

Promoting Equality and Human Rights Includes Self Reflection

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In an interview in 2012 in a Nürnberg newspaper, Hans-Eberhard Rückert – a minister in who officially blessed a gay couple in a church service -- was asked, “Did you have to overcome your own prejudices, so that you could bless them?” He answered,

“Yes, of course I had to deal with the typical prejudices that almost everyone has, and I had to let go of these prejudices. I had known both of the men for a long time, and I knew that my prejudices didn’t apply to them. They had asked me over a year ago, if I could imagine blessing them. At first I told them I couldn’t do it, but I kept working this over in my head. Why were my prejudices so strong? It was clear to me that blessing them would have an impact on me. I would be changed. And eventually it became clear to me, that I would conduct a church service for them, and bless them, even though I am heterosexual.”

In our experience as teachers, activists, and advocates for equality and human rights, we have met people like Minister Rückert, people who take their work personally. Unfortunately, we have also met teachers, activists, and advocates who challenge inequality and fight for human rights from a distance, without getting personally involved. They don’t build relationships with the people who have experienced discrimination or human rights violations. They don’t ask themselves, “Why am I doing this work? What is my self-interest? What do I need to develop in myself? What do I need to change in my behavior?” A friend of ours says, “Working for equality and human rights is hard work. And it needs to be done with the heart.”

In this essay, we are going to give three examples of situations where teachers, activists, and advocates – people who are trying to make the world a better place for others, or who simply want to understand the history of oppression and make sure that history doesn’t repeat itself -- don’t get personally involved. Then we will then describe a model for challenging discrimination and human rights violations and offer some suggestions for people who want to fight for equality and human rights, and simultaneously, do their own “personal work.”

Teaching about the Holocaust

A few years ago, we traveled to Poland with a group of German history teachers to study the historical and political relationship between Germany and Poland, with a focus on the National Socialist period. A centerpiece of the trip was a visit to Auschwitz. The many

lectures we attended, and our group discussions, were almost exclusively cognitive – the focus was historical facts, models, and theories.

We felt quite alienated by the level of intellectual discourse without personal reflection. When Inge told the group that we wanted more personal sharing – that it was necessary that we all talk about our thoughts and feelings about this painful aspect of German history, and that history teachers especially needed to have the skills to talk with their students at an emotional and experiential level – several participants responded, “We refuse to do a “soul striptease.” In the following days, the group discussions remained at a cognitive level, and almost no approached us personally to share their thoughts and feelings, or inquire about ours.

Integration policy for native Germans

As a member of the Nürnberg Integrationsrat (Integration Council), Cooper many attends meetings and events where native Germans share their thoughts about Integrationspolitik: policies developed by the state to determine how immigrants should integrate into German society. In these events, native Germans can easily describe what immigrants need to do to successfully integrate: for example, attend courses to learn the German language, use German at home instead of a native language, learn about German culture, and get additional job skills to qualify for jobs in Germany, on the assumption that the skills they learned in their native countries are inferior to German standards (an assumption that is accurate.) Although it is often said that Integration is a two way street, native Germans seldom talk about their own responsibility in creating an integrated society where we live and work together as equals.

At a podium discussion on the future of Integration, Cooper asked two prominent political leaders in Nürnberg, “If you were talking to a group of native Germans, what would you tell them is their responsibility for successful integration?” Although both leaders are very involved in the development of Integration policy, they gave vague responses to Cooper’s question: “I would try to change the consciousness of native Germans and make them aware that Germany is now a land of immigrants.”

We expect more than a “change in consciousness.” For example, some people in the city administration in Nürnberg are developing a concept for how the city might welcome immigrants and recognize the contributions they bring to the city. But the people developing this concept are almost all Germans, as are the vast majority of city employees, and the creation of a “welcoming and recognizing culture” will require much more than a “change in consciousness”. It requires the development of new skills, including awareness of your own behavior with people from another culture, the readiness to meet others as equals and learn from them, and, learning to communicate with people who are not using your native language.

Seminars on Discrimination

Together with her colleagues, Inge wrote a curriculum on discrimination and leads seminars in Nürnberg on discrimination and human rights. In meeting with colleagues, she often meets resistance to the idea of “personal work:” that facilitators need to reflect on, and being willing to talk about, their personal experiences with discrimination: “When did I experience discrimination as a victim, perpetrator, or bystander? What were my feelings in these situations?” From Inge’s perspective, leaders of seminars on discrimination are more authentic and effective when they can share personal experiences with discrimination. Unfortunately, her colleagues can’t imagine sharing their personal experiences with a group, and want to stay on a purely cognitive level.

Her colleagues are also nervous about asking participants to share personal thoughts and feelings: they don’t believe that participants should be asked to share personal information in a seminar like this. Like the teachers on the trip to Poland, they want the seminar to focus on historical examples of discrimination, like the Nürnberg Laws, but not discuss personal experiences of discrimination.

