

Community-Building Challenges of Listening, Humor, and Hope: A Profile of Normajean McLaren

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I should tell you a little bit about what I do. So, when I first started doing this work about 18 years ago, I went to work for the City of Vancouver and they put together a slightly free-standing Institute, that was sponsored through the city, that dealt with and taught governments and private sector agencies—and to some extent corporations—how to respond to “employment-equity action,” which is our affirmative action, and how to deal with diversity in the work place. So I worked for them for a couple of years when I first started, and then I went to work on my own.

For those early years I worked a lot in the not-for-profit sector. So I would do ongoing training for agencies and organizations that were trying to respond at that time to the rapid demographic changes that were happening—particularly in the lower mainland. So that when on for a couple years, and then my work started being more in the hospitals, colleges, and the justice system.

In the early years it was training front line staff, but then about eight years ago, for three years or so, there was a lot of policy and practice work. For example, how does a university deal with the fact that they have both harassment kinds of things to deal with and that they’re not meeting the needs of the kinds of demographic populations that are present? How do they deal with the language and, more importantly, the cultural components and their lack of training for educators and administrators to deal with all that?

For example, if you have colleges like we do that start getting a huge amount of money from having foreign students come in to study English: kids from Japan, Korea particularly, Taiwan, now Mainland China, kids who’re studying English so that they can do better back home, and that some can actually get entry into Canadian colleges and Universities. Now at the same time

the colleges have got a new crop of the Canadian born population coming in. So along with the Hong Kong wave, the Taiwanese wave and so on, and a fair number of immigrants from Central America – there are also refugees joining this mix.

So the teachers in the colleges and universities are really not clear on how to work with this mix of people, and often not clear on how to negotiate what's happening between the long term Canadian residents and some of their students, so stuff starts happening.

So a lot of my work in the early days was with human rights complaints and harassment charges or discrimination charges or fear of that. Then the work morphed into working with administrators – police departments, colleges, universities, hospitals—trying to prepare the whole system so it can be more responsive to cultures that are not European-based cultures.

It could be little things. At the woman's hospital, so the women are in there either with cancer or issues around urinary tract difficulties, and they're either going to have surgery or they're going to have some kind intrusive procedure. Now some traditional Chinese beliefs would have it that there are certain things you have to do in order to support healing: for example, you don't drink really cold water. Ever. But the hospital delivers ice water to everybody's bedside. Well, there has to be a balancing, so that little things are there, like having hot water taps available in the wards so that people can get their own hot water – or even just leaving the ice out of the water pitcher.

Balancing hot and cold doesn't mean necessarily just temperature in Asian cultures.

So, take another example: the ways a hospital served food. They'd have two hot foods and no cold foods where—again I don't mean temperatures—you need a balance and relationship of foods seen as fundamentally 'hot or cold' in order to heal. It's not going to happen in this place. So this work was about having meals that cater to different people's tastes; having staff that understood a variety of languages; working with palliative care units that have crucifixes on the wall when the person dying in the room is in fact Buddhist. In that case, the crucifix is attached to the wall, and the nuns would say to me, "Well, they came here knowing it was a Catholic hospital." And I say to them, "Yes, but the only two palliative care units in this city are both in Catholic hospitals, so what are we going to do?"

So there were a lot of 'silly' little things but they echoed back into a much bigger picture, and obviously they weren't silly at all, but the hospital in the early days acted as if this was a "nothing" issue. This is just something small, it's not a real thing. But those small things are

what make comfort, are what create acceptance and provide the sense that you actually have a place here, that you belong.

Over the years, starting about ten years ago and going on to the present day, my favorite work has been working with whole communities: small communities or smaller cities in the interior, north of this province and in Alberta and in Ontario.

What I'm doing there is developing the capacity within the community to deal with their issues along these same lines. To deal with issues that arise out of diversity, multiculturalism, and anti-racism, and to deal with the issues themselves.

How do the communities understand these issues? They will use the word "multiculturalism," and more now they would use the word "diversity," but they don't usually say "anti-racism." The people who would come to this one kind of training I'm giving – it's two weeks spread over a few months, or a week and then a week six months later – they would say, "We've got issues going on in my village. I'm the Royal Canadian Mounted Police officer, or I'm running a family service agency – and we do child-care contracts, but we're not providing service to a whole sector of the population because we don't know what we're doing: the parents won't come to us, because the way we're providing childcare doesn't suit their needs, and we don't even know what they're talking about."

Now in the north some of the communities are literally three way splits: Native, European background, and South Asians from the subcontinent— particularly out of the Punjab and South India and some of central India—who came to do forestry work in the north, logging, in the saw mills.... So some of these communities are literally a third, a third, and a third, and those thirds don't always have a lot to do with each other, except that the kids are in school together.

Now, what's arisen in the last five years that's changed everything is the native land claims and the treaty negotiations. British Columbia was supposed to have, as every other part of Canada did, its treaties signed before each province joined a confederation – its treaties with each band, each nation. But British Columbia – they lied. So they told the King of England that yes, yes the treaties are signed. They were never signed and there are only about two treaties existent in this province. So we have few treaties with the native or aboriginal communities – we refer to them as the "First Nations" here. We're basically without treaty. Well, it means that they have the "protection" of the federal government on a general status, but each individual piece of land, each piece of entitlement, never was negotiated.

So now they're starting into negotiation – they're beginning very early stage negotiation between First Nations and the government: federal and provincial government depending on what part of the procedure. The Canadian government was forced actually by international pressure to begin negotiation. The provincial governments have balked at it and then the BC government just caved recently and said, "Okay, we'll negotiate."

So how has it made a difference in my work? The communities are literally, some of them, on the edge of being on fire. There's more anger, there's more active polarization – the "us versus them" has increased just exponentially. So what's happening in all of these communities is that stuff is showing up at the school level with racist incidents. I mean we literally have had cross burnings in this province over time. So it's not new, but that level of hate and fear is turning up again. An elder from one of the bands was dragged behind a pick-up truck to death. People were run off the roads. That's not new, but there's been a fear of the First Nations coming into a power where they could dictate in northern communities who could do what, who could live where, who would 'own' the land. But there's been very little information about the reality of what would be the outcome of these treaties, and lot's of misinformation, so this is a hotbed and it's all through many, many, many communities. In the last two years I worked for oil and gas corporations in the north, and they're having to negotiate access across the lands. And when I was up there, I heard people in those communities saying, "They should just get rid of them all." Does that suggest death?

Who was saying stuff like that? The foresters, the oil workers, farmers, people who are the European immigrants—probably many of them at most third generation because British Columbia was not settled by Europeans that long ago, only three generations. The European settlers, some of them, came out of very hard places – you know Ukrainian settlers, Mennonite communities, and then all the usual eastern Europeans, Italians, Germans – they're from everywhere.

They've come, some of them within the past twenty years. They came and bought land in a place where they thought was like the rest of America. They could have it, they could keep it, it was theirs. Now that's in questions because a lot of BC is under claim. That doesn't mean that people are going to lose their land although for some, it may change who their landlord is. But it does mean absolutely that forestry contracts have to be negotiated with the First Nation bands, oil and gas access has to be negotiated with the bands. There are 33 Tribal Councils in the

province. They form together different nations, but there's something like two hundred bands in British Columbia. So here we are, nobody knows what's going on, and there's a lot of tension.

Under these kinds of conditions for the first time now we have colleges saying, "Wait a minute, we don't actually have any aboriginal staff, any First Nation staff, nor are we getting very many of the students, and maybe we should."

This is one of the places where the power balance could shift. If a college isn't providing what the community needs, the First Nations can set up its own college: that's one of the possibilities. If they are the primary receivers of money, and if they are the primary population, your college is going to be gone. So it is impactful—and this is real [concern,] but [there's also] real fear. and [there's] lots of media and others stirring the pot and making things worse.

These are not private colleges; these are all government run colleges with a central 'parent.' college in the larger centre. So you might get College of New Caledonia, as the first central point in the city of Prince George, with campuses in probably five or six communities as satellites to that. Some of these communities are quite small.

Well, the northwest college, where I was this week, is closing its campus in that satellite community in two months. People won't come in. It is not providing what they want. So that's just one small example.

Where I come into a community to work with them, first of all, is with a group of people where there's no obvious connection between them except that they all have a connection to some kind of public service or community-based service in that community or in the neighboring community. The college might say, "We're going to sponsor this training for anyone who's interested in learning more about diversity and anti-racism work, about the practical applications of it, about how to work directly with your agency and your community, and so on."

