

STORY

SHARING

GUIDE



Includes Sample
First Person Essays

Framing Your Story, Hearing Their Story

Story-Exchange Program for Your
Community

Write Narrative, Not Opinion

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Appoint A Story Catcher For The Larger
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Dr. Paula Green

Sampler of Existing Story-Share Programs





FRAMING YOUR STORY, HEARING THEIR STORY

She looked at me with derision and told me to just “get it.”

No one wanted to listen to my point-of-view.

They found it offensive. Some accused me of raising a child in an abusive household. All of them were complete strangers, some of them professionals whom I had hoped would help me sort things out, others just judgmental parents.

And, for the purposes of this story-sharing guide, I don’t even have to explain “it” just yet, because in that moment, those moments—since there were many—I understood what it felt like to be pilloried for expressing a viewpoint that unsettles the people around you.

I want to pause here and ask you, the reader, to just feel empathy for my position. Don’t worry about what we were battling about; just try to relate to that level of rancor.

You don’t get it.

Something is wrong with you.

You are ignorant.

Anyone with children who holds those views is an abusive parent.

Of course, if a person espouses deeply racist, sexist, homophobic or other super vitriolic opinions, we should all take a stand against such toxicity. But my views didn’t spring from hate, but from love, not from a controlling defensive space, but from a protective one. Again, what we were debating isn’t important yet; I want to focus on the way the exchanges



went, how quickly others turned me off and assumed the worst of me, even those I had just met or never even met in person.

If two opposing sides want very different things, how can any story-sharing program ever work? Can simply listening to “the other” and working on a more empathetic exchange truly get us anywhere when many disagree so vehemently about so much in American culture?

Such questions lie at the heart of a good story-exchange program and cannot be brushed aside easily. *New Yorker Magazine* author Isaac Chatiner raised this point in a 2019 interview with Paula Green, an internationally known conflict-resolution specialist. The fact Green has decided to focus her attention on the US after decades abroad in war torn areas reflects just how much the quality of our democratic discourse has eroded. She took on the job as lead organizer of Hands Across the Hills, a group “that tries to create dialogue among Americans of varying political beliefs,” after the 2016 presidential election.

“What we’re seeing in this country is a tremendous amount of dehumanization and deteriorating intergroup relationships across all lines of race, class, religion, culture, geography, etc. I have become very concerned about those kinds of attitudes deteriorating further and further.”

But when Green said this, Chatiner pushed back and bluntly told her he thought, no matter how much you listen, you’re always going to have conflict, because you want different things.

When Green brought together a group of progressive Western Massachusetts voters with some conservative Kentucky voters as part of the Hands Across the Hills story exchange program, the New Englanders were shocked to learn most of the women in the group from Kentucky had guns in their purses.

Because you want different things.

No amount of discussion would change my personal views about the need for greater gun control in the US, a sentiment I am certain the Massachusetts’ participants shared.

So why sit at the table? Why believe in the Story Exchange program I will outline in this section and in the concept of deliberately listening to people with opposing views?

Well both parties involved in the Hands Across the Hills discussions had deep fears: a deep fear of guns vs. a deep fear for personal safety. The emotion may bring them to polarizing stances, but that shared concern about a growing sense of insecurity in our towns, neighborhoods, public schools, public spaces is true for both parties.



In that sense, they want the same thing: to feel more secure in everyday life.

It's not much to stand on but we must urgently seek what sliver of common ground we can find in our public discourses. We can't fall back on, just get it.

The Fund for Peace, a nonprofit that focuses on fragile states, just downgraded the United States to a "flawed democracy" from a "full democracy," which put us just above Venezuela. If you pair this with the piece of news that peacekeepers, like Paula Green, who normally work in war torn areas, are hyper focusing on the US now, then I think we should all feel very nervous and very motivated to get back to functioning.

A flawed democracy.

So now I am ready to tell you the backstory of my own personal brush with being spurned and personally attacked for views others found deeply offensive.

In my case, "it" was not about race, class or politics, but that I had a daughter who had come out as a transgender son in high school and wanted to change her/his name, pronouns, take hormones and have top surgery, all before age 21. When she/he came out in 2010, no one had heard of Caitlin Jenner yet or seen the shows *Orange is the New Black* or *Transparent*. I had always had a lot of gay, bi and lesbian friends but the T never appeared on the GBLQ line for me. I considered myself openminded and accepting, but when my daughter told me her senior year in high school that she was really a man, all I felt was fear and rage.

I struggled to balance my desire to support my son's right to realize his identity and my conflicted feelings about the medical options he pursued. Educators, counselors, doctors, and pretty much every official professional working with us, sided with Donald and did all they could to support his name change, surgeries and transgender selfhood. When his high school graduation came around, he insisted on wearing a suit and receiving a diploma with Donald Collins on it, not his given name. I begged him to wait until college for the switch. The school and Donald officially conceded to my request, but later I learned a teacher slipped Donald a diploma with his new name on it.

The battles continued for several years and almost cost us our family. We had had a close, loving relationship as a mother/daughter with many shared interests and plenty of personal time together, but all of that broke under the pressure of Donald's transition and my deep unresolved rage and grief over the sense I had "lost" my daughter.



Eventually two key steps saved us: first we turned to my mother, then in her 80s, who loved us both and coached us both to show more empathy for the other, and we agreed to exchange essays with each other—without censor—about our true experiences and feelings.

We still did not agree on many things, but we gained more empathy for each other simply by exchanging essays, which formed the basis of our book, *At the Broken Places: A Mother and Trans Son Pick Up the Pieces*. As Donald moved into his mid-twenties, he could step back and more fully appreciate the sense of loss I had, my fear of being cut off from my only child entirely, and my terrifying sense of isolation as professionals that I thought would help me instead said nothing or judged me for my questioning stance. As time passed, I grasped that my child did not shift his gender to hurt me, but because his physical gender did not match his personal identity.