Inge’s experience, however, is that many participants appreciate the opportunity to talk about their own personal experiences with discrimination. It gives them a place to put words to the pain or guilt that they feel. The sharing of these experiences can be very powerful for the group, and suddenly discrimination is no longer an historical event or something outside of daily life, but an experience that people deal with daily – even people in the group itself. Although some of the participants report that they feel uncomfortable with this level of personal sharing, most of them give Inge very positive feedback about this aspect of the seminar.

Feelings, Experiences, Thoughts

We believe that some of this resistance to getting personal is based on German cultural values. There is a wide spread belief in Germany that one should separate their personal and work lives. There is also a belief that education should focus on cognitive development and intellectual expression, and that feelings and personal experiences are “inferior” forms of knowledge; objectivity is considered superior to subjectivity.

As far as we know, there is no universal truth that objectivity is superior to subjectivity: in other cultures and countries, it is the other way around: feelings and experiences are considered more important than cognitive knowledge. And in some places in the world, all three are equally valued. Personally, we consider feelings, experiences, and thinking all to be legitimate sources of wisdom and truth. So “personal work” is essential if we want to create a society where people from different cultures live and work together, and learn from each other.

We all have a choice about what level of “personal work” we want to do. We all have a right to decide that we don’t want to get personally involved. But from our perspective, people who experience discrimination and whose human rights are violated do not have

the luxury of being impersonal. Being discriminated against, or having your human rights violated, is a profoundly personal experience.

For those people in a society who actively discriminate against others, it is also a personal experience for them. How else to explain their willingness to “go along” or participate in the process of hurting other people? Prejudice and fear, the desire to treat someone as if they are inferior, and the unwillingness to create relationships based on equality – those are personal decisions that create discrimination and human rights violations.

And for teachers, activists, advocates – people who are want to make the world a better place – this is also a personal experience. How else to explain the fact that they decide to do this work? Why would people choose to visit Auschwitz? Why would people advocate for immigrants? Why would people teach about discrimination?

Self Reflection at Four Levels

We are glad that there are people who work for equality and human rights. If you are one of them, please continue your work. Your work is very important.

What we ask is that you do some self-reflection, and make the personal aspects of your work visible. We ask that you use both your head and your heart.

At the *personal level*, ask yourself:

- What is my motivation to do this work? How do I benefit from this? What is my self-interest?
- How have I experienced discrimination and human rights violations as a victim, perpetrator, or bystander? What feelings did I have in these experiences?
- What prejudices do I have about people like myself? What prejudices do I have about the people I am trying to help? What am I doing to overcome my prejudices?

At the *interpersonal level*, ask yourself:

- What is my relationship with the people I am fighting for? Are these relationships at the same eye level, or is there a subtle way that I think I know more than they do? Do I listen to people and take them seriously when they tell me about their experiences of mistreatment? Do I ask them what they want and need? Do I learn from their expertise?
- What relationships do I have with my colleagues? Are we unintentionally or subtly creating inequalities between us?
- Are we all working together, as equals, to find solutions and develop projects, or are the “helpers” doing the work for the “victims?” Are we learning to trust one another?

At the *cultural level*, ask yourself:

- What assumptions do I make about the “right” and “wrong” ways to do this work? Are we stuck in a pattern of thinking we are doing the “right” thing, because it is the way things have always been done? Do I realize that there are other ways to work for equality and human rights?
- Do I ask people who have experienced discrimination and human rights violations what they think are the “right” ways to do this work? Do I see them as experts in this work, who can teach me about my work? Am I ready to learn from them?

And at the *institutional level*, ask yourself:

- How do laws and policies keep some people in power, and allow some people economic, political, and social freedom, and while others are kept outside of the system? What laws and policies do we need to promote equality?
- What structures do we need in our organizations and communities to maximize people’s full participation? Are we silencing some people and allowing others to dominate? What can I do to help create these structures that will promote equality and human rights for all of us?

These are some of the questions that we ask ourselves, and we look forward to additional questions that you want to ask us. And we look forward to hearing your responses to these questions. When we share our personal thoughts and feelings with each other, we learn from each other. If we want to create a society where equality and human rights are guaranteed for everyone, then we have to learn from each other’s experiences.

If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.

-- Aboriginal activists group, Queensland, Australia, 1970s

Inge Spiegel teaches about discrimination and human rights. The curriculum she co-wrote is called *Diskriminierung Trifft Alle*, parts of which can be read at www.diskriminierung.menschenrechte.org/materialien. Workshops using the curriculum can be arranged through the Nürnberg Menschenrechtszentrum or Nürnberg Menschenrechtsbüro.

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