

Inclusion:

*The Art
of
Story-Listening*

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Inclusion: *The Art of Story-Listening*



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Table of Contents

Our Trying Times.....	6
Warren Christian, Ph.D	
Forward.....	8
Dana Thompson Dorsey, Ph.D.	
Acknowledgements.....	10
Introduction.....	11
Derrick Drakeford, Ph.D.	
Purpose of the Book.....	14
Derrick Drakeford, Ph.D.	
Chapter 1: Background- The Art of Story-Listening.....	16
Derrick Drakeford, Ph.D.	

Let Your Life Story Create the Inclusive Space

Chapter 2: Derrick Drakeford's Autoethnography.....	20
Chapter 3: Elizabeth Oxford's Autoethnography.....	29
Chapter 4: Shane Morrison's Autoethnography.....	33
Chapter 5: Evingerlean Hudson's Autoethnography.....	39
Chapter 6: Akiba Byrd's Autoethnography.....	42
Chapter 7: Connie Omari's Autoethnography.....	45
Chapter 8: Chris Roush's Autoethnography.....	48

The Science of Life Stories

Chapter 09: The Calling Process: A Grounded Theory. A Life.....	53
Derrick Drakeford, Ph.D.	
•Chaplain Scott's Story.....	56
•The Process of Building Grounded Theory.....	63
•Conclusion.....	68

Chapter 10: The Dross of Gold: The Educational Politics of Whiteness in the American South	71
Derrick Drakeford, Ph.D.	
•Goals for this Study.....	77
•Reflections.....	81
•Closing Thoughts.....	88
Chapter 11: Sankofa “Go Back and Get it”: HBCU Presidents and Social Entrepreneurship	97
Derrick Drakeford, Ph.D.	
•Type of Institution attended by Eminent Black Entrepreneurs.....	100
•The Silver Rights Movement.....	102
•Research Questions.....	103
•Five Guidelines for a Sankofa Approach.....	109

Confession Leads to Healing

Chapter 12: Conclusion: “I Failed” : Overcoming the Subconscious	115
Derrick Drakeford, Ph.D.	
• My lesson.....	116
• This Book’s Lesson.....	117
• In Closing (Live in Peace).....	118

Inclusion Training Activities

Chapter 13: Activity #1 Finding Your Purpose	121
Chapter 14: Activity #2 Family History	122
Chapter 15: Activity #3 Affinity-Identity.....	123
Chapter 16: Activity #4 Autoethnography.....	124
Chapter 17: Activity #5 Children’s Affinity-Identity (Ages 4 and up)	125
Chapter 18: Activity #6 Positionality Analysis.....	126
Chapter 19: Activity #7 The Five Dysfunctions of a Team Skit.....	127
Chapter 20: Activity #8 Life’s Calling Vision Board	128
Chapter 21: Activity #9 Harvard Implicit Bias Test.....	129
Chapter 22: Activity #10 Myers Briggs Personality Type.....	130

Inclusion: *The Art of Story-Listening*

Our Trying Times

The resurgence of overt white supremacy exemplified by the 2017 white riot in Charlottesville, Virginia was disheartening to those who imagined that the United States has continued, however slowly, on a path towards greater racial equality. Even while less overt forms of systemic and institutional racism have continued, one could be forgiven for hoping that as a country we had outgrown the more overt forms of racial violence typified by lynching. The resurgence of the KKK, neo-Nazis, and Nazis and the public emergence of the white supremacist alt-right call into question whether we can even claim that racism has at least become less overt and violent. The Movement for Black Lives implores that we recognize that the violence against black bodies has not subsided but, rather, has been formalized and continues to be sponsored by the state. The election to president of a man who continually questioned the legitimacy of the first African American president and publicly campaigned for five black men, the Central Park Five, to be executed for a crime for which they were falsely accused further show that we have not come as far as we may have hoped.

On a broader scale, the already inadequate social safety net is threatened. This displays an acceptance of the idea that not everyone deserves to enjoy adequate food, shelter, or health care. Recent gains for the LGBTQ community are threatened. Immigrant families are at great risk of being torn apart. Islamophobia has become a pillar of foreign and domestic policy. All of this is concerning to say the least. How does one go about changing this, or more simply, how does one survive, or even thrive, in such circumstances? In *Inclusion: The Art of Story-Listening*, Derrick Drakeford offers a possible answer: empathy.

