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THEMA

Verbinding

JULIANA TAFUR

Over luisteren naar
andersgezinden

**TABITHA VAN DEN
BERG EN CASPER
SCHOUTEN**

Diversiteit en inclusiviteit

**HARMANNA VAN
DALEN**

Verbindend in
wooncomplexen

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Interview with Juliana Tafur

Healing the divide: how to have courageous conversations

It is no secret that we live in extremely polarizing times, with hot-button political issues weaving their way into the fabric of every aspect of our lives and culture. Amidst all the noise, we all want to make sure our voice is heard. But how often do we stop to listen? Documentary filmmaker Juliana Tafur created an award-winning documentary called *List(e)n* where she invited people with opposing viewpoints on some of our most divisive issues – guns, abortion and immigration – to listen to each other.¹

BY TABITHA VAN DEN BERG PHOTOGRAPHS PRISCILLA YUILL



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The documentary *List(e)n* features participants whose personal lives deeply intertwine with the topics, including one of the survivors of the Parkland, Florida school shooting. As a member of the audience, you are invited to adjust your views and connect to people that may hold very opposing views to yourself, that you may find offensive or appalling at first. Since it was first released, the documentary has been a starting point for a much broader movement, called Listen Courageously. As a follow up, Tafur and her team designed a powerful empathy-inducing virtual workshop to help people identify their listening blocks and engage in heart-centred conversations leading to understanding in organizations around the globe. We asked Tafur how she started using filmmaking and asked her to expand on her work with listening, as a tool for equity-building and social justice.² Her experiences provide interesting insights on how dialogue on polarizing topics can be facilitated through the use of film. An interesting type of intervention to explore for mediators and ADR-professionals/conflict resolution.

You mention on your website you felt an urge to heal a divide that made you transition from a corporate career to pursue documentary making. What is the origin of that urge?

I am a Colombian American who has lived in Brazil and Egypt and married a Norwegian. My mixed identity and lived experiences, exposing me to different kinds of people, has made me strive for a world where we focus on what connects us, rather than any differences that seemingly divide us. My personal journey started when I moved to the US with my family at age fifteen, where we were granted political asylum. It was a tough experience, being taken out of my comfort zone, but it also opened my eyes. From a sheltered and even privileged place in Colombian society we arrived in a very mixed neighbourhood in Miami and I was faced with diversity all over.

How did moving to the US affect you?

I had to come to terms with my identity for the first time. I realized suddenly that there was such a thing as Latina, or Hispanic. In the US you



As announced in September 2021, Tafur was chosen as an Obama Scholar, amongst 24 emerging global leaders. She will act as a scholar resident at Columbia University's World Projects, an initiative devoted to creating tangible solutions for real-world issues.



would get surveys asking about your heritage. I suddenly had to self-categorize. I was never asked 'Are you white, of native descent, or African descent' in Colombia. It was so strange, because I never considered myself as Hispanic or even knew what being Hispanic actually meant. I believe that moving to the US and suddenly feeling like an outsider, is what started my fascination for what unites us as humans, rather than focusing on what divides us.

You went on to study journalism, what brought you to travel to Egypt?

When I was in college at Northwestern University, I enrolled in an exchange program and spent some time in Cairo. After the 9/11 attacks, I wanted to get a better grasp of what was happening in the Middle East. I was pursuing a degree in journalism with a double major in history and was deeply curious about Islam. I ended up tutoring refugees from all over Africa in English. I mostly connected to the Sudanese refugees, that were supposed to have rights by law, but in practice they did not. Their stories really impacted me, and a year later I returned to make a documentary in the slums of Cairo. Not without danger and perhaps a little naiveté, but I wanted to tell their story to the world. I realized I was quite similar to them. My family got political asylum in the US, which meant I didn't get an American passport but a travel document. And it also meant we couldn't return to Colombia for twelve years. We needed special permission to travel from one country to another, until eventually becoming US citizens. The difference between me and the African refugees I met in those slums in Cairo was that I landed in the US and was given an opportunity to create my own future. When asked what started my journey in documentaries, I return to that experience in Egypt, and I am taken back to those stories, that needed to be told.

You talk about having heart-centered conversations, beyond the categories people tend to apply to others. Can you tell us a little more about the methods you have developed to help people connect?

Stories are the most powerful medium we have to help others see us and understand our humanity. What separates us is mostly made up by games we play in our heads, or labels that we apply to ourselves or put onto others. When we

understand people's stories, what has shaped them, what they've gone through, someone that represents an 'issue' becomes 'a human'. I believe this is what will save us, in a polarized society – connecting to each other's humanity

What separates us is mostly made up by games we play in our head

again. But we need to stop, quiet down the noise in our minds and listen. The moment we stop and make time to connect and find the human behind the statistic or what they represent, we begin to care. This is one of our goals with Listen Courageously.

How does empathy or courageous listening lead to conflict resolution?

