perpetrators of violence

against our communities, Diane looked elsewhere for solutions. As infuriated and upset as she was with Tom, Diane knew that putting him in jail would not bring about the healing, justice, and peace that she wanted for herself, Tom, and the community. She gathered her close friends and formed the Chrysalis Collective. We were a group of womyn and trans folk of color with experience organizing around reproductive justice, queer health, racial justice, gender justice, youth issues, immigration rights, and food justice. At that time, we didn't know how to build a Transformative Justice (TJ) collective, how to make Tom accountable, what TJ models already existed, or what our next steps might be.[1] But we did believe in TJ as a path of individual and collective healing through community accountability, compassion, and commitment. It was a way of creating a system of community-based justice grounded in the humanity—not the brokenness—of its members and in our creative capacity to transform and heal from living in a violent and imbalanced society. Instead of turning to the state, we drew on the strength and resources already in our community to end sexual assault and build safer, healthier relations among and between activists.

This is the story of our process, what we did, how and why we did it, what worked, and what didn't. Our story won't apply to everyone, or perhaps even to anyone, but we hope our offering to this beautiful, difficult, and powerful movement for TJ will inspire the work folks do in their own communities.

step 1. gathering: form a survivor support team (SST)

Our first step was to form a Survivor Support Team of folks who wanted to turn this community accountability idea into a reality. Diane called together a team of trusted friends and organizers. Some questions we considered were:

- Whom does the survivor and her allies want in the SST?
- What are the goals of the SST?
- What are the expectations, skills, commitment levels, and availability of the SST? What resources does the SST need to prepare and gain confidence for the work ahead?

The first SST meeting was a two-day gathering that included a lot of tears and tissues, visiting the ocean, and expressing a commitment to support Diane and see this nascent TJ process through to the end. During this initial meeting we also developed our initial goals for the TJ process. We created separate goals for Diane, the SST, Tom, and our communities, including:

- Help Diane seek a healthy, healing path, join a survivors' group, not blame herself for what happened, and keep a journal.
- Have Tom agree to work with the accountability team (AT) we planned to organize, seek counseling, share with friends that he is in a TJ process, and admit to the assault.
- Ensure that the SST and AT commit to a survivor-centered TJ process, recognize Tom's humanity, create a community-based alternative to the state, and eventually share their experience with community organizers and groups.

At the time, we had no idea how we were going to meet these goals or whether it was even possible. Yet the aspirations we named when things were new, raw, and unmapped have remained our guiding force throughout the entire TJ process.

Since neither Diane nor our Support Team had much experience in TJ or accountability work, our next step was to read everything we could find on the subject. Our team spent several months learning, brainstorming, and talking about how to approach Tom. We needed this time to be intentional about our work, build our trust as a group, learn enough to move forward, and give Diane the space and support she needed to heal. There were times when we felt overwhelmed by what we were reading, when we were uncertain about what we could do, and when Diane had some rough nights. We built our trust by continuing to show up for Diane, for each other, and for ourselves.

step 2. expanding: form an accountability team (AT)

Next we began the process of forming the team that would be responsible for working with Tom to hold him accountable. Early on, the SST had concluded

that we did not want to take part in working with Tom. We wanted to be able to focus on Diane's healing and also felt that we would not be able to distance ourselves enough from our anger at Tom to work compassionately with him. So we formed the AT as a separate team of people whose task was to hold Tom accountable. First, we made a list of community allies who could be potential AT members. Since the AT would be in closest contact with Tom, it was vital to choose folks who not only believed in our definition of TJ but could also commit the time and energy, and be willing to develop the skills needed, to engage with an aggressor.[2] We asked ourselves the following questions:

- What experiences did they have with sexual assault, transformative justice, or community work?
- What other skills could they offer the TJ process (e.g., patience, clarity, compassion, political vision, commitment)?
- What leverage did they have in the community (e.g., positive reputation, community elder, financial resources, connections)?
- Would it be helpful if the AT was drawn from diverse communities across lines of race, gender, sexual orientation, class, organizational affiliation, and age? In our case, the aggressor was a middle-class, straight, white male with a pattern of not listening. We felt that an AT led by working-class womyn of color would be less effective than a predominantly white and/or male AT.
- And, finally: Did they know Diane and/or Tom?

