

GENDER Equity: *Storying the Issues*

Storytelling in work and learning settings can help people open up lines of communication and progress towards a profoundly non sexist model of interacting. Far from our litigation crazed contemporary culture, this is a prototype that offers people the opportunity to enter one another's experience. Based on a desire to create a truly equitable environment, *storying the issues*, will expand your ability to empathize with and grasp another's experience, enhance your communication skills, and enable you to create the work or learning environment you want.

Yesterday's newspaper was filled with headlines and foreboding articles about male backlash related to sexual harassment in the workplace. The fear and loathing has been generated by the rash of legal suits. Having increased from about 6000 a year in 1991 to nearly 16,000 in 1997, men are feeling that the attacks on them are becoming endemic. Many of the cases are criticized as "frivolous" or found to be without reasonable cause. Cases, such as the one brought against Astra USA Inc., the pharmaceutical company, where allegations of prostitution and debauchery brought a successful 9.8 million dollar suit are offset by others similar to the Miller Brewing case where a man counter sued over his firing for sexual misconduct and was awarded 24.5 million dollars. (I doubt if he needed his job back.) Gender equity issues have lead us into a mine field of litigation where we are dying to find one party aggrieved and justified and the other perpetrating and punished. **The lawyers are happy, but are we really creating institutions and businesses that foster a nurturing work atmosphere?** There is a deeper, more profound layer of understanding and behavior that must be addressed before, during and after any legal process. Unless we address this layer, the increasingly polarized relationships we are now breeding will only multiply.

In 1991, when the Anita Hill/Clarence Thomas hearings were filling the airways I called my father. Our lovingly contentious relationship was built on just this kind of fight. I taunted "Well daddy, who do you think is telling the truth?" My father, now retired from over 40 years of running his own business, didn't grab the bait.

"They both are," he said coolly into the phone.

"Pardon me?"

"Honey, just listen to them. Watch them. They're both talking right out of their kishkies(guts)."

The next day I watched carefully. He was absolutely right. From their personal vantage points, their life experiences, their expectations, their roles, both were telling their stories with absolute sincerity. Unfortunately, the government panel hearing them was not there to resolve conflicts, it was there to determine who was right and who was wrong. **Laws, except in extreme cases, will not solve these issues, stories will.**

In moving from a point of impasse or hostility towards a commonly defined, gender equitable, work or learning environment, *storying the issue*, is one of the best models we have for building a cohesive, commonly defined, trusting work place. There are five primary steps, that when practiced regularly, can deliver enormous benefit.

1. Telling

Stories are not about facts. They are about truths, personal truths. In many situations, facts go unchanged from one version of the same story to the next, but we know that any two people living through the same literal facts will experience them differently. Go ahead, ask your siblings if you weathered the same childhood! Telling stories is a way of inviting someone, unthreatened, into your world to share your perceptions, hopes and fears. **If the only stories we ever tell and hear are our own, then they will be the only reality, the only sensibility, the only truth, we ever function out of.**

Thomas and Hill each told their own stories. Clarence Thomas, a man in literal and physical control of his world, can 'joke' easily with an office subordinate. His relationship to his world is not threatened, and he honestly doesn't understand how a simple reference to some sexual content in a TV show, could intimidate anyone else. Anita Hill, working to establish herself in a male dominated field, feels judged and subjugated, by her boss. Any comments not directly related to the work at hand, but especially ones with sexual content, leave her feeling vulnerable and uneasy. Shouldn't her boss realize this? Rather than having to defend their perceptions as the 'correct version' of what occurred, they would in this first stage freely and regularly *story their issues*. During this process participants are offered a finite amount of time to share their story about a specific incident or subject. The

sessions are ritualized, so that they occur on a regular basis and conform to a set guideline. Most important among these is that each person be allowed to tell their story (within the time allotted), without interruption or debate. Their story is their personal truth. In order that all parties feel safe throughout the process, confidentiality is a constant priority of these sessions.

