

*Passage Four:
Empowering Ourselves*

Fighting for a Place to Stand

Shawn

It started out as a fairly normal day for me. The usual stuff—almost sleeping through my alarm, mom nagging me about picking up the dirty clothes that I wore at Andrea's garden yesterday and dumped by the doorway, and having to pump my bicycle tires so I could make it to school on time. Oh yeah, and dreading having to show up at class once again without my homework.

I got to class just before the tardy bell rang and sat down in one of the chairs in the circle of our classroom. I looked up at our three-week calendar to see what we were going to do today and discovered that we were going to be discussing the election initiatives.

We started our day with students making announcements and organizing details for coming events—fund raising activities, transportation for field trips, and information on speakers in the community. Andy, in charge of the Mexicali service project fundraiser, announced that we had to raise \$200 more before we reached our goal of \$2000. Kristie said it would cost \$450 to use a school bus for the San Francisco modern-art field trip; she wondered whether we might be able to invite some parents to drive. Adrienne announced a one-man show at Fort Mason performed by Ron Jones; she wondered if we wanted to go as a group Friday night. Paki announced a book-reading by Liz Dana, the daughter of Elizabeth Duvének, a local activist and founder of Peninsula School (which he and Kristie had attended) and Hidden Villa (where Joe volunteered in the garden). It was organizational stuff that usually punctuates the beginning of our day. But, as it turned out, today wasn't going to be a typical day.

Wendy interrupted the announcements by blurting out, "I'm really upset about something that happened yesterday." She started to cry, but she pushed on, "Some people in the group have been out of commitment and I think that they should speak for themselves about it."

I could tell by the look on her face and the trembling in her voice that something was really bothering her. I wasn't really in the mood for emotional discussions today, so I got a bit annoyed and wondered, "Now what the hell is eating her today!"

Things got silent in the room; I looked around. Evan and Andrea were looking down at the floor. Some of the students were looking at me. A cold feeling came over me as I thought, "Oh, oh! Now I know what's up." I folded my arms as if to protect myself and settled back into the chair. "No one is gonna get me," I decided, as I glanced over my shoulders as if to protect my flanks. Then I pretended to stare off into a poster at the far end of the room.

My mind flashed back to the group's garden project. Over the past few Saturdays, some of our group members—Greg, Janna, Joanna, and Andrea—had taken organic gardening classes at a local ecology center. The group taught the rest of us some of the techniques during class. Our group's goal was to learn how to grow vegetables in a way that had the least impact on the Earth. After we understood what we needed to do, we assigned the group to five garden sites at students' houses so we could experiment with the farming methods.

Yesterday, my group was to prepare the soil at Andrea's house. That was the plan anyway; but we happened to pick a miserably hot day. To make matters worse, the soil was really packed at Andrea's and it hadn't been worked for years.

I didn't feel like working too hard in the heat, but I dug in and worked up a pretty good sweat. Evan and Andrea were part of my garden group. They felt pretty much the same way I did, and it wasn't too long before we were standing around sharing our misery. Evan suggested that it might be easier to work if we took a break and smoked some weed to ease the pain. Andrea agreed and went inside the house in search of her private stash. When she returned, we sat down in the shade and smoked a joint.

I hadn't given our actions a second thought yesterday. Now, I was sitting in class and Wendy is pissed!

I maintained my silent, defensive posture—arms folded, eyes straight ahead. As other students began to speak up, I realized that the word was out,

but it seemed that no one was going to point the finger at me. "They better not." I thought, "Nobody better mess with me!"

I quickly checked my options. My natural instinct was to put up my guard, quietly at first, then if someone accused me, to deny any involvement loudly and indignantly. If they pressed me, I would say, "It's none of your god-damn business what I do off campus." Then if people persisted, I'd just walk out. "Nobody's going to mess with me," I thought as I renewed my vow of silent defiance.

Finally, Andrea spoke up, "Well, I smoked a little marijuana at my house while we were working on the garden yesterday. It was my fault, you guys."

"DAMN!" I thought, "She didn't have to say anything. Wendy wasn't going to rat on us and now Andrea is admitting it."

About that time, Evan said, "Well, I did it, too."

"Now, we are really in trouble," I thought, "The class knows, Gary knows, and we are really going to get it."