In 2020, in a victorious moment that marked how far we'd come in our nuanced conversation with each other, a talk show we did for "Where We Live" on National Public Radio in New England, won a Gracie Award—essentially an Emmy for women broadcast journalists—for best noncommercial talk show episode of the year, one of just five recognized nationwide. But not everyone in our similar situation ever even makes it back to being together at all.

This scathing experience as a mother, and my 30 years teaching narrative nonfiction to all age groups, races, ethnicities and social classes, make me ideally suited to lay out a blue print for working with historic sites and societies and museums to host a Story Exchange for America. I get that you can talk and talk and talk and never change another person's mind. I get that the simple obstacle that we want different things can derail families, communities, even nations.

But I saw that my flawed listening skills, my inability to recalibrate my empathy meter and admit to flaws in my own point-of-view almost cost me the thing I hold dearest in my life: my only child.

So I will rewind the tape and return to the first best step that we took as a family under duress: we found someone we both trusted—my mother—and worked through her. Americans must do the same, only the common ground must be a public institution that most citizens trust.

That's not a simple request.



Many forward-thinking nonprofits are already doing fantastic work on story-sharing projects, some with a focus on simply using narrative to develop a story base, but others, such as Hands Across the Hill, Braver Angels, and the more internationally focused With Good Reason, to name just a few, deliberately encourage story sharing across political, racial and class divides.

Changing the Narrative, a story-sharing program launched in Virginia in 2018 by the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities, in tandem with the University of Virginia and a nearly million-dollar grant from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, feels like an ideal place to examine a sample model since it was clearly inspired by the violence in Charlottesville over the attempted removal of the statue of Confederate General Robert E. Lee.

They moved quickly and built a substantial infrastructure including 24 author residencies, a podcast called BackStory, two summer institutes for up to 60 teachers, some grant-funded programs, and story bridge programs in a range of Virginian towns as diverse as uber educated, wealthy Arlington just outside of the Capital and the more rural and conservative Harrisonburg.

Understandably, the program focuses mainly on race and taps into a lot of renown academics from the University of Virginia, Yale and elsewhere. All of it connects to the W.K. Kellogg Foundation's own Truth, Racial Healing & Transformation effort.

Changing the Narrative uses the humanities-based tools of story and storytelling to help Virginians create bridges between the past, present and future to advance racial healing.

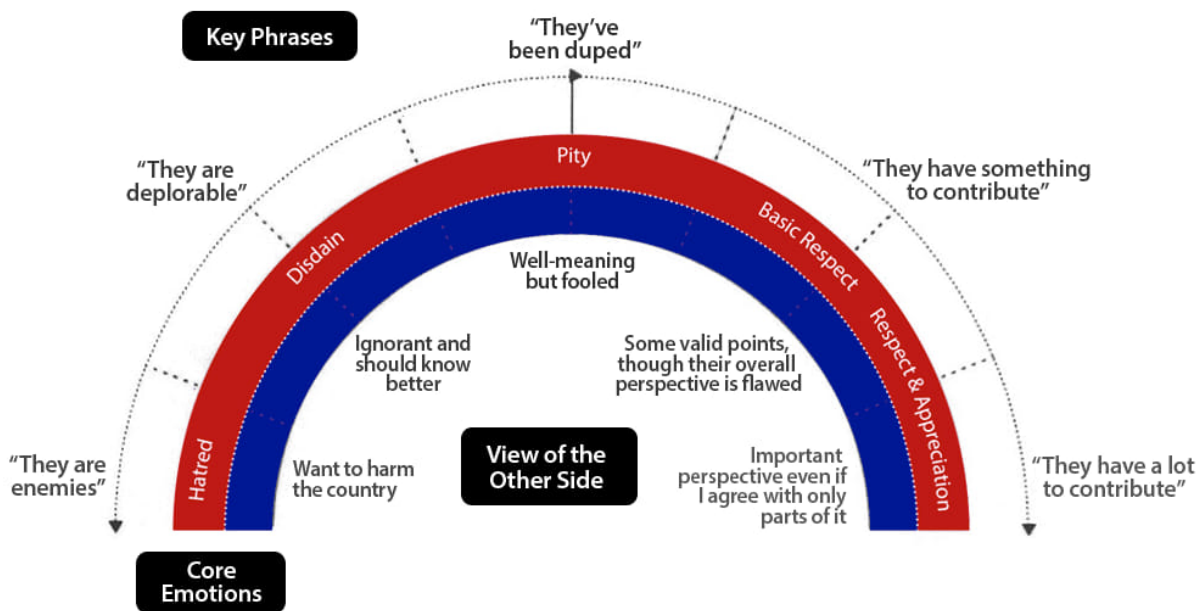
This statement of purpose presents laudable goals, but they rely heavily on academics (public trust meter: barely 25% among Republicans) and journalists (public trust meter: 32% "great or fair amount" for overall population; less than 15% among Republicans). They have laid the foundation for a multi-tiered ambitious program that could serve as a model for any state humanities foundation with strong funding. The simple fact so many smart, accomplished professionals turned so quickly to narrative as a way to defuse the national tensions on parade in the town and at the university in 2017 substantiates the larger argument Paula Green made to *The New Yorker* and I make here: we must exchange stories, listen and build empathy as the one best way forward in altering the tone of our national discourse.

But what happens if you do not have a lot of top professionals with nearly a million dollars, and people feel more divided over something like the growing class divide, not just race? What happens if the academic model with the school-centered and teacher-centered focus appeals mainly

to the more progressive/liberal leaning citizens in the state, precisely because it's an academic driven model? It's a fair question, despite the wonderful ambitions of Changing the Narrative.

