

Opinion: We can rebuild our capacity for human connection

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For the past decade, I've worked with high school students on finding their voice through storytelling.

Sometimes, this was through memoir, where it took courage to dig back into the past and even more to share stories with our class. Sometimes, storytelling was brainstorming ways in which students could take action and make a change in our community – from raising awareness or funds for a local nonprofit to creating public service announcements that educate families on a topic. But where I saw students find their voice most was in the little discussions and side conversations when we connected the stories, films and field trips to what was going on in their daily lived experiences.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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During the mass loss of life at the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the protests for justice in the wake of George Floyd's murder, and our ongoing political battles – fact versus fiction and opinion versus science – what I found mattered most in the hour-long Zoom sessions that I conducted with students in California was the ability for us to hold space for each other. When we took time to journal and process the chaos, I found blackened screens turn on and heard students share openly and vulnerably about how they really felt about the state of the world, our country and our community. I witnessed students show an unprecedented level of thoughtfulness, empathy and compassion for the suffering around them – far more than most of the adults in their lives, and mine at the time.

This year, I served as Maine Academy of Natural Science's liaison for The Can We? Project. Started by the Third Thought Initiative, it focuses on revitalizing our democracy through storytelling, dialogue and identity work at the secondary level. Working with administrators, teachers and a cohort of 18 students this year, we have taken on ice-breakers and listened deeply for understanding. And, bit by bit, we have opened the door to connecting our lives and backgrounds to some of the more contentious issues of today: Gun control, abortion, climate change, xenophobia and the future of education.

During our first session, which took place in a greenhouse and yurt on campus, we shared definitions of family and we laughed about little things, like our favorite desserts. We partnered with students and teachers whom we didn't know well and looked at identity maps of where we come from. But perhaps the most pivotal experience came when we partnered up with people we hadn't connected with yet. We listened in silence to a story from a person whom we barely knew, so that we could retell that story to the group. The topics ranged from heartbreak to family dysfunction, taking a step of courage to letting down your guard. In every story, there was a moment of impact – a turning point when something clicked for a person, and trying to recapture this as the storyteller was difficult but powerful. In our debrief afterwards, many students were surprised that we "barely even talked about politics," but found themselves sharing openly with peers whom they had never met before. There is something vital in this realization that, before we can debate or critique, we must listen to understand.

At the Augusta Civic Center, the home of our second retreat, we gathered with 13 other cohorts from schools across the state of Maine and I witnessed this same deep listening, this same openness and willingness to be vulnerable with complete strangers during group discussions on personal freedoms. On the bus ride home, I heard students eagerly sharing about moments where they started to understand why someone might feel differently about abortion than they did, or why the gun control argument might be more nuanced than they had thought.

Not once did I see students eye roll or scoff. I heard no labeling, and the only laughter that arose was good-natured – a way of connecting with strangers instead of isolating them.

The year ahead promises political disappointment, unrest and finger-pointing from both sides of the aisle. As we try to repair our fracturing democracy amid clips of animosity, violence and silencing, it will undoubtedly be painful for all of us.

But what I find myself holding onto as I think about 2024 is returning to our group of 18 students, setting up a circle of chairs in the yurt once more, and sharing, listening, processing and navigating the road ahead.

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