So I tried to discount it, "OK. So I did it too; but we weren't in school and it wasn't even enough to get high on." That created quite a stir.

Janna reminded me, "You gave your word to be drug-free before and during all class activities, just like the rest of us did. You know you were involved in an LC project."

Wendy got really choked up again and said, "Shawn, when I gave my word to the group at the beginning of the year, I meant it, and I trusted everyone to keep their word, too. Now, I can't trust the group anymore."

Greg jumped in and pointed out, "We need to address specific people. The **group** is made up of twenty-five different people." He made it clear what his

intentions were, “I’m still going to keep my commitments. Could we please talk directly to each other, instead of talking **at** the group?”

Kristie looked right at me, so directly that I couldn’t look away and stated, “Do you realize what you have done? You’ve broken your word to us.”

I wanted to blow her off. Actually, I wanted to fight someone (not her) or run (I wasn’t sure where). But the way she talked to me was so direct that I couldn’t blow her off, I wanted to, I just couldn’t. Here she was asking me why I hadn’t kept my word to myself—and to the group. I needed to think about this one. I finally blurted out “I just wasn’t thinking.” It was the truth, I hadn’t thought about it. I just acted in the moment, did what I felt like at the time, and now the whole damned group was on my case. “Besides,” I added, “a little pot was no big deal.” I was still fighting for my position in the group.

Andrea looked over at me as if she had realized something really important. This was her second year in the program. The first year she had had a lot of problems with drugs. She said that the group had really helped her a lot. When she came into the group she had been doing drugs every day and had claimed that it didn’t affect her mental state, so she didn’t think it mattered if she did them. Somehow in that first year she had turned around. “No Shawn,” she said, “there is more to it than that. I wasn’t thinking either, but I know it was wrong. We gave our word in the beginning of the year, and we broke it. That **does** mean a lot to me!” Then she started crying—something that I had never seen her do before.

Evan, the newest member of our group, looked up and shared his thoughts, “All right, we broke a commitment. I’m sorry. But, what do you want us to do? It already happened.” His sarcastic tone gave away his impatience. I thought he might get up and leave. I just might have joined him, too.

“What do **you** want to do about it?” Adrienne countered. Then the group got silent again.

The discussion lasted for over an hour. I was challenged when I got reactive, or defensive, or started to sound like a victim. I was supported when I was vulnerable, painfully honest, or took responsibility for myself. I looked around at the class; many of the students had confronted difficult issues in their lives during the school year. The group members asked them to be responsible for themselves; they became stronger and our group became stronger. I began to realize that my smoking dope at the garden somehow had affected the whole group. I realized that my everyday behavior didn't necessarily lead me to things that were best for me, either, because I liked these people and I wanted to be part of this group. Somehow, my standing up and being responsible for my actions and living up to my word helped make the group to be what it was.

“Wow, this is new stuff for me,” I thought to myself. It wasn't easy to be fully honest—especially with myself. It was weird to have my classmates call me on my actions and it was weird not to react, not to get defensive, not to want to fight, or not to want to bail.

Somewhere in the discussion Jenny said, “I care about you and I want you to care about yourself.” She must have gotten to me. I really wanted to be here. I didn't want to withdraw, fight, or run.

And then when Kristie repeated Adrienne's question, “What do **you** want to do about it?” I was really taken off guard. I was both surprised and lost. Throughout my life, whenever things had gotten heated, I had always tried to get out of the trouble that I was in. I never took responsibility for what I did, never set up consequences for my actions, and never learned from the situations.

The group's persistence, and now its silence, caused me to reflect. Then Evan, Andrea, and I joined in a three-way conversation in the group. I was confused, so I asked them what we could do. Andrea looked for some kind of authority, “There must be some school rule that applies,” she said. She turned to Gary and asked, “What are you required to do as the teacher?”

He seemed fairly neutral. It was obvious, earlier in the group confrontation, that he wasn't happy about what we had done, but he hadn't pressed anything and he seemed content to let us figure it out. He replied, "Well, if I had caught you with drugs or caught you smoking pot, I would have been bound by my responsibility as a teacher to turn you over to the administration, immediately. I might have been moved to take further action that would have jeopardized your position in the group, since you broke your commitment to the group. But, since members of the group brought this issue out in the open, I think that you need to resolve it as a group."

