Whispers With Stones

GUIDE

A global campaign in multiple languages

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BACKGROUND

The spot is not intended as an end in itself but rather conceived as a beginning place for opening discussion on a crisis shrouded in silence, guilt, shame and misplaced blame.

The concept is international, able to travel across cultures and languages.

The concept is based on an abuse-of-power

The charge of sexual harassment, while very serious, is the surface issue.

Beneath this and articulated from a child's point of view (POV) is the much larger issue of confused, reactionary and outdated thinking around gender. In addition, the approach highlights how badly we humans communicate around the issue.

Sexual harassment narratives generally feature adults; choosing a child to 'tell the story' is done here for specific reason. There is so much polarity and 'us versus them' in gender politics that using a child as the narrator affords us a fresh and more neutral entry point.

Bringing the issue into a home and having a child try and make sense of something they obviously cannot fully grasp enables more agency in the target audience. This is because all sides are drawn toward the common purpose of helping find a solution that helps everyone.

Choosing simple non-culturally specific characters enables easy suspension of disbelief in the audience. That a child narrates and that this child is confused and traumatized adds dramatic tension.

The 3D animation of the child's hands is not race or culturally specific. The Stone Characters, Mother and Father, are also neutral, universal archetypes. The Doll and Child, mostly their heads and shoulders, are only seen in shadow, cast in the sand. They too are not specific of any 'hair type' or ethnicity. The drawing of home could be anywhere.

The spot is designed as a tool for frank and tough discussion amongst the target audience (late teens and adults) in how to tackle the issue in their specific church/community. Ideally this process helps enable all participants to unpack how their own unspoken and unconscious gender assumptions are at the root of inequality, prejudice and concomitant abuse.
**APPROACH**

A single child is deeply traumatized post a heated argument in the family home.

The child is recounting the story to a doll, trying to make sense of the conflict between her parents. The ‘child’s play’ is dramatized using simple sand drawings and stones, representing characters. The child tells the story via re-enactment of the fight in the home. The child, played by an experienced actor, voices all the parts.

The backstory is that Father Stone, a senior administrator in the church hierarchy, has been accused of sexual harassment by one of his employees in the church. Father Stone expects Mother Stone to unconditionally back and support him, believing it is an outrageously false charge.

As Mother Stone has a mind of her own. She believes it is her right to point out that Father Stone should consider the inappropriateness of his attitudes and his actions and not, as is often the case, reverse the accusation, making himself the victim.

It falls to a child to try and make sense of both adult positions to a Doll she has not played with for many years. While the narrator dramatizes the conflict, she is not a neutral observer. Her emotional breakdown mirrors the wider affects sexual harassment has on everyone.

The spot ends with the child facing her own crisis, a crisis of understanding and a crisis of faith that she simply does not know how to navigate. The spot ends on a child-like question, which opens discussion in the workshop.
THE WORKSHOP

The following suggestions are proffered only as a guide to the workshop facilitator. This is not an instruction manual and the video and discussion can be tailored to many different contexts.

The proposed steps and questions are designed to forge solution thinking within moral outrage. It goes without saying that each facilitator will have the cultural interiority and local insight required to best address the crisis at a local level. It will be important to acknowledge there are probably survivors present.

Tip: Write on a board what people say. Participants seeing their thoughts written empowers critical thinking. This is not a hug-feel process. The animation is an activist tool in the struggle to fix a major and unjust societal scourge.

Step One: Pre-screening

It is best that the facilitator only introduces the animation as a child playing with her doll trying to make sense of an issue that affects families, communities and the nation. Keep it short and simple, no details. Too much pre-empting will negatively impact on the reception of the story.

Step Two: Post-screening opening

Post the screening let there be a moment of silence to consider the emotions the animation evoked.

Talking about what the story made participants feel is key. Thoughts, meaning and strategy comes later. Try to get a range of ‘feeling responses’, not allowing one gender or age group to hijack the discussion. If people are silent, shy or defensive, unpack why it is so difficult to speak about the emotions the video triggered. There is no rush to get responses. Get them to look inward and think about what they are feeling.

Tip: Keep coming back to the story and the characters in the video throughout the Workshop’s early parts.

Step Three: Post-screening discussion

Let participants know the discussion guide builds in an opportunity for sharing personal experiences in a later exercise. At this point in the discussion it will be important for the facilitator to keep the flow of conversation moving. Because of the invitation to share feelings related to the video, and the knowledge that there are probably survivors in the room, it will be necessary for the facilitator to know available resources in the community for referral if someone may request it.
Ask the participants what they thought of the stone characters? Ask them to describe them, are they recognizable and why? Ask them their thoughts around the doll.

Critically important is centering discussion on the child’s articulation of the Father’s crime and how the child tries to make sense of how he reacts, denies, counter-accuses and finally threatens.

**Step Four: Diving Deeper**

Explore what everyone believes the child is trying to convince her doll of? Ask participants to explain their responses, for example, why is the child trying to feed the doll an outdated image of the role of a mother? Why is she so protective of Father? What is their opinion of the ‘culturally correct’ codes the child ‘should’ be expressing to the doll?

Guide participants to be conscious of the child’s unquestioned assumptions around gender roles. There will be anger around the gender stereotyping the Child expresses. Explore and unpack. Write salient points. Who authors these beliefs in our lives?

*Tip: In the middle of the discussion, throw in from left-field the question as to how the child treats her doll? Why is the child so angry with her doll?*

**Step Five: Holding Truth to Power**

Get the participants to compare Father’s denial/dismissal of the charge of sexual harassment with the Child trying to convince her doll of Father’s innocence. Ask participants why the Child first takes father’s side? Why is the child critical of Mother and then later, critical of Father’s Secretary?

Ask them to give their frank opinion on Mother Stone. Is she too hard on her husband? Why does she instantly take her friend’s side instead of believing her husband is innocent? Is she being disloyal? Is this a good mother, has she brought up her daughter to have independent thoughts and self-esteem?

*Tip: In the video we never hear the Doll’s questions. Ask the audience if they needed to hear these questions or were the Doll’s questions their own unspoken questions? Why are there so many ‘unasked’ questions around sexual harassment? What is the source of our resistance?*

Now throw the participants another curve ball. Do the audiences suspect the mother is too close to her friend, Father’s Secretary…? Do the audience suspect the father is sexually abusive to the wife? Why did Father belittle, humiliate and harass his secretary? Does the audience mistrust why the daughter is defending her father?

*Tip: Now move away from the video*
Step Six: Personalizing

Participants will now be primed to think and not just react. This is the time to allow them to articulate their experiences and insights of sexual harassment in the community.

It is key that the facilitator ask for personal testimony coupled with potential remedy in each context of sexual harassment. The facilitator should never judge but simply try to nudge responses to include articulating the problem and potential solution. (Note the workshop is not the place for trauma counseling). Allow the participants to talk and share but take notes of salient points raised and of action steps to forge change. Facilitator better know of therapy resources.

When emotions run high, remain calm and empathetic. The workshop is all about channeling emotion into activism, sharing damage and rage yes, but more importantly, building solidarity and devising concrete strategy to out the problem, hold people to account and work collectively to forge rapid change.

Step Seven: Concluding

In conclusion, ask the audience to paint a scenario of what happens to the characters post the Father’s hearing. Get them to agree on the best way forward.