As I traveled the country listening, reflecting and researching, I kept coming back to *New Yorker* reporter's Isaac Chatiner's fair question: No matter how much you listen, you're always going to have conflict, because you want different things.

I looked at the goals and modus operandi of the story-sharing programs listed in this guide, in particular Braver Angels, one of the more high-profile, well-financed groups headed up by professional academics and psychologists. They have a chart on their website that I found illuminating in its particularity, which moves from "They have a lot to contribute" to "They want to harm the country" with various stops along the rainbow of "core emotions" we feel about people who disagree with us. Their program clearly wants as many Americans as possible to fall under "Basic Respect" or "Respect and Appreciation."



Source: [Braver Angels](#)

But if I return to the emotional experience I had as I tried to navigate my disagreements with my transgender son and the professionals and educators working with him, I realize I followed a very different chart that moved from "disagree" to "must oppose."

At points, I felt morally obligated to take a stand against certain statements or actions and no amount of conversation or patience altered my view. Something as deep as my love for my only child was at work: the

moral, intellectual and spiritual underpinnings of my integrity and sense of self.

Basically, Chatiner is asking if we can move from one chart—mine, which is based on fear and anger—to the other, which encourages respect—unless, of course, the person is engaging in phobic, hateful, destructive behavior.

Unless.

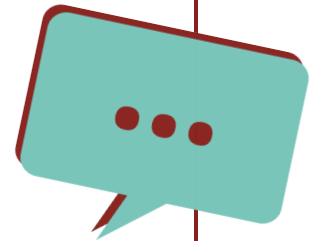
Therein lies the biggest “wall” facing our society. Who can truly provide an accurate barometer of what constitutes hateful, destructive behavior that destabilizes society and our democracy? If, for even one moment, you feel someone is acting in such a way, no amount of listening will open your “mind” to their world view because letting them in is tantamount to self-destruction of the self and society.

But my son, Donald, and I did come to a much healthier, loving place and did save our family. The two key ingredients (besides love): respect and empathy. The essential starting point: we understood we actually wanted the best for each other and were not seeking to destroy anything or change each other’s minds on key issues. Again and again, the story-sharing programs and civic discourse experts emphasize the need to resist arguing with facts, aggression and with the intent to “change” the mind of the “other.” It simply doesn’t work because most of our core beliefs stem from our emotional center.





STORY-EXCHANGE PROGRAM FOR YOUR COMMUNITY



Work with historic societies/sites or museums to establish a trustworthy base for exchanges

My son, Donald, and I never did find a space with professionals—educators, counselors, doctors—where we both trusted the intentions of the hosting group or individual. We wound up turning to a family member, my mother. But I learned from that experience that having a trustworthy home base that can hold opposing views in a safe space is a vital first step. Once you identify that space, you now have a meeting area.

As I discussed earlier, museums and historic places remain highly valued and trusted by the majority of us. More people visit them each year than attend all sporting events combined—a true shocker in ESPN and football crazed America. Every state has an historical society, a good place to start, or you can check out these national organizations:

The American Association for State and Local History

<https://aaslh.org/>

The American Alliance of Museums

<https://www.aam-us.org/>



Practice reading or listening to opposing views

I disagreed with many decisions my transgender son made during his transition. At first, I did not handle it well and responded from the gut rather than from the intellect. I felt grief, rage, shock, not ideal roads to empathy.

While driving on assignment for this project, I often wanted to flip off the radio when a pro-Trump host came on the air on the local station, but I always stopped myself. In the case of my son, it took years for me to develop effective brakes, but I did because it was the only way forward. I kept the radio station on in my car, because I had often just spoken in person with someone who espoused Republican values and I had a deeper appreciation for the emotional roots of their stance. I didn't have to agree, but I could see and feel their humanity.

In 2019 two Stanford political science professors, James Fishkin and Larry Diamond, pulled off an astounding, and expensive, experiment. They raised millions of dollars and paid to have a representative sample of Americans all meet in a hotel in Texas to discuss national issues, such as health care. They used a professional nonpartisan survey group out of the University of Chicago to identify and recruit accurate percentages of Americans from all across the country from every imaginable political, social and economic background. For example, of the 526 attendees, 10 lived in mobile homes, 27 identified as extremely conservative, 30 as extremely liberal and 21 out-of-work, all percentages that correlate with the breakdown of America's general population profile.

They found that while few people involved in the three-day discourse changed their minds about fundamental beliefs and political positions, the experience muted "their harshest views" and made them "wrestle more deeply with rebuttals. They became more informed, even more empathetic," Fishkin and Diamond reported.

In my own family situation, I took very similar steps to become a better listener of opposing views:

- I stopped reacting to my initial emotional response.
- I tried to assume the other person feels as deeply about his/her view as I do about mine.
- I acknowledge that blind hate is actually rare and most individuals respond the way they do because of years of socialization, fear of

change or loss of power, and lack of knowledge. As story-share programs like Changing the Narrative and Hands Across the Hills have already shown, an impressive number of conflicted Americans do want to build a bridge to the other side. I know that when it came to my son Donald, I did.



Write narrative, not opinion

When Donald and I exchanged personal essays about our experiences working through his transition from female-to-male, we agreed to simply write stories that included scenes, reflection, but as little opinion as possible. We avoided trying to convince the other or our readers. Indeed, the only time we received negative or hateful reviews online was when a reader insisted on taking a side. They'd characterize my essays as close-minded, self-involved, and even cruel. Parents whom I met in person at readings sometimes told me they felt all transgender individuals, including their own children, are completely unhinged, emotionally disturbed and totally wrong to alter their bodies. I'd always deflect and say, well it doesn't matter what we think, your child is still transgender. Instead of judging, work to find a middle ground and shared goals.