I looked back at Evan and Andrea and said, "So, I guess the three of us are going to have to work this one out ourselves." A sense of sadness came over me. I said, "I really feel shitty! God, I'm really sorry that I let you guys down."

Gary replied, "I, for one, don't want you to **feel guilty**. I want you to **be responsible**." He added, "Guilt can become its own reward, if you feel badly without changing anything."

Evan, Andrea, and I talked to each other while the group listened. We talked about consequences. Maybe we should have to put in more time working in the garden, maybe we could dig other groups' plots for them this weekend. We explored other ideas, but found it hard to shake the feeling of having done something to the group.

Finally, Evan said he had been thinking of leaving the group. Andrea picked up on this idea immediately, "Maybe we don't deserve to be in the group anymore. Maybe we should all leave the group."

Wendy, who had been silent since her emotional plea earlier, came alive. She leaned forward on the edge of her chair and pointed at each of us. "If you guys leave, I'd really be pissed! I want you in our group, not out. Think about what we've been through, what we've created together, and what we've planned to do this year." Others quickly added their agreement to Wendy's statement. The will of our group was certainly against our leaving.

“God, it's so hard,” I thought, “A few months ago, it would have been so much easier. I would have just gotten up, told everyone to ‘go to hell’ and walked out. I think that Evan and Andrea would have walked out too. And now, that doesn't even feel like an option.”

Finally, after a lot of soul searching and much discussion, we came up with a solution that seemed right for us, and one that the group supported as well. We decided to do three things. First, we would re-commit to our group's agreements. Second, we would do our part to make the group work for the remainder of the year. The final step in our solution seemed real different: the three of us would get up, walk to the vice principal's office, explain what we had done, and willingly accept the school's consequences. The entire solution was our idea and we chose to do it of our own free will.

Various members of the group counseled us on which vice principal we should go to—we chose Mrs. Hammel. Then we walked to her office and sat down. One by one, each of us told her what we had done. She was astonished. As we completed our explanation by saying that we were ready to accept the consequences, she was even more surprised. She said that she had never had a student come to her asking to be punished before. She told us that she admired us for what we had done and would like to send us back to class without further consequence, confident that we had learned a valuable lesson without any coercion from the institution. “But,” she said, “the school board policy requires that students who use drugs during school activities must be suspended for three days. It is my commitment to the school to follow its rules.”

She did soften our punishment by saying, “Today will count as one day, tomorrow as the second day and, if you will report to my office at 7 a.m. on the morning of the third day, you will not have to miss class that morning.”

As I walked off campus to begin my suspension, I thought about the person that I had been—the guy looking for a place in which to belong, the hold-back kid, the playing-it-safe guy, the prize fighter who always kept an eye on the exits, the guy that never quite fit in. This really wasn't the person that I

wanted to be. I had felt more strength, personal power, and sense of belonging today than I had ever felt in my life. I could be open and honest, I could listen to others in the group, and I could feel that I was part of the moment that we all built together. As for exits, the only door that I was interested in was the one the whole group would pass through, and that was the one that led us all into the future together.

It wasn't easy though. Even though our group had shared special moments and pulled together to work our way through obstacles, for me—and for some of the others—the experience still felt incomplete. We knew that we couldn't feel fully in charge until we got our personal studies under control. But control was something that I had fought so hard against most of my life—especially in school.

I didn't want to be somewhere if I thought I was being controlled. My style was to play a game of Cat-and-Mouse with the teacher and the class. The challenge for me was to find the easiest way out, to discover how to get around the teacher's rules, or to join the class rebels and find ways to sabotage the teacher's lessons or teacher's authority. It wasn't so much that I wanted to be destructive; it was just that I didn't like to be controlled. When I don't have control over my circumstance, the game is to find ways not to be compliant, not to cooperate.

When I first came into LC, I didn't really believe that Gary meant it when he said we were going to **co-create** the course; actually I didn't really understand it because I had never done it before. But when I began to understand what we were up to, I honestly saw an opportunity to do nothing. When Gary suggested that we had an opportunity to create anything we wanted, my inner conversation was, “Good, I don't like school, so I won't do anything.”

As I heard other students coming up with ideas of what we could do, I found some of their ideas intriguing and took part in some of their discussions, but I still held back, didn't initiate, and didn't do any research outside of school.