2. Listening:

Stories allow us to enter into another's experience, unthreatened, and emerge with a new insight or vantage point outside of our own. When the teller begins 'Once upon a time' or 'When I was young' or 'The other day' we find ourselves sitting back, relaxed, willing to enter their world. We are welcomed to travel with the hero or heroine of the story. As they meet challenges, face hardships, discover their foibles, and emerge out the other side with a new knowledge or understanding, we are at their side. Imagine yourself listening to a news report on the radio. The analyst is quoting numerous facts and figures about deforestation, and you are reviewing your shopping list or thinking about your golf stroke. Then the victim of a flash flood begins to recount how her ancestral home was lifted by flood waters and your listening changes. This is the listening that allows us to identify with another's experience and their issues. The listening we embody needs to be open, unthreatened, and non judgmental. These conditions can exist only if we enter the sessions knowing that we will not be judged, confidentiality will be honored, and we are willing to accept one another's stories as their personal truth.

3. Hearing:

Now we take the time to retell one another's story. Without personal embellishments or editorializing we simply retell the tales we have just heard. Each story should be retold a number of times by different members of the *storying* group. The benefits of this process are many. In hearing the story you have told to yourself a million times, externalized, you often move from the victim stance to the authoring of your experience. You hear your ideas and images within a broader context. You explode the fear of being 'found out' to discover that your stories are not nearly as idiosyncratic as you might of thought. For the mirror tellers, living through someone else's experience, broadens their vantage point. Often a new empathy or understanding will create a bridge between them and the original teller.

Let us suppose that a secretary has just recounted an old story, about her boss:

"Mr. Wothrop always calls me 'his girl' or 'the girl.' I have mentioned my name to him numerous times in the last three years. 'Mr. Wothrop, it's Melanie, your secretarial assistant.' And with a huge laughing guffaw he'll ask 'Ah, what does my girl want?' One time I answered 'Your assistant, Melanie, Ms. Howard to you, wants to let you know that your 3 O'clock is here.'" He then said "Send her in, Ms Howard, my dear." He always has to have the last word, and that word reminds me that I'm a silly little female."

The story is now retold, as closely to original as possible, three times. Mr. Wothrop is one of the tellers. In turn he shares his story, which is also retold, by, among others, Melanie .

"When Ms Howard interviewed for the job as my secretary I was thrilled. She reminds me of my middle daughter, Kate, who left for college in Seattle a couple years ago. Kate was our little libber and from the time she was 12, she always reminded me that she wasn't my 'little girl', but my 'little woman.' I asked if Louisa May Alcott was her mother and she'd get fighting mad. Oh how my wife and both miss her. Katy kept us all on our toes that same way. Melanie was sent to me as Katie's conscience, I'm sure, and I relate to her more as a daughter than a secretary."

What happens as you hear your story retold is an amazing and powerful thing. In this case, after the second telling (prior to Paul's-her employers-tale) Melanie leapt up and said "Dear G-d, I sound like like a little girl, complaining away about my daddy!" For his part, Paul, laughed in recognition and noted that it felt safe to him to treat Melanie like his daughter, but that possibly he needed "a broader repertoire of communication skills." In any case they had a new, open, window to both their own and one another's experience.

4. Understanding:

Once you have heard your own tale told it is appropriate to take time and explore where our stories originated. Feelings, our old stories, only tell us about what we have experienced. They are not the best guides for lifting you into new ways of being. Here we take time to understand how and why our

old stories were constructed.

We all have very good reasons for viewing our world the way we do. The behaviors and attitudes we have adopted are a result of our experiences.

I hold dear a very old story that it is a man's world and I will never get an even break. This opinion is well grounded in a lifetime of experiences that support this stance. Go ahead, ask me for one of my stories. I'm more than ready to share them. For example, a couple years ago I was one of two guests on a widely listened to radio talk show. Our host that day is considered an enlightened, liberal, intellectual. The other storyteller and myself were there to promote our annual regional festival. Every time a call came in our host swiveled in his chair, looked meaningfully at my tall, male, colleague, and asked "Well, how would you respond to that?" After this happened 6 times in a row, I ventured a quick response to the question before the host could field it to my cohort. When I was done he said "Interesting," and turning to my colleague asked "but Mark, do you have anything to add?" I was never offered this same consideration. This is the type of sexism that drives women wildest. One can prove disproportionate pay for equal work. A lack of promotion when it is highly deserved is reasonably clear to everyone, and a big fat pinch on the butt leaves a mark, but this! I am never taken as seriously or listened to as carefully as my male co workers.

