



*More  
Than  
One  
Story*

The  
Toolkit

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# Better Conversations

## The 5 Core Strategies

<p><i>Strategy 1:</i></p> <p><i>Listen First</i></p>	<p>For a conversation to truly take place, someone needs to <i>listen</i>. Take a break from expressing yourself and truly engage with what other people say.</p> <p>Watch the video: <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1KMtbPo7o7c">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1KMtbPo7o7c</a></p>
<p><i>Strategy 2:</i></p> <p><i>Seek Multiple Perspectives</i></p>	<p>When we share stories, the goal isn't necessarily to arrive at an agreement. It is merely to co-exist in a moment and (hopefully) walk away from the experience feeling enriched. Learn how to see disagreement as a tool, not a barrier.</p> <p>Watch the video: <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=urD4vD_Pqbo">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=urD4vD_Pqbo</a></p>
<p><i>Strategy 3:</i></p> <p><i>Make Space</i></p>	<p>Making space – physical space and mental space – for conversation requires intention and care. Learn how to set the stage for success.</p> <p>Watch the video: <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZKzDhxPhz9Q">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZKzDhxPhz9Q</a></p>
<p><i>Strategy 4:</i></p> <p><i>Be Vulnerable</i></p>	<p>Making mistakes is a natural part of life. Don't let the fear of messing up keep you from connecting with others.</p> <p>Watch the video: <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BsqaP2Uy3y8">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BsqaP2Uy3y8</a></p>
<p><i>Strategy 5:</i></p> <p><i>See the Bigger Picture</i></p>	<p>Bad feelings should be the springboard for bigger, better things. Learn how to overcome negativity so that you can be civically and socially engaged.</p> <p>Watch the video: <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NtK7uw84TyQ">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NtK7uw84TyQ</a></p>

# Better Conversations

## Part 1

### Help Other People Listen

<i>The Problem</i>	It can be hard for people to pay attention to what you're saying for any number of reasons. How can you help whoever you're talking to feel more engaged in the conversation?
<i>The Premise</i>	Traditional storytellers (and politicians, protesters, and others) use call-and-response techniques to engage audiences of all ages. The interaction captures listeners' attention and transforms the group into a kind of temporary community. It's a great strategy, but it doesn't readily scale down; in one-on-one conversation or even with a small group of people, call and response would be weird.
<i>The Application</i>	<p>There are more subtle and conversational ways to elicit someone's interest. "If we're smart, we're always asking questions," says Reverend Robert Jones, a storyteller and musician. "We don't just tell you a story. We ask you things that give you an opportunity to give us feedback even when we know the answer."</p> <p>He recalls the example of asking a group of kids about the name of the children's game Telephone. "When I describe what a folk tale is to a kid, I'll say, 'It's kind of like a game that you guys played when you were little,'" he says. "I'm appealing to their sense of fifth-grade sophistication. 'What's that game called that you guys played when you were little where I whisper something in your ear then you whisper it in someone else's ear?'"</p> <p>"I know the answer before I ask it. But the important part is that I'm seeing if you're clicked into what I'm saying. I'm giving you a chance to participate in a story. It doesn't have to be a young audience."</p>
<i>How It Works</i>	As simple as it sounds, try asking a question the next time you're facing a difficult conversation. The content of the question doesn't matter, so long as it's relevant to the topic at hand. It could be the title of an old film, the year something happened, or the name of a politician. This tiny act of participation will set the stage for deeper collaboration.



# Better Conversations

## Part 2

### Use props

<i>The Problem</i>	Getting to know someone can be awkward. How can we make it easier to share our story with strangers?
<i>The Premise</i>	<p>Storyteller Lyn Ford often leads storytelling-based community outreach programs. For one of her favorite projects, she partnered seniors in assisted living facilities with high school students in “paired shares.”</p> <p>“We encourage stories with prompts. The older person will bring something to our circle and tell a story about it. One brought a beautiful painting, and one brought a small statue. One brought a hat that had all kinds of fishing hooks on it that had actually been her father’s.” The objects served as a kind of memory prompt as well as a point of material interest for the kids to connect to.</p> <p>“The young people gain an appreciation not just for people from a different generation, but also for circumstances that connect in some way to history,” Ford says. “And they realize that they have a history that they can share, too.”</p>
<i>The Application</i>	<p>Storyteller Antonio Rocha developed a program for kids that tells them about the world through souvenirs and artifacts he has collected during his travels.</p> <p>You might not have a collection like that, but you probably have some objects that help tell the story of who you are. It might be something you make and share with others, like a dish for a potluck or a recipe you write down. It might be something special, like a quilt your grandmother made for you, or something ordinary, like a photo on your phone.</p>
<i>How It Works</i>	Did your classroom have show & tell sessions when you were a kid? This follows the same principle. Some people find it difficult to talk about themselves – their histories, their families, and their points of view. Having a prop of some sort can give the speaker and the listener a third thing to focus on, which makes the exchange easier.