Examples of telling a story vs. sharing an opinion

I often ask my writing students at Central Connecticut State University, a regional public university with about 12,000 students, a third of whom are the first in their families to go to college, to pen personal essays on some aspect of their identity. In 2016, the year Donald Trump won the presidential election, the students responded by blending their reflections on some aspect of their identity with their responses in general to the outcome of the elections. I intentionally paired students with opposing points-of-view and asked them to coach each other through the writing process without passing judgment on the other person, unless they felt that person espoused egregiously racist, sexist and/or other polarizing toxic views grounded in hate and ignorance. No one in the class that term crossed the line. Instead the pairings resulted in some amazing exchanges between people that often had nothing in common other than being at CCSU and in my class.

In one instance, I had a Trump voting young white male paired with a daughter of immigrants from the Middle East, who arrived and stayed without the proper papers but eventually secured Green Cards. The two pieces reflect completely opposing responses to the election, but with humanity. The woman, fearful for her parents' identity papers, asked not to be identified as the author of the essay, but she did agree to let me share it. The work of these two young students offers a wonderful, approachable template for anyone looking to build a story exchange in his or her community.

Here I will show how they could have expressed dogmatic opinions, but instead followed my directions and penned narratives that offered more space for constructive discussion.



**NEXT: Story sharing examples
& more tips**

Sample Essays Summary



AUTHOR

College age woman, Middle Eastern, daughter of parents who entered the US without proper papers, and, after waiting decades, secured Green Cards just before Donald Trump's election.

OPINION

My parents may have come into this country illegally from the Middle East, but they have worked hard for 20 years, paid taxes and been model citizens. No one has a right to tell them to leave.



WRITER'S ACTUAL NARRATIVE

Papa had his license revoked several years ago due to a careless mistake he hadn't noticed for years. But now without any legal documentation, he has been hitching rides ever since, sometimes walking or bicycling 10 miles to work to avoid bothering anyone. He works under the table at McDonald's now; his [Middle Eastern] college degree is stowed away somewhere in his suitcase.



AUTHOR

White college age male, Trump supporter, American citizen

OPINION

Distressed people on my university's campus had no business being so upset about Donald Trump's victory; he won in lots of states! Clearly the crazy liberals in Connecticut just don't get it.



WRITER'S ACTUAL NARRATIVE

During my last class of the day, I overheard chatter about professors cancelling classes and people breaking down crying. It left me thinking, "Grow up!" In a way, I had become a typical Trump supporter. It wasn't until I heard a different side of the story a couple of days later that I understood some of the concerns of those who supported Hillary Clinton.

Story Exchange Between Two People with Opposing Views

Sample Essay #1



Author: College age woman,
Middle Eastern, daughter of parents who came
to the US without proper papers and waited two
decades to secure Green Cards



Responding to: Donald Trump's Election in 2016

9/11 11/9 9/11 11/9

By Anonymous



Morning of November 11, 2016. History seems to repeat itself.
I clutch my phone as my heart sinks, scanning the news for
the results of the election. This has to be a mistake! Who could
possibly vote for a man who has openly spoken of sending immigrants
back to their countries? I had dozed off in bed at 10 p.m. the previous
night, confident that the lesser of two evils would win the election. What
happened? I shut down. Anger replaces the heartbreak I initially meet
with.

Slogans read "Love Trumps Hate."

Trump trumped us.

I reluctantly step outside of my apartment as my Uber pulls up to
take me to work. I'm late but I don't care. The driver is chatty. I can't bring
myself to respond to him. My eyes shift towards the window as my right
hand lifts a handful of Goldfish to my dried lips. I am the single fish left in
the bowl next to the tank full of fish.

Alone.

Millions of immigrants are gripped in the fear that they will be sent back to the third-world countries they escaped from. Their concerns are just. My parents only just made it to the final stretch of becoming legalized. But what if they didn't?

Okay. Compose yourself. I greet customers with my usual high-pitched chime, but there is a faint edge to my voice. Many of these customers are white. Do they hate my immigrant family? Suddenly I am uncomfortable in the store that has been my haven for months. I make an excuse to go to the backroom. While gorging on Lays' sour cream and onion chips, I unlock my phone to a stream of texts in the group chat labeled "Miss You Bitchesssss<3."

One of my closest friends voted for Trump and my sister and best friends are scolding her for it. My friend loves us; she is not a racist! But still, how could she vote for him?

What hurts the most isn't that voters preferred Trump's policies over Clinton's. I can accept that. The issue is people chose to vote for a man who is so clearly against the residence of my family in the United States along with 81 million other immigrants. Many of these individuals do not need to worry about issues such as racism and immigration. They are blinded by their white privilege, a term meaning that white individuals are predisposed to privileges such as healthcare and greater income simply because they are white. Individuals who possess white privilege will always remain unaffected by matters like the president's personal preference for a certain group of people.

April 2014.

I am seated on cushioned chairs but comfort escapes me. There was talk about the age for sponsoring being lowered to eighteen but here I am in the immigration consultant's office, days after my 21st birthday. Ammi and Papa have patiently waited for twenty years--all their previous unsuccessful attempts to gain legalization will soon be scrutinized by immigration officers that receive this paperwork. Papa sits next to me, sharing a tight-lipped smile in an effort to ease my tension. How can he be so calm? So strong? So spirited?

Papa had his license revoked several years ago due to a careless mistake he hadn't noticed for years. But now without any legal documentation, he has been hitching rides ever since, sometimes walking or bicycling ten miles to work to avoid bothering anybody. He works under the table at McDonald's now; his Pakistani college degree is stowed away somewhere in his suitcase.



He still considers himself blessed; there are immigrants living in considerably worse conditions. Papa has been privileged with hours at work, and affording days off; he has paid taxes for 20+ years. He and 14.4 million other immigrants in the United States are struggling to reap the benefits of the Land of Opportunity while simultaneously being stigmatized as people who are taking citizens' jobs.

