

Listening Across Differences

Cindy Rivka Marshall

“Wait behind the line,” the guard cautioned my daughter when she stepped up with me to airport security. *“One family at a time.”*

Although she looked older, my daughter was seventeen, still a minor, and did not yet have a driver’s license, so, as always, we were going through security together.

But the guard did not think she was with me because we do not look like each other.

“We are together. This is my daughter,” I stated loudly, my shoulders tense and my chin raised.

The guard’s eyes darted from me to my daughter, his face shifting from annoyance to confusion, to then realizing his false assumption.

“Oh, you’re together?” He checked to see that our last names matched. *“Go ahead.”*

As a multiracial family sometimes our bond as a family is questioned or invisible to others. A look of surprise or confusion passes over faces as an assumption is replaced by the dawning of “oh, you’re not who I thought you were.” I acknowledge that being a white person makes it safer for me than for my daughter, who is Asian American, to speak up and correct a mistaken assumption.

Everyone is affected by assumptions and stereotypes based on race, class, gender, ethnicity, religion, and sexual orientation — exponentially more so for those in marginalized or targeted groups. Particularly in the recent climate of pervasive xenophobia and bias, many communities and organizations are looking for ways to encourage understanding and respect of human differences. Those of us who deeply understand the potential of both story sharing and story listening have a lot to offer.

I facilitate personal story sharing as a tool for diversity work. I have developed models for groups that can help to break down barriers and connect people across differences. I have done this in schools and in congregations — in settings where people are already in a shared community and have a stake in trying to understand each other. These groups have intentionally come together in an effort to build empathy.

A session like this requires honesty, openness, and listening respectfully. Because this work makes people feel vulnerable, it is vitally important at the outset for the group to agree to a set of guidelines. The group should come up with these themselves, but typically include: respect, confidentiality, open-mindedness, use “I” statements, take care of yourself. This helps the group proceed with a sense of personal safety. If for any reason problematic interactions occur, the group can be redirected back to the agreed upon guidelines.

“Try to be present and listen respectfully, with an open mind,” I suggest. “This is a time to listen to personal stories, to try to understand the reality of some members of your community,” I say. “Your task is not to articulate opinions or to formulate counter arguments. Your job is to simply listen. How might you relate to what is being shared, even if your life experience is quite different?” Rather than seeing the teller as “other,” this directive

steers participants to listen empathically. By directing people to listen for and acknowledge points of connection, I strive to create a pathway of common humanity and understanding.

As a first step to transcending barriers, it is essential to look at one's own experience. Everyone has, or will, at some time in their lives, have the experience of marginalization. When have you experienced feeling "other?" Think of a context when you were in the minority, when some aspect of your identity was different than others around you. Describe a time when you were excluded or perceived as "other" because of some aspect of your identity. Tell about a time when people made assumptions about you because of your appearance or other perceived traits.

With prompts such as these, participants may recall relevant anecdotes from their lives, memories that can be explored individually in writing/journaling, and then orally in pairs and then in small groups. Some may volunteer to tell their story to the large group.

"After you listen," I guide participants, "you may respond by highlighting some aspect of the stories that you heard, and then **specify how you resonate with the teller's story, how your own experience is in some way similar to theirs, even if the circumstances are quite different.**"

I request that the responses to the stories be stated in first person. Responses are invited in a highly structured way, and before we begin, I model examples of how to respond. "Rather than stating 'You are so brave!' or 'You must have been scared,' offer something like 'I appreciated what you said about X because it helped me understand Y' OR 'I resonate with what you said because I have experienced Z.'"

If responses veer away from this structure I gently remind participants to rephrase their thoughts. Using "I" statements and keeping the focus on the ways our experiences might have some points of connection is intentional and it holds the group to the expectation of mutual respect. I do not see it as dialogue, per se, although dialogue may grow out of it at a later time.

Story sharing sessions allow individuals to connect the dots, to listen with an ear for what they have in common with others. They also raises awareness of the unique issues that may impact a particular identity group. When seeing one's experience in a context, in relation to others' stories, it is important to acknowledge not only the similarities, but also the differences.

The model I describe here can be applied to identity issues such as race, religion, class, gender, sexual orientation, disability, or ethnicity. Hearing personal stories, particularly those of people who have been silenced, marginalized, or targeted, has the potential to open the hearts of the listeners and create change —change in attitudes, policy, and social change.

Of course, changing attitudes and working towards equity is an incremental and complex process. Story sharing programs alone cannot satisfy the need for systemic change. It is important to acknowledge that not all experiences of “other” are equivalent. Prejudicial attitudes combined with systemic social and economic power form formidable and specific barriers that impact groups who are marginalized. Storytellers who have the opportunity of facilitating these programs can do our part to teach people how to listen across differences, and to make our communities safer for all.



Cindy Rivka Marshall and her company Story Arc aims to Reach, Teach and Change with Stories. Her consultation and training in the use of story modalities addresses the needs of congregations, schools, organizations, and individuals. Along with being an award-winning story performer, Cindy facilitates groups to share stories and coaches individuals to craft stories, with the goals of enhancing learning experiences and building community.

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