# Better Conversations

## Part 3

### Connect with humor

<i>The Problem</i>	Sometimes we're thrown into situations with people who find us unrelatable. Humor is one of our best tools for building a relationship in these awkward situations.
<i>The Premise</i>	<p>Storyteller Geraldine Buckley had several barriers to overcome when she started to teach workshops at a maximum-security men's prison. Chief among them was that the guys she was working with didn't find her relatable. She was a female pastor with a chirpy British accent. They were not.</p> <p>One day, when three of the prisoners were complaining in her office, she saw the opportunity to make herself more relatable.</p> <p>"They were going on about how I have no idea," she recalls. "<i>You have no idea how humiliating it is for us when we have to go and see our family. We have to be strip-searched.</i>" Well, Buckley had just the story for them: the time she was cavity searched by police at a Spanish airport during a bout of catastrophic food poisoning. It's a romp, as you can imagine.</p> <p>"I tell you, we bonded after that," Buckley says. "When you tell stories, you see that other people are terribly similar to you underneath." Sometimes literally.</p>
<i>The Application</i>	"Laughing together is a unifying experience," says storyteller Elizabeth Ellis. "The more people laugh together, the more they feel like one people. They put aside their differences. They suddenly have a shared history." This is true of an audience as much as it's true of two people in conversation.
<i>How It Works</i>	A little humor, especially self-deprecating humor, goes a long way. A willingness to laugh at yourself is a form of vulnerability, so it helps deepen a relationship quickly.



# Better Conversations

## Part 4

### Acknowledge other people's mistakes

#### *The Problem*

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.

#### *The Premise*

"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."

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.

"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.

#### *The Application*

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.

#### *How It Works*

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.

# Better Conversations

## Part 5

### Avoid labels

<i>The Problem</i>	Stereotypes are conversation stoppers. How can we talk about stigmatizing subjects without prompting bias and prejudice?
<i>The Premise</i>	<p>“My son is dead,” says storyteller Elizabeth Ellis. “I tell stories about him that make him real to [listeners] in all his complexity. When I begin, they see him as a brother, as a son, as an uncle, as a good friend, before I begin introducing the concept that he’s mentally ill.</p> <p>“I don’t give it labels, because labels have the tendency to shut the door in people’s faces. I just lead them to understand that he was, at times, a very hard person to love. That I have learned a great deal from having him in my life. And that some if it is stuff I wish I didn’t have to know. I think in hearing these stories, it opens people up to be more empathetic and more understanding of people who are different in whatever way.”</p> <p>Ellis once noticed that her colleague Donald Davis uses a similar technique of delaying information in a story he tells about a beloved neighbor who died of AIDS. “If he had made it known that the man had AIDS at the beginning of the story, a lot of people would withdraw,” she says. “They would hold themselves against developing any warmth or feeling toward that man.” Sometimes bringing someone along is simply a matter of timing.</p>
<i>The Application</i>	We live in a media environment that leads with provocation and controversy. A headline can make a reader decide how they feel about a story before they know any details. In conversation and relationship building, we want to achieve the opposite. We want to provide as much information as possible before a person makes up their mind.
<i>How It Works</i>	Stigma is real, but it’s not immutable. The way we create change is by helping people see past divisive labels. Timing is a surprisingly effective way to help people transcend their bias.

# REFLECTION GUIDE



## “THE LIFE OF LANGSTON HIGH SCHOOL”

Click the title to watch the video.

### CONSIDER

- Why do you think that administrators chose to close Langston High School instead of integrating it?
- The motto at Langston School was “Enter to Learn, Depart to Serve.” What does that mean to you?
- What was lost when Langston High School was closed? What was gained?
- How does the tone of the story shift as it’s told?

