

Conference Session 4.1: Media - Publications
Making the Personal Public:
Harnessing the Power of Public Storytelling in the Interfaith Movement
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Why Personal Stories

When we engage with other religious communities, we seek to create transformations in attitudes and behavior toward other religious groups. In small, private dialogue settings, the sharing of personal stories breaks down conscious and unconscious stereotypes people may hold about the other. The longevity and success of a dialogue often depend on how deeply and effectively participants connect with the personal stories of one another. The personal story has profound political implications.

Yet strikingly, when interfaith work occurs in public, the personal story gives way to a sense of responsibility and accountability to one's entire religious community. In public settings, dialogue participants perceive or experience a pressure to represent both their tradition and their community. This pressure can manifest in opposite extremes. In some cases, it can take the form of debate where the goal is to discount the claims of the other. In these settings, participants enter a dialogue to argue- unprepared and unwilling to be emotionally moved by the other.¹ This approach is most common when public figures convene for a closed conversation that still feels public by nature of the people sitting at the table. Alternatively, large public events designed to foster understanding emphasize universal values, practices or beliefs that transcend religious boundaries. These events draw their authority less from personal stories and more from the authority of tradition with carefully chosen sacred texts that support a pluralistic outlook. This focus possesses tremendous symbolic significance but remains fragile should participants later encounter texts that seem to contradict the message emphasized at the event. Without the tools to navigate and contextualize sacred text, the public may question the authenticity or believability of the more universal claims.

Given the limitations of traditional public forms of interfaith work, the question becomes how do those of us working to help our communities understand other religious communities harness the power of the personal story in public sphere? Community organizers offer one model for the fusion of the private and the public. Community organizing theory makes the personal story the essential cornerstone of social transformation. In his manual for organizers, *Going Public*, Michael Gecan notes a fundamental problem that underlies Western culture but also seems to characterize the limitations of public work between religious communities:

The trouble with many of us, and with our culture as a whole, is that we don't take the time to 'relate', to connect publically and formally but meaningfully with others. Instead, we live in what Richard Sennett called a 'tyranny of intimacy' – presidents pretending to share our pain or talk show hosts prying into the most intimate corners of private life. Or we feel a need to

¹ Tobin Belzer, and Nadia Roumani. *Community Building Among Muslims and Jews in Los Angeles*. Jewish Alliance and the Muslim Public Affairs Council, 2006 (unpublished) 18.

maintain constant superficial contact with others. We see and are seen by others. We sit in meetings and conferences and dinner sessions with scores and hundreds of others. We ‘touch base’ with others or ‘make an appearance’ or ‘give brief remarks’... But all real living is meeting, not meetings... We forget or deny that the appetite to relate is fundamental, and the willingness to relate is nearly universal.²

One-to-one meetings in which people share their personal stories and struggles in order to find points of shared interest form the foundation of the strategy for community organizing.

Ultimately, community organizing assembles these stories into a coherent narrative in which each individual’s story represents one aspect of a broken system requiring change. At public “actions” that gather different communities together to move key political figures to certain policy decisions, personal stories from different invested community groups are shared publically. The entrance of deep vulnerability and openness in the public space serves as a catalyst for collective action.

In our work to understand other religious communities, the vulnerability and openness of the public personal story ought to be harnessed, but with different objectives. Community organizing’s primary mission is to galvanize people into unified political action. Our primary objective is less concrete but perhaps more fundamental in creating a healthy society. By understanding other religious communities, we seek to build functioning pluralistic environments that tolerate diversity and simultaneously acknowledge a shared context. While our work may sometimes lead to unified political action, its more essential function is one step back- to provide a foundation for conflict diffusion and prevention of violence. Thus, the primary public use of stories in the interfaith movement ought to make people’s perception of the “other” more complex. Rather than painting a cohesive narrative into which each personal story fits as befits community organizing’s objective, the use of stories by us ought to deliberately capture the internal diversity of communities.

Nigerian writer Chimamanda Adichie speaks in a TED talk on the danger of the single narrative. She notes that it is a human tendency to form a single story about others, especially when we are only ever exposed to one story about them.

That’s how to create a single story: to show a people as one thing, as only one thing over and over again and that is what they become... The single story creates stereotypes and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue but they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story.... The consequence of the single story is this- it robs people of dignity. It makes recognition of our equal humanity difficult.... Stories matter... Stories have been used to dispossess and malign but stories can also be used to empower and humanize.³

As Adichie captures, a public interfaith forum using personal stories must then reflect and capture a wide array of stories within a single community to deconstruct monolithic views of the other.