So probably twenty-five people would come, and some of them come from great distances to go to these things. In the first week of training we work with them on an understanding and a personal exploration on their own issues around racism and discrimination. Then we work through a series of days training them how to also do this work—so they can do the same exercises with their staff, or they can do the same stuff in the school system. Then they pair up, usually in a mixed pairs, mixed doubles—so a white European person with one of the first nations people or one of the South Asian people, and then they go out and work at each other's agencies.

For example, there's a particular community on the northern corridor between Prince George and Prince Rupert. It's really only midway up the province, but it's twelve, fourteen, sixteen driving hours from the city of Vancouver.

I had already worked with these people as trainers. Let's call this village North Lake.

North Lake made national headlines. When the village had appropriated band land probably eighty years ago, the band was still there within the town limits so they were on sewer, on water. They said, "We shouldn't be paying you sewer and water if you just took our land."

So they stopped paying sewer and water in 1999, or 2000 I think it was: the village cut off services to the band, which means children, old ladies were without these services.

So then comes into do the negotiations what was the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs.

The village says, "You're not neutral, you've got a vested interest because this is your money that comes or goes out here so we won't have anybody." So it stayed like this for month. This is a very small community, the village is probably seven-eight hundred people I suppose, maybe a thousand. The reserve is right tucked inside the village so they're all living together.

The reserve is not that big. It's probably two hundred maybe on the band-list. So the young woman who worked for the college and also worked for the band says to me, "Please come up and work with us."

She pulls together a group of people – twenty-five people - a trustee from the school district, a minister of one of the churches, a couple school teachers, one of the retailers, a variety of people including four or five band members. Over a six-month period I went in twice to work with them with my training partner, my work partner, facilitating this. We did work between times, consultation over the phone.

Out in the community, the village people said, "We've just got to get the band to be sensible."

And the band says, "Sensible? What are you talking about? 'Being sensible?'—The village is cutting off our services."

So it was hot at first.

So, the village feels it has provided services to the band forever, and the people of the village are saying, "This is a hundred year old argument. Get on with it! We're right here, right now: Pay the taxes."

The band says, “You took the land. You never paid for it, and over and above that there’s a whole new forest company down the way on our land and they’re paying you taxes, not us money.”

So they were further and further apart. And now it’s a health issue as well as a forest issue because there are no sewers, and so they have no plumbing working. They’re trucking in water, but people are using outdoor toilets right near the watershed – this is not good.

But the people who came together in this group actually did want to come to some kind of agreement, in this small group, so that they could go out from that group and work together within and between and somehow heal the community.

This small group came together voluntarily—this group of counselors and teachers and the church minister and band members. Two members of the community had convened the group, one from the native community and one from the white.

So this is what my work is almost entirely now. What is happening in many communities today is that when an issue like this happens, we try too often to hop over the historical and ancestral problems and issues—especially around issues that have their bases in race—like issues between the European settlers and the people who’ve been here for twenty thousand years in their ancestral home. In most places where we work, negotiators and developers come in, and they try to just jump over that issue and start from today.

People who work on a consultant basis—or people who work bureaucratically—don’t want to touch that. But if we don’t, if we hop over that issue, we never build the community’s capacity to look at itself and begin on a solid place. It begins on a very rickety framework. Then, as often as not, it falls apart.

So my partners and I, when we go in, our first step is always asking, “What are the issues?” and we go backwards into them. I don’t mean that we want everybody to say, “Well, you did this, and you did that.” It’s not about that.

What it is about is: “What do I carry that I learned at a very early age about you?”

So we might hear: ‘I was taught in school that you were savages,’

‘I was taught in school that you were greedy pigs.’

I mean people will say any number of things: “You came here to steal our land’ and ‘You weren’t using it.’

‘You people are all lazy and drunk, that’s what I heard. I don’t really believe it, but I know I hear it all the time, and I see a lot of lazy drunks around.’

‘Well you just stole everything we had, and now we can’t hunt, and now can’t we can’t fish, because you polluted our waters. . . .’

So there is some really solid stereotyping and some unfounded beliefs—and some of them are founded—but they’re founded on group membership, not on individuals.

We do that in the group. We’ve done the background talking. So they’ve gotten as far as they can get without someone’s outside help. They may have had a little bit of teaching around the question, “What are the roots of racism? What’s the story of colonization? How did this community get here? How did this issue turn up?” So people have talked this through, and they’re stuck.

So when we come in, we do a pyramidal piece of work which starts out fairly light-weight—with people talking about their names and the roots of their names: what their names culturally meant to them. Part of that is for the white community, because third and fourth generation North Americans sometimes feel that they have no cultural connection to their names.

They might say, “I don’t know what my name means. I don’t know what it’s connected to. I think my grandfather came here—I don’t know, it doesn’t matter, it’s all past.”

But it’s drawing that into the circle and getting people to talk about even their first name: “Where did “John” come from, for example, in your case? Was it your grandfather’s name also? Was it a saint name to protect you?”

While I’m asking people about their names, I talk about the history of the country. I talk about the history of settlement. It’s just story-telling. So this takes a little piece of time, but by the time that component is finished people are in the room. They’re present. They’re now taking part, even if they didn’t want to in the first part.

So this is a big opener. It takes a bit of time, but it’s very effective and very powerful. You have to be careful with it, too, because with some communities, talking about the names can cause all sorts of hell to break loose.

For example, the Davidson’s were the settling native community, and another band moved in and encroached on this band’s land, and they are McClain’s. So once we start talking about the Davidson name, up will come, “This was all our territory until you came along years and years ago and took it.”

So you have to be aware that stuff can come up around things like that. But it can still be part of the story, but you still have to weave it into the story. This is about loss, about loss through immigration, loss of connection—rarely are the Europeans within a hundred miles of their family of origin, so it's a country with people always on the move. So we're bringing all those pieces in: new immigrants and the different waves of immigration through the years.

These workshops usually take about two days. So the first day I'm going to lay out the issues, build a framework, and in that afternoon we're going to get to the tough stuff, which is our own personal racism about each other—because we have to have the second day to heal that and to get to, “Now, what are we going to do?”

[In the background are the issues like the water and sewer and taxes, but] we're not going to go into all of that. That's already laid out, and the arguments are all there. This is about: How do we pull the community together to actually build a common vision and have enough people who say, ‘I don't want go on in this way. I don't want this split. I don't want this hatred. I don't want this fear of each other. I want it to be different’

Let's go through the two days. So we've done the name game, and they're in the room. Probably we'd do another two pieces on how they came here, and what they want to happen.

The first piece is for each of them to declare who they are, and why they're there. Some of them are there because they're connected very specifically with an agency. Some of them are just there because they're just a community member. Some of them are just there because their daughter just got beaten up on the school grounds. So they declare all that—and they say what they want out of this whole exercise.

The next piece is a set of guidelines for how we are going to be with each other over the two days, how it's going to be different. Usually in guidelines for any kind of group like this, somebody says, “Well, I want to feel safe in here, and for me to be safe I have to know that you're not going out there and are going to talk about everything I said in the room.” Or, “I need for people not to look like they're not believing me, or say that's not true, or argue with me.”

So they lay that out. But we don't do it that way. We say, “What do you bring? What do you need and what do you bring to make that happen?” So it's both a right and a responsibility. It shifts everything within the room.

Because traditionally, especially over the last twenty years, where we've done a lot of group work together, it's been typical that everyone comes in and says, "Well, I need this, and I need that" to form the group guidelines.

This one says, "What are you going to do to make that happen for other people? What are you going to do to make that happen for yourself?"

"Well, actually I'm going to listen and not interrupt people."

"Ok."

That shifts the balance "big time."

By the beginning of the afternoon we start into this pyramidal work: it's an upside-down pyramid, and its intensity increases as the day goes on, and it goes from large group work to very individual work, to accommodate risk and to ensure the safety of the group. At the end of the day, before they leave the place, it has to shift and come out into a hope-building exercise, all on the first day. There has to be some hope left for them at the end of the day, or they are not going to come back.

The pyramid might start out like this: I say, "Okay, if we're going to talk about stereotyping and racism, let's just play with it." So here's a bunch of photographs of people. I want you to get together in groups and mix them all up."

They're in small groups, mixed up; they're not with their friends. "As a group you're going to work up who these people are, where they're born, how much money they make, what they do, what're their values, what're their interests" – just from a photograph.

I say, "If we're going to stereotype, let's do it. Do it big time. The hardest thing is going to be to just keep doing it, because you're going to want to try to second-guess me on who these people really are. But when it's all over, we'll talk about who you think they are. I play with this. I bring up a lot of humor in what I do: a lot. I make a lot of jokes about myself, and I play with them and use humor hugely. We'll come back to why humor is important.