This 'host' like so many men who feel you aren't important enough to be reckoned with, never made eye contact with me. I knew if I'd have to pitch any idea in the gentlest possible way so as not to appear 'pushy.' I could go on ad nauseum plus How do you confront such subtle and complete sexism!

As you can see, I am on my horse, off and running.

Let's assume that this is the story I told, and then heard back from my peers in a *Storying* session. If I still want to define my experience by it then I must ask the question, what do I get by believing my version of this story? That's easy.

- It validates me as an authentic victim.
- I can feel self righteous and wronged.
- I have the culture to blame for my career failures.

- I have the culture to blame for my social failures.
- I have a wonderfully nasty story to tell about a well known personage.
- I can unite women around the we/they dichotomy.

These are great reasons to keep this story in my self descriptive repertoire. But, by doing so what have I lost? This list takes a little more thinking and a lot of honesty, but there is a benefit and cost to every stance we take.

What are my costs?

- By being in the victim role, I see myself as damaged.
- I cannot be an equal 'player' and simultaneously minimized by a 'sexist society.'
- If I am wronged and reacting then I've denied myself the opportunity to be proactive and reshape situations.
- If I can't blame rude, crude, socially and politically inept men for this situation, then a stew of unanswered questions opens up.
- If I don't acknowledge a we/they dichotomy then I must accept competition and collaboration in open field.

As I size up the plus and minus list, and think about myself as a working woman, do I want to keep this story in my repertoire? Do I want to limit my possibilities in the workplace?

When men go through this process they emerge with disturbingly similar conclusions. They might for any number of dearly held reasons minimize women in their jobs, pinch tooshies, or find themselves perpetrating the subtlest of sexist behaviors, by simply not bothering to make eye contact with the women at a given meeting, but the trade offs are enormous. Every story we hold dear in defining ourselves and our world can be measured on a cost/benefit basis. Our old stories often justify our biases and defend out personal style. They also keep us from hearing each others stories and creating a shared reality that could optimize communication and creativity. **If the costs outweigh the benefits, then it is time for a new story.**

5. Shaping A New Tale

Now we must ask ourselves, 'what do we want?' We begin with the issues at hand that emerged out of our stories. In building a new ones, shaped and shared by an entire team, an old personal story dissipates and a dialogue with vision is engendered.

Had my radio host, on that fateful day, and I engaged in this process, a number of things would have happened. I would have heard his story. We probably would have laughed about missed cues, protocol, 'pre existing conditions' and many other things. Most importantly we would paint a picture of what our next interview would be like:

He might offer: "I would share with you right away that you weren't my choice for this slot. The producer insisted."

I would build on it: "I would thank you for your honesty, and then tell you all the wonderful things I have to offer."

On we would go. Whether we ever met again is insignificant. What we did was to dispel our personal biases and create a shared reality, one much more pleasant to live in than either of our individual worlds.

Mr. Wothrop and Ms Howard would have the opportunity to create "The Perfect Morning."

"Maybe because I do remind you of your daughter, I really need to know that you see me as a competent adult."

"How would you like me to express that?"

"Could you call me Ms Howard?"

"Sure. Let's start our new story there, with me coming into the office and greeting you: 'Good morning Ms Howard.'"

"Good morning Mr. Wothrop. The letter you wanted is on your desk. Ms Barlow would like to see you when you have a minute, and your daughter Kate called. (with a grin) We had a lot to talk about."

Our work, our beings, our lives are intertwined. Far away from the cold, isolating model of having one narrow persona in the work place, *storying the issue*, helps us to understand, integrate and create anew from who we are.

What might the work place be like if during the natural passing of a year people took time to share their experiences, their vantage point, in a very personal, non threatening way that enabled others to identify with both them and their concerns? If everyone's story is their own truth, what happens when we listen to and hear each others? Is it possible that we move from a

well honed internal script towards an interchange that dispels old fears and reactions and offers a clean pallet to create the relationships we desire. We would not only avoid the hostile and costly litigious situation we are now in, but would also be creating new lines of communications that would imbue our workplace life with energy, creativity, and constant possibilities. We would be breathing new life into our lives.

