From Mindless to Mindful Dialogues about Identity

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When people first hear terms like "mindfulness" or "contemplative," it is common for images of cross-legged silent meditation or perhaps uttering "Om" to be conjured in the listener's mind. This is a stereotype of course, and like others, it is constructed from things that actually happen (i.e. seeing someone cross-legged and meditating and/or chanting) and then extrapolated into a caricature of reality.

These caricatures are repeated so often that they give the impression of reality, which is then enforced through individual and collective habits. However, mindfulness practices can actually help us to see things as they are by bringing us into the present where we can more easily observe reality without interference by illusion. In fact, it can help us to see both the reality AND the illusion. Some may call this critical thinking, but I would argue that mindfulness offers a more potent form of observation because it incorporates not only intellectual perception, but also mental, spiritual, and physical perceptions. Notwithstanding the various worldviews that do not conceive of these as separate, the point is that when we are mindful, we are more fully present in the here and now, allowing a far more visceral and salient
experience of reality.

In the case of identity stereotypes and their consequences, mindfulness allows us to more easily see the reality, the caricature, and perceive their relationships with each other and the broader context. It is the original 3-D (or perhaps 4-D) experience, and it is available to us with increasing convenience as we practice cultivating it. Much like with mechanical devices, being able to comprehend the parts and the whole together illuminates opportunities for improving function and repairing what is broken. We are thus more able to purposefully direct our heads, hands and hearts in service of authentic, equitable and just relationships.

Stereotypes are byproducts of dysfunctional and broken human relationships. They tend to be repeated often enough to hijack or obscure truth, replacing it with narratives that separate people and organize power relations that generate and sustain privilege and oppression. This can also happen within individuals, internalizing hurtful and false narratives that separate us from ourselves, diminish our dignity and health, and constrain our sense of place in community.

The development and proliferation of stereotypes and their impact of people's experiences and connections is facilitated by the social nature of humans. By this, I mean that we are innately curious and social, but we are socialized within a framework that develops the habit of organizing others and the world into categories. The efficiency of this habit fosters its mindless repetition. There are both problematic forms (e.g. repeating and acting on stereotypes, answering "what's up?" with "not much" even when that's not true), and positive forms (e.g. courtesies such as opening doors for, and greeting people, offering immediate help when someone is injured). Neither of these forms requires much risk.

When people meet (meaning more than just passing by another... being introduced or being in a situation where it is customary to talk for a bit) for the first time, the dominant social convention is to seek out commonalities. When that happens quickly, we feel connected and are motivated to begin with the assumption of compatibility. When it is mitigated by something we have experienced as different (such as cross-racial meetings between
people who have limited or even negative experiences of others of that race, whether personally or through observation via media, the motivation is often to assume incompatibility. Either way, we tend to build from there.

Those of us who describe our work with terms such as "anti-racist," "anti-sexist," "anti-oppressive" and the like share many experiences of frustration. We try to explain to others how they experience privilege, or try to affirm others' narratives of oppression. In the former, we find difficulty identifying a compelling example that will be persuasive to the other, often leading to a counterproductive and clinging eagerness. In the latter, we often feel a self-conscious worry about sounding patronizing or dismissive when responding to someone who shares their maddening or painful truth with us.

It is very hard to motivate people to willingly engage uncomfortable experiences associated with listening and sharing vulnerably across difference. In fairness, guilt, shame, and hostility are often present, and they are difficult and scary experiences. Those of us in the work know the huge dividends that arise after fear, guilt, anger and shame give way to solidarity and connection. We want everyone to be comrades in this work, but figuring out how to make that happen is an intractable conundrum.

The learned habits of avoidance or attraction based on stereotypes and assumptions have become mindless reflexes. So, what would happen if that could be immediately disarmed to hold a bit of space for exploring connections in an inviting way? It occurred to me that the same psychological and sociological forces that lead us to quickly categorize and dismiss each other in a distancing way could be harnessed in a connecting way. This could be accomplished if a first encounter with someone who appears (stereotypically) different begins instead with something in common.

This led me to experiment with practices that use the reflexes
associated with social interactions to invite people to be present in dialogue, trusting that this would likely generate its own momentum. I was looking for universal frameworks that transcend social identities and could be communicated succinctly and clearly. In turn, these frameworks could be invoked through what I call "benign prompts" that disarm assumptions of difference and replace them with assumptions of commonalities. The first one that came to mind involves siblings. People all around the world have stories about their families, especially regarding their siblings. It is very common to speak of older siblings who received stricter rules, or younger ones that "got away with things." These often have gendered dimensions such as greater or lesser latitude from parents or siblings because of their assumed strengths, weaknesses, or expectations.

