



## **Sharing Personal Narratives: Listening and Talking from the Heart**

**Objective:** To understand different perspectives on a highly charged topic through respectful sharing of personal stories.

**Introduction:** This methodology was developed by Rabbi Justus Baird, Dean of the Auburn Seminary in Manhattan, and tested by two chapters of the Sisterhood in Princeton and Highland Park, NJ from September-December 2016.

Sisters share their personal experiences related to an issue and gain insight into the beliefs and values of sisters who may have a very different perspective. Consistent with Sisterhood values, the activity focuses on listening and understanding, rather than debating or trying to convince others to adopt a different point of view.

It is intended for Sisterhood chapters that have developed strong relationships marked by deep trust and respect, over the course of at least one year, and have expressed a desire to deepen their relationships by engaging in conversations that have the potential trigger strong or conflicting feelings.

Topics for this process might include: the Israeli/Palestinian conflict; racism; terrorism; modesty and dress; same-sex marriage or homosexuality; abortion; belief in God; feminism and patriarchy; body image; and group identities (am I an American first or a Jew/Muslim first?)

**Time Required:** 90-120 minutes

### **THE METHOD**

#### **At the meeting prior:**

1. Select a topic as a departure point for personal stories. Since not everyone will have a personal story on the topic, the issue should be generalized (e.g. "women's roles in our faith communities vs. patriarchy). Related stories are welcomed.
2. Select a moderator from the group. Helpful moderator skills include the ability to: (a) listen deeply; (b) keep track of time; (c) help group stay focused on personal experiences; and, (d) manage group discussion so all members are heard.

## At the meeting:

1. The Moderator role is to:
  - a. Place two chairs in the center of the room for a storyteller/ listener pair, with the remaining chairs in an outer circle. The moderator also places a “pressure valve” object in the center of the circle (e.g. stone, feather).
  - b. Explain the activity objective to the group and remind them of the topic.
  - c. Invite someone to be the first storyteller and asks someone from the other faith group to be the active listener. (A Jewish member listens to a Muslim member’s story, and a Muslim member listens to a Jewish member’s story.)
  - d. Ask the storyteller to share her personal experiences related to the topic (2-3 minutes). It’s important to clearly state that the purpose is to share specific incidents in her life, not to expound upon her views of “right or wrong”. For example, if the topic is homosexuality, encourage the storyteller to focus on her experiences interacting with LGBTQ people, her feelings talking about homosexuality, and how her life experiences have shaped her views.
  - e. Invite the listener to give a brief summary of the story, and then complete the sentence, “Given what I’ve heard, I imagine you might have felt \_\_\_\_\_,” completing the sentence with a short list of feelings or emotions. “Do I have that right?”
  - f. Invite the storyteller to respond to the listener’s summary.
  - g. Invite up to three members of the group to share a moment in the story that they connected with most. “I connected most with the part in your story when.... because....” These validating responses should be focused on connecting with the story and not on making a point or counterpoint.
  - h. Explain that if anyone in the group is feeling too uncomfortable to continue, she may choose to pick up the “pressure valve” object or leave the room. In such a moment, the moderator should pause the process, invite reflection and support, and discern the best path forward. That path might include waiting for a few minutes for one or more people to process, asking for a member of the group to sit with the person who is unable to continue, or ending the process altogether.
  - i. Invite another storyteller/listener pair into the center of the circle to repeat the process. Continue for as many pairs as time permits.

If there is time after everyone present has shared a story, the moderator may invite reflective discussion about what it was like to hear the stories. If there wasn’t time for everyone to participate as a speaker and listener pair, the moderator can ask if the group would like to stay later or continue the process at the next group meeting. If there is time and interest, the moderator may choose to share a personal narrative.

The Sisterhood thanks Rabbi Justus Baird, Dean of the Auburn Seminary in Manhattan for his guidance and wisdom developing this process.