True Stories from LA’s Muslims and Jews

Founded as an elite leadership training for Muslim and Jewish young professionals, NewGround: A Muslim-Jewish Partnership for Change saw the power for attitudinal and behavioral transformation created by the vulnerability and openness in sharing personal stories. As part of

² Michael Gecan, *Going Public* (New York: Anchor Books, 2002) 21.

³ Chimamanda Adichie, “The Danger of the Single Story,” July 2009, TED: Ideas Worth Spreading, 21 February 2013 <www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story.html>.

the cohort-based training, participants cultivate deep personal relationships based on sharing personal stories about their identities, communities and beliefs. In developing a more comprehensive strategy for normalizing Muslim-Jewish relations, NewGround expanded not only to cultivate the leadership of these change agents but also to directly impact the public with a message about the importance of engagement and resilient relationships. The translation of the personal story to the public sphere has become an essential component of this strategy. NewGround began experimenting with the role of personal stories in the public sphere in 2009 when NewGround fellows participated in StoryCorps- a national project to capture the personal stories of Americans. This project ultimately led to a feature of NewGround personal stories shared through the radio program *Speaking of Faith with Krista Tippett* on National Public Radio.⁴

In addition to broad exposure, NewGround wanted to create a more local grass-roots forum in which stories could serve as the catalyst for diverse communities to begin the process of engagement. In addition to creating a forum that would embody the objectives noted above, it was also clear that such an event would require broad-base appeal to attract sizeable audiences. The event needed not only to be substantive but also entertaining for it to have an impact on the public.

NewGround thus modeled the forum off of a wildly popular secular storytelling forum known as *The Moth*. “Originally formed by the writer George Dawes Green as an intimate gathering of friends on a porch in Georgia (where moths would flutter in through a hole in the screen), and then recreated in a New York City living room, *The Moth* quickly grew to produce immensely popular events at theaters and clubs around New York City and later around the [United States].”⁵

Every Moth event is advertised with an intentionally vague theme such as “animals” or “growing pains”. At the event, if a person wants to share a true five-minute story on that theme, he puts his name into a drawing. Ten people are selected from the drawing to share their stories and the evening usually covers a vast range of content and tone. Some stories are funny. Some are insightful. Some are tragic. The format creates an atmosphere of deep empathy and creates a temporary but authentic sense of community in the room. The audience embraces the storytellers— identifying with the person on stage as just another audience member like themselves.

With some slight tweaking, the format of *The Moth* effectively meets all of the objectives for an interfaith public storytelling forum. It offers an entertaining forum to draw significant public attendance and attention. It provides the opportunity for the personal stories to become public. It elicits a broad range of stories by providing a theme open to interpretation that breaks down stereotypes. It also naturally creates an environment of empathy, setting the audience up to identify with the “other” on stage.

In adapting *The Moth* to an interfaith context, NewGround altered a few elements.

- **Ensuring Communal Investment:** In order to reach important stakeholders in both communities, NewGround sought the cosponsorship of a wide range of Muslim and Jewish communal organizations including mosques, synagogues, young professionals’ organizations and cultural groups. With an equal number of Muslim and Jewish groups, the inaugural event

⁴ “Curiosity Over Assumptions: Interreligiosity Meets a New Generation.” *Speaking of Faith with Krista Tippett*. National Public Radio. 15 October 2009.

⁵ “About The Moth,” Public Radio Exchange, 21 February 2006 < www.prx.org/themoth >.

attracted 14 cosponsoring organizations and 150 people. The following year, 16 organizations cosponsored attracting well over 200 people. The nature of the forum allowed for organizations that otherwise shy away from interfaith work for fear of conflict to have a low-risk opportunity for engagement. One Jewish cosponsor noted without wanting to be identified that “we had been trying to figure out a way to work with the Muslim community but it just seemed like everything was too problematic until this.”

- **Pre-selecting Stories:** While *The Moth* values spontaneity as part of its format, it is vital to the success of the interfaith incarnation of the program that the stories shared are consistent with the goals of the program to diminish conflict and increase understanding. Not wanting to risk the potential for someone to share a story intended to cause division, storytellers are preselected and their content reviewed to ensure a) diversity in ethnicity, gender, and community organization affiliations and b) compelling content that creates opportunity for people to empathically connect with the storyteller.

- **Expanding Beyond the Stories:** While the stories provide the focal point of the evening, it is also important for the audience members to interact with each other as part of the overall objective of normalizing engagement. Thus half of the program revolves around six storytellers (3 Muslim and 3 Jewish) and half revolves around interactive activities available during the pre-show, intermission, and post-show. These activities include:
 - an organization fair for cosponsoring organizations to share who they are and what they do in the community. This fair also creates opportunity for collaboration as these organizations are often unfamiliar with one another and the possible overlap of the work in the community.
 - Interactive art installations related to the theme for people to share their own connection regardless of whether they are a storyteller. These activities also serve as an icebreaker for audience members to begin conversation with each other.