Forming an intentional community of people as the AT was key to the process of creating safe spaces for Diane and Tom, and crucial to our TJ work. For us, the TJ process was not about shaming or threatening the aggressor; it was about a deep transformation based on radical reflection, community accountability, and love.

Next, SST members contacted the folks individually on the list. Since their vocational circles overlapped so much, Diane chose to keep her and Tom's identities confidential. Without divulging identities, the SST informed the potential ally that a sexual assault had occurred in the community and that the survivor was starting a TJ process. We shared the SST's framework for rape, sexual assault, and TJ, and made sure that folks shared a similar analysis. Although most folks did not have much training or experience with a TJ process, we emphasized to them that they could still join the AT, pool their skills, and learn together.

At the end of our vetting process, our AT included four incredible activists who shared a radical political vision and a strong gender justice framework. Three of the members were well--respected activists in the social justice community with decades of community work and organizing experience, a few had previous experience confronting perpetrators of sexual assault, and one was involved in ongoing prison-abolition work. The majority of the AT team was white, male, and straight, reflecting our intentional strategy, and one of the veteran movement activists was a person of color. All of them knew Tom and/or Diane, and several had close working relationships with one or both of them. The AT's deep compassion and commitment guided them through the early months of negotiating their working and personal relationships with Diane and Tom. As with the SST, the AT members would progressively build on each other's strengths to create a trusting, powerful group.

After introducing the AT members to each other, the SST gently revealed the identities of Diane and Tom. As some AT members knew Diane and/or Tom, this required some time to process, especially since there was an awkward period of time when the AT knew about Tom's identity before being ready or prepared to confront him.

Around this time, the SST and Diane compiled a list of "talking points." These talking points included information that the AT could (and could not) share with Tom, i.e., a very brief summary of the assault from Diane's perspective: that the assault occurred by manipulation, not physical force, and other details. Crucially, Diane reported that this phase was extremely stressful. Sharing her story with the AT was a huge, public, and sometimes terrifying step. She felt a lot of fear, self-doubt, and anger, so the SST took extra care in supporting her process. They sat with her, listened to her worries, affirmed her

commitment to healing, and reminded her that she was not alone in this difficult, but good and important, journey.

step 3. communicating: defining the relationship between teams

For each group, we outlined clear expectations and roles. However, we kept open the possibility of shifting them as needed.

THE SURVIVOR SUPPORT TEAM:

- Focused on Diane's needs and desires throughout the TJ process.
- Educated themselves about TJ by checking out resources in books/zines, on the web, and in our communities.
- Supported Diane's healing process as an individual and within the TJ process.
- Initiated, monitored, and evaluated Tom's accountability process through the AT.
- Communicated between the AT and survivor, making sure the AT knew Diane's needs and gave Diane updates of the AT's process while respecting how much/little she should know with respect to her healing process.

THE ACCOUNTABILITY TEAM:

- Committed to a survivor-centered praxis at all times in their work with Tom.
- Educated themselves about TJ with an eye toward supporting Tom's transformation with compassion. (Our AT also had to balance taking the time to be fully prepared with the urgency of transforming Tom's behavior.)
- Worked directly with Tom to achieve accountability and transformation. (As a group, they had to gain Tom's trust and commit to honoring his humanity. For example, they consistently reiterated their commitment to TJ, rather than to legal or retaliatory justice.)
- Conveyed *and* translated ideas and suggestions from the SST to Tom. For example, the AT developed specific exercises and discussion tactics to convey the concerns of Diane and the SST to Tom.