While formal racial segregation has been outlawed for over 60 years and been nominally enforced for over 45 years, social segregation is still quite common. In a society that is still so segregated, *Inclusion* offers that radical story-listening can provide a bridge to empathy. When we read a novel or listen to a story we do not find the character most similar to ourselves and identify with them; instead we, generally, identify with the main character no matter how different they may be from ourselves. The autoethnographies collected herein provide a chance to empathize with those who are different from ourselves. While we can never fully understand the experiences of others or contemplate the discrimination

and subjugation of those different from us, this book provides the opportunity to learn more and to practice the skill of empathy. This book is important because in addition to the overt displays of white supremacy exemplified in Charlottesville, and the systematic racism that sees more money and resources funneled to whiter schools and more severe punishments for people of color, there also exist the more banal everyday forms of racism and discrimination that wear on those who bear their brunt. Whether it's a bag held extra tight as another approaches or a rude exchange at a counter, we often allow implicit biases against others to guide our actions. This book gives us a chance to contemplate how we may be complicit in forms of oppression, even implicitly, and what we might do personally to combat forms of oppression. Lastly, this book is important because it dares us to listen closely, to others and to ourselves, to orchestrate harmony where there once was discord.



Warren Christian, Ph.D.

Warren is an English Language Specialist at the University of North Carolina at Chapel-Hill. Warren is the co-author of “The Monuments Must Go” featured on *Democracy Now!*

Forward

W. E. B. Du Bois' proposition, or some would say, premonition that "the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line" written in his renowned 1903 book *Souls of Black Folk* and introduced at the annual meeting of the American Negro Academy in 1900 remains one of the most commonly cited statements in history. One of the reasons it is quoted so often is because the passage was written in a classic literary masterpiece, but another and more disturbing reason is that Du Bois' proposition poignantly illustrates an enduring disease that continues to infect American society even in the 21st century – racial division.

The book *Inclusion: The Art of Story-Listening* may become a literary work of art in its own right because it offers readers and willing story-listeners an opportunity to tear down the racial walls that has long separated us and cross the color-line. Each chapter in this auto-ethnographical journey chronicles an individual's personal or professional encounters with racism, race-consciousness, and/or racial courage. The stories are an emotional, yet hopeful ride through the good, bad and ugly of the racial divide in this country. The introduction to the book takes us back to President Barack Obama's final address to the American people in January 2017, in which he warned us that "Race remains a potent and often divisive force in our society." In that farewell speech, President Obama explained that prejudice and racism permeate every part of society, but they can be overcome by simply paying attention and listening to each other's stories. He even goes as far as to quote the famous fictional character, Atticus Finch, from the book *To Kill a Mockingbird* who wisely stated, "You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view, until you climb into his skin and walk around in it." *Inclusion: The Art of Story-Listening* is written with such candor, transparency and vulnerability that it directly places you in the shoes of each author, so that you cannot help but to walk through each thoughtfully shared experience.

The authors courageously challenge the reader to be more introspective and to deeply investigate one's own attitudes, beliefs, and experiences about race and racism. While the stories in *The Art of Story-Listening* are a formidable glimpse into the lives of each author that helps others see the

world through their eyes, they also urge us to tell our own stories, particularly if you have personally experienced racial oppression. Richard Delgado, one of the founding fathers of Critical Race Theory, noted that stories about oppression, about victimization, and about one's own brutalization lead to healing and liberation. This book dares us to heal thyself by pushing pass prejudice and crossing racial barriers to tell our stories and listen to other's. We are encouraged to stop internalizing oppression and the negative effects of racism, but instead to own our experiences by sharing our stories. If you want to be a part of the solution – and not the problem – to the color-line in the 21st century, this book will show you how the art of storytelling and listening may be your way to racial inclusion and freedom.



Dana Thompson Dorsey, J.D, Ph.D.