So in this exercise they get kind of nervous, because some of them are saying, "Oh, this guy's a drug dealer—I can tell: he's a drug dealer!" and others going, "No, no, no; you don't know that!" and I say, "Oh no, no, no: you're not allowed to talk about reality here. We're talking about stereotypes."

So I'm getting them to generate them, big time. Then, of course, we go through the exercise, and the guy on the motorbike with the tattoos all over him is a spiritual leader of some kind and works with a youth agency, for example.

These are pictures of real people, and I know who they are, and I've given the group the pictures to work with. But when we took the pictures, the people wrote down all the answers to the questions we ask the group. They've said who they actually are.

But I might tell stories about them. "They're not really like that. This is a real smart mouth. He's not an "Asian, quiet guy;" Believe me: he's mouthy!"

So we do that, and then I talk about, "Okay, what's a stereotype? What's racism?"

We might do some definitional things about what they really think we're talking about. Because people will use the word "racism" and mean inter-group relationships of all sorts, not about race. So we talk about race and where that came from. I might make it a bit academic. It depends who we're working with. It might be academic. It might be anecdotal. It might be historical.

Say with this particular one we were going to define racism on a very specific level, but we were also going to talk about the pieces that are going to come up—the first of which is 'reverse racism'. That's what people call it when white people get something enacted against them.

So we go through the fact that there's no such thing as reverse racism. It either is or it isn't racism. You can't reverse it. So what does it mean? What's power and prejudice? How does the power have to come in for racism to be enacted to have effect?

So they talk about their own experiences of that to define it. Sometimes I let them define that. We talk about their definitions. They defined what it was for them, and then we talked about whether that worked within this group.

I gave them cards to work out a definition and hand back and forth and give examples, and so they created the definition of each of these trends. Then I might go through an exercise and say, "Well, this is the way classically "stereotype" is defined, and this is "discrimination," this is "prejudice," this is "racism." So at this point then I get them to talk about all this in smaller groups

We can go through what actually happened in North Lake as an example. I pretty much do the same kind of thing everywhere.

So in the afternoon in the first day it gets more and more intense but we want to end the first day with something hopeful. So we're in the afternoon, and we've done the bit on stereotyping.

The next one is about your own biases and stereotypes in this community, and how they're going to get in the way with you working with members of that community. "What happens when you try to be in relationship with a member of that community? And being in a relationship, who would you have sitting at your kitchen table eating with you?"

So now we're down to you. "Where did this come from? Is it from your parents? Did you read it in the media? Is it from living next door to people? How did it get generalized to be a whole group?"

Then, finally, the last question is, "If you could get rid of this particular bias, what would you gain or lose in your life with the understanding that some of us make our framework of understanding and meaning in the world around exactly those stereotypes?"

In a village like that, it happens big time. So then I say, "In the village of North Lake here, if these sets of stereotypes that you make up your life around weren't present, what would shift?"

Now it gets painful. We have a lot of tears at this point. People talking about some of their experiences with group members: a time that they were a friend in school with a kid and then they were not allowed to be, any longer: the parent told them not to play with this child or "Don't bring that kid home."

They went to the reserve and they were playing on the reserve, and then someone told them to go back where they came from—those kinds of very painful stories.

North Lake didn't have this particular story—one that I was given this week - was that in 1972 they'd taken a sign off a ferry landing of the town next door, the coast town just beyond North Lake, that said 'No Indians or Dogs Allowed on the Pier.'

So today, right down through to anybody 35 years old who would have known how to read would have seen that before that sign came down.

So I ask them what they know about anti-Semitism. So I talk about my family, and I talk about personal experiences I've had with holding my little Chinese godchild and what the next-door neighbor said. I talk about my husband Nathan's family—most of his European family didn't survive the war. So this is "alive and well" all over. What keeps it steady and in place, and what shifts it? My belief is that what shifts it, to start with, is when we speak it.

So in North Lake what happened was that I finish the day in a communications exercise. There's two of them that I do, one that ends this first day and one that starts the next day. These are about listening. As someone said yesterday about their planning work, "It depends on how you listen."

My life has been very changed by the training that I've gone through over the past four or five years in the States with my mentor and teacher there. Her name is Carol McCall, and she has written a book—her first book—called, "Listen. There's a World Waiting to Be Heard".

What she talks about is that most of us in our lives have never been heard. We were shut up very young or told what is acceptable for us to say and not.

So what I teach them is a very brief exercise that Carol gave me to work with in community—and it just gets them hysterical for a while, so that breaks the whole tension that has just built. People get in pairs, and they both choose a subject.

I say, "This is a listening exercise, and we we're going through three layers of it. This is layer one. It's not going to last very long; it's going to be very painful. I tell them to both talk to each other: they have to talk at the same time, and neither one of them can shut up—they have to keep going. They couldn't possibly both talk and listen at the same time. So the first part is that they talk at the same time, and then they stop.

Then I ask "What happened there?" "What did you learn out of that piece?"

And they respond "Well, I kept wanting to listen to them."

"Well, I didn't want to talk at the same time. It's rude, my parents told me not to."

Then I ask them, "Is this exercise fake?"

"Yeah, we don't all talk at the same time."

I say, "Wait a minute. When you're listening to me talking, how much of you is truly and only listening to me: Not thinking of what you're going to say, not thinking of something else, not thinking of judging what I'm saying, not trying to remember if you left the stove on, but listening?"

So then the second part is, "Let's try it again. You're going to do the same thing this time, only one of you is going to speak but the other one is going to hold in their head, the whole time, and you can show it in your face, but you can't say a word, but you're thinking, 'You're a total idiot. This is the dumbest thing I've ever heard. This is stupid, this is boring'" – whatever you choose, but it's negative, and it's in your head.

Then they change places. Now this time it's a study because people do that in the non-verbal too, so they're really playing this out. They roll their eyes, they pick their fingernails, they don't make eye contact.

They have one minute each. They couldn't handle it for more than one, because they'll stop talking. The speaker will wind down and stop talking because they know the other person is not with them.

Then we debrief that one, and they talk about that this one's also hard for them to do because they don't necessarily disagree with this person. They want to hear what they're saying. They don't think it's stupid, but they play with it.

Then we go to the next and final piece, which is about listening to a person that you don't have an easy time listening to. Say it's in the community, and it is the person you've heard describe why this issue is this way fifty-two times. Say it's a child and you're in a hurry. This is the exercise: Given that that is what you're holding in your mind, the choices are this: you listen to the person as though this person was a good leader or you listen to the person with respect. You're holding them with respect.

Now if this is a person who hates your guts, this may be a tough thing to do: if it's your next-door neighbor who just sued you over your fence.

So the third one is "listening to the person with capability." It's also something we don't do: listen with a variety of kindness. We try to listen as if they are a capable person: they have great capability. Now part of the trick of this is that you have to continue in the same place, to hold yourself in that place. Because in this society we're often taught, in a hierarchical society, that if I hold you with respect then I'm not respecting myself, or if I listen to you, it means I agree with you. So the deal is we're equals. I'm respecting myself and I'm listening to you with respect.

Nathan—[a senior planner in Vancouver]—has added a fourth one to these that he says gets him through the tough conversations, and it's "listening with curiosity." He says that he stays curious, to take an extreme example, as to why this person tried to get him fired.

So now they're going into the last piece, but we do a little teaching bit on this first day: "Now you're going to do this conversation again—you choose one of these ways of listening, and you hold that in your head the whole time the person is talking."

So curiosity is an option, leadership is an option, respect or capability are options.

So say we have two people now sitting here in North Lake in this room. There's actually six styles—there's also “listening in “partnership and “listening in cooperation”—two of the ones people use to actually build an outcome.

Just to sum them up, Carol McCall's listening styles are: listen with respect, with capability, with leadership, with partnership or with cooperation. And Nathan has added 'with curiosity'. You choose one of these styles.

So here we are, sitting in the village of North Lake, and these two people are together. Let's say one is a very, very quiet woman from the band who never has spoken in the group so far, and she's with the minister of the local church that she doesn't belong to, and they are partners.

So, I say, “Okay, now you're really together on this one. Choose a listening style, and stick with it the whole time that the other person is talking, and see what happens to both of you.”

It's quite amazing how people do this— people have talked about it one a year later. I go back, and they say, “We put this chart with the six styles of listening up on the wall every time we have meetings”—because it breaks a pattern, and in small communities, or small academic institutions for that matter, we form a pattern of listening and hearing. It was just like I got 'patterned' with a guy in a conversation about the war in Iraq last night. I didn't hear a word he said because every moment I was ready with my next piece.

Traditionally, First Nations' communities don't listen like that anyway. They don't listen while thinking what they're going to say next. That's not how it happens. So this is like a godsend to them because this comes really to the way they listen naturally. But within the school system and with community meetings and so on, they don't experience it.

