

# Leaps

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*“Was Molly smarter than all the experts? No, she was just braver. The Administration’s exploitation of 9/11 created an environment in which it took a lot of courage to see and say the obvious... Molly had that courage; not enough others can say the same...”*

*“And it’s not over. ...Now, more than ever, we need people who will stand up against the follies and lies of the powerful. And Molly Ivins, who devoted her life to questioning authority, will be sorely missed.” - Paul Krugman in a column mourning the death of columnist Molly Ivins*

**O**n Monday morning, I barely stopped myself from standing on a table at a faculty meeting in an urban school and yelling, “Stop! Stop talking about the kids that way!”

The odds are if I had, I wouldn’t have been satisfied with the results. And yet, I still wonder. The picture replays in my head like a cartoon where my body stays seated listening to the discussion of how to control the kids with systemized and incrementally more serious punishments for infractions of dress code, being in the hallways without a pass and rude behavior, while my alter ego rises up to interrupt the direction of the discussion.

The next morning, in a more affluent school a few miles outside the city boundaries, I walked through the hallways surrounded by kids enjoying freedom of movement, choice of clothing, joking around with each other and with their teachers. The cartoon replayed in my head, this time with more specific questions: Why are the kids in the affluent school met with words and behaviors that release and empower them while the poor kids and kids of color are met with demands for compliance and control? What adult beliefs and perspectives support this disparity?

Over the past year, as we have pushed ourselves harder to think, talk and act around issues of equity, I have been disturbed. I have listened and heard more. My own story bubbled up, and my capacity to keep my mouth shut, never great to

begin with, diminished.

Yet, what stops me from leaping onto tables and yelling, “Stop it!” when I see inequities? I question myself as a coach and facilitator in new ways, not sure if I can trust my old instincts. Am I quiet or tactful to keep myself safe? Am I saying something offensive or naïve? Who am I to facilitate this learning unless I am taking the same risks into unknown territories, not only on my own, but with this community?

I don’t often have the luxury of days set aside for “trainings,” or workshops to build new aware-

ness through carefully crafted experiences. Rather, my work has to occur in real time in classrooms and hallways and committee meetings. I have to find ways to insert questions, new perspectives that shed light on assumptions and name inequities in the moment. With these short chances at conversation, each

move has to count toward affecting instructional practice and relationships with students.

Once as a meeting was starting, a teacher with whom I was feeling some beginning alliance whispered to me, “Many of these kids are involved in gangs and drugs. We can’t compete with that.” I whispered back to him, “If we don’t do it in this school, who will? What will happen to them?” He looked at me in a way that I interpreted as, “You are naïve. You are not in the classroom with these kids.” I wondered what he did to cope with the horror of kids being just let go. I wanted to tell him stories of students and their teachers whose lives refuted his assumption. I suspected he could match me story for story, and I would not change his mind. My question was just a beginning for both of us.

I keep looking at how my beliefs about what actions are possible and right are influenced and limited by my own experience. My perceptions are colored by my Midwestern childhood in a school that was 100% Jewish kids with no Jewish teachers and no external acknowledgment ever

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Molly Ivins



Marjorie Larner

of our culture and difference from the mainstream society. Our parents unquestioningly came to the Christmas programs where we sang carols, including the German "O Tannenbaum," in those years not long after WWII, where some of the parents had survived German Concentration Camps.

In my family, if I squinted, I could almost imagine us as Dick, Jane and Sally, which gave me great satisfaction on top of the uneasiness that no matter how close we might come, we could never really match that American picture. We internalized the dominant view of our difference as partially shameful. We were very verbal people and yet something deep within us was silenced.

Maybe I'm overly sensitive about uniforms and hallway passes because of how stifled, controlled and bored I felt in school and how hard I took it when I got in trouble for noncompliance. School for me, to borrow the words of a colleague, was soul-crushing. I hear the opinions that what appear to me as harsh words and heartless authority might not appear that way to all kids. But I can't help it. I feel an unbearable tug to act every time I sense anyone is silenced. So for me the question is not about whether to act but about how.

When I am told that many of the rules in a high poverty school are in place in response to what the kids expect because of what they are used to in their home cultures, I need to ask someone how they know about these students' home cultures. I also want to ask why so many kids are in trouble all the time for infractions of these rules. I want to say, "It looks like you're picking and choosing what to lift and what to omit from your students' home culture, do you know enough to determine if you are picking and choosing what matters?"

Underlying these questions is my assumption that there are pieces in every culture that outsiders are not able to see, such as qualities of relationship, social and historical context, intonation, and so on, that make different customs and rules work. When I hear the generalizations about kids from particular races, cultures, socioeconomics, even regions of the

country, my instinct is to hold those assumptions as context to be filled in by the real people, and have them confirmed...or not.

I am exploring opportunities for interactions to help myself and everyone I work with really see and hear each other within the constraints of day-to-day school life. We don't have time to wait for in-service days or retreats to get started. Since it is only when we infuse this work into who we are and all we do that things will change for kids, I think we need to just do it. I need to just do it. If I question systems and practice or offer my opinion with a genuine desire to learn more about another person and about the experiences that have led to

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that person's practice, I hope I can convey a spirit of real dialogue. I rely on dispositions and habits established and reinforced through CFG experiences, especially in using protocols for Constructivist Listening, Making Meaning, and Descriptive Review. I am working on a hunch that when I speak my truth, really listen to the responses and explicitly hold clear guidelines for maintaining safety, we can become actual allies. Not just teachers and me but all of us – staff, students and parents.

I am not finding it easy. A principal at a school where I'm working said his bottom line is, "We have to take care of our kids at all costs." In a conversation with a couple of African-American parents, we shared a fear for our sons in the face of racism and anti-Semitism – and an uncertainty as to whether we should tell them the potential dangers they face so they would know how to protect themselves, or let them live unknowing and unafraid. And hope for the best.

If history is any indication, hoping for the best, being silent, is probably a risky way to go. And so, I am relieved to share in the drive to live our mission at NSRF – for the dissonance we create, for the urgency to rethink instructional practices, increase awareness of assumptions and develop tools to listen without defensiveness. And perhaps, sometimes, with women like Molly Ivins for inspiration, we do need to leap onto tables and yell. ■

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