Judith Black and her husband Michael Elkin lead trainings in *Storying the Issues* for business and educational institutions throughout the country. Judith is a full time storyteller and educator. A faculty member for Leslie College's Arts Institute, Judith's work has been featured on stages as diverse as The National Storytelling Festival, the Montreal Comedy, and Jerusalem's Hebrew University. Michael is a family therapist. He was declared a founder by the American Assoc. of Marriage and Family Therapists, conducts a thriving practice in New England as the director of The Center for Collaborative Solutions and is author of *Families Under the Influence*.

“Why didn’t you include me in the discussion?”

Chances are he would laugh and say I was overly sensitive, possibly a bit paranoid, that he had. Ask any woman who works in a predominantly male environment what she considers the most appalling form of sexual harassment and her answers will probably include these:

Women want to be honored for what they bring to any work or learning setting, and treated as equals in that place. The greatest form of sexual harassment is the subtlest and most difficult to quantify. It’s attitudinal, and often so deeply embedded that it is played out without the overt consent of the practitioner.

Now, we can spend centuries delving into each other’s psyches, and still not emerge into a more functional world. Our job is not analysis, but a recognition of what has been going on for each party, and the creation of a new, shared story. It is at this point we move on from what we have perceived, from our personal stories, to what we want. The question is proffered: What are our goals here, and how are those best achieved?

We can only imagine what might of resulted from this process had it been practiced in the law firm where Clarence Thomas and Anita Hill worked side by side. Had each of them been given the structure and freedom to tell their stories any number of things might of resulted. Since we are all the heroes of our own story, it infrequently happens that one party throws up their hands and cries out “Ach I was an insensitive, sexist, dog. Please teach me how to behave in an honorable fashion.” Equally unlikely would be “Ach, I was a paranoid, insecure, nut. All this time you were just being friendly and trying to help me feel at home. Please teach me how to ease up and joke.” More likely is the establishment of a window into each other’s worlds.

"So you really felt threatened when I talked about the pubic hair in the Coke bottle?"

"So, you really didn't think a thing about that conversation. It was so meaningless to you, you don't even remember it."

Margaret is in HR for a fortune 500 company. When it became her job to negotiate contracts with the companies largest labor union she was equal to the task. Labor law had been her specialty in law school, and after a number of years working her way through the ranks, she had a good understanding of each constituencies needs and positions. The day after she negotiated her first major contract, her supervisor brought her a bouquet of flowers. She was floored. Is that what he did for the man who preceded her in the position? When asked he said he was pleased and surprised at how well she was able to do her job. She was the first woman in the companies history to have this task. He felt a little hurt that she didn't accept his offering with demure thanks. She would have preferred a bonus.

Clarence Thomas is a highly educated man who is very sensitive to legal and illegal behaviors. Margaret's boss never for a second thought he was being inappropriate, or sexist. He was. All three of these men were behaving badly, and none of them purposefully. The only stories they ever heard about gender equity, shared in a non threatening environment, were their own. Without being the object of derision they each needed to hear the women's stories in a way that would allow them to identify with the tellers.

My husband, Michael Elkin (Family Therapist and author of Families Under the Influence) and I enter these settings and introduce the concept of 'storying out the solution.' Initially people get in touch with their story, often as an old complaint by this point in their lives.

"He tells me sexual jokes. Sexual jokes! I am never taken seriously here, plus I don't know if he expects 'more' from me."

"The work place needs to be broader, looser. If we can't talk like three

dimensional people, then we are doomed.”

“I am never given equal standing with my male counterparts. I was on this talk show and.....”

“I didn’t want her on the show. I wanted him and the sponsoring organization insisted I take her too. She was so pushy...”

“Flowers! My boss has no idea how to interact with me, so he gives me flowers when I close a big contract. The last time I asked for back up in a situation.....”

“Who could have guessed that one of the girls would have been able to cut a contract so quickly?. Are we doing golf on Saturday?”

This is both the most subtle and serious form of gender inequity. Gender inequity emerges from three sources. The first and most subtle and serious is out of a deep fiber embedded in the bulwark of our society, sexism. Women have been frozen out of positions of political and economic power for centuries. Men’s fears of dealing with women as equals often emerges as sexist behavior.