So this is the end of the first day. But how does this connect with anything more hopeful?

We say, “Okay, how could you use this? How could you teach this?”

They're quite excited by this idea. They think it's quite funny, but it's also quite useful: How could you have other people learn to work with you this way? What would happen if every village council meeting began with this as an understanding of what you were going to do, and as a way of treating each other? How would this shift day-to-day relationships in this community if only this changed?

What do people say about this exercise? In the exercise itself we might hear, “But I don't want to respect them.”

I say, “Sure. Well, what’s that about then? What’s that based on, and what’s the future of that thought?”

I ask them where’s that going? If you are intent on not giving respect to this person because they don’t deserve it, where can you go? You can only go to shutting them down.

I tell them that I’m going to be back here in a month, and I want to hear the stories of what happens when you use this.

Then I hear, “I’ve tried this with my neighbor in the past and they’re not going to listen to me”. I say, “Well, their listening, that’s part two. We’ll get to that one next week. Try just your listening first.”

The primary thing that we teach them is that when a person is hurting, they may repeat that theme all the way to the end of their story, they may finish with just that piece that they’ve kept telling you over the past ten years as to what’s wrong with you guys, or with the world.

If they never get to finish their thought, because everybody’s going, “Well that’s a stupid thing to say…” then they get to stay there forever. But when people finish and are heard all the way to the end, they start to share what’s really important, and they feel heard…maybe for the first time.

So this is not only giving the listeners something, it’s also a gift to the speaker: a big gift to the speaker.

How do people describe that? First of all, from this exercise, what they say is what they experienced when the other person was paying attention to them that way – how different that was from being listened to as they ordinarily are.

For example, they say it was like they could have talked about anything:

“We could have talked about anything. I could have told anything, and I felt that she would just listen to me—she would really hear what I was saying. I felt such warmth from her,” or “I felt such caring, I felt really cared for. I felt they were really listening to me. I feel really listened to, this person really was hearing me.”

What’s the affect in their voice? It’s like wonder, quite often, wonder at the difference, at the shift, of having gone through the negative ways of listening to this.

So then what I usually do is that I say, “Okay, let’s not bother going to the general community first, let’s go home to your family. What would shift with your children, if every

time you had this conversation with your teenager, the first thing you would do would be to hold them as is capable?”

And they go, “Oh my God. I never thought of that.”

So, immediately you get an ‘aha’—because people get that one, big time. They might be teachers who work with teenagers, or parents who have teenagers in the home. You want capability for your child; you want them to grow up being capable—but do we hold them as capable when we’re talking to them and knowing that they’re going to leave their socks on the floor again?

So, there’s an interest. This one really does cause hope. It’s little and it tweaks their interest, and they have an agreement with each other that even before I come back, they will come back to their next meeting and tell each other what shifted in their experiences when they listened.

When I’ve come back the next time, people have just been full of stories. At North Lake, when we came back, a woman comes in and she said, “I have this neighbor. We’ve lived together ten years. I never knew anything about her life, because I was always scared to hear a whole story—because I thought, ‘Oh God, she’s going to tell me this whole thing, and I’ll get all caught up in her life.’”

She said, “From what you’ve told me last time I’m just listening. I don’t have to do anything about it. I’m only listening.”

And she said, “As soon as she started telling me this story, it was like this whole incredible story.’

She said, “I didn’t know what her life had been like. You know, my next-door neighbor came here when she was thirteen from Russia, and this is what had happened to her. This woman is eighty years old, and I’ve lived next door to her all these years, and I didn’t know all this stuff.”

She was just so excited—she saw the possibilities of what can happen between two humans when we listen. Because in this society we’re taught that if I listen to you, it means I agree with you, and that’s not true. In this one, that’s clearly what we teach: listening is not agreeing with you. It’s not about agreeing, it’s about listening.

You ask, didn’t we all learn to listen in third grade? Actually what happens in third grade is that we’re told “Children should be seen and not heard.”

We're told in third grade, "If you're going to speak, raise your hand." Or, "That's not the way we talk in this class." Or, "That's not the color that flower's supposed to be. Flowers don't come in that color."

Little people's worlds are often formed out of disrespect for who they are and what their ideas are. So, yes, we did learn to listen in grade three in a very specific way, and it's mostly learning that people are not going to listen to you.

Another part of what we learn as listeners is that some people learn I'm never going to get a chance to talk, so I'm not going to bother. So I'll sit here and not say anything. You'll never know what I'm actually thinking. You want to hear me, fine.

Other people spend their whole time saying, "I've got to get the floor here, so I've got to plan exactly what I'm going to say so I don't make a fool of myself, so I don't lose my chance to speak here.

So the whole time that you're talking to me I'm setting up in my head what I'm going to say when you finish, when you shut up in five seconds." That's what we learn about listening—which doesn't have a lot to do with actually listening.

So with all this they have a tool. This is a tool. They can do something, and they're quite excited about going and trying it out with people. Now they say, "I can go talk to him and actually listen to what that old guy has to say."

The shift that happens first is listening to people who are elders and listening to children. Those are the two that come up first.

So the next morning they actually come back and say, "You know, I had this conversation with my husband last night, and it went to the strangest, newest place because of what we did here yesterday."

It took me two years of this learning before I actually listened to Nathan and I said, "I'm willing to listen to you." Which meant that I didn't interrupt him to tell him what he actually thought or said "no it didn't happen that way". We had been married eighteen years at that point. It's scary, isn't it?

So they're saying, "Last night I had this conversation with my husband—which was fascinating because I heard what he said, and we've never gotten to that point without being in a fight before."

Or someone will come back and say, “You know, I had this conversation with my kid this morning, and I said something about ‘Don’t forget your lunch,’ and my kid turned around and said, ‘Mom, you always say that to me,’ and I turned back around, and I said to my kid, ‘You’re right, and I know that you’re perfectly capable of looking after your lunch, so I’m not going to say it anymore,’” and the kid said, “Thanks.”

She said, “Something just shifted there.” So these are little things. So this is what we come into the second day with.

So on the second day one of the first things we do is go into a cross-cultural communication exercise. It comes out of the work of Dr. Terry Tafoya, who taught at the University of Washington. He was in the medical faculty as a clinical psychologist. He’s also a shaman and a storyteller of the Pueblo people in New Mexico. So he teaches very interesting principles around the pieces that keep us from being able to listen to each other and communicate with each other.

We all learn verbal and non-verbal principles and put value to them—“right” or “wrong” sets of principles, ways we are with each other: what’s right or what’s wrong about handshakes, about the sound of voice, about eye contact, about touch. Before we go to school, that stuff is already intact. Then we add value to it.

So a person who doesn’t have a good, strong handshake is a particular kind of person. All of those things are gut-held, not brain-held, not intellectually processed: they’re sub-conscious.

So, what happens is that when we’re in community meetings or working with a community that has a variety of cultural principles of communication, we have an undercurrent of trust and distrust going on that has nothing to do with the issues that are present in the room and everything to do with our value about the way people are communicating. So, one of the major things I teach them is about the issue of “pause time,” which virtually none of them have a sense of at all.

“Pause time” is the time between when I stop talking and you know I finished and when it’s okay for you to speak. In most Western, urban areas it’s just under a second. In many of the native communities it’s between two and seven seconds long.

Well if you go into many communities where we do community development, the bureaucrat comes in, or the mediator, and runs a meeting to figure out what this community wants to happen, and three quarters of the people in the room never say a word, never will get to say a word, because their pause time is just a bit too long.

Perhaps they are thinking how to phrase the thing, or perhaps they're also translating it, and if they pause for a second to translate in their head someone hears that one second pause, and in they jump. They take back the floor, the conversation. Because for the western, urban person, that was the cue that the first person was done talking.

Now in the workshop, they know that by the end of this second day we are going to have an action plan. When the community building plan starts, we're going into the vision building or the action plan. We give them a picture of the second day: we're going to start it out with a communication plan, we're going to do some creative planning on what the issues are here: what're the hot spots and what're the issues. Everybody puts theirs up, using 'sticky notes', and then we'll do a creative planning process where they're check-marked according to what's the most important one that has to be dealt with right now. We'll sort them all by category. Nothing's going to get lost, nobody's words are going to get lost. They'll be safe for later. We'll choose three.

We choose three issues that we can start with, in their community, and in the second part of that we're asking "Where're the places that we could most readily address those?" Where are three entry points to those three issues? What's the hardest one and the most long term? What's the easiest one and the most short term? Then either at some point mid-day I'm going to have them write up "What're the strengths in this community that we'll build on"

We're going to do that all in the second day? Yes it goes quickly because at that point they're ready to go. They've got all the rest of their crap out of the way, and they don't want to talk about stuff that doesn't apply to healing at this point. They're ready to go. They don't need to go on and on about you did this and you did that.

