

circle justice touching spirit bear

Understanding Circle Justice in "Touching Spirit Bear"

Circle justice is a central theme in Ben Mikaelson's novel "Touching Spirit Bear," which explores the journey of a young boy named Cole Matthews as he grapples with the consequences of his violent actions. The novel delves into the concept of restorative justice, where the focus is on repairing the harm caused by wrongdoing rather than simply punishing the offender. This approach not only addresses the needs of the victims but also encourages the offender to take responsibility for their actions and reintegrate into society.

In this article, we will explore the principles of circle justice as depicted in "Touching Spirit Bear," its significance in Cole's personal transformation, and how it serves as a model for conflict resolution and healing in real-life contexts.

The Essence of Circle Justice

Circle justice is rooted in indigenous practices, emphasizing community involvement and the interconnectedness of individuals. This method contrasts sharply with the traditional punitive justice system, which often isolates offenders and fails to address the underlying issues that lead to criminal behavior.

Key Principles of Circle Justice

- 1. Community Involvement:** Circle justice emphasizes the participation of all stakeholders, including the offender, the victim, and community members. This collective approach fosters understanding and empathy.
- 2. Restoration over Punishment:** The primary goal is to restore harmony within the community rather than inflicting punishment. The focus is on healing relationships and making amends.
- 3. Accountability:** Offenders are encouraged to take responsibility for their actions and the impact they have on others. This accountability is crucial for personal growth and transformation.
- 4. Healing:** Circle justice seeks to heal both the victim and the offender. This healing process allows for emotional and psychological restoration, which is essential for moving forward.

Cole Matthews and His Journey

Cole Matthews, the protagonist of "Touching Spirit Bear," epitomizes the struggles of a troubled youth caught in a cycle of violence and anger. After

brutally attacking a classmate, Cole is given a second chance through a form of circle justice. Instead of facing conventional incarceration, he is sent to a remote Alaskan island for a year-long program designed to help him confront his actions and learn about accountability and healing.

Initial Resistance

At the beginning of the novel, Cole is deeply resistant to the concept of circle justice. He views it as a punishment and a way to escape the consequences of his actions. His initial experiences on the island are marked by defiance and rage, reflecting his lack of understanding of the healing process.

Cole's transformation begins when he encounters the Spirit Bear, a symbol of nature's power and resilience. This encounter forces him to confront his fears and the pain he has caused. It is through this journey of self-discovery and reflection that Cole begins to embrace the principles of circle justice.

Lessons Learned

Throughout his time on the island, Cole learns several critical lessons:

1. **The Importance of Forgiveness:** Cole learns that forgiving himself and seeking forgiveness from others is vital for healing. This understanding is a pivotal moment in his journey.
2. **Facing Consequences:** Cole realizes that he must confront the consequences of his actions and that true accountability involves understanding the impact of his choices on others.
3. **Connection with Nature:** The natural world becomes a source of strength and healing for Cole. His bond with the Spirit Bear teaches him about respect, humility, and the interconnectedness of all living beings.
4. **Community Support:** As Cole begins to heal, he understands the importance of community support. When he returns home, he must engage with his family and peers to rebuild relationships and foster understanding.

The Role of the Spirit Bear

The Spirit Bear serves as a powerful metaphor throughout Cole's journey. Initially, Cole perceives the bear as a threat, embodying his own fears and insecurities. However, as he learns to respect and coexist with the bear, it represents the potential for healing and transformation.

Symbolism of the Spirit Bear

- **Strength and Resilience:** The Spirit Bear symbolizes the strength required to overcome adversity. Its ability to survive in the harsh wilderness reflects Cole's journey towards resilience.

- **Nature's Healing Power:** The bear's presence reinforces the idea that nature can be a source of healing. Cole finds solace in the wilderness, which helps him reflect on his actions and emotions.
- **Connection to Ancestral Wisdom:** The Spirit Bear also represents the wisdom of indigenous cultures, which prioritize community, respect for nature, and the importance of healing.

Real-Life Applications of Circle Justice

The principles of circle justice, as illustrated in "Touching Spirit Bear," have been adopted in various forms in real-life settings, particularly within indigenous communities and restorative justice programs. Here are some of the ways circle justice is being utilized:

Restorative Justice Programs

- **Community Mediation:** Many communities have established mediation programs that bring victims and offenders together to discuss the impact of the crime and work towards a resolution.
- **Youth Offender Programs:** Similar to Cole's experience, youth who commit offenses may be directed towards programs that focus on rehabilitation and personal growth rather than incarceration.
- **Victim-Offender Dialogues:** These dialogues allow victims to express their feelings and needs directly to the offender, fostering empathy and understanding.

Benefits of Circle Justice in Real Life

1. **Reduction in Recidivism:** Programs based on circle justice principles have shown lower rates of reoffending, as they address the root causes of criminal behavior.
2. **Empowerment of Victims:** Victims feel empowered by having a voice in the justice process and can find closure and healing through dialogue.
3. **Strengthening Community Bonds:** Community involvement fosters stronger relationships and a sense of collective responsibility, making neighborhoods safer and more cohesive.

Conclusion

Circle justice, as portrayed in "Touching Spirit Bear," presents a powerful alternative to traditional punitive justice systems. Through Cole Matthews' transformative journey, readers are invited to reflect on the importance of accountability, forgiveness, and healing. The lessons learned from Cole's experiences resonate beyond the pages of the novel, offering valuable insights into how communities can address conflict and promote restorative

practices. As society continues to grapple with issues of crime and punishment, the principles of circle justice remind us of the potential for healing and growth in both individuals and communities.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the main theme of 'Touching Spirit Bear' as it relates to circle justice?

The main theme of 'Touching Spirit Bear' is the journey of healing and redemption, emphasizing accountability and restorative justice through the concept of circle justice, which focuses on repairing harm and restoring relationships rather than punitive measures.

How does Cole's experience with the Spirit Bear symbolize his transformation in the context of circle justice?

Cole's encounter with the Spirit Bear symbolizes his inner struggle and eventual transformation, representing his confrontation with his own violence and the journey towards understanding, forgiveness, and reconnecting with nature and community, which are key aspects of circle justice.

In what ways does circle justice differ from traditional justice systems as depicted in 'Touching Spirit Bear'?

Circle justice differs from traditional justice systems by focusing on collective healing, community involvement, and personal accountability rather than punishment. In 'Touching Spirit Bear', this is illustrated through Cole's journey, where he must confront his actions and their impact on others.

How does the role of community play into the circle justice process in 'Touching Spirit Bear'?

The role of community in the circle justice process is crucial as it involves the participation of various stakeholders, including victims, offenders, and community members, who come together to discuss the impact of the crime and to collaboratively decide on a path toward healing and restitution, as seen in Cole's journey.

What lessons about forgiveness are conveyed through the circle justice framework in 'Touching Spirit Bear'?

The lessons about forgiveness conveyed through the circle justice framework in 'Touching Spirit Bear' include the importance of understanding the underlying causes of behavior, the necessity of personal accountability, and the healing power of empathy and compassion, both for the victim and the offender.

How does the setting of the novel enhance the themes of circle justice and healing?

The natural setting of the novel enhances the themes of circle justice and healing by providing a backdrop for Cole's introspection and connection to the environment, symbolizing the idea of renewal and growth, and reinforcing the notion that healing involves both personal change and a reconnection with the world around him.

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