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-Derrick

Introduction

On a blustery night in Chicago, January 10th 2017, President Barack Obama tearfully delivered his farewell address. On this day, it was his last official opportunity to speak to the most pressing issues that defer the dream of America. His past eight years provide a unique perch to see the nation and world like no other person alive. The wisdom of eight years was packed into a 45-minute speech. In these final 45 minutes, the President highlighted three pressing threats to American democracy:

- 1) “Economic opportunity,”
- 2) “Race relations and division,” and
- 3) “Taking democracy for granted”

Sandwiched in between the macro issues of economics and democracy was the issue of ‘race.’ I’ve included a portion of his speech to help us see, from his presidential view, the issue of ‘racism’ and its solution at this time in history. President Obama prescribes, what I call “the art of story-listening” as the best solution to racism in America.

President Obama’s statement on race:

There’s a second threat to our democracy. And this one is as old as our nation itself. After my election there was talk of a post-racial America. And such a vision, however well intended, was never realistic. Race remains a potent and often divisive force in our society.

Now I’ve lived long enough to know that race relations are better than they were 10 or 20 or 30 years ago, no matter what some folks say. You can see it not just in statistics. You see it in the attitudes of young Americans across the political spectrum. But we’re not where we need to be. And all of us have more work to do.

If every economic issue is framed as a struggle between a hardworking white middle class and an undeserving minority, then workers of all shades are going to be left fighting for scraps while the wealthy withdraw further into their private enclaves. If we’re unwilling to invest in the children of immigrants, just because they don’t look like us, we will diminish the prospects of our own children — because those brown kids will represent a larger and larger share of America’s workforce.

And we have shown that our economy doesn't have to be a zero-sum game. Last year, incomes rose for all races, all age groups, for men and for women. So if we're going to be serious about race going forward, we need to uphold laws against discrimination — in hiring, and in housing, and in education, and in the criminal justice system.

That is what our Constitution and highest ideals require. But laws alone won't be enough. Hearts must change. It won't change overnight. Social attitudes oftentimes take generations to change. But if our democracy is to work the way it should in this increasingly diverse nation, then each one of us need to try to heed the advice of a great character in American fiction, Atticus Finch, who said "You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view, until you climb into his skin and walk around in it."

For blacks and other minority groups, that means tying our own very real struggles for justice to the challenges that a lot of people in this country face. Not only the refugee or the immigrant or the rural poor or the transgender American, but also the middle-aged white guy who from the outside may seem like he's got all the advantages, but has seen his world upended by economic, and cultural, and technological change.

We have to pay attention and [story]-listen.

For white Americans, it means acknowledging that the effects of slavery and Jim Crow didn't suddenly vanish in the '60s; that when minority groups voice discontent, they're not just engaging in reverse racism or practicing political correctness; when they wage peaceful protest, they're not demanding special treatment, but the equal treatment that our founders promised.

For native-born Americans, it means reminding ourselves that the stereotypes about immigrants today were said, almost word for word, about the Irish, and Italians, and Poles, who it was said were going to destroy the fundamental character of America. And as it turned out, America wasn't weakened by the presence of these newcomers; these newcomers embraced this nation's creed, and this nation was strengthened. So regardless of the station we occupy; we all have to try harder; we all have to start with the premise that each of our fellow citizens loves this country just as much as we do; that they value hard work and family just like we do; that their children are just as curious and hopeful and worthy of love as our own.

And that's not easy to do. For too many of us it's become safer to retreat into our

own bubbles, whether in our neighborhoods, or on college campuses, or places of worship, or especially our social media feeds, surrounded by people who look like us and share the same political outlook and never challenge our assumptions. In the rise of naked partisanship and increasing economic and regional stratification, the splintering of our media into a channel for every taste, all this makes this great sorting seem natural, even inevitable.

And increasingly we become so secure in our bubbles that we start accepting only information, whether it's true or not, that fits our opinions, instead of basing our opinions on the evidence that is out there (Obama, 2017).

Here, President Obama articulated how race is one of the three greatest threats to the democracy of the United States of America. The President ended his analysis saying, “if you are tired of arguing with strangers on the internet, try talking with one of them in real life.” This challenge to ‘talk to strangers’ implies that the ‘talking’ will be two-way, and part of that conversation will entail story-listening. We are challenged, now more than ever, to listen to people who experience the world differently than we do. We are challenged to talk to someone who may be ‘the other’ for us.