So in the second day at North Lake, we went over the communication thing in the morning. Then in the issues identification they identified the issues: the biggest one was between the village and the band. The second one was the way that the retailers treated Native customers so that they wouldn't even shop in the community any more because they were treated so badly.

So after the cross-cultural communication piece in the morning, right away we go into a creative planning piece on defining the issues in this community. So their other issues were racial tension and fights in the schools and the hiring practices of the biggest forest company. These were the four they settled on.

They did these all together, because in the creative planning process they all have their little pads of paper and they write on them. “I think it’s da da da.”

They write it, speak it, put it up on the board. Instead of a facilitator, in a brainstorming thing, writing down what they think the person said, or not hearing that person speak at all, or somebody not getting their chance, here, they write it themselves. Then they walk up and stick it on a board.

Then I ask them to put the issues into categories and in the categories, what fits together. Then they do the check marking, with dots. So they’re given five dots and asked which five issues are most important to you? Then you count the dots, and sort them by how many dots were given each issue. Line up the multidotted ones across the top of the board in descending order. So you would say this is number one for now, but which others relate to it? So those go under that category. And on down the line. It’s ranking; but they do all the ranking. That’s really important in a community like this where a lot of people haven’t felt like they had a voice of doing it this way. It changes things a lot.

So, in the next part of the day they’ve got these issues dotted, and we’ve got four different areas. They have a discussion as a large group saying, “Well, this one can happen fast, and this one is going to take a lot longer, but I want to work on that one, and I want to work on that one. So, they chose: people ‘choose with their feet’, as in ‘I’m going to work on that one.’

So we had a table of that one, a table of this issue, a table of this issue. They can go from table to table but they write down everything as it is discussed. This got some people to say, “I’d like to work on racial tensions in schools.” And some other people said, “I’d like to work on hiring practices.”

Now they bring it back, and they say what they’ve done. What their plan would be first. They spend about an hour and a half on the specific issues, and then they report back to the big group.

As they’re doing that the rest of the group adds their thoughts on the issue, “Okay, when you’re doing the one with the school, one of the big issues is with…”

The school administration had decided that the native kids needed to have a special room of their own in the school: a place where they could go and feel safe. But the only room they had was a computer lab. So they closed the computer lab to all the other kids and let just the native kids have it.

Now is that a set up or what? Now it's something that can be solved. All these adults in the group are sitting around saying, "Well, we could do this, or we should go in and do that and so on."

Someone said, "Why don't we let the kids solve it and come up with what would be the most reasonable solution?"

But in doing that they said, "The best thing we could do is have the native kids come into a teaching position with the other kids in some way."

So if they were doing drumming, they could teach the drumming or the making of the drums to anybody who wanted to come. But they could also do things with the computers—there's some computer game stuff that's been generated through some of the aboriginal television programs, and so there are some things they could teach through that. So they're trying to bridge here.

So they go back into it now, and now they're going to set up timelines. Who needs to be involved that's not in the group already? What will be the report back mechanism?

The strength in this group is that it is already a group, but at the end of the day, they have to decide how are they going to function as a group, given that they're working on these different issues. Do we have little sub-committees? Are we going to make those kinds of entities, or is it just going to be a "working group" that comes back and tells us how they're doing? Are there other people that should be in this circle without whom this whole thing cannot work?

So we're working toward action plans at the end of the second day? It goes in and out of the small group twice. First of all to identify what they're going to do with that issue and who's going to work on it. They come back to the big group and identify their strengths and see who else needs to be involved in ideas for the large group. Then they go back and say, "Okay, this is when we're going to do it, and this is who else needs to be here."

So they do more detailed planning in the small group. Then they come back and show that to the group and decide, as a large group, how the support should happen for what they proposed.

How does the big group support the little group doing that? They came up with things like theater pieces, and the big group could be involved with it. The church had a youth group, so they ask how could the youth group feed into the healing part of the school? Would that be a help? Would that be a hindrance?

But they're actually able to talk at this point about, "That might not work because Christian kids and the non-Christian kids might not get into it." So they're already talking past that point, and they're not getting upset because each other's saying these words.

The final thing in North Lake happened in the last half hour of the second day. The woman who had organized the whole thing, the minister of the Evangelical church, and a man who had been a school trustee and now ran special education programs in the adult learning piece of the college, he was a grand kind of a maverick made up the group dealing with the relationship between the village and the band. It turned out that she had, the day before, received a verbal communication from the band, and a written communication from the village, asking her if she could act as sort of a go-between.

She was "scared shitless" to do this because there were big stakes involved. What came out of their working group was that they would form a triumvirate to support her—so that she could go through each piece she was going to say and work with, so she could go work with the band, come back and work with the little group—to ask, how do we work with it now—and then go to the village. And that actually started one of the main shifts that started to happen in that village.

She played this intermediary role and then I agreed to do long distance consulting, so that if something came up about what she would do, we'd be on the phone together before she went back to the village: "Well, how about this? How's this piece?"

Then they decided that the best thing I could do is come back a few months later and work directly with the village staff, the staff of the municipal government in this town—and that happened. I thought that didn't go particularly well, but there were some good things that came out. But as often happens—when the village manager (like the city manager, only for the village) decided that everybody should have to come to this, but he would be busy. And that's a set up for failure. But it went where it went, and they continue to work to this day, and things are better. Obviously the water is back on, and the sewage is back on.

So they started talking through her. They still have their issues and their problems, but the group is still plodding along. They've made some inroads with the high school, and they got in to talk to the human resources people at the forestry company about labor practices and hiring.

So they're working on all these issues, and they're continuing to work on them and they're sponsoring the next big community-based training for the north. So that's a big deal.

Now, we can go back to issues of loss and healing. The biggest piece that I talk about, before we start discussing loss, is that the one way that I have experienced in communities that can destroy this process is through blame. So I've said, "In whatever we're doing, we're looking at what has been. But in our relationships with each other, it's from this moment forward."

That means that I cannot carry the blame for anything except for what I do from this moment forward. I cannot carry the blame for ancestral stuff. I have to recognize that it happened, and that there's stuff left between us because of that. And I'm willing—and we're both going—to go into a conversation about what happened here, what happened in the north, what happened through the church residential schools.

That's real stuff, but I cannot personally carry it—because what happens in a lot of white communities is that we go into 'paralysis' when we go into white guilt. Paralysis is not useful. One doesn't do a lot while in 'paralysis'.

Do native peoples say that this is a way let the white folks off the hook? They don't normally say that in these classes, because the conversation is relatively long about all that and we understand that this is what happened.

So, for example, one thing we teach about is internalization of oppression of how that legacy then goes on. Yes, it happened fifty years ago, it happened thirty years ago, this is how it carries on into now. This is how the legacy of internalization happens. There are several things that I as an individual can do: first of all to understand, and hear from you where you are in that circle and ask you, "What do you need from me in support? Do you want me to listen? Do you want me to have you as an ally?"

So as the facilitator, what I do with a sense of loss is honor and seek it. First of all I surface it as historically real. This is what happened. This is where we are as a country.

Even in the name game, I'm already saying, for example, "We don't have Japanese people here because they were not allowed back until the 1950's: they weren't allowed within 500 miles of the coast. All the boats that the Japanese population had in Prince Rupert and Vancouver were taken from them and sold cheap to white fishermen in the Second World War, and the government took the money. So maybe you don't have people in this community that are Japanese because they didn't come back.

So what I'm trying to do about loss is first of all to lay out a historical framework. This is what was, and then through these issues get to "This is what is."

We cannot start again from today as if yesterday had never happened because we have a legacy. So what's the legacy here? How is it reflected here? How does it show up? But one of my main roles is to talk about the institutionalized part. They can talk about "personally this is how we are with each other," but it's very hard for communities and for agencies to see their own institutional component.

So I draw out pictures of how they look for it. For example, "How does your hiring committee hire somebody? How were the last three people hired into your agency? Who are your staff? How many aboriginal people work with you? If the goal is for this community to be reflective, or for your agency to be reflective of the community, how are you doing towards that? How would you change that?"

"Oh we hire the best people."

"Well, let me tell you about this little hiring practice we just went through for one of the health boards."

So I'll tell them the story of a blind hiring that we did. Which means that any identifying information on the resume is erased until it comes to the very last piece of the hiring, the last three people who are short-listed. We went through this whole thing: they've never had anyone of color in that position, and they've certainly never had an aboriginal person in the main management of that health authority.