February 2015.

Excitement surges into my system as I hear myself congratulating my parents. This is surreal. Ammi and Papa's permanent residence cards flash an artichoke green. They call it the Green Card. Giggling like school children, my parents jokingly informing me that they don't need me anymore. I'm beaming.

November 11, 2016. Afternoon.

There's a lump in my throat. I mumble a greeting to my parents and make a beeline for the desktop computer to work on a paper. Avoidance has always been my preferred coping mechanism. My mother keeps conversation light, and finally reaches for me as I get up from the swivel chair. Her embrace is so warm. Bound in her arms, it feels like everything will be alright, even for just a second. ■



Sample Essay #2



Author: College age white male,
Trump voter, American citizen



Responding to: Donald Trump's Election in 2016

* This essay was previously published in *The Hartford Courant*,
December 2, 2016, Sunday opinion section.

White Male Trump Voter Navigates Victory in Blue State

By Robert "Dale" Matusek

I've been singled out before, but as a student doing his undergraduate work at a university in a state dominated by the political party opposite his own, it got particularly hard as Election Day approached.

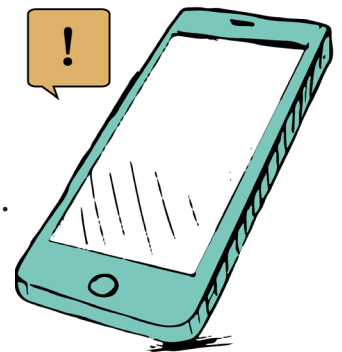
I keep my views quiet for the most part for fear of being swarmed by a group of political extremists. I never know who has what view and worry that a single word about the election could wake up a sleeping hostility.

On Election Day, casting my vote was the easy part; no one saw me mark down my choices. Not as if it actually mattered. The state is dominated by Democrats and Hillary Clinton was sure to win Connecticut. The thought of knowing who would be the new president the next morning rattled in my mind all night and kept me half awake.

At 1:30 a.m., I gave up on sleep and reached for my tablet to check the election updates. I scrolled through my Facebook news feed to see a post that said Trump took Texas.

"Wow," I said to myself and my eyes opened wide. My surprise continued as I scrolled some more and saw that Trump took Pennsylvania and Florida: I gasped with near disbelief. The list of states backing Trump just kept growing: Ohio, Georgia, North Carolina, Tennessee, Missouri... That's when I realized Donald Trump was winning. I locked my device, smirked and went to sleep.

The next morning as I walked around campus, it seemed quiet, but what I picked up on was the mood. The noisy



conversations I normally hear were reduced to low whispers. People moped around the halls with their heads hanging, everything just seemed dreary. It was as if someone had died.

As I headed to my first class, tension built as I anticipated someone mentioning the election. I walked in and, despite the dark mood that I encountered in the halls, I was surprised to find that the lecture hall was a bit lively.

I took my seat and greeted a fellow classmate. Sure enough, he said, “Hey how about the election? Crazy, right?!”

His tone seemed upbeat, which let me relax a bit, I supposed, judging by his smile, he was happy with the outcome.

“Yeah, what an upset for the Democrats,” I replied as I chuckled. Maybe my response wasn’t clear enough for him to get the idea of where I stood.

He followed with another question. “Did you vote for Trump?”

I hesitated. The question of the hour, the day, of the century. I almost wanted to ignore the question.

“Yeah,” I replied with a nod of my head.

His smile got bigger then he shouted, “High five!”

We slapped hands and from that moment on I felt way better. Class ended and I had a little swagger in my walk, it felt good to be on the winning side. My chin was up but, as I strolled to the library, I noticed a familiar mood of sadness again.

During my last class of the day, I overheard chatter about professors cancelling classes and people breaking down crying. It left me thinking, “Grow up!” In a way I had become the typical Trump supporter. It wasn’t until I heard a different side of the story a couple of days later that I understood some of the concerns of those who supported Hillary Clinton.

I was talking with a coworker of mine. She’s a joyful person to speak to, but when the elections came up, she started to whimper. I was shocked—I had never seen her cry before. But the reason why she was crying confused me.

She believed that she was going to lose her job and be deported. She is a Mexican immigrant who doesn’t have all of her papers for full citizenship yet. Even though I told her I didn’t think that will happen, she still had that mindset. It was then I realized how fearful she was of an America with Trump as president. ■



Share Your Story



Everyone tells stories. All day. Work to get past any anxiety and remind yourself how natural it is for people to tell stories to other people!

You can elect to speak your narrative into a tape recorder, directly to the group or write it down. The key building blocks to a first-person story that carries you and the reader somewhere include:

→ Identify your primary **topic**, perhaps Economic Disparity, and your **angle**, which is your way into that larger subject area. What in the particular do you want to look at with your story and what's in it for the reader?

- **EXAMPLE:** Perhaps you've experienced first-hand the growing economic divide between those with a college degree and those without. What's your story around that central issue? Try to be specific and include scenes, characters. Think like a short story writer; avoid big sweeping general summaries and strong opinions. If you had a camera in your hand, you'd be moving from a big concept to a closeup!

→ **Reflect** on what your story means to you. Perhaps it includes you or a relative/ancestor as a central player. Strive to put the overall story into **context**. For example, maybe you are the first in your family to go to college and see first-hand how much easier your life has been in terms of employment than it was for your parents or grandparents. Do some research on the historical context of their lives and why it might have been so difficult for them to receive higher education.



Critique

In the fabricated “opinion” pieces, I raise many of the points the student authors expressed in group work in class. For their personal essays, I demanded that they show and unveil their experiences instead of declare what’s right or wrong. I nudged them into a point-of-view that allowed some empathy for the other side to seep through. Both students remained entrenched in their personal opinions about the outcome of the election, but definitely had a more open manner with each other by the end of the term. They recognized that both of them felt fear in the current political climate. In the end both students developed more context for the opposing view. That can happen in micro situations, such as simply meeting someone in person and talking with each other, but it also has to happen in classrooms across the country.



