

**THE TRAP OF FAMILIARITY:
Appreciating the Uniqueness of Those Who Are Similar to Us
By Susan O'Halloran**

Beth and Nancy came to my house for rehearsal. It was ten o'clock in the evening. We had each worked eight hours at our day jobs, then, in the evening, switched hats to become our professional storyteller selves. Now, we were meeting at my house to rehearse our collaborative storytelling performance *Mothers and Other Wild Women*. In five days we'd perform our ensemble piece for educators at their statewide conference. The last two evenings we'd rehearsed until one in the morning.

By the time I opened the door for Beth and Nancy, I was beyond tired and hungry. The only consolation was in knowing that my two cohorts would have had similar days. Yes, my day was not done; I would have to keep working but, at least, I'd be working with two people who *understood*. I wanted to sink into my bed but I'd settle for sinking into the familiarity and similarities that I shared with my two colleagues.

Beth and Nancy arrived with their takeout dinners and we spent the first half hour eating and going over logistics – costumes, sound system, travel arrangements. By the time the meeting portion of our rehearsal was over, our heads were resting on the dining room table atop crooked arms. We realized we were talking to each other sideways.

Beth told her story first. She was working on a tale about her mother who went back to graduate school at age fifty-two. Beth was practicing the part of the story where her mother finally received her PhD. Beth described a photograph taken of her mother at her graduation party.

Beth said, "There's Mom with her hood slung across her chest Miss America style, a drink in one hand and a poinsettia in the other."

When it came time to give Beth feedback, I told her that one of her images was confusing to me. "How can you sling a hood across your chest?" I asked. "Hoods go over your head."

"No, you know," Beth countered, "a hood. A PhD hood."

"What's a PhD hood?" I asked.

"You know," she said "it's like a stole. It's draped across your shoulders over your graduation gown."

"Oh, that thing!" I exclaimed. "I didn't know it was called a hood."

My brother and I had been the first in our family to go to college. Getting our bachelor degrees was milestone enough for our working class family. I had never been to a doctorate graduation. "I think maybe you better define the word for the audience," I told Beth. "In case there are others who don't get it."

"Okay. Thanks."

I begrudgingly stood up to practice my story next. *Moments of Grace* tells of taking my grown sons to Guatemala with a Catholic relief group. I got to a funny part in the story about a conversation with the Mother Superior of the convent where we were working. Beth managed to lift an arm and stop me. "What's a Mother Superior?" she asked.

"You know," I said. "The one who runs things."

"What do you mean?"

"She's the head nun. She's in charge, like the CEO of the convent."

“Oh. Oh. I get you. I think you better say that.”

I nodded but have to admit I was surprised. I knew Beth hadn't been raised in a formal religion, but hadn't most people seen movies such as *Sister Act* and, therefore, know something about how convents were structured? I guess not.

Nancy was last to run her story. She was telling a touching vignette about watching television with her father before he died. She made a reference to a cartoon animal of which Beth and I had never heard.

“You know,” she said, “from *Roadrunner*.”

Beth and I looked at each other and shrugged. We continually forget that Nancy is ten years younger than us. We were going to Saturday night dances when she was still absorbed in Saturday morning cartoons. I grew up on a whole different batch of cartoon animals and Beth grew up on a farm with real animals and no TV.

“I think you're going to have to drop the reference to the *Roadrunner* character or explain it,” we both told her.

Here's what I discovered: We are women. We are white. We are in similar professions. We had almost identical days. We keep thinking we're the same.

We are not.

The diversity amongst us is about so much more than race and gender. In our case, educational level, religion and age were just a few of the ways Beth, Nancy and I were different from one another.

As performers, we're lucky in a way: we *have* to think about multiple perspectives or else we lose our audiences. We get instant feedback if our assumptions and the events of our lives don't translate to others.

But how many times do we go through our day-to-day lives presuming that *our* way is everybody's way? How often do we think we're communicating when, in fact, we understand only a small portion of each other's references?

We don't only make assumptions about people who look different from us. We can forget that people with whom we work, study and seem to have everything in common have a richness of backgrounds and experiences as well.

If we want to create truly inclusive school environments, we'll all need to develop a willingness to let go the illusion of similarity and a readiness to be surprised by everyone.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- How often are you practicing Active Listening? i.e. peppering your conversations with your co-workers with questions to make sure you really understand them?
- How often do you explain the background or context of what you are saying? Do you appreciate that your experiences and perspectives are unique and not automatically understood by everyone?
- Often even positive words such as respect, contribution and teamwork (let alone words such as privacy, on time, motivation, etc.) can mean radically different things to different people. How often does your team take the time to make sure everyone is working from shared definitions?

- What did you take away from this story?
- What can you do to better "develop the habit of consciously communicating (speaking and actively listening) with everyone?"

Susan O'Halloran is a diversity speaker and professional story artist who uses powerful and engaging stories to grab her audiences. She is an author of four books plus diversity curriculums, CDs and films. *The Chicago Reader* says O'Halloran "has mastered the Irish art of telling stories that are funny and heart-wrenching at the same time." She can be found at: www.susanohalloran.com or by calling 1-866-997-8726. (Creative Commons License: This article may be reprinted when this full byline is used.)