So we go through this blind hiring process, and guess who the three short-listed people are? Not one of them is white. One of them is an aboriginal woman; one is a man who moved from South Asia twenty years ago, and one's of African descent.

Those are the people who came up as the most qualified to the job. Now how come that happened? So what's happening is that I'm trying to show them gradually how it starts to show up in this agency—and not in terms of blaming what happens but "how do you look beyond?"

What I say to them is, "What we don't know, we can't know. You don't know that, but I'm telling you how you can figure it out. And once you know, you know. So no more saying, "I don't know that."

We do a series of these things. “I’m giving you the information about how the hiring practices you’re talking about explain why you don’t have any aboriginal employees. This is why. This is how it shows up. I’m not being mean to you.”

I say, “You have somebody come in, and you say, “Tell me about your work experience.” The person doesn’t say anything and then they say, “Well, I worked here.” And they don’t look at you.

I say, “All sorts of stuff is happening inside of you that’s judging the way this person is even talking to you. In many cultures, to speak about your accomplishments is rude”.

Then I go back to the communication exercise or I talk about cultural differences and the way that people will speak about success or credentials before others. I talk about the ways that we don’t, in Canada, recognize other countries’ credentials for example. I talk about the ways that we don’t talk about life experiences having any kind of credibility.

Then we wonder why change doesn’t happen. Then I might talk about how modern racism works. That concept explains why, even after you hire people, they quit in the first year! So I might stop and work with someone on institutionalization of racism]; I will do that absolutely at one point, but it depends on how much time I have with them.

What’s also happening is that the organizers, the people I’m working with have been trained in this, and I’ll say, “Okay, Pat’s going to come and talk to your agency about some of this, and she’s got some really interesting material.”

Now there’s bits about healing structured into the two days.

Healing is partly what I carry with me. For my training partner and myself, it’s our path, and it’s what we do. She’s native. I’m white. We work together to show that this can happen. Like two fingers together, we work very closely together to show that this is possible, that this can be done with respect and in partnership.

We talk about our own struggle with each other: Our own miscommunications, our own path of healing. I talk about recovery from drug addiction. I talk about my family’s struggle with alcoholism. I talk about that we’re walking a path together, and I say, “As a middle-class white woman, my path is not the same path and can’t be compared. That’s why in your community when you say, ‘I wouldn’t do it that way,’ yes, that’s true, you wouldn’t.’ What’s the real story behind all the supports that you have that aren’t available to a kid that’s been raised here in a very poor reserve?”

So we talk about our own lives and our own struggles. But the part of this that's about healing, and that's a major part of what I carry, is the thousands of stories that I've been given about that from people all over this country—and I tell those stories as I go along. Some of them are teaching stories. Some of them are painful teaching stories. Some of them are stories of healing.

For example, in a northern community last week, I only had five hours with that group, and at the end of it I did a piece, that had about half of the people in the room crying—but it's about their strength and their power to change.

It's impossible to describe but I have to be at a certain point in the work to do it. At a certain point when you're working with a group, they are going to reach a point where they say, "I can't do this. How can I possibly change this community? How can I possibly change what's going on here?"

In that moment, and I can feel when that moment happens in the group, I talk about two or three stories of change. I might start and say, "Okay. I worked with three different groups during a very short period of time, a month." One of them was the administrators of the university, one was the head of the police department, and the third was the head of the management of the whole health authority.

I asked each of those groups at one point in our time together, "Tell me about your relationship to the power of the position you hold. How powerful do you feel?"

So in those groups, you've got heads of universities, and heads of the health authorities, and the head of the police, and you now I am asking you, which ones, or is it all of them, that said, "Yes, I feel like I hold power"?

And they all go, "Oh, the cops for sure. Well, maybe the university, I bet they had some power too."

I said, "Actually, the truth is, none of them. Because the way that we are in this society is we feel helpless, so I would suspect it to be all over the place. Politicians get elected from your constituency and they get to the legislature and they go, "Oh my God, what am I going to do here? I can't effect any change."

Everybody feels helpless here, and the fact is each one of us carries extraordinary power to affect other people. So I say, "Okay, how many people do you meet in the course of a year? How many people do you come in contact with?"

This person says, “One hundred—oh not a hundred, a thousand.” Another person says, “Oh, I travel a lot—so probably two thousand.”

So then I add all the figures up, and I say, “Okay, this room comes in contact with forty-five thousand people a year.”

I say, “Think of the listening exercise and of just what came across when you changed the way you were thinking. Think about when you’re walking down the street, and a person turns and looks you in the eye and smiles at you—versus the person who looks at you like you’re a piece a crap.”

With our stereotyping we have the power to do one, or to do the other. When you do that, everything that comes near you shifts—and that’s the truth.

I said, “Now, I want to tell you two small stories.”

One story is about a young guy that came up to me during the break of the recruit training class at the Justice Institute where the municipal police recruits for the whole province were trained. Now, this young guy is Vietnamese, and he’s the first Vietnamese recruit in his department: he’s number one.

He came up to me and said, “There’s something I want to tell you during the break.”

So he didn’t say it in the group. He said, “You know, when I was thirteen I had been running in a gang for several years.”

He was a very normal, immigrant kid. He was brought here by parents who both felt really cut off, but he found a group of other Vietnamese kids, and they started hanging out, and then they started doing a little bit of breaking and entering, and then they were moving up.

By the time these kids were fifteen, they were into car-jacking: they were really moving up. So, needless to say, they were well known by the police in the community. The police knew them all by name and would visit them from now and again.

So one day, he said, they were walking down the street, on the east side of town here – Clark Drive – about twelve of them walking around, and they all fit the look, the attitude, and a police car comes up and stops, and they’re not carrying anything, so they’re all, “Yeah, well, fuck you, man.”

So the cops get out of the car, and they come over and talk to them and search a couple of them, but there’s nothing. They turn around, and they’re going back to the car, and one of the police officers stops.

He turns around, and he walks up to this kid, and he says to him, “This isn’t what you’re supposed to be doing. You’re supposed to be doing something else. This isn’t it.”

That’s all he said, and he turned around and walked back to the police car. And the kid said, “I stood there, and there was this chill running up and down my spine.”

He said, “From that day on, something just started to move. He told me, that cop told me I could do something else.”

A small point here: when we do that whole study of internalization of oppression, one of the things on the scale of internalization is that as soon as you shift your vision of your own ability, for example, then you start thinking that if you can do something that matters, you start thinking that your even being here matters, and you’re out of that downslide.

And the recruit said, “And here I am.”

I said, “Yeah, do you think that that police officer even remembers?”

He said, “You know, I don’t; I doubt he even knows.”

He said he wouldn’t know.

So I say to him, “That’s the effect, that’s the power that every one of you have.” There’s not a revolution in the world that started because government funding came down and said, “Let’s do it.”

The practical play of humor

Now humor has a role here too. Humor is one of the things that happens when I walk into any training room.

I say, “One of my purposes here is to keep you safe while we get you through this day. But the second thing is that I refuse not to have a good time today. You can have fun, if you want to or not; you can leave the room having not had any fun at the end of the day, but I personally am going to have a good time.”

I use a lot of puns, I tell stories about myself.

Does that help me in the work? It changes everything, just everything. I have been though so many training pieces where we do this kind of work, and I have worked with many other trainers where it’s very serious: as if “Now we’re going to be really serious here, because you can’t laugh about this kind of stuff.”

Well, though, I think human beings are hilarious. Most of the things we do are pretty damned funny. And some of them are mighty sad.

So how does it help in the work? In the evaluations of our sessions it always comes up, that the humor made it possible – even a ‘good’ experience.

For one thing, part of the thing I talk about is a piece about blame for historical stuff—that builds on recognizing that as human beings, this is the way we are. We’re a joke. We’re walking around trying so hard to protect what we are, so nobody can see what I really am, when any three year old can tell you what you’re actually up to.

I don’t mean that I’m making light of things, like racism. If I feel like crying in a group, I don’t just vent the tears, but if I feel in this moment that I’m going to cry, I don’t stop myself from crying. There are stories that I’ll tell and I will cry while I’m telling them. But I will tease them and joke with them too.

This one fourteen year old was in this group in the North last week. She’s got green hair and an orange cap and blue sparkly eyeliner about a quarter thick on her eyes. She’s sitting there, and she’s not saying anything, and I say, “By the way Audrey, if you think we can’t actually see you, I’ve got a mirror right here if you’d like to actually check it out (laughs). If this is your “I-can’t-be-seen” look, it’s not working. You are a pretty powerful presence.”

What would I lose if I didn’t somehow have humor built in here? Would anybody care?

