

Presents Out of the Box Theatre Workshop on EMPATHY performed by YOU

Introduction: I am in the centre of the room.

Hello everyone. The workshop is about to begin. It is one hour long without a break so if you wish to go to any other workshop in this time, I would ask you to please not stay now as you will be working with others and therefore leaving half way through the workshop will leave them without getting the benefit of the workshop. Likewise, I will be creating space for everyone to interact with others in a personal manner, and there is no room for audience, so everyone in makes a commitment to participate. Having said that, if any of my instructions counter any of your personal standards, please just raise your hand as we go along, and I will make some personal adaptations for you.

And that starts from NOW.

I would like to draw your attention to the video camera in the corner of the room. It is pointed at this (indicate) sector of the room, so I can gather video documentation for the purposes of review, reports, and promotion. In other words you may find a snippet of your action here today, on youtube or other new media, if you are in this part of the room. If you especially do not want this, just keep to the other side of the room.

Commencement

Please stand in a circle, feet apart about shoulder width and sides of your feet touching the person next to you.

(I stand in the circle)

When in a circle)

This workshop is about Empathy. It is therefore also about Discrimination. We'll get to that soon.

My name is Owen Allen. I am a physiotherapist of 30 years of practice and have a special interest in neuroplasticity. If that word is unusual to you, it is just about the way the brain creates learning in its structure. About 10 years ago I found myself helping Farvadin Daliri (this conference's organiser), design and run a leadership camp for teenagers, called Uth Agents of Change, right here in Townsville. In that program, we chose performing arts as a key method for teenagers to get their minds around important social issues such as equality, equity, justice, unity. Perhaps we shouldn't have been surprised at how well teenagers were at translating social issues and their potential role in resolving such issues, through self designed performance.

It just so happens that performing arts, and especially learning how to work and design in performing arts strongly fulfills many of the criteria for enhancing the ability of the brain to create more structure and ensure lifelong learning and creativity.

A couple of years ago I established Phoenix Functions to look at ways to translate what I was learning about the learning process and performing arts to the community level.

This workshop is a taste of a larger workshop framework that a group of us designed through a RADF grant last year, and called Out of the Box Theatre workshop.

Second Instruction

Starting with this fine person here and moving to the left, please number yourself 1, 2, 1, 2, 1, 2 etc. Okay go.

Now could all the number twos take one step forward.

Number twos, please turn around to face the other way.

Now Number twos, please take a step to your left so that you are face to face with another person in the outer circle.

If there is anyone without a partner, please come and stand with me and you can partner me.

Now, number two's please walk in close to the person in front of you until you are within one foot of them. If you can bear it, you can stand toe to toe. Number ones if you find the closeness too much please just ask number two to step back until you are feeling relaxed. Be authentic about this. You need to be relaxed and clear minded for this exercise.

Now you are comfortably facing your partner as close as you can be.

This exercise must be done as dispassionately as you can. Keep your face relaxed, your mind clear, and just look at the face in front of you. Just take in the face. While your eyes look at the features in front of you, just take them in. You may hear yourself talking about the features, just let such thoughts whisk by. This exercise will take 30 seconds. You have no feeling one way or the other about the face in front of you. Just take it in.

Check down 30 seconds.

Continue talking

Human society is empathic. Empathy is the process by which we recognise the commonality with another, and are able to interpret that other's feelings, and anticipate their actions. Empathy is at the heart of community.

Empathy, is a double-edged sword. It is built on our ability to recognize sameness and therefore to recognize difference. Empathy relies on our perceptions of discrimination. We empathise more immediately with people that look like us, and less with people who don't; more with people who move and sound like us, and less with those who don't.

Empathy is at the heart of family and community ties, but therefore also lies at the heart of group think. So, empathy, is also responsible for the many tyrannies of one group of people against another. When we ask ourselves why did the German people allow Adolf Hitler raise a genocide against Jews and a war against Europe, think, empathy. Group think derived from empathy underpins the success of partisan politics in democratic countries.

On the other side of the empathy coin is fear. Fear relies on recognizing the difference. How else would we notice the tiger or the snake is not to be patted, although sometimes toddlers don't know this and have to be taught it. Our protection relies on fear. Fear relies on discrimination. However, fear often also relies on the story we are told about that 'other thing'. "Don't go there, it is dangerous." "Kill it, it is dangerous".

So, the tyrant or the astute politician will find ways to combine a sense of empathy for an "us", with a story about "the dangerous other".

To become a peaceful, unified, empathic multicultural or global society, we, therefore, must train ourselves to accept broader distinctions of commonality. I know I am speaking to the truly converted, here. You might recognize, though, that you are being more broadly empathic than many others in society through the benefit of education, not that you are necessarily more empathic than another person. Indeed, raising the level of unity in society would necessarily require loosening the tightness of our bonds and empathic responses to our smaller, cultural or political group, to allow a broader distinction.

A NEW STORY

However, just as the story can invite us to fear, as powerfully, story can invite us to the broadening of empathy. A new storytelling can be used to unravel the imaginary world that we have built up, to learn how to build new community, resolve all our differences, and all our immediate problems.

Story number one. We are all human, we are all different, we are all one.

Third Instruction

Number twos, take another step to your left until you are now in front of another partner. Now, beginning with this couple here, couples number off A, B, C, D, E, F(DO that) Now can all the C couples step four steps into the centre of the room. Can all the A & E couples step two steps into the centre of the room. Now, each of you, stand side on to your partner, facing in opposite directions. Raise your hand nearest your partner and place the flat palms against each other. Apply no pressure, just a firm even contact.

