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Check this out: 'Library' offers meetings of minds

By Nigel Alston | Local Columnist

Stereotypes are devices for saving a biased person the trouble of learning. -- Author Unknown

Theodore Zeldin's *Conversation, How Talk Can Change Our Lives* is a book I revisit often. I was prompted to do so recently after reading an article by Mark Rice-Oxley, "Borrow A Muslim? A 'Living Library' To Prick Stereotypes." That headline can stir up fearful images and feelings of rage, until you get behind the label to read the content. That's where a conversation could change your perception and aid in understanding.

"Conversation is, among other things, a mind-reading game and a puzzle," Zeldin writes. He likes conversation that catches fire, "... one which you start with a willingness to emerge a slightly different person." It takes you on "an adventure in which we agree to cook the world together and make it taste less bitter." That's the essence of the article. People check out people for a 30-minute conversation to challenge their own prejudices. The intention is to break down some of the perceptions a person has and to stop "judging the book by the cover."

The idea is the brainchild of Ronni Abergel, a Danish antiviolence campaigner, who has taken the Living Library to 12 countries. He believes that "We live in a time where we need dialogue. With dialogue comes understanding and with that comes tolerance." That's the mission of the Living Library: to promote understanding and tolerance through dialogue.

I like the concept and had an interesting dialogue with several friends. As you might imagine, many points of view were expressed; some were hesitant, though all thought it was a good idea. Some of the people they would "check out" and talk to include a Korean, a Jew, a homeless man, a liberal politician and a West Virginia coal miner.

"I really like this idea," Mike said. "Some areas I'd enjoy discovering more about would be the ones I feel would most have a negative impact on my current 'quality of life,' those areas that would possibly take me out of my comfort zone." He was honest, too, saying "Call it lazy, call it selfish, but my one ride on this earth I want to be comfortable."

At the same time he is open to greater understanding of others and welcomes the opportunity to grow and become a more caring and concerned human being.

So is another friend, who said, "I like to think I am open-minded enough to talk to people who could enlighten me about things that affect me personally and us collectively." She said, "I'd like to 'check out' Minister Louis Farrakhan. I think he's seen a lot, and he's been through so much in the name of Islam that I don't fully understand." She doesn't agree with him on everything he says, yet, thinks his perspective is worth hearing.

John would check out a Muslim. "Too often people don't take the time to understand other cultural points of view," he said. "They just make a judgment based on their own preconceived ideas. "I feel as if that person could give me tremendous perspective on the part of the world I

know very little about." Unfortunately, despite knowing little about Muslims, he dreads seeing a Middle Eastern person on an airplane, fearing that they all have ill intentions.

A young woman I know would be interested in speaking with a gay male in his early to mid-40s. "I would want to speak with him to get an understanding of when 'he knew' he was more attracted to men than women," she said. She would compare his story with her brother's. She took the news of her brother being gay hard and could not understand how a man could be attracted to another man. "This would be very eye opening to me," she said.

And Art wondered if "the minds of those in this community are open enough to hear and appreciate what the 'book' shares." He also questioned if "we will ever get to the point where a dialogue can take place that promotes understanding of the various patches that comprise the quilt of the culture or will it just reinforce prejudices already in place? We seem to embrace *E Pluribus Unum* (out of many -- one) but have our own individual ideas of how that one should look."

"Conversation is a meeting of minds with different memories and habits," says Zeldin. "When minds meet, they don't just exchange facts: they transform them, reshape them, draw different implications from them, engage in new trains of thought."

Whose mind would you like to meet?

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