

Human Library by The Gratefulness Team

The Human Library is a learning platform that challenges stigmas and stereotypes, through the art of open and honest conversations. It is a safe space where strangers can discuss taboo topics openly and without condemnation.

The Human Library is based on a very simple idea: that conversation is key to understanding. The global, hands-on learning platform, which is based in Denmark, works to create a safe framework for personal conversations that can help to challenge prejudice and discrimination, prevent conflicts, and contribute to greater human cohesion across social, religious, and ethnic divisions. People who can help defy stereotypes volunteer to serve as “books,” and — with their “readers” — enter into conversations where difficult questions are expected, appreciated, and received with an open heart. International coordinator Alma Pripp shares more about how the Human Library is working to help create more inclusive and cohesive communities around the world.

What sparked the creation of the Human Library? Why the metaphor of the library?

The Human Library was created in Denmark in 2000 by journalist and social activist Ronni Abergel as a learning platform for diversity and inclusion. The first “books” were published at Roskilde Festival on June 30, 2000, and since then the library has been introduced in more than 80 countries.

When looking around in our civil society, we noticed a lack of understanding and mutual respect, often because of the fact that we are quick to judge each other. The prejudices we hold become obstacles that we are too comfortable, or too scared, to question/challenge. Since all of us judge, we are all also contributing to the stigmas, taboos, and stereotypes that negatively affect people’s lives. We asked ourselves the question of how we best could address this issue and encourage people to start “unjudging” instead? We saw the need for a safe space to have open and honest conversations between strangers, and the Human Library was created to meet that need. It seemed to us very early on that this library had more impact and potential to create change than any other platform we had ever seen. And we saw that the world was in need of more safe spaces to find common ground and learn about our differences.

The Human Library uses the imagery and metaphors of a library and borrows the vocabulary from this setting to describe and explain what we do. We have books, librarians, readers, library cards, bookmarks, a lending catalog, rules for readers, etc. There are several reasons for using the language of the library: First of all, the library is a neutral place where everyone is welcome. People know that there are rules in a library that should be respected as a serious institution of knowledge and a place of freedom of

choice. And people know that everyone is welcome at the library.

Secondly, using the terms “readers” and “books” functions as a kind of role-play, which creates a safe but also creative space for a conversation often on heavy subjects. The role of the librarian functions as a guide and upholder of the framework around this setting.

In addition, the titles of the human books highlight how they are objectified and stereotyped, which the reader and book together can challenge through dialogue. We publish our books with concrete titles, such as Autism, Bipolar, Disabled, Transgender, etc. to reflect how they are stereotyped by society. By shining light on the biases we have about people who are different from us, we create the premise necessary to actively challenge them.

How does the Human Library fill a need for the world? What is the importance of your work at this time in particular?

We live in deeply polarized times. Growing divides between groups in our communities and the world needs a safe space to try and find common ground and learn about each other’s differences. The Human Library is a learning platform that challenges stigmas and stereotypes, through the art of open and honest conversations. It is a safe space where strangers can discuss taboo topics openly and without condemnation. We believe this contributes to creating more inclusive and cohesive communities across cultural, religious, social, and ethnic differences.

The Human Library contributes to contrasting the negative narrative that the news and media are creating around certain vulnerable groups in society. There is great power in the face-to-face, one-on-one, human interaction. In this setting, it is hard to hide behind a mask, to not let yourself become vulnerable and open to new impressions and feelings. Meeting with an actual individual, who could tell you about the consequences that intolerance and narrow-mindedness have in their everyday life, is an effective way to bridge understanding and challenge stereotypes.

Finding a way to continue our work during the current pandemic has been vital since the need for conversation and human connection is huge in times of lockdowns and social distancing. In April this year we launched our first online events and since then have been hosting events for the public and for our corporate diversity partners each week. This presented the opportunity to conduct international events with books and readers from all corners of the world, creating a stronger cohesiveness and uniting our global organization even further. We are now able to operate not just internationally, but transnationally.

Although the actual physical meeting is hard to top, we have found that when conversations are genuine and honest, it does transmit through the screen. The basis is the same: It is still strangers who voluntarily take the time to sit down and talk openly to each other — and that does not change, no matter the setting.

How do the offerings of the Human Library embody and cultivate gratefulness and related qualities?

The readings (conversations) facilitate feelings of compassion and kindness and respect. There is something special about finding compassion and kindness for complete strangers by learning their life-story. There is also gratefulness for the books choosing to share their

story, their trauma. It is a vulnerable position they are putting themselves into, but I think the feeling of doing good and helping their community is very motivating.

What do you think inspires people to participate in the Human Library - both as books and as readers?

As a book in The Human Library, you are amongst people who all share one thing in common: the experience of being stereotyped. Whether it is because of an experienced trauma, a belief or lifestyle, a disability, a medical illness — they carry stories that are waiting to be heard. To be part of that community is something our books truly value.

As a human book you get to speak out about and help educate on a topic often surrounded by ignorance, stigma, and stereotypes. And when these factors have a daily impact on your life, educating others can be very motivating.

All of our books are volunteers. Although some have been with us for many years now, they are still constantly learning new things about themselves when they get asked a completely new question by a reader. They get to know themselves, as well as process their traumas and experience, through these dialogues. It is a beautiful process to witness, and it is also a sign that the conversations between reader and book are genuine.