Recognize the Importance of Historical Context

Another word for context: history.

Research shows that Republicans tend to get most of their information about politics and society from a single source, which encourages affirming entrenched attitudes rather than expanding understanding. Nationwide, at every level of education, public schools and colleges have cut back on instruction in the humanities in favor of science, computers and math, which deprives students most in need of context for their place in society with little to no access to that information.

The only exception to this trend, as Eric Alterman points out in his *New Yorker* article, “The Decline of Historical Thinking,” is at Ivy League and other elite universities, which has created an “intellectual inequality.”

“I do not refer to the obvious and ineluctable fact that some people are smarter than others but, rather, to the fact that some people have the resources to try to understand our society while most do not.”

My son Donald knew a lot more about the history of transgender individuals than I did, and still does, but he pointed me to resources that help put my own situation as a parent in context. Without that larger picture, without the fuller understanding about the science behind gender in the womb, the history of prejudice and violence against transgender

people, their higher risk of suicide, unemployment and addiction, I would have never evolved.

I would be a parent with a transgender son stuck on the fact that I simply did not understand.

And what does it say that places like Yale invest so much in History Departments? Such an internationally renowned university can rise above the pressure to make sure its students major in subjects that lead to good jobs, because the Yale name alone will give them that. The ruling elites grasp that the big picture thinkers who have a deep understanding of context and history tend to be leaders and problem-solvers.

As Alterman explains, “They have the luxury of seeing college as a chance to learn about the world beyond the confines of their home towns, and to try to understand where they might fit in. That’s what history does best. It locates us and helps us understand how we got here and why things are the way they are.”

Fear keeps rising as a common denominator among all groups in all social categories under discussion, from race to class. Lack of context fuels fear. The white male student in my class, who resented the despair of the Clinton voters after the Trump election, learned to see the daughter of parents without legal papers to stay in the U.S. as a real person with heart-breaking challenges.

The young woman grasped that Trump supporters voted for him for a range of reasons and may actually disagree with many of his policies. They fall along a political continuum, just as she does.

My class, and the essay exchange exercise, forced them both beyond the confines of their home towns.

No program for improving social discourse will work without some sort of focus on providing fuller context for the issues under discussion. Of course, the historical narrative itself also comes under fierce debate. Down South many hail Confederate General Robert E. Lee as a heroic military leader, the epitome of the dutiful, self-sacrificing public servant. An African-American descendent of slaves sees a very different historical narrative. But both can agree Lee was a major figure and both sides need to know more about the entire story to understand what they are looking at when they see that statue in Lee Park in Charlottesville, Virginia. Only spouting off narrative and facts that fit their particular point-of-view of Lee’s story isn’t history—it’s folklore and mythmaking.





Appoint A Story Catcher for the Larger Community

Often the people who feel most marginalized are the least apt to seek out any sort of community program, which makes it especially imperative that each story exchange group appoint at least one official story catcher.

I learned firsthand how many important stories hide in the shadows behind walls of fear and mistrust while working on a special project for the Connecticut Veterans' History Project to collect personal accounts from Gold Star families—those that had lost a son or daughter in the line of duty—for the 50th anniversary of the Vietnam War. At the time, I was working as a writing professor at Central Connecticut State University with 10 college students who served as the story catchers and editors for the magazine and traveling exhibit we created. The program, part of a national Veterans' History Project run by the Library of Congress, provides yet another template for how to gather narrative without judgment.

I must add that the Veterans' History Project even had a working relationship with the state's Gold Star families and a list of those that showed some interest in sharing their story.

But when my students finally arrived to interview family members of fallen Vietnam soldiers, people shut down. All of the mistrust and fear they had felt during the Vietnam War came pounding back. One Gold Star mom recalled seeing her son's body in full uniform in the casket and, as she stood by, a neighbor came up and asked her why had he gone to fight in that terrible war?

"He had no business being over there," the neighbor said.

Here we have Exhibit A on how NOT to speak to others whom you disagree with. Of course, we can all imagine what followed. Fifty years of silence. Fifty years of being afraid to show any pride in her son's service in a controversial war. Fifty years of often not even sharing with other family members how hard it had all been.

Then some Central Connecticut State University students showed up at her door asking her to tell us about her experiences as a Gold Star mother. She did not seek us out; we had to find her, knock on her door, promise to just listen. Only then did her story come out.





Allow Others to Process Your Story

When I first gave my son Donald a personal essay about the bizarre stages of grief I went through as I processed the fact the daughter I knew was disappearing before my eyes replaced by a son, I felt very afraid. For the first time, I exposed the full depth of my despair and pain. I did not know how he'd accept it. Would he take it personally and feel blame and shame for my pain? Would he attack me for being irrational and discount my grief as weird, since I still had a child—him—and hadn't "lost" anything. Were we simply doomed to never embrace each other fully again because we wanted different things?

The first key rule for a viable story exchange: both parties have to be receptive to reading or hearing an opposing view. Donald was only 20 at the time, but he embraced a receptive state, read the essay, "Mapping Modern Grief," that is now in our book *At The Broken Places: A Mother and Trans Son Pick Up the Pieces*, and told me he was glad I shared it. He focused on the honesty of the piece, the lack of judgment in my essay and the sharing aspect of my gesture.

At one point while on the road for this project, an interview with a Latino man came on an NPR station. He explained how he intentionally went on shows like Fox News on a regular basis, despite his views on immigration, the border walls, and his own personal life as a gay, bi-racial man, because he wanted to enter into a conversation. He said the Fox News commentator thanked him later for working hard at keeping it a conversation and not a shouting match.

