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Gray Area Thinking™: Interacting with Transgender Persons and Other Diverse Humans

Everyone habitually categorizes and groups others who are “different” from “us,” which often lends to black and white thinking, as in “we” versus “them” or “good” versus “bad” or “American” versus “immigrant” and a host of other isolating labels. With this presentation, Ellen (Ellie) Krug offers a toolset—Gray Area Thinking™—for interacting with diverse humans in a mindful and compassionate way.

Because Ellie Krug has experienced what it means to move from one of “us” (as an ostensibly heterosexual Christian white male) to one of “them” (as a bisexual Buddhist transgender female), a component of this presentation relates to understanding transgender humans, who have become far more visible, and which is reflective of greater societal acceptance.

What does it mean to be “trans”? Is there a way of approaching transgender persons so they feel welcomed and accepted? Is it possible to adopt a way of thinking that benefits not only someone who is transgender but every other “different” (e.g. diverse) human?

1. First, how the deck is stacked toward Grouping and Labeling

- The concept of tribalism—insider vs. outsider.
- Neurobiology at work: Fight or Flight?
- Awareness that explicit bias and implicit bias exist despite our best wishes.
- The “Bystander Effect”—operating on cues from others.
- Humans want to do the right thing—hardwiring for empathy and compassion (or, how rats can teach us a thing or two!).
- Economic self-interest may be an element of the solution.
- The Identity Game—how self-labeling/categorizing drives humans.

2. Engaging in Gray Area Thinking™

- Societal/cultural biases for black-and-white thinking: good vs. bad; gay vs. straight; success vs. failure; rich vs. poor.
- Gender translated: **there's only** male or female, assigned at birth; the core belief that birth gender should be “forever.”

- In reality, many persons “live in the gray” relative to gender, sexuality, race, religion, careers, relationships, etc.
- Awareness that explicit bias, implicit bias, micro-inequities, micro-aggressions, and cultural competency/humility all exist.
- The difference between arrogance and curiosity.
- Remembering the Four Commonalities: (1) a desire for our children (or nieces or nephews) to succeed; (2) the need to be free of physical or emotional violence; (3) a desire for some measure of personal peace; and (4) the need to love and be loved.
- How the Four Commonalities form a basis for radically changing our fear-driven society to one that's more inclusive and accepting of all.
- Hallmarks of Gray Area Thinking™:
 - (a) Awareness of human vulnerability (or suffering);
 - (b) A willingness to take risks to soften or lessen another's vulnerability (or suffering);
 - (c) Compassion/kindness.
- Darnell Barton: The epitome of “Living in the Gray.”
- Day-to-day awareness, risk-taking, and the payoffs from compassion.
- Strangers, Weirdos, and “Those People”—the value of openness.
- A pitch for self-help and other groovy stuff: Gray Area Thinking™ works inward as well as outward!
- Remember ARC (Awareness, Risk-taking, Compassion/Kindness).

3. Inclusivity and Allyship

The 3 Levels of Inclusivity: Tolerance, Acceptance and “Party Host.”

“Ally” is an *identity*; “Allyship” is a *form of action*. Some suggested inclusivity and allyship actions:

- Get to know people's stories: “Tell me your story.” In the process, understand commonalities (and remember the Four Commonalities); this is how we learn to accept others.
- Create space for persons who live in the margins; don't allow for a thin margin for failure.
- No apples-to-apples treatment—SAT or ACT test scores don't tell the complete story; persons with privilege haven't learned poverty or marginalized life skillsets.
- Persons of color or from marginalized communities can't be on every committee; be an ally/engage in allyship in their place.
- Don't be afraid to speak up for a person: “Don't touch her hair” “Remember, he uses male pronouns now.”
- Understand that society easily utilizes double standards and ask why that has to be.
- The difference between “opinion” and “experience.”
- Don't assume that you know what everyone's experience is; it's true that society treats “different” persons “differently”; you can't get blisters unless you actually walk in another person's shoes (or vice versa).
- Allyship enriches those for whom you're speaking up and yourself. It's all about respectful empowerment in multiple ways.