The second is simple sexuality. The male and female of the species hunt one another (or each other) out for sexual fulfillment. What is often considered ‘sexual harassment’ is a form of sexual play that precedes courtship. Animals sniff, we play. Sometimes it becomes inappropriate. The third is simply the results of a brain turning to shit. When one human being feels so insecure or has been so psychically injured that they must belittle another through their sexuality, then they need lots of therapy and a year long session with Miss Manners. Storytelling, listening, and hearing, can help in all three of these situations.

We then ask people to fictionalize their story. That is they change the names and often the species (never the sex) of the main characters, but maintain all the facts as they perceive them. They recreate the environment or culture in another time and place and retell the story as if it happened to someone else.

"In the high court of the Lord Percival, his head minister kept his own cabinet. This cabinet did all the work the Lord assigned to head minister. If the work was done well, the minister received praised and gifts that filtered down to the cabinet. If the work was inaccurate, shoddy, unimaginative, the minister would blame his cabinet and behead the person whose fault he perceived it was. Being a member of the cabinet was not an easy job. A young, bright, energetic, ambitious woman worked in the cabinet. Her name was Cleopatra. At the risk of her head she hoped to work hard and gain the attention of Lord Percival. Now, the head minister was a proud and haughty man who honored himself for choosing well his cabinet. he particularly liked Cleopatra, for not only did she have good ideas that he could claim were his own, she was a pleasure to look at. Young and comely he liked the way she made him feel, and would take time to socialize with her trying hard to recall tid bits from the court that she might find amusing so she would laugh and he could enjoy her ample bosom giggling with glee.

I teach for a college whose specialty is education and whose student body is represented primarily by women. Into a class walks a young man. Not any young man mind you, but a young man of muscled arm and small waste. A young man who exudes a physical vitality through his clear green eyes and smooth complexion, and vibrancy. A young man who.....yes, had our attention. When he spoke we listened. When he participated in the physical exercises we watched them a little more closely. When the material we were discussing moved into the area of sexuality we had a heightened sense of his presence. We are only human, we poor females, and a work of true art among the clay pots will get attention. Frankly if these juices that are raised ever become forbidden moisture, we should all hang it up and retire to southern Florida. An attraction, an energy, a primordial jolt is the stuff we are made of. What we do after acknowledging that jolt is what separates from the animal kingdom and maintains us in the realm of a healthy, equitable, work setting. I will proudly say that no one in my class of 20 graduate students made a comment to the young man about his physical appearance or the effect it had upon them. No one suggested that he engage in an after class activity with them based upon his looks. No one touched him inappropriately. No one weighted his opinion with greater or lesser regard because of his appearance. This is not to say we didn't want to. In so much as we did not, we allowed the head to reign our older instincts

in the name of a gender equitable learning environment. The trick is not to erase sexual attraction, but to acknowledge it, and place it where it needs to be for work and learning to take place.

Tell the story of how they found this particular job. Tell the story of the joys and difficulties they experience daily in this work. Tell the story of where they hope to go from this position. Upon hearing one another's stories, might not the two experience one another's vantage points and gain new insight, sensitivity, and adjusted behaviors when working together? If this feels like too broad an assumption, and more direction is needed, then these people are asked to tell each other's stories as if they were their own. Intervention would take a completely different tenor. Instead of rigid disciplinary actions or firings, the parties involved would then try on one another's experiences! Once you have walked in someone else's shoes, you understand how they got their calluses.

Na, don't think this is the right approach for this problem. This is a jolly good idea for human development and growth, but I instinctually think that a finer rather than broader brush is what is needed here. A brush that will enable us to see the little idiosyncracies that we share, that bind us. I want our explorations to draw us into each other's shoes instead of creating other worlds and other parables.)By creating arch types of the major characters you can focus on the primary characteristics that speak to you about that person and the behaviors that are most distinct. Though you will know that you have created a parable of your work environment, chances are that no one else will notice. Their stories will all be quite different. In creating the fairy tales parable you are forced to isolate the most significant characteristics you perceive about both yourself and the others in your environment. By painting with a broad rather than detailed brush there is no room for little explanations, apologies, footnotes about specific acts or comments. Yes you are retelling your story, but in changing its time and place and setting the characters as broad being you are taking the first step in not just reliving your experience, but processing it.