Commentary: We admit the difference between ourselves and another, and acknowledge that difference, not to become similar, but to reach agreement how we shall authentically communicate and work together.

(If there is anyone who for some reason is not able to make this contact please just raise your hand.)

Hand Dancing

Now, feel through your palms some sense of your partner. When I say GO, I want you to make some movement, any movement. The rule is that, whatever movement you make,

you must always have gentle firm contact with your partners palm. Realise that they might also be making a move. So you need to think how you might move, at the same time you are anticipating how your partner is moving. Focus your feel through your hands. be aware of other partners moving in the vicinity in case you come into too sharp agreement with them. CLUE: move very slowly. You have one minute of movement. Okay GO!!!

1 minute

Story Number Two. Moving across the differences requires a common form of communication for the global society.

Fourth Instruction

Can you now make three circles with partners facing each other. Number twos please stand on the inside of the circles. Number twos please step to the left again and be in front of a new partner.

Now step back from your partner one short step each. Beginning with the tallest person of the partners, show, through actions, the story of your life. You may use brief words as indicators but do not tell story verbally, use your body, and as much space as you can within these confines. The role of the partner is to observe this movement story closely, and, when I call in one minute, CHANGE, the partner shall copy the movement story. When I call CHANGE again, the shorter person will perform a movement story of their life, and then the taller partner will copy.

Whoever is unable to make a movement story, raise your hand. (Go to them) How can you tell your story?

Story Number Three. Sharing our selves opens up the space of empathy. It doesn't reduce our sense of discrimination, but increases our sense of commonality by drawing up those things of our life that is not apparent on the surface like our simple struggle to live, our suffering, our happiness.

Fifth Instruction.

The final instruction for this workshop is doing something out there in the rest of your lives.

I will start this instruction with a commentary on the state of performing arts.

Performing arts often reflects the way we are doing politics. In western countries this often means establishing an argumentative alignment, a right and wrong, a good and bad, a

protagonist and an agonist. It is orientated towards winning the audience over to a point of view, by creating a certain empathy with some of the characters, their lives, their tragedy, and then pointing out the enemy and castigating them.

Writing or designing from a performing arts perspective, can assist us to achieve that level of detachment / dispassion we need to look deeply at another's life, and our own, exploring the boundaries of each other's lives. Here we can ask real questions about agreement and unity in society. Here we can begin an argument from anyone's point of view. And then we can bring into the encounter any number of other point's of view. And in that arena, we can try to break any hypothesis. Yet the only virtue in so doing, is to find some approach to bring ourselves and our life's interactions to account for the lack of unity that exists. If we believe someone is a racist, what method can disabuse ourselves of that objectification, and bring that other to account for their behaviour?

Performing arts is rarely about the sacrificial. Yet transforming an approach to performing arts to exhibiting vulnerability, sacrifice, and dispassionate justice, will draw the world into a new conversation, a new agreement, a new political mindset. Here we reach empathy through characters who are able to sacrifice their dominance, their protection, their ownership, to open space for the other. Here, the dominance in all of us is revealed. Here there is a striving to reveal only true protection for the empathic, the meek, the lovers of humanity.

This new global society has also been called the dramaturgical society. From this generation onward, the world is, literally, the stage for people. We all are actors on that global stage. Your performance can depict whether you are part of the older politics of divisiveness or the future of unity. The latter requires sacrifice and encouraging sacrifice. I mean giving up lesser things, like wariness, separation, being right, being a victim; for greater things like engagement, forgiveness, trust. In all real sacrifice, endings are happy ones.

In this era of new digital media, empathy is a precursor to beneficial communication. The digital era has shown us how problematic our communication can become because it allows us more empathic distance than face to face communication. Where digital and virtual technologies have been the most valuable in the learning process of university students, there has been an established empathy through face to face interactions eg classroom and tutorial and social venues. So it seems that the enhancement of the learning process that occurs in the virtual world, is due to a reasonably well sense of empathy already developed in each student. And I am sure there are those who don't do as well in either virtual or ftf venues of group learning, because there are barriers to them developing a strong empathy with others of the group.

There is an opportunity for new media to establish Internet venues that can foster empathy, by merging realtime a/v communication such as Skype with multiple-user interactivity suggested by facebook, and depth as suggested by blogs or YouTube type tools. Such an advanced tool would utilize: the gesture, the demonstration, the written and spoken word, in an interactive space. It would require very strong bandwidth.

I have no doubt that the next phase of educational, social, and business networking technology will support the empathic process. Paradoxically, I think this will support a greater local community activity.

Final Word:

A Couple of last words.

Out of the Box Theatre workshops are particularly designed to assist teams and organizations with challenges with 'others' to a mindset move that will forge creative approaches to solutions.

I am happy to run full day or 1.5 day workshops, anywhere within Far North Queensland. Please take a brochure about Phoenix Functions, as you leave.

If anyone would like to talk to me further, I will be around just this afternoon. I must be back on the Tablelands tomorrow for the opening night of a play in which I am acting.

For anyone who feels that they are stuck in some way in their life, either in career, in the workplace, in love, in politics, or suffering, I would like to recommend to you Landmark Education. I am not a subsidiary in any way but I have personal experience with these transformative education courses, and cannot recommend them more highly for people who want to live life powerfully, be a leader in community, an agent of change. Take the course as professional development, to see your service to humanity thrive, because you love your family.

The courses are run in every capital city in Australia, and introductory sessions are held in Townsville and Cairns. If you would like to attend an introductory session (these are free and run by volunteers) please come and give me your contact details and I will ensure you receive information on the next introductory sessions.