The SST and AT had two fundamentally different roles, lenses, and responsibilities; yet they were connected by their shared commitment to TJ principles and by a similar analysis of the various forms of sexual violence and oppression. Building a solid foundation between the AT and SST laid the groundwork for what was to come. Regularly scheduled communication between the teams addressed Diane's process, Tom's transformation, logistics, coordination, questions, and any other issues. Our understanding of TJ required that each perspective be balanced: the AT needed to hear from the SST to continually see their work with the aggressor from the survivor's perspective, and the SST needed to hear from the AT to monitor Tom's progress and be reminded of Tom's humanity despite the harm he committed. When the groups were working and communicating well, they formed a continuum from Diane to the SST to the AT to Tom, allowing for direct lines of communication as well as the distance necessary for Diane's healing, safety, and confidentiality.

step 4. storming & developing: create a transformative justice (TJ) plan

We found that it was crucial that the SST and AT develop a TJ plan before they approach Tom. The purpose of the plan was to outline our steps toward TJ if and when Tom agreed to work with the AT. We created a document where we outlined potential "steps" and then brainstormed ways of pushing Tom to accomplish the best-case outcome, ways of protecting ourselves from the worst-case scenario, and some of the possibilities in between. Our TJ plan included:

- Our goals.
- Ideas for how to first approach Tom.
- Warning signs of covert aggression from Tom.
- Backlash precautions (i.e., maintaining Diane's safety and using our leverage were Tom to respond by counter-organizing or trying to contact Diane).
- Establishing guidelines for meetings with Tom (e.g., building trust between Tom and the AT, and offering resources, "homework," and goals for each meeting).

— Working with Tom's accountability process, which involved overcoming denial and minimization, improving survivor empathy, changing distorted attitudes about power/privilege/gender, learning good consent and intimacy practices, and cocreating a relapse prevention plan.

The actual TJ process proceeded differently than what we had imagined in our brainstorm. Some ideas were never used, and others had to be developed along the way. Even though not everything was used, it was really helpful for the SST and AT to have thought through these issues together and anticipated possible reactions and outcomes. Our plan was imperfect, incomplete, and did change, but it was much better than having no plan at all. We drew on the good resources we already had—and embodied—to make the plan as strong as possible.

step 5. summoning: prepare for the first approach

Our AT and SST spent several months mentally and emotionally preparing for the initial approach and first meeting with Tom. The SST and AT lined up, vetted, and interviewed local resources, such as therapists, men's groups, and other TJ resources. We found that local community resources for aggressors in relation to sexual assault and TJ were weak, so we explored regional and national support networks as well. We also asked:

— Where and when would the first approach occur?
— Which members of the AT would approach Tom? How would they invite Tom to the first meeting? Where, when, and how would they tell Tom that a survivor was seeking his accountability for rape?
— How would the AT communicate with the SST about the first approach?

We wanted an approach that would model concern (rather than punishment), confidentiality, and community safety while still giving us enough leverage to compel Tom to participate in the TJ process. In our discussions, it was helpful for us to distinguish our tactics for the "initial approach" when we would ask him to come to a meeting about a community concern, and the "first meeting" where we would tell him that the community concern was his behavior and Diane's experience of rape. It was agreed that two folks whom Tom respects would do the initial approach and keep the exchange brief and general to avoid tipping him off as to what the meeting would be about.

We felt that this plan would maximize our chances of getting him to the table to listen to our concerns, be willing to participate in the TJ process, and minimize any reaction that could endanger Diane. The success of the "initial approach" would rely on the fact that Tom cared about the community and would want to be part of the solution to a community problem; the success of the "initial meeting" would rely on the fact that these concerns would be brought to him by people he trusted and respected, and that it would be done in a way that was not about shaming or punishing him.

Preparing for this step was important because Tom's reaction could not be predicted, and how the AT responded could influence Tom's participation in the TJ process. What if Tom refused to engage with the AT, leaving everyone unhealed and the community endangered? What if Tom freaked out when his behavior was named as rape? What if everything went as planned? We simplified our preparation for the first approach by assuming a best-case scenario, but we also developed a list of tactics to influence and raise the stakes for Tom in case he resisted (e.g., going to his friends and colleagues).