President Obama's challenge is to “presume a reservoir of goodness in other people.” In this book, our challenge for the reader is to take a risk and listen to the stories of people who may think vastly different from you. In this simple art of story-listening, you simultaneously create a new space of inclusion.

Purpose of the Book

“This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief”- 1 Timothy 1:15

As I read this scripture and contemplated on this book I came to understand that the solution to racism was also one of my greatest personal weaknesses, “listening.” If I could learn to empathically listen to the stories of others who look different and think differently then anyone could learn to do the same.

This book examines diversity, inclusion, and multiculturalism by taking a closer look at storytelling from the perspective of the listener. Here we use the research method of autoethnography (or life story telling) to better understand how to communicate and accept difference across race, culture, gender, ability, and identity. I have learned that the times in my life when I have failed at inclusion, patience, and empathic listening (Covey, 1989) have been the times when I did not eagerly listen to the stories of others.

My experience as a professor at both Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and Predominately White Institutions (PWIs) has taught me that each student and teacher brings to class a unique story. I have made it my job to care enough about each student to become eager to hear their life story and background. It is their story, which colors the ways in which they approach the class, the material, their classmates, and their instructor.

To become an inclusive instructor and leader, for me, has been the journey to become an expert story-listener. It is when I position my body, mind, and enthusiasm as an eager story-listener that I can become a more inclusive leader. An inclusive leader creates a space where story-listening is common, expected, and valued.

Story-listening is the antidote to prejudice. It makes sense. Webster’s dictionary defines prejudice as, “preconceived judgment without just grounds or before sufficient knowledge.” Prejudice is to pre-story tell onto someone else. It is to read our own life story, stereotypes, and experiences onto another person without ever asking them. Prejudice limits our ability to see others clearly.

Unfortunately, there is prejudice in the classroom, the boardroom, and the courtroom. It happens when we create a space where 'others' voices and ideas aren't heard, validated, and eagerly anticipated. It happens when arrogant professors (of whom I am chief) believe they are the only authority on a subject, and assume the false role of 'expert in charge.' This attitude of arrogance strips away the agency and individual authority of each student's privilege to intellectually disagree. For me, it is a daily struggle to forgo my storytelling, teaching, and professing to enter a space where we all can become story-listeners. This book is an effort to cultivate a mindset of inclusion and empower leaders to re-create this mindset through story-listening.

In Chapter 1, we set the stage by discussing the art of story-listening and examining the research method of autoethnography. In Chapters 2 through 8, we practice story-listening by reading the diverse stories of courageous co-contributors. In Chapters 9 through 11, we examine three academic articles which utilize life-stories to introduce; a) the new construct of '*dross education*,' b) a grounded theory on the process of finding one's *calling* in life, and c) a historical look at social entrepreneurship at HBCUs, and a prescription for liberal arts schools to create inclusion by cultivating social entrepreneurs who wrap entities around their positively constructed identities. In Chapter 12, "I Failed" I briefly walk the reader through one of my private failures on race to model self-reflection. In Chapters 13 through 22, we provide leaders and teachers practical inclusion training activities.

In summation, our book provides narratives, counter-narratives, academic research, and activities to better understand the *Art of Story-Listening* in theory and practice. The selected voices are former students, colleagues, and professors who share their stories and lessons on inclusion. It is our hope that this book helps your everyday practice in the craft of mindfulness and the art of story-listening.

Chapter 1: Background- The Art of Story Listening

In the book *The Intercultural Campus* by Greg Tanaka, the author describes his challenges as he tried to lead a group of college professors to embrace multiculturalism and change their courses to include more diverse content. Tanaka writes:

An attempt to conduct workshops in how to teach a diverse classroom met with partial success. One possible reason was that neither outside nor internal faculty consultants used the kind of “small group” format that was proving successful in the staff intercultural training workshops. Lecturing about what they considered “best practices,” some facilitators addressed the faculty only on an intellectual register and, as a result did not lead participants to investigate their own feelings, perspectives, or assumptions about diversity. With attendees “intellectualizing” their involvement rather than learning from each other through storytelling, there was less self-introspection concerning their own positions of power and their own rootedness. (Tanaka, 2007 p.139)

Here, Tanaka describes the difficulty of getting mentally dug-in intellectuals to change, their ways of thinking and listening. His research found that the staff and students (for a business this would be management and customers) who sat down together in small groups of four or five people and shared their life stories had more meaningful experiences.