When I got home, I looked him up and learned that the speaker was Jose Antonio Vargas, a Pulitzer Prize winning journalist and founder of Define America, a nonprofit that focuses on opening up dialogue about the definition of what it means to be an American.

After I received such a compassionate response from Donald about that first essay, he and I moved forward on our essay exchange for *At the Broken Places*. He created space for me to be true to how I processed everything and I worked hard to do the same when he shared his essays with me. We disagreed. Some of the material in his chapters was hurtful, even painful, for me to read and I am certain he felt the same about my material. But at no point did we feel we were trying to do anything more than fill out our story so the other person could formulate a more empathetic and accurate picture of what happened to our family and what



we needed to do to get to a better place.

Why can't we apply this same approach to the grave differences Americans have over race, class and politics? *New Yorker* Magazine author Isaac Chatiner is correct; if we all continue to want different things—gun ownership vs. stringent gun laws, for example—no amount of story sharing will budge either side. But the best way in then becomes finding out what both sides do want. You won't bring in all of the people from the other side, but if we reach the middle, people who are swing voters in elections, who agree to constructive steps like story-sharing programs, then a national Story Exchange could be as important to national stability as a healthy Stock Exchange.





Dr. Paula Green.
Greenfield Recorder
file photo

Tips On Engaging In Better Public Discourse

From Conflict Resolution Expert, Dr. Paula Green

The 2016 Presidential election generated a massive surge in story-sharing programs at universities, nonprofits, and on radio as well as a lot of start-up organizations, such as Dr. Paula Green's Hands Across the Hills. Most of the programs simply gathered stories with no particular goal to encourage an exchange of opposing views, a much more daunting task since conservatives in particular do not tend to trust the process and feel they will be misrepresented. The upside: Americans have ready access to a trove of stories from a huge range of perspectives and entire organizations devoted to particular groups, such as undocumented Americans or GBLTQ citizens.

I can't say it enough: take the time to listen in.

The downside: the story-sharers tend to be a self-selecting group with Democrats/Liberals/Progressives far more represented than Republicans/Conservatives. The fact Dr. Paula Green decided to use her decades of experience in conflict zones such as Rwanda and Bosnia to wrestle with the current decline in discourse in the US by deliberately launching a program, Hands Across the Hills, that only works if both sides are included and face each other, set her work apart from anything else I discovered in the story-sharing community. I asked if I could publish an interview with her for this guide she graciously agreed, even though she's been in huge demand in mainstream media with features about her in the *New Yorker*, *New York Times* and on major TV news shows. She understands that since she works with small groups at a time in a very labor-intensive setup, she must spread the word about what she's doing and what people are gaining from her carefully honed process, through as many venues as possible.



INTERVIEW WITH CONFLICT RESOLUTION SPECIALIST, DR. PAULA GREEN



Intent on learning more from Dr. Paula Green than what I found in the mainstream press, I traveled to Northampton, Massachusetts, to interview her. She had just returned from leading a workshop at Cambridge University in England for Israeli and Palestinian educators. A petite woman with decades of experience traveling to the world's troubled spots, she projects a fierce energy and focus as I start the interview in a quiet room in the Forbes Library.

Marginalized Groups

I met with Muslim, Christian, Jewish educators, all live inside the state of Israel as citizens, but the Palestinians are a marginalized group. They are unable to have opportunities in education, development, livelihood, and expansion, so they are second-class citizens.

I was thinking when I was there that prejudice and stereotypes manifest themselves in the same way around the world. I thought of the people from Kentucky whenever we were talking about the Palestinians. Power and privilege operate in similar ways in any context. The power group has a limited understanding of the marginalized group but the marginalized group knows everything about the power group because their lives depend on it.

Our Kentucky participants feel marginalized and unseen in the culture. So in that case they are like the Palestinians or African Americans in terms of being the invisible group. One thing I've seen is that marginalization leads to self-destructive behaviors. People can either act their anger out or act their anger in. Depression, suicide, alcohol are acting in--reducing oneself because of one's marginalized status.

Leading an Effective Workshop

I spend a lot of time building the group and finding the common ground that they have with each other. We had 25 educators and they had never talked to someone from the other side. That just doesn't happen. So they loved the experience and said it was one of the best things to ever happen in their lives.

There was anger. That's healthy. Just don't punch. Talk about the hurt, frustration. But first we must establish guidelines: respectful speech, do not interrupt, agree to honesty.

We each have multiple identities and some of them are cross cutting identities. For example, being a mother. Black, Native American, Palestinian—each could have that common identity. So you first build some sort of familiarity then once you build that we talk about ways you've been hurt by society. It starts slowly and bit-by-bit the trust builds.

We had an amazing space at Cambridge University but I've worked refugee camps, worked in broken brick buildings. An attractive place helps, but I worked in Bosnia after the war in a school where the gym had blood stains on the floor because it had been a torture chamber during the war. I worked in Rwanda in refugee camps in very huge tents in the rainy season. The rain was so loud you could not hear.

Building Experience as a Conflict-Resolution Leader

In the beginning when I came back, I just felt like I was making it up. There were no guidelines. I never say that anymore. I know exactly what I'm doing. I didn't know 30 years ago, when the field was just starting, how to bring people to a better place but now I know how to help people communicate across very angry boundaries. I am not very afraid.

I feel my role is to hold a container for people to do the work. I often think of my hands as holding, a holding gesture, that's my goal. My job is to be steady, kind, patience and as inclusive as I can possibly be.

I have to be very careful. I must make space for everybody. I have learned that someone in the group will respond and say what I might feel so it's important for me to not do that. I am a facilitator. we talk about ways you've been hurt by society. It starts slowly and bit-by-bit the trust builds.