We believe that readers are inspired to participate in the library because of their curiosity, the will to be better informed and educated. But more importantly, we are seeking to inspire readers to participate to test their own preconceived beliefs — what they think they know about a certain topic. Someone can have a clear idea of how a homeless person looks/acts/thinks, without ever having exchanged a word with someone who is homeless. In the Human Library that person can come head-to-head with these prejudices, and not be discouraged or shamed, but rather encouraged to acknowledge and discuss them. The Human Library is not only a place for readers to un-judge the books, but also a place for the readers not to feel anxious for having prejudices. A Human Book will not judge the reader for the questions they ask — as long as they are asked with respect.

What is unique about the Human Library's approach to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion?

Our

mission

is to create a platform for open-minded dialogue, presenting the reader with an opportunity to talk about topics that are often taboo and in so doing, to work toward a more inclusive and cohesive society. Ultimately we are a human rights initiative, as the protection of the right to be different lies embedded in the Human Library methodology.

The Human Library methodology is unique in its intersectional, inclusive, and neutral approach by always aiming to give a voice to as many stigmatized groups as possible at the same time and place. We wish to give voice to humanity in its different forms and not just work for one or a few groups in society.

How do your special dialogue rooms create “a place where people who would otherwise never talk find room for conversation”? How does your work support the capacity to

listen?

The Human Library is a space separated from the social norms that usually prevent us from going up to strangers on the street and asking them personal questions. To create this safe space, there needs to be a mutual agreement between the book and its reader. They agree beforehand that the intention of the conversation is to ask, listen, and perhaps better understand or maybe agree to disagree. This is the role of the library analogy: It is a framework that creates freedom. Just like in a library, you go and borrow the book you are interested in, and then you read it. No one from the outside is going to be listening and judging the reading, or commenting on any questions or answers that come up. It is not a public conversation, you do not have to be aware of how you are being perceived by anyone else but the one you are speaking with.

It is vital for us to facilitate interactive conversations - when reading a human book you are not getting a monologue or lecture. We encourage the readers to ask things that can be uncomfortable, things which would normally not be socially acceptable asking a stranger. By letting the reader's questions guide the conversation, their genuine interest, curiosity, and preconceived notions about a topic can be revealed. This is essential because when you ask something you are genuinely interested in hearing the answer to, you will listen.

What is the lasting impact of the Human Library's offerings? What do you hope are the ripple effects?

Walking away from a Human Library event, having for example "read" a person with schizophrenia, the next time you hear about or meet someone with schizophrenia, you will most definitely do so from a new perspective, whether because of a medical fact you learned, the realization that mental illness is not necessarily a scary thing, or the fact that you did find certain aspects of the illness a bit scary, which is okay too. Because in the Human Library, there is no agenda. We do not expect every reader to walk away as an entirely new person. We believe that real change comes slowly, bit by bit, and that the smallest victory is a step in the right direction. The focus of our work is to facilitate a safe space where these changes can happen.

We hope that the power of conversation will continue to grow, that it will help to de-stigmatize groups in our community. That we continue to be interested in each other even though we are strangers, and that we do not let a fear of the unknown stop us. The thing about prejudices and stereotyping is that it feeds off ignorance, and the antidote for it is human interaction between different kinds of people.

What are some of the common barriers and obstacles that arise for participants? How are they addressed?

Initially, there is a tendency for readers to feel anxious asking about a sensitive topic, like trauma, assault, or serious illness. We address this by emphasizing that the books are there to answer the reader's questions as best they can and that they are trained in being a book, meaning that they are stable and confident. The book will also let you know if there is an area that they do not feel ready to talk about - they will say that this chapter of their book has not been published yet. Usually, the readers get quickly into it and feel comfortable with being open and honest. Our approach is all about creating a solid framework.

How does gratefulness inspire you and the organization as a whole to make change in the world?

We are grateful to the people who make the Human Library possible: our books who voluntarily share their personal stories, being open and vulnerable, and our volunteers around the world who spend their free time dedicated to the cause of a more diverse and inclusive society.

How does the Human Library plan to grow and expand its work?

In order to adapt our work to the Covid-19 pandemic, we started doing events in a virtual format. Most of these events are for companies, organizations, and institutions, and this is a field of partners that is constantly and rapidly growing.

We are also developing several interesting initiatives at the moment. First, we will be introducing our unconscious bias quiz, which is aimed at helping people realize that we all judge and that a visit to the Human Library may be a good way to explore the opportunity to un-judge.

Next, we hope to launch an online library service. A place where readers can log on, reserve a book, and have a conversation using video over the internet. We call it the Human Library Online, and we are raising funds now to build the platform. It will allow readers from all over the world to join the conversation and to select from our global community of amazing books.

If you could encapsulate one message for people who participate in the Human Library, what would that be?

Don't be afraid to ask those burning questions. The questions that are uncomfortable are usually the ones that result in the most honest and impactful conversations. The books are always grateful when they are asked a question that they know took courage for you to ask.

If the Human Library could share one message about living gratefully, what would it be?

That we do not necessarily have to like or agree with each other, but we need to accept the basic right to be different and have mutual respect. If you take the time to share a conversation with a stranger, you will see the person behind the prejudice and realize that you are not so fundamentally different after all.

How can people engage with and support the Human Library?

There is a constant increase in demand for books, so naturally we are always looking for more human books and volunteer librarians to help us publish the books. We accept applications online using the forms available on our website. You can also apply to become a local organizer if you are interested in organizing a Human Library in your local area. Most importantly, our public events are free and open to anyone, and becoming a reader is a great place to start.

To read more about this inspiring project, visit the website: humanlibrary.org

To learn about other Grateful Changemakers, visit: [Grateful News](#)