Inclusion: The Art of Story-Listening creates a small-group, life, storytelling session. You will find humor, insight, faith, fear, shame, and love in these pages. Multiple people spent their time to think and feel deeply about their lives in the re-telling of these stories. We invite you to grab a cup of coffee or tea and sit down at our small group table to listen to the courageous authors as they spill their stories and lie bare their lives, naked before you. Then, we challenge you to do the same in your office or classroom. Share your story with others and develop a keen “ear” to hear more life stories. In the end, our hope is that you will begin to put into regular practice the art of story-listening.

The Art of Story-Listening

Art is expression. Every expression is unique and beautiful. Even in thick and dense forests, each tree is unique, and no two are exactly alike.

There is not a standard definition or procedural steps to explain the *Art of Story-Listening*. I believe it's a space that is created when a person genuinely cares about another human enough to listen to them.

The Art of Story-listening is a mindset that subconsciously tells you when you meet someone new or different, "I wonder what his or her story is?" or "I wonder what the story is behind this person." It is a mental eagerness to learn, not born of gossip or nosiness, but an eagerness to story-listen, which is born of love.

Stephen Covey's description of "empathic listening" is a tool for improving the *Art of Story-Listening*. Covey's research consisted of interviews with some of the most successful business leaders in the world. He found that one of the qualities that made these leaders so successful was their ability to genuinely listen to different types of people. In the book *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, Covey writes:

Empathic Listening

"Seek first to understand" involves a very deep shift in paradigm. We typically seek first to be understood. Most people do not listen with the intent to understand, they listen with the intent to reply. They're either speaking or preparing to speak. They're filtering everything through their own paradigms [or mental lens], reading their own autobiography into other people's lives. "Oh, I know exactly how you feel!", "I went through the very same thing. Let me tell you about my experience." (Covey, 1989 p.239)

Similar to Covey's description, a theology scholar, who was consulted in the preparation of this book, pointed to the scripture: "*be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry*" -James 1:19. I then asked myself this question, "Ok. It's clear that listening is important, but how can I improve my artistic expression of listening in a way that's personal, unique, and real?" I found the answer in an emerging research method called autoethnography (life-story research), which helps people articulate their life stories in ways that help others understand race, culture, oppression, power, etc.

Autoethnography (Life Storytelling) Approach

Life stories help readers with the understanding of processes, characteristics, people, context, links, multiple meanings, and cultural practices (Noblit, Flores, & Murillo, 2004). The thick and rich stories in

autoethnography research help readers to understand the multiple perspectives of complex racial problems. Since racism is one of the top three threats to democracy in the United States, it is important to add diverse points of view to the ways in which we perceive and conceptualize racism, diversity, and inclusion.

The use of the auto-ethnographic research method allows each co-contributor to delve into their own reality while using the widely respected qualitative research tenets of autobiography and ethnography (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2010).

Learn Auto-ethnography

A comprehensive overview of the autoethnography research method can be found in a work by Carolyn Ellis et. al. (2011), entitled *Autoethnography: An Overview*. In Chapter one Ellis writes “autoethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno).” Ellis explains that this approach challenges canonical ways of doing research and representing others as well as treats research as a political, socially-just, and socially-conscious act. The method of autoethnography is noted for providing an alternative venue for marginalized voices (Hayano, 1979).

Limitations

It is important to note that these stories cannot speak to the plethora of cultural nuances and battles of race, culture, and identity, which occur in many spaces in the United States and around the world. However, this intensive study of life stories is critical and adds to the body of discussion on race, diversity, and inclusion. This book does not seek to generalize these experiences as the normative example, but rather this book adds a layer of narrative to help understand the life sojourn of different people.