The AT chose two members whom Tom respects and who have worked directly with him. After a community event they all attended, the two members casually approached him and said, "Hello, we would like you to join us for a meeting about an important matter concerning a member of our community." They diverted Tom's questions about the community member's identity by saying, "There are issues of confidentiality. We'll talk about that at the meeting." Neither the assault nor the TJ process were mentioned. For the first approach, we felt the less said, the more likely Tom would participate in the first meeting (where the details would come out and the real work would begin). We were wary of sharing any more information about the assault or TJ process with Tom for fear it would scare him away, trigger

aggressive reactions, or turn him off. Our primary goal was to invite Tom to a first meeting, and fortunately he agreed to attend.

Immediately after the initial approach, the two members processed the experience with the rest of the AT and the SST, as everyone was anxious to know how it went.

In hindsight, we've realized that this approach had the extra benefit of activating within Tom the mental frames he and we needed for this process: responsibility, caring, trust (we were going to trust him with a community concern), at the possible cost of him feeling betrayed by our half-truth. In contrast, an "authoritative" approach would likely activate an offense/defense response in Tom so he could regain "his way"—the opposite of what was needed in the process. (And truthfully, we just felt uncomfortable with acting in an "authoritative," top-down manner, rather than modeling horizontal cooperation.)

Although this first invitation to the process seemed simple enough, it was an extremely stressful time for Diane, the SST, and the AT. We supported Diane and each other through our feelings of doubt and anxiety about whether the first approach and meetings would be effective. Unfortunately, we were not prepared for the growing internal stress in the groups. Our SST and AT lost some folks due to the increased intensity of the process and the time commitment. This was a time when folks really saw and felt how the TJ process would roll out.

step 6. building: the first meeting

The AT planned the first meeting with an eye toward Tom's potential responses. This would be the first time Tom would hear that Diane had experienced rape, that she had been deeply harmed by his behaviors, and that we would be asking him to engage in a long, complex process of TJ. We considered the following range of feelings that Tom might experience and/or express:

— *Ganged up on.* To minimize the chances of this happening, we limited the first meeting to the two AT members we had selected—community leaders and elders who modeled cooperation, not domination—to make the initial approach because among us they were the most trusted and respected by Tom.

— *Denial, outrage, remorse, shame, guilt, fear, and defensiveness.* With these feelings in mind, we didn't expect much at first. We set and kept good boundaries, and used active listening.

— *Betrayal by the survivor and AT.* We tried to build trust and safety right away by compassionately (but critically) listening to his experience, giving him space to feel betrayal and denial, and allowing him to offer some input on his TJ process.

— *Overwhelmed by too much information.* To avoid this we kept things simple at first.

At the first meeting, the two AT members gently told Tom that a community member experienced his behavior as rape. They revealed Diane's identity and shared a few of the SST's talking points. The AT folks explained that Diane and the community had experienced a harm which must be healed in a responsible way. These points were communicated both verbally and in a written document for Tom to reread and process later. Some of those points were:

— The AT was there to serve the needs of Diane and the community.

— The AT would support Tom in his accountability and transformation process.

— The AT would provide Tom with a simplified statement or version of Diane's experience, rather than a detailed account that could lead to a debate over what happened.

— The AT acknowledged that Tom's intention and experience might be different than Diane's.

— The AT set clear boundaries around the survivor (i.e., do not contact Diane).

— The AT valued Tom's contributions to the community.

— The AT and Tom had a mutual interest in stopping sexual assault in the activist community.

— The AT invited Tom to bring his needs and goals to the next meeting.

The AT members were also prepared to:

- Validate Tom's story, feelings, and experience, if offered; repeat our support of the survivor's experience if Tom tried to blame Diane for what happened.
- Deflect questions or challenges about the incident, violation, process, or Diane until the next meeting.
- Avoid volunteering any additional information "to be helpful."
- Ask if Tom had friends to process with afterwards.
- Establish that Tom should communicate with the AT through a predesignated point person.

