



Tell Me Your Story, by Dan Gottlieb

It came to me in the middle of the night a couple of weeks ago, four words that could change the world:

Tell me your story.

These four words could have an impact on everything from global conflict to personal well-being. All we have to do is ask others to tell us their stories and then be quiet. Oh, one other thing: While you are listening, try to imagine what it would be like - and how you would feel - if it were your story. That's called empathy.

So just ask people for their stories, listen, imagine, and feel - sounds naive, doesn't it? Stick with me here.

First, saying these words will change you. Listening to others is an act of emotional generosity, and there is ample evidence that generosity stimulates the brain's endorphins - natural antidepressants. [...]

Second, this little exercise will change the person whose story you've asked for. Socrates may have overstated the issue a bit when he said, in modern translation, "an unexamined life is not worth living," but we humans do have a fundamental need to be understood for who we are. Think of how full we feel when someone looks in our eyes and says she wants to know how we experience our lives.

In today's world, social networks are shrinking. The number of people who report having no intimate friends is increasing. Simple eye contact, along with a caring "tell me your story," can go a long way toward diminishing someone's feelings of alienation and aloneness. I've spoken those words to kids of all ages in all kinds of neighborhoods. Most thank me for asking - and say that no one has ever done so before.

Third, beyond diminishing alienation and increasing a sense of connection, these four words can have a biological effect on both parties. According to Herbert Adler, a psychiatrist at Jefferson, compassion in the doctor-patient relationship actually changes each person's biological healing system. And if that happens in those relationships, it happens in other relationships. It literally promotes healing.

(...) Try it with a neighbor you don't know very well, a relative with whom you've had a misunderstanding. Try it with a street person and see what happens to both of you.

Just four words. We could start a movement.

--Dan Gottlieb

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