

WordTrails

Three Stories: From Separation to Connection

Chapter 1: Before They Could Share the Same Room

Sarah sits alone in the small conference room, staring at the scattered colored chips before her. The mediator has stepped out, leaving her with something called WordTrails - hundreds of words on colored chips, action cards, and simple instructions:

"Just explore. Pick one, and lay it down in the center of the open space. Feel for the next one..whatever the one is that wants to follow. Follow the words where they lead. Let them lead you into being able to view your own thoughts with compassion and curiosity."

Down the hall, David sits in an identical room with an identical set, having the same experience.

They can't be in the same room yet. Too much has been said that can't be unsaid. So the mediator suggested this: individual sessions first, each having a chance to see - and remember - ALL of what's inside them.

Sarah's Room

Sarah's hand hovers over the chips. "Exhaustion" calls to her first - an orange chip that she places in front of her. She stares at it. How long has she been so tired?

Her fingers find "Overwhelm" next, then "Anger". Both orange chips sit heavy on the table. She reaches for an action card: "I hold on".

What am I holding onto? she wonders. The story of who's right? The need to protect Emma and Tommy from... what exactly?

"Scared" appears in her hand. Another orange chip. She places it carefully. I wonder if I'm scared David will convince everyone he's the wounded party. Scared the kids will choose him. Scared I've been so busy being right that I forgot how to be their mom.

"Control" finds its way to her trail - a yellow chip. I wonder. No, I know, that's connected to the exhaustion. Trying to control things I can't control.

Then, surprising herself, she picks up, "Wonder". When did I stop wondering about things? The red chip sits alone for a moment before she adds "Curious" beside it - another red chip.

"I question" - the action card appears in her hand. "What if I know I don't know everything I think I know about this situation - but everyone thinks I do. I feel like I'm supposed to. What if I had some way to just ASK?"

David's Room

David's first chip is "Shame". Orange. He sets it down and wants to take it back, but the mediator said once a chip is played, best to leave it and work from there. Things happen. There are no wrong choices here, just building from what's been played.

"Judgment" comes next. Then "Significance". Light blue. I've felt insignificant for years. Like nothing I did was enough.

"I feel" He draws the action card and pauses. What do I actually feel?

"Heartbroken" joins the trail. Another orange chip, but when he places it, something loosens in his chest.

"Outside". I don't know how to be divorced. Don't know how to be a part-time father.

"Guilty" appears. I feel guilty for being relieved this is over. Guilty for sometimes resenting the kids because dealing with them means dealing with Sarah.

Then, surprising himself: "Love". A bright blue chip. I do love Emma and Tommy. Under everything else, that's still clear.

"I remember" - the action card makes him pause. "What do I remember about why we began, who we were, what we dreamed of?"

Both Sarah and David continue building trails that no one else will see. No explanations allowed, no justification needed. Pure personal exploration in the safety of their own thoughts.

Sarah looks back over her trail. She draws "I let go" and stares at it. What if I could let go of some of my need to be so right about things, so sure? Could I trust that much? What would I need to trust?

In his room, David picks up "I trust" and wonders what that might mean.

Neither knows what the other is discovering. They've actually stopped wondering about the other for a moment. Because there's so much going on here. For them. But inside each of them

something that had been clenched is relaxing. Just a little tiny bit. Tiny, yes. But - it's a new feeling. And it's a relief.

Chapter 2: In the Same Room

A week later, Sarah sits across from David in the mediation room. Since they were here last, they've both been moving around inside themselves with what happened in their individual sessions - no conversations, just living with it.

Between them, today, lies the now-familiar WordTrails - colored chips scattered across the table, action cards in a neat stack. The mediator reviews the rules: build trails together, no explanations, follow what wants to happen, see what emerges. Then she steps back, letting them work.

Sarah feels the familiar first resistance...How can we work anything out without talking it through? But she remembers the surprise she felt last week.

She places her first chip: "Wonder". Red.

David looks at it for a long moment, then places "Allowing" next to it. A teal chip.