After this meeting, the AT members debriefed, updated the SST, supported each other, and relaxed as best as they could. Their work had just begun.

step 7. transforming: meetings with the accountability team

Fortunately, the initial approach and first meeting led to regular meetings between Tom and the entire AT. During each meeting, the AT allowed generous time for check-ins and emotional processing. As expected, our personal feelings, such as anger and judgment, arose, so we consistently reemphasized the entire team's commitment to TJ—not to punishment—and to building a climate of trust and respect.

In the initial meetings, the AT gave an overview of the process that we expected going forward. We solicited boundaries from everyone and developed shared goals, ensuring a place for Tom's voice in the process. We also learned not to expect much from him during the initial meetings. The work ahead was likely to be long, and we figured it was most important that each meeting lead to the next one.

As we've continued, the AT has played many expected and unexpected roles, such as supporter, friend, challenger, therapist, investigator, contract negotiator, and judge. Always, the AT and SST have worked together to make sure that the survivor-centered TJ process be guided by the goals of the TJ plan. The AT also focused on the shared goals produced with Tom. They respected Tom's needs while prioritizing the safety of Diane and of the community.

MEETINGS WITH TOM HAVE FOCUSED ON THE FOLLOWING:

- *Challenging rape culture:* Pacing the information slowly, starting with sexual-assault definitions and statistics; studying and discussing relevant zines and resources; repeating our understanding of rape and how it differs from the criminal definition and mainstream myths; exploring the difference between intent and impact; and challenging the primacy that rape culture gives to an aggressor's intent over the consequences of the aggressor's behavior for the survivor and the community.
- *Exploring unrelated scenarios:* Describing situations involving culpability, intent, and manipulation, and then connecting them to the incident; asking what taking responsibility would look like even if Tom were blameless.
- *Focusing on the survivor's experience:* Asking Tom how something looks and feels from Diane's perspective; asking "What did you take from that statement?"; asking who got what they wanted; restating the survivor's experience; pressing for feelings and empathy; understanding the meaning and practice of good consent.
- *Connecting with Tom:* Connecting to his activism and using various anti-oppression frameworks that would be familiar to him; involving Tom in problem solving; pushing Tom to places of discomfort; asking Tom to imagine he is on an AT for someone else; assigning and discussing homework; practicing active listening and mirroring.

We also expected Tom to manipulate conversations to avoid accepting the painful reality that he deeply harmed Diane and, by extension, the community.

AT members attempted to avoid this by:

- Practicing role-plays about defensive behaviors.
- Developing mantras for tough situations (i.e., "Diane experienced that as harm").
- Debriefing together after every meeting with Tom, with a particular focus on detecting manipulation.

— Debriefing with the SST after every meeting or two to check in with the TJ process.
— Trusting the experiences and wisdom of the group members.

Throughout this process, one difficult and recurring question was whether the AT and Tom had met their goals. The AT had clear goals for Tom, i.e., that he admit to rape and seek professional counseling. At the same time, we have been frustrated by how to measure or evaluate these goals. The AT not only wanted Tom to change his language and behavior; they also wanted him to internalize what he was learning and emotionally "get it." Observing behaviors and statements were one way to measure change, but we realized that there was no guarantee that he was really "getting" it. Given the difficulty in measuring our success, it has been crucial to set clear goals for Tom from the beginning of this long process of transformation.

GOALS FOR TOM:

— LEARN about sexual assault, consent, privilege, patriarchy, gender socialization, and rape culture.
— RESPECT physical and communication boundaries for Diane's safety.
— EXAMINE his past behavior for other experiences of manipulation and assault; acknowledge and be accountable to that history; and keep the community safe in the present and future if this is repeat behavior.
— SEEK professional counseling for aggressors or join an aggressor recovery group.
— SELF-EDUCATE to deeply understand the incident, his intent, and behavior, and the subsequent harm to Diane and the community.
— DISCUSS & MODEL consent behavior for future relationships.
— COMMIT to acts of restitution to Diane and the community.

step 8. evaluating: lessons learned

As much as we prepared, there have been important lessons that we did not anticipate in our TJ work:

— The situation—and many rapes in activist communities—involved coercion, manipulation, and/or entitlement, not sheer physical force, and reflected how deeply rape myths and culture are embedded within our own activist circles. Male entitlement, racism, and an ignorance of rape culture made it that much harder for Tom to recognize his behavior as rape.
— It was hard to balance Diane's need for confidentiality with the need to warn the community about Tom, and this remained an unresolved tension in our TJ process.
— Diane's and Tom's transformations needed to follow their own paths, which might mean that Tom might be ready to offer restitution before or after Diane is ready to receive it.
— We should have been more serious about communication between the AT and the SST. It sounded easy enough, but it sometimes felt overwhelming to schedule another meeting or call. No matter what the excuse, we have learned to make time to check in. It is worth much more than we first realized.
— The aggressor accountability process got so involved that the SST started to lose track of Diane's healing process. At one point, our meetings were all about Tom's progress, and we would run out of time before addressing what Diane needed. We are learning to put Diane's well-being back at the center of our process through things like expanding our support circle, reading zines together, and making a trigger plan. (A trigger plan is a way for Diane to identify and overcome her triggers. When she experiences a traumatic memory or reaction, the trigger plan that we developed together helps her identify what is happening and the steps she needs to take to feel safe.)

The Chrysalis Collective is still actively engaged in our survivor-centered TJ process. The more we learn about TJ, the more we realize that it is a deep commitment requiring a lot of energy and patience. Our unfinished process has lasted almost two years so far and we have gone through stressful times.

Yet healing and transformation is clearly, slowly, steadily happening for everyone involved. This experience has connected each of us in unexpected and powerful ways that reaffirm our collective commitment to transforming ourselves and our communities.

working definitions

— **RAPE.** Nonconsensual sex through physical force, manipulation, stress, or fear; the experience of sex as the unwanted physical, emotional, mental, or spiritual violation of sexual boundaries; not an act of caring, love, or pleasure; sexual violation of trust.

— **SEXUAL ASSAULT.** Any unwanted physical, emotional, mental, or spiritual violation of sexual boundaries.

— **CONSENT.** An understandable exchange of affirmative words and actions regarding sexual activity; agreement, approval, or permission that is informed and freely and actively given without physical force, manipulation, stress, or fear.

suggested resources

generationFIVE: Ending Child Sexual Abuse in Five Generations
http://www.generationfive.org

Hollow Water: Community Holistic Circle Healing
http://www.iirp.org/library/vt/vt_bushie.html

Indigenous Issues Forums
http://www.indigenousissuesforums.org

INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence
http://www.incite-national.org

Communities Against Rape and Abuse (CARA)
http://www.cara-seattle.org

Center for Transformative Change
http://transformativechange.org

Angel Kyodo Williams, "Doing Darkness: Change Vs. Transformation," *Transformation: Vision and Practice of Transformative Social Change* (October 2009).
http://transformativechange.org/docs/nl/transform-200910.html

notes

1 After a lot of phone calls, web searches, conversations, and networking with amazing activists around the country, we found incredible resources. We are grateful for the wisdom and work shared by the TJ activists who came before us, especially the folks from generationFIVE, Hollow Water, Indigenous Issues Forum, INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence, Communities Against Rape and Abuse (CARA), and the zine "The Revolution Starts at Home: Confronting Partner Abuse in Activist Communities," eds. Ching-In Chen, Jai Dulani, and Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha (2008).

2 The Chrysalis Collective deliberately uses the term "aggressor" throughout the chapter for reasons similar to those offered by a collective of women of color from CARA: "[W]e use the word 'aggressor' to refer to a person who has committed an act of sexual violence (rape, sexual harassment, coercion, etc.) against another person. Our use of the word 'aggressor' is not an attempt to weaken the severity of rape. In our work of defining accountability outside of the criminal system, we try not to use criminal-based vocabulary such as 'perpetrator,' 'rapist,' or 'sex predator.'" See CARA, "Taking Risks: Implementing Grassroots Accountability Strategies," in *Color of Violence: The INCITE! Anthology,* ed. INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2006), 302n1.