I couldn’t survive without it. This work is too hard without humor. It’s too bloody hard. Without our humor we have no salvation. Humor is such a connector. It’s such a leveler, and it’s such a release—because tension will build in a room when you’re doing community development work and you’re dealing directly with issues that are so much in peoples faces.

It’s important of course that you’re not making fun of their issues. Ever. But the tension gets so high that humor’s like a safety valve that you open up. If it’s at my expense for the first little while in the room, that’s fine—say, if I’m making a joke about myself or what I’ve done.

So it’s a salvation and a release. It starts as a connector between me and them, and then that says it’s safe to be with me, because I won’t hurt you. I’m not going to bring you out here: stand you up and say, “Here’s a victim of racism, and she’s going to tell you her story and bleed all over you.” Or it’s safe because I’m not putting myself above you as someone who can’t be poked fun at. So humor’s a leveler and it’s a release when the tension gets so high.

Yesterday, for example, I was doing a training with the cops, and at one point they're dealing with an issue of homophobia within the police department. Now for the cops in this room there has already been some sort of issue that has turned up in their departments. I know it's already happened.

So we're not talking hypothetically here—we're talking about the real thing. So if it's around homophobia, I might get right serious and heavy with them about it: "These are your brothers and sisters in the Police Department. You think you don't have gay and lesbian cops in the Police Department?! You're nuts. Count the stats!"

So they are working on a scenario involving two partners in the force; one is gay and never has 'come out'. The other has concerns about all the homophobic jokes in the squad.

The group is to come up with recommendations for the partners and the squad. First of all they say "well the gay guy should just 'come out' and then tell people to cut the jokes."

Then in the next minute they'll say, "Oh, and I guess they don't have to actually "out" this guy, actually—in order to make the point about homophobic jokes not being alright"

I threw myself on the table and said, "God, I thought I was going to have to come and slap all of you around, because if you didn't get that one, you didn't get the whole point of it. . . Thank goodness!"

I get very physical. I inadvertently make double entendres constantly. I don't intend to, but it comes out.

I'll say something, and then say, "I can't believe I just said that, and they'll all crack up because they knew what I said and they aren't sure I didn't mean to say it.

I'll be telling them about a human rights case, and I'll say, "Well, in the judgment here, the judgment of the tribunal, it says that the woman swore. Actually, she told them to 'Fuck off!' That's in quotes. Right?"

They all howled—because the facilitator just said the words.

What is this giving the group? Is it important?

It's hugely important, and it's a dance. It's a dance, because we're dealing with such heavy-duty painful subjects. You're dealing with people who have been kicked out of restaurants or not served, who have been called "dirty squaw" as they're walking down the street, who have friends who have been beaten for appearing 'gay'.

We're dealing with pain—and that has to be dealt with seriously. I do not make light of that kind of stuff. I may tell a story that is about exactly that kind of thing, but on the other hand

you've got to let it go. It's got to move on. Otherwise nothing changes and the 'victim' keeps paying.

So the humor is not making light of the pain. Never. Never. Never. Does the humor actually let you acknowledge the heaviness? Yes. Sometimes it's actually about the heaviness, but you have to be very careful. This takes attention and practice.

This is one you have to weigh really carefully. You have to be very careful. This isn't something that you go in and play with to see how it works.

But I can see this in the evaluations. If I have thirty evaluations, twenty of them would say, "Her humor got us through this."

Why? Because what I'm telling them is that the pain is real, and if we can laugh at ourselves, we can move on and figure it out in a new way tomorrow. We can do something different because, you know, look at us: We are capable of causing pain and capable of creating magic; we have a choice every second.

One of the things that I tell the police is, "I'm going to have a good time here today, because otherwise the group gets really constipated! I don't want you as a group to be that way—I think it would be really hard on the Police Department if you were all constipated—so humor is going to get us through the day and onwards, so you aren't constipated."

I literally might say it like that. It depends on the group. The police departments are famous for their humor, so I play rough in there a bit.

For example, one of things I'll say is, "Okay we're going to do this kind of name exercise—you can do your first name, you can do your last name, you can do a nickname."

"Well, first of all, in this group, don't do a nickname. Be careful what you say, because none of this group is ever going to forget it, and it goes through your whole career."

"But I don't want to know about your police academy nicknames—my ears are too tender and too young to hear this kind of stuff. I don't want to know—but if you give one more thing for someone here to nail you with for the rest of your career, don't blame me, because I just warned you!"

Then half way through somebody will say, ". . . but my first name is actually Alfred." And they all go, "Alfred!!!!"

And I say, "Didn't I tell you, didn't I? It's not my fault, you did that yourself. Didn't I warn you?"

I do that with the police. I wouldn't do that with others, but the police already have a specific kind of culture of humor.

There are people that I don't play with in a group—like elders, unless they play with me, in which case I'll play back.

If I play with kids in the group, it's as an equal out of respect, as a matter of respect. If there are kids in the group, I will not play with them except about 'in' jokes: something about music or whatever—something that brings them into the group so that my relationship with them is based on equality, so they're my equals.

What's the risk of being too serious? If you're serious dealing with this subject, and I've been in groups that have done it, it's literally a cycle down, like a reverse tornado or something.

The seriousness cycles the room down. It gets heavier, and heavier, and heavier—and I don't believe that hope is built on heaviness.

I don't believe that when I'm at my most, "Oh my God! This is terrible. . . , this is awful, this is overwhelming . . ." that I'm thinking at the same time, "Oh goody! I can go out and change this."

Personally, I don't work that way. Change is possible when somebody says to me, "If we can make it, here, in this little bubble, then we can take this piece of it with us out there."

I ask them "You don't have to change the world. Can you do that little piece?"

"Yeah, I can do that little bit."

"I thought so."

But in order for me to feel that way, I have to have a sense that it is manageable—which doesn't come from cycling heavier and heavier and heavier and heavier, because then it's a mass, it all becomes a lump. It's all the racism in the world. It's every war we're ever going to fight. It's the Israelis and the Palestinians. It's all the armaments; it's everything all at once. I've been in groups where we've gone through all that.

Here, Nathan Edelson, Senior Planner for the City of Vancouver: adds,

"The other part of that heaviness is that the group starts to turn on each other. Because they start saying, "You're saying that because you're white, and you're favoring this person."

The seriousness will contribute to that because they'll be looking for the differences, and there'll be anger.

I use humor in negotiating with developers, or in mediating situations, because people come in, and they're trying to be so serious. The humor shifts where they are. I mean, there can be an absurdity in the situation. People want something and they'll surround what they want in all these abstract principles; principles which may or may not be shared by others. Finding some level of humor helps shift that to where participants can actually talk to each other as human beings and talk about what they really care about and what they're prepared to give up. This can allow the negotiation to complete itself in a meaningful way.

The humor can make it possible for people to talk to one another, but it depends on what it is. If the humor is disrespectful, then it doesn't work—but if it's something about the absurdity of the situation that we're in, or if it's something where one person has said something that you would have expected from the other side, then it can help.

I can't think of an example, but there's something humorous about when it becomes apparent that the other person is basically trying to get some small thing that they want, but phrasing it as if they were saving all of democratic society. Often negotiations are framed in that way – large principles defending small wishes. However, if the person is open to laughing at the level to which they've raised the small thing they want, it just helps them relax a bit and move on to what's really important.”

Norma Jean continues,

“For example, in a development situation like that you have people come in, and they're feeling very strongly that you're there as part of the bureaucracy and there are all of these hoops that they have to jump through. So let's say you're about to sit down at the table, and they're already good and grumpy because they've been through this fifteen times, and you're the sixteenth person they've had to talk to. They're sitting and everybody's looking impatiently, “Well, where're you going to sit?” And you might say, “Well, according to the by-law, subsection such and such, I actually have to sit right here”—which makes it as stupid as it really is. You're not making fun of them—you're really making fun of exactly what you're doing, which immediately says, “I don't take myself this seriously.”

So what's that conveying to them? That things are possible—that possibility comes through the whole band of human interaction. It comes through the pain, it comes through the laughter, it comes through our tears, it comes through grieving together, it comes through eating together. It comes through dancing. Through that whole band of human interaction we find solution, we find

possibility. We find soul-mates, we find teachers. But when we take just one heavy piece out to work on, we don't function very well, especially as community.

It's like "We're only going to look at the pain, and nobody's allowed to talk about anything but pain here this afternoon! I'm sorry: that's all we're dealing with. . . So if you didn't come with your pain, you get to come and we'll give you some: you'll hear my pain!—and then you'll feel so shitty by the end of the day, I can assure you: you'll be in pain then!" (laughs).

