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History as a Tool for Healing

In my home town of Richmond Virginia, which is still identified as the Capital of the Confederacy, at one of the highest points in our city is the site where several stories that have shape the lives and history of so many come together. It is one of the most breath-taking sites in a city, which prides its self on the preservation of its history and the history of this country, Virginia is also known as the mother state of America.

On this site before the British settlers arrived into what is now called Richmond, lay what was believed to be a sacred burial ground for Native Americans, as history would indicate, Native Americans buried their dead at the highest points in the regions in which they lived. This is the site, when Captain William Byrd set foot on it and looked out and saw a replica of Richmond on the Thames in London he not only claimed it on behalf of the Queen of England but also name this city after it. Additionally, on this site sits the tallest monument in the city of monuments, a memorial to the soldiers and sailors that lost their lives in the Civil War. Seventy-five percent of southern men between the ages of 17 and 50 fought in the Civil war and thirty-seven percent of those were killed or wounded in battle. Finally, from this site you can look across the James River to the Manchester Dock and see where the enslaved African were brought into Richmond to be sold as sub-humans and after the importation of slaves was abolished in the United States in 1780, were now sold “down the river” as export goods. Richmond was the second largest city that imported enslaved Africans in America and between 1780 to the end of the Civil War, it is estimated that more than half-million enslaved Africans were sold in the export. Interestingly more enslaved Africans were sold down the river than was imported into Virginia. It is interesting that a site so lovely, so beautiful and so enticing can product such different feelings as well as different views on history.

For the Native Americans it represents a violation of trust, a disrespect of culture and the lost of something scared. For the European American it is the glorious history of the founding of this great country and the risk it took to accomplish its mission. For the descendents of enslaved African it is a reminder of forced labor and the striping away of ones dignity, in some cases it depicts the strength of a people to overcome against great odds. For the descendents of Civil War veterans it is a showing of grief due to the lost of family and friends. They all have their story to tell and there is truth and validity in each of them, however, to often we only look at our story, which can devalues the sacredness of the stories of others. Rarely do we see the overlap in these scared stories. This short sightedness is a major reason that divisions exist among people. These scared stories make up our history; they are the foundation of our identities. In every society we benefit from the strengths and weaknesses of that society. At some point we are all victims and victimizers, while one position may out weight the other, there are none with totally clean hands. The questions become how do we honor the whole story? How do we reconcile our differences? How do we walk in the other person shoes?

In Richmond we have used the principles of I of C to help heal the history that these divides have produced.