Hands Across the Hills and Bridge4Unity

I developed the home stays as part of Hands Across the Hills and took that idea and used it in South Carolina [for Bridge4Unity, which focuses on racial issues]. There's nothing more intimate than being in someone's home, sharing bathrooms, having coffee. Those relationships have sustained over time. I did that purposefully.

I accept that the people who come to the meetings [for Hands Across the Hills and Bridge4Unity] are self-selecting group but my reasoning is if I can reach people who do come then it's their job to reach into their communities. It's up to the participants to spread the values and ideas. I do try to stay connected. For example, I will return to the Israeli/Palestinian group in January and I did work in Bosnia for years [and was going again this year]. You must reinforce the possibility for change.

Using Public Radio & Historical Sites as Unifying Spaces

Social media is wonderful for connecting people but tragic when it connects people around hate. I wish traditional media and social media would help more. The groups are small so we need media to amplify the message. All of those years public radio helped do things on litter, smoking, seat belts; we could use the same model. You can educate the public mind.

We should have civil education about understanding and managing conflict and celebrating difference but we don't have any and we don't equip our citizens. People are mostly segregated by race and class. We don't talk about our differences. The struggle.

We should be doing that through education. ■

A Sampler of Existing Story-Share Programs

Many of these organizations simply gather stories from individuals but some do attempt the more challenging task of bringing together Americans with opposing views for constructive discourse about race, class and politics. I encourage you to start local through an historic society or site or museum and with a small group and expand outward. But all of these organizations offer plenty of free material on their sites and even coaching for those that want to take the lead as moderators.

<https://braverangels.org/>

BRAVER ANGELS is a national citizens' movement that aspires to reduce political polarization in the United States by bringing liberals and conservatives together and move them beyond stereotypes and their red/blue communities. It's a skill-building program with trained group leaders and psychologists. They avoid asking people to change their minds about key issues and instead focus on encouraging better understanding of each other and to absorb values and experiences that inform different peoples' political philosophies. Its all about our common humanity. For more information, check out this video at <https://braverangels.org/abc-nightline-on-better-angels/>

<https://www.virginiahumanities.org/2017/12/changing-the-narrative/>
<https://www.withgoodreasonradio.org/>

CHANGING THE NARRATIVE is funded by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation through a two-year grant to implement Truth, Racial Healing, and Transformation guidelines. In collaboration with librarians and educators, Virginia Humanities developed programs that use stories to empower young Virginians in under-served communities in Arlington, Charlottesville, Norfolk, Richmond, Roanoke, and Harrisonburg. These programs focus on creating safe opportunities for Virginians to tell their stories and engage with the experiences of others in an inclusive space.

<http://www.civilpolitics.org/>

CIVIL POLITICS aggregates research on moral psychology and focuses on the science behind why we can't simply just use facts and arguments to change people's minds. For an outstanding article on that issue, visit <https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2017/03/this-article-wont-change-your-mind/519093/>.

<https://www.citizenuniversity.us/about-us/>

CITIZEN UNIVERSITY hosts conferences that draw together civic leaders, authors, journalists, academics and others involved in building a "civic revival across the nation," with more and more focus on the problem-solving and civic dialogue aspects of their agenda. CEO Eric Liu also directs the Aspen Institute's Citizenship and American Identity Program.

<https://defineamerican.com/>

DEFINE AMERICAN, a nonprofit media and culture organization, highlights the power of storytelling to transcend politics and shift the conversation, with special emphasis on immigrants and the changing face of citizenship in the US

<https://engagingplaces.net/>

ENGAGING PLACES focuses on using historic sites and museums as spaces for constructive, engaging public discourse.

<https://www.everyday-democracy.org/>

EVERYDAY DEMOCRACY, founded in 1989 to foster better public discourse. They run an effective Dialogue for Change program nationwide and often work with local governments.

<https://www.handsacrossthehills.org/>

HANDS ACROSS THE HILLS formed in response to the 2016 election with the goal of facilitating face-to-face meetings between Americans on opposing sides of the political spectrum. Founded by internationally renowned conflict resolution specialist Paula Green, this unique program not only organized town-hall like gatherings of people from Western Massachusetts and coal country in Kentucky, for example, but also arranged for the various sides to visit each other's homes. See this Guide for an interview with Paula Green, her top 10 pieces of advice for generating constructive dialogue, and some sample narratives from participants in the Hands Across the Hills program. Bridge4Unity, which focuses on racial issues, falls under the umbrella of this organization as well.

<http://humanlibrary.org/>

THE HUMAN LIBRARY is designed to build a positive framework for conversations that can challenge stereotypes and prejudices through dialogue. Librarians invite participants to talk honestly about difficult subjects.

<https://www.livingroomconversations.org/>

LIVING ROOM CONVERSATIONS intentionally avoids using “skilled facilitators” or any sort of fancy venues and instead mainly works through public libraries to organize conversations between people with opposing views.

<https://onbeing.org/>

ON BEING host Krista Tippett from American Public Media launched her show to explore where spirituality, science, art and social healing intersect, but in the last few years she and a crew of professionals have crafted an ambitious program, The Civil Conversations Project, which involves going into communities, especially in the south, to identify and work with areas that show signs of fracture. On Being launched a pilot program in 2019 and expects to expand. Poetry is a big part of the art segment of their program.

<https://thepeoplesupper.org/our-impact>

THE PEOPLES SUPPER launched in January 2017 with its #100Days100Dinners program and has since expanded to more than 1000 dinners in states across the US Featured on CBS News, the Peoples Supper literally tries to bring people of opposing views back to the table over a meal.

<https://tlhvillagesquare.us>

<https://respectandrebillion.com/>

THE VILLAGE SQUARE feels like a quirky startup in the “better conversations” field, but its college speaking program offers a really refreshing take on our national divide. They call it Respect and Rebellion and send out speakers like a Blue Mom and a Red Mom to campuses.