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MY TURN

■ Dmae Roberts



Finding community

For more than two years, I've served as a facilitator for the "Conversation Project," a series presented by Oregon Humanities, on the topic, "What Are You? Mixed Race and Interracial Families in Oregon's Past and Future."

The conversations have taken place with groups ranging from five to 35 people. The locations of the dialogues have mainly been in Portland, Beaverton, and Lake Oswego, but also further away, in Woodburn, Coos Bay, La Grande, and Pendleton. Most of the venues for the talks are community centers, classrooms, conference rooms of organizations, and once in someone's home. I've been lucky to be welcomed in communities I've never travelled to before, and I find it especially rewarding when families with children and teenagers attend.

I start each conversation talking about my personal story to help create a safe space for people to also tell their stories. There is much joy for me to be able to speak with people in Oregon about people of mixed race. Each event becomes fresh and enlightening. It's something I never got a chance to do when I was younger because people didn't understand much about multiracial identity. And honestly, we didn't really talk about race openly until the '90s.

At a recent "What Are You?" event, a young mixed-race woman spoke about her desire to be part of a mixed-race community. She expressed a feeling of isolation, a familiar emotion I've experienced in Oregon. She asked where she could find a community. "Where is it? I don't have a group of people like me." I suggested she start by finding a mixed-race group on social media or locating organizations and events that might draw mixed-race young people. I also recommended possibly staying in touch with some of the people she met at the talk. Yet her question stayed with me.

Though I know there can be restrictions as well as benefits to belonging, I've always envied people who are connected to social groups. For those who may not have one specific ethnic, racial, or religious identity, sometimes it's difficult to create bonds. Many people may fall on the outskirts of society. A hobby, sports, or an art form can also help people find kinship, but not everyone cares about being connected with others. My husband doesn't. And while I can be a hermit when I'm working on a

writing or radio project, I like the socialization of working in theatre. In my experience, many people tend to have a human need to be with others who share similar goals, dreams, missions, and experiences.

As a biracial Taiwanese American who grew up in a small Oregon town, my family was pretty isolated. In Japan, where I lived as a child, there seemed to be social acceptance, but not when our family came to America. We moved to a town that earlier had been settled by generations of Scandinavians. My family and I were outsiders — actually living on the margin of the main town. It wasn't until I went to college and became involved in predominantly white theatre productions that I felt connected artistically — but not racially. There were few if any biracial people around during my youth, except for my mom's friends. But I never seemed Asian enough to really fit in.

In my professional career, my focus on racial and cultural issues seemed to be tolerated by my radio and theatre colleagues. Later I learned to raise funds to create my own projects so I could hire other women and people of color. In the last decade or two, I have experienced acceptance by Asian-American groups and individuals. Yet I still feel like I'm considered white-passing by most white people, and I have to consciously reject the privilege of what that means. To this day, I continue to feel like I belong to the perimeter of many communities but not one single perfect one.

So I lead these conversations with diverse strangers. And after 90 minutes, we form a bond with each other simply by talking and listening. That's rewarding and inclusive. In this new social-media world, we may think we know each other, but in reality, we don't. That's not to say that Facebook friends aren't able to help you feel less alone, but it's even better when one can meet with people to form person-to-person connections in real life.

As we head into the holiday season and people look forward to (or dread!) family or friend gatherings, try this: actually listen to each other — especially when you disagree. Ask the person you're speaking with to do the same. If you're part of a group, ponder a few moments about how this feels. And if you see someone outside the circle who might like to take part in that community, try to include them.

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