Sarah stares. "Allowing" Not the word she expected from someone who... Wait. What did I expect? What if I don't actually know what he's thinking?

The trail continues. Sarah adds "Courage" - orange. David adds "Safe" - another teal. Sarah draws an action card: "I dance".

Thirty minutes in, something shifts. Sarah realizes she hasn't thought about winning or losing in the last ten minutes. She's been watching David's choices with something that feels like... curiosity? When he placed "Respectful" after her "Guardedness", she saw something she'd forgotten.

We both want Emma and Tommy to be strong and protected. We both want them to know they're loved.

An hour in, Sarah feels something she hasn't felt in months when looking at David: Recognition. Not of the man who disappointed her, but of the father who placed "Readiness" next to "Safe" - an orange chip next to a teal one - because he knows children need both.

When David places "Commit" on the trail - light orange - Sarah doesn't assume it's about her. In this space without explanations, it simply sits there, meaning whatever it means.

"I wonder" - she draws the action card and looks at it. I wonder what's possible now.

By the end of the session, they haven't solved their logistics. But they've remembered something: they're not enemies fighting over children. The trail they built together shows shared values they discovered they still hold. A simple trail of colored chips, creating a path neither could have built alone.

These become guideposts. When they return to discussing schedules and holidays, they're building from this foundation of recognized common ground.

"I see" - Sarah draws the card as they prepare to leave. She sees so much differently now. Herself, David, the children, life itself...Not as people trying to win, or something to be won, no longer as what they were or have been - starry eyed youngsters, a committed married couple, battered people who can barely stand to be together - but as a pair of every day humans working on the same project, trying to achieve the same thing: their children's joy and wellbeing.

Chapter 3: Before We Get That Far

"I don't really know how to explain it," Sarah says, sitting across from her friend Lisa at their usual coffee spot. "But something shifted. I stopped being so... reactive. I could actually think about what Emma and Tommy needed."

Lisa stirs her latte. There's something different about Sarah - calmer, less brittle. "What kind of game?"

"WordTrails. You just place words and build trails with them. No talking about what they mean." Sarah pauses. "I know it sounds weird, but it helped me see things differently."

Lisa looks out the window. "Rob and I have been so out of sync lately. Not fighting exactly, but everything feels like effort. I keep thinking, 'Is this how it starts?'"

"Maybe it would help before things get... complicated," Sarah suggests.

That evening, Lisa sets the WordTrails box on the kitchen table after dinner. "Sarah gave me this. I was thinking maybe we could try it."

Rob looks skeptical. "A game is going to fix us?"

"We don't need fixing. But maybe we could use a little... reconnecting?"

They read the instructions together and clear space on the table. The colored chips catch the light as they scatter them between them.

Rob picks up "Tired" and places it down. Orange. Lisa looks at him, really looks, and sees something she's been missing. He's tired. Not just work-tired, but something deeper.

She places "Understanding" next to his word. Teal.

Something in Rob's shoulders relaxes. She sees me. He adds "Grateful". Orange.

Lisa places "Supportive". Teal. Rob adds "Silliness" and grins - the first real smile she's seen from him in weeks. Another orange chip.

"I notice" - Lisa draws the action card. And another: "I smile"

Their trail winds across the table.

"I have missed us," Lisa says quietly.

"Me too." Rob reaches across and touches her hand. "I wonder when I started enduring instead of living."

Over the next few weeks, they play WordTrails a few more times. Twenty minutes with the words and they remember they're fun partners, not adversaries.

"I pause" becomes Lisa's favorite action card when she feels herself getting reactive about Rob's dishes in the sink.

"I consider" becomes Rob's go-to when Lisa worries about money in ways that used to trigger his defensiveness.

The game becomes a way back to each other. A way to remember what they're building together.

Their fifteen-year-old daughter notices. "Mom and Dad seem happier lately. Like they're actually talking instead of just coordinating." She takes it out to play with her girlfriends.

When Lisa's sister visits and asks what they've been doing differently, Lisa shows her the WordTrails box. "It's hard to explain, but it helps us find each other again."

Two months later, Lisa's sister orders her own copy.