

Better Conversations

Part 4

Acknowledge other people's mistakes

<i>The Problem</i>	It's not just difficult to admit to our own mistakes; it's hard to acknowledge the mistakes of others. People often airbrush their stories to avoid this discomfort.
<i>The Premise</i>	<p>"I have a lot of stories from women's history," says storyteller Elizabeth Ellis. "And the people that we admire and respect were not perfect people. There are situations in those stories where you almost just want to shut your eyes really tight and flinch over how racist their behavior was, even though you admire them for what they accomplished."</p> <p>For a variety of reasons, history as it's told and taught tends to leave out these imperfections and flaws. Talking about mistakes and misdeeds can be uncomfortable. And it can be inconvenient when we're trying to celebrate a person's good deeds.</p> <p>"If you're going to tell stories from history, you end up having to deal with racism and sexism and the treatment of disabled people and children and other situations that are really difficult for modern listeners to hear," Ellis says. But it's important that people do hear them. Leaving out only inconvenient details compounds whatever harm was caused in the first place.</p>
<i>The Application</i>	It's easy to acknowledge flaws in people we don't like. It's much harder when the flawed person is someone we admire – a historical figure, a great actor, or someone we care about. We each have a personal calculus about how much a given transgression matters that's partly based on how we regard the person who made it. You don't have to explain that calculus or excuse mistakes; you simply need to acknowledge that they occurred.
<i>How It Works</i>	Many stories are complicated. When we oversimplify a story to make a point, it becomes a lie of omission. But, maybe worse, it's a disservice to the story itself. The complicated parts of a person or a story – the contradictions that are hard to resolve – are often the richest terrain to explore.

Find the full toolkit on the [More than One Story Resources](#) page.