

## Collaborative Potential

A review of *Omagh*

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I recently watched a sad but great movie. Its promo says it is about "a father's search for justice." Maybe so, but what rings true to me is its search for a better outcome via community-level collaboration.

The movie portrays the aftermath of the 1998 Real IRA bombing of a crowded market in Omagh, Northern Ireland during a time simply called "The Troubles." Thirty-one people died in the blast.



Politics surrounded the "why" questions. Why hurt citizens? Why do this in the middle of the peace process? Why were the perpetrators never brought to justice? Why didn't the authorities put this mass murder to the top of their agenda? But, the complexity of it all is not what makes this movie a stunner to me. What makes it worth talking about and recommending to those that work with "community engagement" is its story of collaboration. Even more important is the movie's in-depth portrayal of one ordinary man going through such a collaboration, and seeing it through his eyes.

Michael Gallagher is your average citizen. He's a non-political family man who is a motor mechanic by trade. He has no public speaking skills, no head for strategizing community action – at least not until the death of his 21 year old son in the bomb blast. In deep grief, he sees the potential to collaborate to force justice to be served, and sets up a hodgepodge of other community members in a venture that came to be called the Omagh Support Group.

In this society deeply divided along religious lines, the Omagh Support Group found common ground in their experience of grief and rage. The purpose of this group, over months and months, was to find out what really happened and bring the guilty to justice. While they work together, viewers can't help but cringe at the apparent political consensus to ignore what has happened, the bureaucrats' misleading double talk, and the police as they back off the investigation and fail to make arrests. Finally, an ombudsman's report confirms how dishonest officials mistreated the Support Group by placing expediency higher on the agenda than justice.

Examples of collaboration can be seen throughout the movie. From realizing the cause of the blast and trying to develop and agree on simple strategies to address its destruction, the Omagh Support Group huddles in living rooms and a trailer space with just one phone. Together, the Group develops their ability to work together, stay focused and get their point across "with dignity."

As the Group makes progress, the movie also portrays the bored, shuffling bureaucrats crowding the group into off-hand meetings in rooms too small to contain them, mouthing fatuous platitudes. "Michael...do you mind if I call you Michael?"

By the end of the movie (in those updates that scroll too fast), we learn that as of 2004, when the movie was filmed, there was still no "success" in the core work of this group – that is, if success is measured by prosecutions.

But, is making a difference on a large scale the only measure of success in this grassroots group? They may not have achieved their goal of justice, but they were successful in other ways. The movie shows that by working as a group, they created a path to healing that allowed their rage to morph into purposeful action.

I think many collaborations do not “succeed” in the big picture, but they help to reframe frustration and pain by working together. In the end, they “make a difference” in themselves.

*Omagh* explores feelings that most community activists and their families would recognize. Michael demonstrates one common issue in collaboration – burn out. He begins to lose touch with his wife and kids. He becomes steeped in the collaboration for his own sake. He comes home from too many all-evening meetings to a household of family members who have already gone to bed. Planning the group’s next staged event means there is no time to plan with the family. Phone calls interrupt dinner, press conferences must be planned and attended, and the Group requires conflict resolution. The work never ends and balance is lost.

A turning point occurs for Michael when he realizes that his work with the Group is jeopardizing his family life. In a moment, to the chagrin of his group, he quits. Months later, at the end of the movie, he rejoins the group after one piece of encouraging news is received – a report that validates the Group’s rage against the system that fails them. The news re-energizes the group members. When Michael returns to his role as leader of the Omagh Support Group, he has the support of his family, which makes all the difference.

My great interest in this movie was watching the evolution of the Omagh Support Group through its formation and initial high energy, its small progress, and the frustration of success-to-small, patronization, the backhanded efforts to squash their work and the realization that they are too small to effect the difference they seek make. The group hits the wall, nearly dissolves and then gains new energy after restructuring. Eventually, they pursue their goals in different ways.

Released in 2004, *Omagh* and can be found amongst the dramas at your local video store. If the story of collaboration doesn’t grab you, perhaps the movie’s 13 awards and eight nominations will.

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