I tested Gary's philosophy. "If we are in charge and we can do whatever we want, then why can't I do nothing or just hang out with my friends and listen to music and stuff," I thought. Well, that's what I did for quite a while. Gary didn't get mad at me; I wasn't punished or belittled in class. The only problem was that, the way the class was structured, I wasn't getting the courses and credits that I needed to graduate. I wrote a contract, but I hadn't turned in any course work, and when Gary and I met every other week for our thirty-minute evaluation conference, I didn't have any work to show him. We would just talk about me or my interests outside of school. Sometimes we talked about my plans for the future. But, as glorious as my dreams were, they weren't working. I couldn't lie. I couldn't fabricate things or fill in worksheets the last minute—I just hadn't done the work. Gary didn't push me to do it; I know that he wanted me to work, but he said that it wouldn't help if he wanted it more than I did. Still, he saw my lack of progress and somehow I wanted him to see something different from me.

It was hard to rebel against myself. The message I was getting from Gary was: "This is your life. What do you want to do with it?" It took quite a while for this message to sink in. Yes, it was my life, but I had been running away for so long that I didn't know what I wanted to run toward. I could set up personal goals for myself, but I had to think this one through. What did I really want? If it was high school graduation that I wanted, the school had external standards for me. If it was college that I wanted, colleges had entrance requirements. But I needed something much more relevant to my life to build my goals around. The best I could do for now was to focus on who I was and what the world was all about.

In the end, it was up to me. I had the choice to determine what I would do and how I would do it. The group had the same opportunity. It took a long time to realize that that seemed to be the purpose of our program: to discover our own way, then do it. But it was hard to shed old ways. After all, I had had ten years to develop my current attitude about school and old habits fall hard. I noticed some change as I went through the school year, and I knew that I wanted to have a good life. So I began to seek my way, and not just hang out.

My stubbornness and laziness slowly gave way to just going along with the program and listening to others. As the year progressed, I found that I started to make suggestions during our planning sessions and people listened to my ideas. I even started getting interested in what was going on in the world and discussing it. It was cool to find out about things and to see what principles my opinions were based on. I began to understand how other people made choices and why they did the things they did; I began to see my own actions as products of my own choices. I started to feel like this world was my world, that I had some stake in the it, and that I could, in some small way, change it. These were startling discoveries for the class “prize fighter with his eyes on the exits.”

Our four-hour-per-day class gave us enough time to know each other personally and to care about each other. It also gave us the time to have in-depth discussions and really find out what people believed and cared about. We respected each other so we spent the time to understand each other. Discussions ended when we had shared all the points of view of a topic, not when somebody won and somebody else lost. The emphasis was on understanding the issue, understanding our values, challenging our assumptions, and seeking the truth. I liked that; it gave me a different view of school, not because those same classroom goals didn't exist elsewhere, but because we discovered and created them for ourselves.

We did get some help. Gary conducted a four hour Psychological Systems seminar each week. In the beginning of the year he helped us to get to know and trust each other. After we began to work together more effectively, he had us look deeper into who we were. We learned how to take greater interpersonal risks and challenge each other to keep our word. We looked at our values and how we made choices in life. One of the systems that he presented, Kohlberg's System of Moral Reasoning, became a model for us during the year in evaluating and making our choices. We learned that people make decisions based on how they see the world. We explored the kind of decision-making that results from self-indulgence, rewards and punishment, back-scratching, approval, duty, contract, and principle. Since we had started our year by agreeing to a set of commitments, our challenge was

to base our decisions on our group contract. Then, as we investigated our personal values, we began to apply our principles to our decision-making. We applied these lessons as we worked out our issues as Andrea, Evan, and I did with the garden issue or as we discussed global issues.

Circumstances in the group helped me see that I could make more out of my life. I realized that the game of Cat-and-Mouse that I had played could be replaced by real learning with real people who cared about each other. Working together to make a difference in the world was far more entertaining and meaningful than just hanging out and doing nothing. With each new experience, our class became more like real life, rather than school. I had learned a new way to gain acceptance. Now I really felt like I belonged in a way that I had never felt before. Defiance and rebellion had been replaced by a stronger bond. I had found a place where I could stand: ***I had chosen to stand on principle***. As I took my stand, I found that I was not alone. Our group had found a common strength, one that was based on principle and one that we could develop together.

