



Video Story Transcript

Mixing It Up

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Link to YouTube Video:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o0tFzT8E0I0>

Note : The following is a transcription of a spoken story performance and may not reflect textbook perfect English. It will guide you as you listen (or read) along.

Hi, I'm Laura Simms. And I got a phone call early one morning, from a junior high school principal. It was 20 years ago. And he said that there was racial tension in his school. Three gangs, battling every day in the schoolyard. "Sometimes it was extremely violent," he said. "There were Chinese, Latino, African-American gangs. Could I tell stories? And would that somehow bring them into dialogue?"

He wanted to know exactly what I was going to do and exactly what the outcomes were. So, I said, "Well, I have no idea about the outcome; I'd have to just be there. But I do know that listening is a kind of magic." He said he would think about it. Two days later, I was in the school.

And I entered the classroom, and it was a scene that I'm now very familiar with, there were kids sitting in three racially specific zones. Arms folded as if they had absolutely no emotions and a kind of weird, numb tension in the room. I sat in the front of the room. Nobody paid any actual attention to me but I started telling stories. And I told three stories, one after another. I told a story about growing up in Brooklyn with a Norwegian and African-American girlfriend. It was all about creativity, disobedience. I noticed that arms were kind of loosening. Then I told a West African story about girls and jealousy, power necklace. And people were leaning in. And then I told the third story, which is a story I love from Morocco. About a wild girl who has been so traumatized that she doesn't speak and how she becomes, through her story, a queen.

And there was a moment of silence and then a Chinese boy just blurted out, "Man, I know that story about the girls is true." I didn't have time to ask which story. He said, "My grandmother, my grandmother had a walk across China during the revolution. She sold her only gold bracelet for a bowl of rice."

Then a girl in the back said, "I sleep during my classes. You want to know why?"

I said, "Yeah, I do."

And she said, "I understand those girls in the necklace story. I like that."

I said, "Okay."

She said that, "I have 10 brothers and sisters. My youngest brother is retarded. It's my job to get up at 5 o'clock in the morning, dress everybody, feed the youngest. When I come home, I have to do homework with all of them. I put them to bed. I'm tired. That's why I sleep all day."

Everybody kind of giggled but it wasn't in criticism or making fun of her. It was some kind of a mutual understanding. I said, "Well, anybody else have a story? Does this remind you of anything? Did you like those stories?"

Somebody called out and said, "Hey, was that mud story true?"

I said, "99.5 percent." And they all laughed and then they went on to tell stories. And it was the first time they had listened to each other. And it was for me, the time I realized that when you hear each other's stories, you're not an assumed enemy anymore. You're a human being.

Bell rang, everybody got up. They kind of sauntered out. A couple of people touched me. Somebody shook my hand. Gave me like a fist hello/goodbye. Off they went. Second group came in. Same thing. Three zones. But then, half of the kids who'd been there earlier, wandered in and they sat on the windowsills, filled in empty seats. The three zones were not so clear anymore. I said, "What are you doing here?" You have to go to classes."

"These teachers, man, they don't care if we come in. We said, 'We like that story girl, can we go back?'"

So, I had a large crowd. I chose three different stories. Again, the conversation occurred. I told stories every day to all of them for three periods, three days. After that, we began to write in small groups. They wrote about their futures, what they wanted to be. One boy at one point looked around the room. He started laughing. He said, "Hey, we mixing it up now." And I knew what he meant.

The principal said to me, "Like how'd that happen?"

And I said, "You know, something I've really come to think about a lot and to say a lot? What's really happening here is that when you listen to a story, you're not really hearing about someone else, even if it's your personal story. When you hear the story, you become everything you imagine. So, that distance just dissolves like a wall of sand melting."

We were peacemaking. I never talked about the causes of their violence. I never spoke with them about the violence in the schoolyard. What we did, we shared our lives. It wasn't a common ground of what we had in common. It was the common ground of everyone having a story, and everyone listening, and everyone beginning to want each other to have the best future possible.

Months later, I went back to the school and I was walking down the hallway and, uh, actually, no one remembered my name, but they remembered the names of characters and the stories. They would say, "Hey, Magali! Hey, mud sister!" They didn't have to even thank me for me to know that they had uncovered inside of themselves what was always there...their joy. And by listening.

It's true that those violent gang battles in the schoolyard lessened. And that was the beginning of my work with kids in the schools. Understanding why I was telling stories.