

What I Encountered Within

“We are three orphans from Ethiopia. Today we are...” As the presenter read the story starter, my partner and I imagined how we would finish it. “We are three orphans from Ethiopia. Today we are rummaging for food in the streets of our village. We are hungry and scared.” As we finished that story starter and others like it, we felt sure that our impressions were an accurate example of the plight of others in the world.

The presenters, women involved in conflict resolution and peace education in Denmark, finished the story starters for us after we wrote our drafts. They put pictures up on a screen that in every case totally contradicted our perceptions. The orphans were healthy, smiling and playing in a field of teff, Ethiopia’s staple grain.

“Wow, were we wrong in our perceptions!” I exclaimed to my partner who is also from the USA. He was as embarrassed as I was at our obvious stereotypes. As I listened to the presenters, I realized that people from all over the world made the same mistakes and shared similar perceptions. This moment was life changing for me. For the next few years, I would explore perceptions and help others to see what I saw by doing this exercise repeatedly in my workshops. The stereotypes exist everywhere I go.

This incident was just one that touched my heart and soul during a hot summer week in 1995. I was scheduled to speak at the Fifth World Congress International Educators for Peace Conference in Vermont, U.S.A. At the time, I was “new” to public speaking and a beginner on my path to seeking insights and solutions to peace: peace in the world, peace in schools and most importantly, peace within myself. The greatest challenge and joy would not come from speaking, but rather would come from what I encountered within myself. The experience with the story starters was only the beginning.

At lunch, I sat at a table with people from France, Egypt, Canada, U.S.A., Africa, India, and Denmark. Lunch discussion brought out issues around the definition of violence. A woman from Canada looked at me and claimed, “You Americans define violence as a physical act, however, violence can be verbal and sometimes that is a far greater violence than fists and knives.” I was taken aback at her cutting accusation, naïve to the ways of the world. “Yes,” I agreed, “words can leave scars that last a lifetime.” Schools here, however, rarely address verbal violence. So, we rarely think in terms of words as violence. The raw vulnerability that I felt sitting at that table was uncomfortable.

The discussion turned to the workshop I had participated in earlier in the day. “‘Save the Children’ advertisements are one of the worst reinforcers of African stereotypes in the media. The ads infuriate me!” An elder African woman explained. “Why?” I asked, “Don’t those ads bring in money that helps African people?” Her answer was an emphatic, “Yes, but imagine if we focused on one of your American ghettos and put ads all over our country depicting it as representative all of America. How would you feel? Those ads promote the stereotypes that you saw this morning. We have beautiful places in Africa. Not all our children have distended bellies.” I listened humbled. Once again, feeling ignorant, but, at the same time immensely grateful for the opportunity to grow and learn.

Peace through open expression became delightful during the conference’s international dance. People gathered together with instruments and voices, people from all different cultures and world experiences. In this moment, their voices sang in unison

the words of folk songs of all nations. Music filled the air with a joyful intensity that I had never experienced.

Later, a world music-drumming group played several rhythms in the background. The sound of the beat vibrating through the air touched the souls of all in the room. So many of us danced together in the room, as one people, not knowing who's hand we took to swing and twirl, not caring what their ideology, politics or beliefs. In that moment, we were simply human beings dancing together to the beat of the music, some of us African, Indian, French, Danish, American, Egyptian, German, English, Spanish; human. The joy in my heart seemed to lift me off the floor. I was overcome with the experience and sought out Glen Hawkes, the conference organizer. When I found him, words burst from my heart, "Glen, thank you so much for organizing this conference. What a beautiful thing out there! People from all over the world dancing are together as one and it does NOT matter where they are from! At this moment in time, we are all simply human dancing to one beat." Glen looked at me smiling, "Your eyes are sparkling from deep within your soul. That is what this day is about."

My greatest challenge, then joy, came from what I encountered within myself during open expressions with people of other lands. This experience has touched my life continually reminding me of who we are at our core: humans capable of love and peace if we can carefully understand each other's experiences and create harmony through our cooperation.

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About the Author



Susan Fitzell is a nationally recognized speaker and author of several educational resource books. She has over two decades of experience with differentiated instruction, teaching youth with special needs, students with behavioral and anger management issues, and students who experience bullying. Susan's company, AIMHI Educational Programs, focuses on building caring school communities.

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