So seriously and heavily focusing on the pain on an ongoing basis is not always paying respect to someone—though it may be, in that moment, respectful—but to stay there may not be healing, nor giving any opportunity for change to happen.

There's a piece that Nathan talks about here: that if I hear so much about your pain, and this person's pain, and this person's pain—I, as a white person, for example—and I'm hearing about the fallout of the kind of racist actions that my ancestors have enacted here, there will come a time where I will trip over to the other side, and I will go to being defensive on this, and then I will go to anger, and then I'm going to shut you down—because I can't go on feeling this way. And unless you show me a way that I can move with this, hear you, honor what's there, and say where we're going, say what can I do to help change this, I may get stuck in that angry, afraid place.

I can't change what happened to you when you were eight, and I can listen to you, hear you. How can I make sure that our kids don't go through this again? What can we do together to ensure that your children and mine—as Martin Luther King said—can climb the mountain together, can have their own dreams?

So using humor sometimes says, "I don't take myself so seriously." That's a big part of it. That shows up in various ways that's important in this group.

If I come there as the enlightened teacher with the serious answer, I'm telling them two things,

A) "You don't what you're doing."

B) "I do, and I've come here to tell you."

When I do that, I don't make their actions possible.

In the first years that I worked as a community developer and facilitator, I came in to a community and showed them all these brilliant and wonderful things that I'd done and could do. I did it so well that when I left, they were all convinced that they couldn't do it.

Now, they did want me back again, which is good as a consultant. But that's not the point.

In the past four years, at the end of these long training sessions that I do, the group goes around and says what changed, what's been the most powerful experience for them. In the old days they'd say, "Norma Jean, you are the most incredible facilitator, I've never met anyone like you. You are just – I can't even imagine doing what you're doing."

And that was the kicker line, "I can't imagine myself doing what you're doing." I just failed. I may feel grand, but I just failed.

Now what I hear is different, and I'll tell you exactly what came out of another northern city, the community I'm going back to this week. At the end of the last training week, we went around the circle, and they said, "This is the most powerful group of people. I can't believe we're together. This is amazing. Oh, Norma Jean, you were great too."

That is success.

So part of what humor does is pull me out of the power place, but there're many ways that I pull myself out of the place of saying 'I'm the one that knows and I'm bringing you the wisdom from the mountain.'

Part of it is saying things just like that. "Guess what? I didn't bring the wisdom from the mountain. You all got the wisdom from the mountain in this room, and our whole week is going to be just figuring out how wise you are. If you didn't come in wise, you'll be leaving wise— isn't that good news?"

It's about me stopping some of the ways that I act in the facilitation of the groups. If I'm just serious, I become the teacher, they become the student. I'm up, they're down—absolutely.

So I'm up, they're down, I'm wise and they're not. So when instead I make fun of myself, for example, and become a player in the room, I enter into the room as another person in that room. I enter into the community. First of all I'm saying to them, "Thank you for letting me come into the circle with you."

When I say I'm coming into the circle, I say, "I'm not staying here. I'm not living here, you're here. I'm here for this period of time to do this with you, you're staying—and you have every piece within this circle—already here is every answer that we need. My work with you is that we're just going to figure out what those answers are. I'm not bringing you something that you don't have—but what we're going to do is have this time together and part of what's going

to come out of this is a knowledge of your strengths, your resources, your possibilities, and that's a guarantee.

So a sense of humor is a leveler, big time. Because I can't be sitting in the circle as the serious, wise outsider. I'm not in the circle.

Am I now the funny, wise outsider? No, not for this moment in time—and that's part of why the humor has to be with them. It's not me standing out front telling jokes. It's with them—it's interaction humor—that's essential, because that's what breaks me into their circle. It's interaction humor.

So, when they give me part of their life, I give part of my life back, and I make jokes with them about what these parts are of our lives. But it doesn't stay funny. It's really important that this shifts back and forth regularly.

It's not canned jokes at all. For example, I was just up in the northern islands, and one of the women came, and she sat outside the circle, which is a true sign, right off the bat that we had a little problem here, and I asked for her to introduce herself.

Then I did that listening exercise, whereupon she left the room. So she comes back in, and she says, "I was scared to be here last month so I didn't come, and you may have noticed that I left the room now."

I said, "Yeah, and the other thing I noticed was, you came back. That told me that being here mattered—that's the deal: "If you want to go, go, but I sure hope you come back again."

She never left again. There's a connecting that happens between me and every other person in that circle; it starts with the names, because I make a real deal out of who they are and who their name is and what the story is of their family.

I talk about different things while they're talking—besides the demographic and historic stuff, I might talk about stories of names I've heard.

I might say, "There's a kid not far from here that told me about how dads used to have all this power—because of how they registered the kid. No matter what the mom thought the kid was going to be named, the dad was actually the one registering him. So this father comes back and tells the mom that he did actually change the name and named the boy after his real hero. So his real name is "Alphonse," but they can call him "Al."

But it isn't until a family fight four years later that he tells his wife that really he named the kid after Al Capone."

I said, “Things like that happen in families, in the best of families. Let me tell you about my family. . .”—just like that. “Now, you tell me about your family.”

I might use territorial jokes—it depends on where I am. If I’m in a rural area, I play out my rural roots, and I play out the fact that “Here I am from the city to tell you what to do. Aren’t you glad I’m here? No? Aren’t you glad I’m leaving tomorrow?” (laughs)

That opens a channel between us right away. It’s amazing how fast it happens. I really connect with people. That’s my gift if I use it right.

This breaks expectations and is often different from their experience of what people have been like who have come from “the big city” to tell them what to do—or who have come from the West Side of town to tell the Downtown community what to do. It’s essential that you break that piece if you’re going to have any kind of shift and change people’s experience of bureaucrats coming out or planners coming out to tell them what to do.

You have to break the presumptions of the expert: “Do I bring something to you? You bet. You can have it if you want it – use it if it works for you.”

So the major thing you’re doing anytime you go into any community is that you’re building a network of people, and you’re not part of it. You’re building a network of people who can work together, and you’re giving them ways of understanding, having shared experiences... deep, deep experiences with each other.

You’re making it possible for them to have these experiences in these two days and then they’re going to be left with that. So I’m building the network, ensuring it of it’s strength, giving it it’s form perhaps, and ensuring that it’s intact for the next set of times—and then I’m out of there.

So I’m talking to that all the time: what have you got here? Do you see what you’re all carrying? Do you understand what this 92 year old has to tell us about your experience? The first thing I said to this women was, “Have you written your stories? You can’t not write this story about going into Nazi Germany and bringing out some papers. Don’t let that story get lost.”

She said, “I don’t like to write.”

I said, “Tape record. Anybody in the room willing to work to do this?” and before the night was over, someone had agreed to come and tape her stories. The whole community is represented there and you don’t need any more people than are sitting right there.

Humor is saying, in part, “We’re not dead yet.” We’re not dead yet. The connection of humor and hope is an amazing dance.

I was just remembering what happened when I worked up in the northern islands. When I walked in the room people were saying, “I didn’t know whether this meeting was happening this week, because it was just cancelled last week. I didn’t get told. Just came and it wasn’t happening!”

I said, “You probably don’t know why it was cancelled. Why it was cancelled last week was because my son’s father, my first husband, suicided, and so I couldn’t be here with you.”

I said, “I was just thinking on the way up here—a bunch of things came together in my head that I wanted to share with you, and it’s this: I had one piece of the puzzle of what happened to my husband. He had been in recovery for 17 years. But I had one piece of this puzzle, that I didn’t know I had. One of the kids had another piece, because she thought she saw him drink, but she didn’t tell anybody, because she didn’t want to get him in trouble, if it wasn’t true. His new wife really didn’t have much experience with alcoholism, so she thought that his drinking was okay, because it was social drinking.”

So I said, “We all had a piece of it, but we all kept the secret, and nothing happened—and he’s dead. We didn’t kill him. He did that, and still, he’s dead.”

I said, “On the way here I was thinking that this is what racism is like in the community. We keep it a secret. We don’t think we should tell anybody this—certainly not outsiders: “We shouldn’t say anything to that person because it might make it worse. I can’t deal with that”—We’ll just pretend, because he’s the mayor, or a business owner. . . Whatever, we keep the secret.”

I said, “The one thing that would guarantee that nothing changes in this community is that we keep it a secret.”

So as soon as I said that, we’re in the room—nobody’s drifting in and asking what’s for supper. Everybody is really present and involved.

But about ten minutes later, I asked what was for supper—because I only brought cookies so I hope someone else brought real food. (laughs).

But, if you’re going to dance this dance between humor, pain, celebration and grieving, you must have your eyes and ears open – and be ready to laugh at yourself.