

Learning Experience 4

What it Feels Like: Empathy

Purpose: To become aware of an alternative perspective
To recognize that "knowing how it feels" may be impossible

Rationale: When we avoid entering into the suffering and pain of others, we avoid human contact and relationship with others. Such an avoidance is contrary to the Jesus model of a life in solidarity with those who suffer. "Feeling with others" can be understood as that which makes us human. Empathy enables us to be feeling persons and to enter into the feelings of others.

Materials needed:
newsprint
markers
masking tape

Approximate time: 60-90 minutes

Teaching Process:

PART ONE

1. Introduce this experience by telling the participants that sometimes we use the word "imagination" in a derogatory manner, such as "He/She has a wild imagination." People who imagine things often are considered suspect. However, the word "imagine" means "the ability to confront and deal with reality by using the creative power of the mind." Tell the participants that the method of learning in this experience is one that may be common to some of them and unusual to others. In order more fully to appreciate the learning experience, participants are encouraged to relax. Tell them that you will be asking them to close their eyes; that you will be leading them in imagining a situation. Tell them that, after you tell the story, you will ask them to get in touch with their feelings and then to open their eyes. Ask if they have any questions about the process.

2. Ask participants to find a comfortable place in the room. Invite them to use floor space or an easy chair or to put their heads down on a table. They are to get comfortable. Provide time to "settle down."

3. Ask participants to close their eyes. Tell them to become aware of their breathing; to take several breaths that are deeper . . . and slower.

4. Tell them to imagine . . . (and then slowly read the following)

"As you wake up this morning, you stagger into the bathroom and look into the mirror. Your White face is reflected back and a slight pain comes across it. You try to get in touch with the source of this pain. Suddenly you remember when you were a child and moved from a place where only White people lived — a place where everybody was your friend, a place where your cousins and aunts and uncles lived. You moved to another town and you remember two events that happened.

