Gray Area Thinking™: Tools for Interacting with Diverse Humans

Everyone habitually categorizes and groups others who appear “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, I offer a toolset—Gray Area Thinking™—for interacting with diverse humans in a mindful and compassionate way.

Because I have 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), I have a far better idea of what discrimination feels like compared to when I lived as a high-earning white man. I also better understand what it’s like to be part of a community that is marginalized by society.

Finally, I believe that 99 percent of all humans want to do the right thing; it’s just that many of us don’t know what the right thing is or we’re afraid to take risks that involve interacting with people who are “different” from “us.” With this talk, I offer a way of getting past our fears to do the right thing.

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

   • The absence of a Human Owner’s Manual.
   • 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 grounded 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.)

Personal Contact/Consulting Information

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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 creating organizational diversity and inclusion plans, 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™!

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Encouraging open hearts and thriving human spirits