Quite frankly, I have not found anything else that works to reduce toxic polarization. It starts out with the intention. These difficult conversations do not just happen. We must be intentional about creating them. You simply cannot assume to know how someone else feels. When we facilitate a viewing of the film and workshop, we ask people to put their cultural programming aside for a moment, to be curious, and open yourself to the other person. It's helpful to think about what might trigger you and to not respond in defensiveness but respond to seek understanding. What has shaped someone's opinions? What has someone experienced to make them think a certain way? If you do that, you stop demonizing and hating that person.

So, if you see a person for who they really are, and connect to that person, you cannot return to the old opposing opinions of each other?

That is exactly what we found while making the film. We saw two out of the three dyads that we followed disagree yet validate each other's experiences. It seems like we forgot how to disagree with someone and still validate and respect the other person. *List(e)n* showed us that this is possible, and this is what we now inspire others to do through our workshops.

So, what did you set out to do, when finding people with opposing views for *List(e)n*?

During the first meeting we wanted them to talk about their issues and avoid the personal stories. This is what we see in the news, people focus on issues and opinions, almost exclusively. For the second meeting we wanted people to share their personal stories and talk about why the issue was so important to them, and they did so through painting. That is when we saw people transform and start to validate each other's experiences. The third meeting was facilitated through a letter writing exercise, that allowed the participants to express what they may have found to have in common and/or something they may now appreciate about the other person, who still holds a very different view from them. The audience watches this rollercoaster of emotions, throughout the encounters, and sees how it is possible to connect at a human level, when we stop, to listen.

What was the methodology behind the process? It was a social experiment, but what was the foundation underlying it?

Both my parents were psychologists, and I saw them as a young girl designing and running training programs, so the process in the documentary was very intuitive. I interviewed each participant thoroughly, to get to know them, and so I could pair them up. Going into it, I had an idea on how the encounters could potentially work out but allowed myself to learn along the way while filming. What I discovered was the power of empathic listening, in action, and realized it could really be a powerful tool for a larger discussion on how to connect across differences.

So, it started with a curious human, a fifteen-year-old girl who engaged in action research, feeling a pull, a need to tell a story that led to an award-winning documentary and a method to learn to listen and have courageous conversations. Who or what inspires you?

For the creation of the Listen Courageously workshop series, I was inspired by the listening research of Professor Graham Bodie, connected with my mentor Corine Jansen – who's from the Netherlands – and joined the International Listening Association (ILA). I got so involved in the ILA that I now serve on the board of directors. I also began cooperating with colleagues, who helped me create the work I now do, and became Listen Courageously facilitators - including Jennie Grau, Doak Bloss and Carlton Evans.

One of the things I learned from Professor Bodie, for example, is that it may feel extremely threatening to ask someone to stand in someone else's shoes; so, threatening that they avoid a conversation altogether. Connecting through a personal experience while standing 'in your own shoes' helps you to understand that you are your own person and that while you

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can try to empathize with what someone else might have gone through, you will never be them. So, then we explore the notion of inviting people to 'take off their shoes' when entering these difficult conversations, to put their own ideological ideas to the side for a moment, in order to approach these encounters with curiosity, and with a willingness to listen. In the workshops, we use an empathic listening framework I developed called the *L.O.V.E framework*: which stands for listen, observe, visualize and eliminate. It's a mental scan, that allows participants to recognize their listening blocks and be fully present in a conversation with someone that they may completely disagree with.

And now you have taken this project into the corporate world, academic institutions and non-profit organizations?

With a focus on diversity, equity and inclusion, the program has already positively impacted thousands of participants in leading corporations, community organizations and academic



institutions, such as Manulife, Acuity Brands, Northwestern's Kellogg School of Management, Ohio State University, Michigan State University, the United Nations Foundation Girl Up and Coca-Cola Scholars Foundation. To measure our impact, we survey people at the beginning of the first session, before seeing the film and participating, and then again at the very end. One of the questions is how willing and able people feel to engage in difficult conversations. Before watching the film, the average 'willingness' is less than 50 percent, and at the end of the sessions, the average 'willingness' goes up to more than 90 percent. Inspired by our work across our ideological differences, we have also centered the conversation around our identities, knowing that we have all experienced situations where we have felt less than someone else, because of our gender, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, race or cultural background. And when you recognize that feeling, then you can become an ally to those who are excluded on a daily basis because of who they are.

What's next?

This September I started a 9-month residency as one of the Obama Foundation Scholars at Columbia University's World Projects initiative. The Obama Foundation Scholars program granted 24 rising leaders from the United States and around the world who were already making a difference in their communities, the opportunity to take their work to the next level through an immersive curriculum that brings together academic, skills-based, and hands-on learning. I will be using my time as an Obama Scholar to continue to develop Listen Courageously's listening methodologies and programs, as well as officially launch Story Powerhouse, a professional and social development organization using film to cultivate understanding.³ Our hope is to continue creating spaces where people share stories, listen and learn strategies to cope with the times we're living in. At the forefront of the work is a deep desire to continue fostering human connection. ■

NOTES

1. *List(e)n* has been screened in film festivals across the United States, receiving awards from organizations such as the IndieFEST Film Awards, Accolade Global Film Awards, and ImpactDocs.
2. See the trailer and read more about the project via listencourageously.com.
3. To learn more about Story Powerhouse, visit story-powerhouse.com.