

“Can’t we all just get along?”:
Learning to listen despite difference

(Genesis 25:1-11; 1 Kings 3:16-28)

In the home that I grew up in, nearly every night of my adolescence, like clockwork, my father and I would get into an argument at the dinner table. Some of the issues remain with me—teens using drugs, national politics, worthy work, union organizing—but more are lost in the mists of time. What was not lost, however, was what I learned from those arguments. I learned to spar with the most powerful man in my life. I learned that my opinions mattered. I learned that being challenged sharpened my thinking. I learned that the commandment to honor thy father and thy mother does not mean being seen and not heard; rather I honored my father—and in turn felt honored by him—by believing that we had something to learn from and teach one another, even if the way to get there was often contentious.

Those lessons loom very large in my mind right now—on a campus roiled by a number of consequential issues—sexual assault, the virtues and vagaries of activism, student mental health and well-being, divestment, affirming and examining multiple identities and convictions. Between Stanford’s recent national press and social media broadcasting email trails with inflammatory comments, finding thoughtful opportunities to sort through ideas, engaging in discussion with those who may have different experiences or starting points or

even understanding the educational value of different perspectives is all the more essential. There are those who insist with certainty, passion and public witness, that our community must confront thorny issues. There are those who shy away from the conflicts they create. There are those caught between two or more identities that cause them to feel, in the words of poet Adrienne Rich, “split at the root.”

And some of you, on Stanford’s campus for the first time, are trying to determine whether this is the right place for you or for your children to spend the next four formative years of your life. “What kind of education might I or my child receive here?” you may be asking.

This past Monday, our office had the privilege of hosting Oprah Winfrey, who was here to give the Rathbun Lecture, “Harry’s Last Lecture on a Meaningful Life.” Among the wisdom that she imparted, based on years of interviewing not only celebrities, captains of industry and presidents, but also rapists, racists and murderers, she told us is that each person who came on her show had something to say from which she herself could grow. No matter the circumstances, she knew how to listen to the person behind the story, to find an opportunity for connection.

Too often, our impulse is not to reach out, but to withdraw. I recently was sent a film to review. As a 13 year-old, Matthew Boger was thrown out of his home for being gay. While living on the streets of Hollywood, he was savagely beaten in a back alley by a group of neo-Nazi skinheads. Boger managed to survive the attack and escape life on the streets. Twenty-five years later, Boger found himself in a chance meeting with a former neo-Nazi skinhead,

Tim Zaal. The two men soon realized that they had met before...Zaal was one of the attackers who had savagely beaten Boger and left him for dead.i

As they explored their past, each of them now engaged in education against intolerance and hate, they forged an unlikely friendship. What I was reminded of as I watched the film is that there is a kind of alchemy in victim and perpetrator escaping their definitions and coming to treat one another as full human beings. Tim and Matthew's lives were irreparably intertwined—through violence and ignorance. Their triumph is to intertwine them once again through compassion and knowledge.

The film is called, "Facing Fear." Engaging in dialogue, listening to the story of someone else, especially someone whose life and values challenge or even threaten our own can, indeed, raise our fears. But avoiding those who are different, or espouse different outlooks, wrapping ourselves in our discomfort or in the refusal to listen to other perspectives perpetuates not only fear, but also ignorance. It snuffs out hope. It engenders isolation.

Martin Niemoller, the Lutheran pastor who worked against Hitler eloquently expresses the problem of only engaging with those who share your worldview when he wrote,

"First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out— Because I was not a Socialist.

Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out—

Because I was not a Trade Unionist.

Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—

Because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.ⁱⁱ

The university is a place where not only should we practice speaking out in solidarity with one another, we should also practice speaking to one another. We should learn how to listen to one another. There is an insidious idea among some that dialogue itself signals defeat, that to listen to the views of one with whom you vehemently disagree is anathema. In some circles, this is called “whitewashing”, “faithwashing” or “normalizing injustice”.

When we are willing to entertain only our own perspective replayed or reinforced in the voices or stories of others, we rend the fabric of our community. Like the biblical Solomon threatening to tear asunder a baby when two women dispute who is the mother, an all or nothing, “my way or the highway” orientation leads to fragmentation and fear, isolation and insecurity. In Solomon’s story, only when the implications of that tortured logic sets in—that the only way the mother can save her baby is by relinquishing her claim, is it possible to discern the truth. In the story of Solomon, literally, looking down the tip of a sword, hearing the other is preferable to being right—and to being righteous.

As feminist theologian Mary Daly teaches, “Our liberation consists in refusing to be the Other, and asserting instead, “I am”—without making another, the Other.”

The best way I know to follow Daly’s teaching is to listen, truly listen, to one another’s pain and one another’s hopes. They can’t remain “the other” when you know what causes them pain.

In a well-known Chassidic story, two Russian friends, Ivan and Peter, were drinking in a tavern. After many drinks, Ivan said to his friend, "Peter, do you love me?" Peter answered, "Of course I love you!"

Ivan said, "If you love me, can you tell me what's causing me pain?"

Peter replied, "How can I know what's causing you pain?"

Ivan then said, "If you don't know what's causing me pain, then how can you truly say that you love me?"

Sometimes holding the pain of another, being willing to understand the ways in which we may have inadvertently contributed to the pain of someone feeling overlooked, or isolated or unworthy or judged or invisible creates the same alchemy that the skinhead and the gay man experienced when they became to each other Tim and Matthew, each with a history of hurt, each with the capacity to love, each together, facing their fears to conquer hate and injustice.

Most of us start with more in common than Tim and Matthew. We are at the same institution. We live in the same dorms, eat in the same dining halls, root for the same sports teams. We value education. We want peace and justice. But there are still significant and deep differences within our community.

Hillel and Shammai are two rabbis in the Talmud whose arguments with one another grace nearly every book of rabbinic literature. Many of their disputes in the Talmud concern identity and status—issues of who to marry, what to cook, what is pure and what is impure, whether children would be considered legitimate or illegitimate. Yet, following these fierce, serious and consequential arguments, the Talmud teaches, “Nevertheless, the House of Shammai did not refrain from marrying women from [the daughters of] the House of Hillel, nor did the House of Hillel refrain from marrying women from [the daughters of] the House of Shammai.” (Eduyot 4:8)

So important to them was the primacy of community that when it came to marriage, they learned to live with their differences and affirmed that they were one family. Sometimes it is only through a willingness to truly listen to one another that love and a shared future are possible.

In the Bible, Isaac and Ishmael lived their lives in isolation from one another but when their father Abraham died, they came together across differences. They joined hands to bury their father Abraham. They understood that some differences of habit, lifestyle, conviction and culture can be overridden in service to a larger love, a larger justice.

May we, as we make our way through a thicket of misunderstanding, hurt and history, also join hands in service to something larger than ourselves—to an education, a community, indeed, a world in need of empathy and careful listening. May we reach toward one another with outstretched hands and with willing hearts.

Welcome to the Farm. I hope you will find your future here.

ⁱ <http://www.facingfearmovie.com/index.html>

ⁱⁱ <http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10007392>