- Sharing about commonalities not ground in race—children, survivorship (a parent's alcoholism or divorce) or a sibling's disability.
 - Share about the 3 Levels of Inclusivity (Tolerance, Acceptance and "Party Host").
 - A truly inclusive community is filled with Party Hosts!
 - Inclusivity must be a constant value; it requires a positive culture in the workplace and the community.
 - Writing a check to a cause is just not enough.
 - Don't laugh at someone's jokes or marginalizing—"Not cool."
4. Shutting Down Micro-Aggressions (aka Confronting Racism, Homophobia, Transphobia and other Marginalizing Behavior)
- Questioning: "I'm not sure what you mean by that statement (or question). Can you tell me more?" Or if it's a joke: "I don't understand the joke; can you break that down for me?"
 - Educating: "Actually, I just read an article that says quite the opposite" or "Really? I just read an online article (or saw on TV) that in fact the reality is....."
 - Empathetic Relating: "I wonder how it actually feels to be in her (his) (their) shoes."
 - Expressed Emotions: "I Statements" such as "I'm hurt by what you just said." Or, "I'm really rethinking our relationship (project, joint paper, party plans....) because of your statement."
 - Returning to it later/avoiding the Fight or Flight Emotion: "Two days ago you said in the staff lounge....."
 - Direct Approach: "Not cool dude. Not cool at all." (Ellie's favorite.)
5. Transgender Persons
- A society that enforces traditional gender roles.
 - "Gender correctors" and "Trans kids."
 - "Gender Identity" vs. "Gender Expression" vs. "Transitioning."
 - The question of being transgender as a "choice."
 - The highest incidence of suicide attempts, suicides, depression, addictive behaviors, homelessness and joblessness within the LGBTQ alphabet.
 - Trans people are legally protected in only 18 states (plus Washington, D.C.), which limits career and living options.
 - Fairly unique: transitioning genders is very public—more so than almost any other kind of life change/authenticity achievement.
 - Gender "transitioning" and the value of pronouns.
 - The concept of "passing." Passing isn't always important to the trans person but it may greatly influence those he/she interacts with (e.g. black and white thinking: "She sure doesn't look like a woman....").
 - Loss of privilege and learning the heart sting of discrimination.
 - Ellie becoming one of "them." (But not completely—she's still white.)
 - What can trans people teach about awareness, risk-taking, and self-compassion? And inclusivity?

- Double back: Gray Area Thinking™ applies to everyone, trans or not! It's even applicable to one's self...
- See also the accompanying Resources/Bibliography.

Personal Contact/Consulting Information

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Author, *Getting to Ellen: A Memoir about Love, Honesty and Gender Change* (2013)

Book website: www.gettingtoellen.com (Book available on Amazon, Kindle, etc.)

Twitter: @elliekrug (feel free to Follow me)

Facebook: Ellen Krug Minnesota (feel free to Friend me)

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Sign up for my newsletter, *The Ripple*, by clicking on "Newsletters/Media" at www.elliekrug.com

Many of my talks/presentations inspire others to live authentically no matter what the challenges or hurdles (e.g. cisgender people find meaning from my words, too!).

Nationwide consulting services include assisting employers with employee on-the-job gender transitions and on-site trainings relative to diversity/inclusion (Gray Area Thinking™), LGBTQ issues, and "Transgender 101" presentations. I'm also working to change the rural Midwest diversity/inclusion landscape with The C* Project presentations.

An open invitation: any human can contact me relative to gender or sexual identity or anything else related to the human condition. I'm a good listener and willing to meet with anyone in a public place or speak on the telephone for up to an hour. Please have compassion for yourself and for others!

Thank you. Remember the need for Gray Area Thinking™!

ellie

Encouraging open hearts and thriving human spirits



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Transgender-Related

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Resources (National and MN-based)

Suicide Prevention for LGBTQ youth (with an emphasis on trans youth): The Trevor Project (www.thetrevorproject.org); Trevor Lifeline 866-488-7386.

Human Rights Campaign suggested policies for transgender inclusion in the workplace: <http://www.hrc.org/resources/entry/transgender-inclusion-in-the-workplace-recommended-policies-and-practices> .

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Transparenthood: a Minnesota blog-based support group for parents of trans children. www.transparenthood.net. (612) 518-2238.

Couples in Transition. Peer-based, suburban Twin Cities support group for couples where one partner is transgender: <http://couplesintransition.org/> .

OutFront Minnesota: MN's largest LGBTQ advocacy group with a comprehensive list of trans-related resources: <http://outfront.org/resources#trans> .

Southeast Minnesota Transgender Support Group (SEMT): a peer-based transgender support group that meets biweekly in Rochester. <http://www.semt.info/> .

Bridge for Youth "So What if I Am?" Weekly support group for LGBTQ youth and frequent parent support meetings. Based in Minneapolis: <http://www.bridgeforyouth.org/find-help/support-groups/> . 24 hr. crisis number for youth or parents: (612) 377-8800.

RECLAIM. In Minneapolis; provides mental health support for "queer" and transgender youth: <http://www.reclaim-lgbtyouth.org/> . (612) 235-6743.

Other

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