I first thought to use this idea on a university campus where I served as an instructor and administrator. The campus was quite racially homogenous (93% Caucasian, 80% from within the State) and it was very difficult to advance diversity interests due to resistance by students whose identities made it very difficult for them to critically examine privilege and oppression. I recruited a small cadre of willing students to be peer educators and trained them in the method I called "The Identity Conversations Project."

So, in the case of the "Sibling Prompt," the idea is to strike up a conversation using this familiar construct. One can make a comment about their sibling and then ask the other if they have siblings. Because it is so common, it works remarkably well. For example, I could say "my sister drives me crazy because she gets babied by our parents and won't help with chores," and then ask the other person if they have that problem. This will almost invariably be reciprocated with commiserating about the fun and/or difficult aspects of siblings. The topic is so common that it too gets moved along mindlessly in the sense that it doesn't occur to the discussants to be hesitant. People often laugh and feel motivated to discuss such a topic at length, which in turn generates a rapport of familiarity and comfort.

Once that happens, the peer educator can go deeper with less chance of mistrust or resistance. One example is to say, "Hmmm...that's so weird. We and our siblings grew up in the same house, with the same parents, during the same period of
time, and it would never occur to us to tell our sibling that such and such didn't happen or that they are wrong. We realize that each of us has our experience of the time and place, and so even if we have differences in perspective, we don't tell accuse each other of lying. We just believe our sibling told us their truth. This reminds me of what happens here on campus. Here we all are on campus, with all these different identities and experiences, during the same period of time, and yet we get into arguments about whose truth is true and whose isn't. Doesn't that seem messed up? Why can't we believe each other just as we believe our siblings?"

Now that the rapport is developed and the mistrust is preempted, I have found that these dialogues flow with more ease and with a willingness of the participants to hold the complexity of differences with new energy. With a foundation constructed, the more fraught issues of privilege, oppression and so forth have more to rest on so it is not so scary. This is not a panacea, but it has certainly gotten farther along the path than other things I tried before. It has become mindless to avoid real conversations about identity issues, and it can become a mindful habit to have them too.

How it works:

1. Introduce a benign (e.g. safe) "prompt."
2. Develop a conversation about the "prompt."
3. Extrapolate to an identity issue and make the analogy explicit.
4. Document, reflect, learn
5. Present data and lessons learned to campus community as a springboard for discussion.
A couple other examples of benign prompts:

The "Bottle of Oil" Prompt

· If someone hung a bottle of slippery oil on your back, but you didn't know it was there, and it was leaking behind you so that people were slipping, would you want to know about it?

· How could you believe it when people tell you about the oil, but you didn't feel the bottle?

The "Explaining Water to Fish" Prompt

· How would you explain water to fish?

· How could you prove to the fish that the water is there?

· How could you respond if the fish insists that the water is in your imagination rather than in real life?

I hope you find these ideas helpful for your own practice in life, at work, in the classroom, or wherever you go.

Bio

Dr. Jason Laker is a Professor of Counselor Education (and former Vice President for Student Affairs) at San José State University in California, USA. He previously served as AVP & Dean of Student Affairs, Fellow in the Centre for the Study of Democracy, and on the Gender Studies Faculty at Queen's University in Canada. His scholarly work includes four texts: Masculinities in Higher Education (with Tracy Davis, Routledge, 2011), Canadian Perspectives on Men and Masculinities (Oxford, 2011); Citizenship,
Democracy and Higher Education in Europe, Canada and the U.S. & Civic Pedagogies in Higher Education (both with Concepcion Naval (University of Navarra, Spain) and Kornelija Mrnjaus (University of Rijeka, Croatia), Palgrave Macmillan UK). He serves as series editor for Palgrave Studies in Global Citizenship Education and Democracy. He is currently writing a book with Dr. Jane Fried (Central Connecticut State University) and Dr. Ruth Harper (University of South Dakota) about pedagogies enacted in the broader learning environment of campuses and communities. His current research (with Dr. Erica Boas) focuses on sexual consent among college students. Learn more about his work on his website.

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