- **Highlighting a Shared Concern:** The storytelling event is used to highlight a social issue facing the larger community that is also tied to the theme of the event. By directing proceeds of the event to a non-Muslim, non-Jewish organization in the community, audience members are reminded of their shared local context. The inaugural theme of “relationships” highlighted the need to prevent gang-violence and proceeds were donated to a gang rehabilitation program. The second year’s theme of “home” highlighted the issue of homelessness in Los Angeles and proceeds were donated to a shelter.

- **Creating a Respectful Environment:** While most *Moth* events take place in bars, many Muslims have religious objections to being present at an event serving alcohol. To create a respectful environment, no alcohol is made available at the event.

The outline of the evening appears as follows, guided by a Muslim and a Jewish emcee who informally share their own personal connections to the stories shared on stage.

- Open forum for people to meet and engage with interactive art installations and organization fair (30 minutes)
- 3 stories (25 minutes)
- Intermission (10 minutes)
- 3 stories (25 minutes)
- Open forum (until crowd diminishes)

Beyond the StoryTelling Event

As intended, the broad appeal of the event and the uniqueness of its format in an interfaith setting not only attract significant crowds but also media attention—serving to subconsciously normalize Muslim-Jewish relations for the larger community not in attendance. The most recent *True Stories from LA's Muslims and Jews* received local, national and even international media attention.⁶ NewGround also captured the individual stories to post online⁷ and through Facebook where attendees and storytellers promoted the experience to their networks. Two months after the event, more than 600 people experienced the stories shared at the event online primarily on account of a personal connection to the storytellers themselves or their immediate social networks.

Impact and Limitations

True Stories from LA's Muslims and Jews has succeeded in broadening the conversation to include new participants- both individuals and organizations. Moreover, the forum debunks stereotypes about interfaith work as the domain of old religious leaders sitting around a table in the basement of a church. The program also models core values of connecting on the personal level.

Notably, the program's format does not inevitably lead to the consistent relationship building necessary for long term impact on a large scale. However, in serving as an entry point for first-time interfaith engagement, the experience of the event has enticed attendees to apply for NewGround's core leadership training program. The event also serves as a catalyst for some ongoing personal relationships (particularly among the storytellers themselves) to form. As an example from the 2012 event- one storyteller shared her experience of mourning the loss of her mother as a young adult and how that transformed what "home" meant to her. Another storyteller who shared that evening on the same theme but with totally different content connected after the show having lost her own mother to illness recently as well. While consistent long-term relationships are not the primary outcome of the event, *True Stories from LA's Muslims and Jews* does model the openness and vulnerability essential to effective interfaith work that takes place in more intimate settings. It creates positive and authentic touch points that can begin to breakdown stereotypes and set the foundation for deeper engagement. In spite of its limitations, the forum provides a useful alternative to the other primary forms of public interfaith engagement with the contentious nature of leader level negotiations and the fragility of sacred text-inspired gatherings that diminish communal particularities. More importantly, the format for *True Stories from LA's Muslims and Jews* is replicable and adaptable to any community of Muslims and Jews. No experts are required as community members

⁶ Mike O'Sullivan. "California Group Helps Young Muslims and Jews Find Common Ground," 17 January 2013, Voice of America, 21 February 2013 <www.voanews.com/content/california-group-new-grounds-helps-young-muslims-jews-find-common-ground/1586190.html>.

Jonathan Arkin, "Muslim-Jewish Camaraderie Is Alive and Well in Los Angeles," 27 December 2012, Action Now Network, 21 February 2013 <<http://actionnownetwork.com/home/contents/?p=7607>>.

Merav Lashem, "A Muslim and a Jew Walk Into a Bar," 11 December 2012, Yediot America, 21 February 2013 <<http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-4318628,00.html>>.

⁷ "Home True Stories from LA's Muslims and Jews," NewGround: A Muslim Jewish Partnership for Change, 21 February 2013 <www.muslimjewishnewground.org/home.html>.

themselves are the content of the program. The only cost of the program is the cost associated with the venue which can be offset by financial contributions of cosponsors and by tickets sales. With potential for adaptation and implementation nationally and internationally, *True Stories from Muslims and Jews* can serve both local grassroots efforts to build connections and enhance international efforts like the Foundation for Ethnic Understandings' *Weekend of Twinning*SM by reaching even broader audiences with an unexpectedly entertaining and substantive forum.