### DIG DEEPER: RESOURCES FOR MORE INFORMATION

#### “History’s Smallest Soldiers”

Leona Tate, Gail Etienne, and Tessie Prevost were just six years old in 1960, when they were escorted by U.S. marshals into their new elementary school. In 2022, the International Storytelling Center hosted the “McDonogh Three” and Tessie’s mother, Dorothy Prevost, to discuss their experiences on the front lines of desegregation in the deep South.

#### “Black, Appalachian, and Educated: The Living Legacies of African American Schools”

Watch an International Storytelling Center-produced documentary about the history of education in the South.

#### “Stories for Change”

In 2022–23, the International Storytelling Center partnered with Langston Centre to produce free workshops and after-school enrichment programming for kids. Learn more about the initiative, which was one of ISC’s community outreach programs.



# EDUCATORS' GUIDE

## “THE LIFE OF LANGSTON HIGH SCHOOL”



Click the title to watch the video.

### COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

- What is the difference between desegregation and integration?
- What happened to the Langston High School staff when the facility closed?
- What happened to the Langston High School students when they transferred to Science Hill High School?
- What happened to the Langston High School campus after it closed?

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Why do you think administrators chose to close Langston High School instead of integrating it?
- The motto at Langston School was “Enter to Learn, Depart to Serve.” What does that motto mean to you?
- What did you know about desegregation before you heard this story? Did you learn anything new?
- What was lost when Langston High School closed? What was gained?

### ACTIVITY

L.C. and the Scarboro 85 did not experience violence during desegregation. But many of their peers in other places did. Ruby Bridges is a famous example. (If you don't know her story, take a few minutes to do some research.) Would you describe Ruby's experience as similar to L.C.'s? Or different? (You must take a side.) Write a paragraph or two to explain your answer.

### RESOURCES

- [“History's Smallest Soldiers”](#)  
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# REFLECTION GUIDE



## “THE SCARBORO 85”

Click the title to watch the video.

### CONSIDER

- The storyteller mentions a newspaper headline from 1955 — “Segregation Is Done” — implying that the declaration was premature. How do we decide when segregation ended in the United States?
- Describe the harm that L.C. experienced while he was in high school and the harm he experienced after graduation.
- Consider the statement, “Just because there is not violence, does not mean there is not great harm.” What is the difference between violence and harm?
- Have you ever been in a situation where you experienced harm, but not violence?

### DIG DEEPER: RESOURCES FOR MORE INFORMATION

#### “History’s Smallest Soldiers”

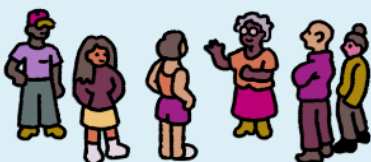
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#### “\$3.2M from state to be released after July 1 for Scarboro 85 Monument in Oak Ridge”

Learn more about the state of Tennessee’s plans for a monument to honor the Scarboro 85.

#### “The Secret in Scarboro: The Oak Ridge 85”

Oak Ridge, Tennessee, was a key site in the Manhattan Project during WWII. Its status as a “secret city” kept the story of the Scarboro 85 from being told for many years. Learn more about this important piece of national history.



# EDUCATORS’ GUIDE

## “THE SCARBORO 85”



Click the title to watch the video.

### COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

- When and where does the story take place?
- Who were the Scarboro 85?
- How was L.C. treated when he transferred to Oak Ridge High School?
- Who was Emmett Till? What did he and L.C. have in common?

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Consider the statement, “Just because there is not violence, does not mean there is not great harm.” What is the difference between violence and harm?
- What was lost when Langston High School closed? What was gained?
- Have you ever been to a place where you felt unwelcome?
- How can we help people feel welcome in places that are new to them?

### ACTIVITY

L.C. and the Scarboro 85 did not experience violence during desegregation. But many of their peers in other places did. Ruby Bridges is a famous example. (If you don’t know her story, take a few minutes to do some research.) Would you describe Ruby’s experience as similar to L.C.’s? Or different? (You must take a side.) Write a paragraph or two to explain your answer.

### RESOURCES

- [“History’s Smallest Soldiers”](#)  
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Learn more about the state of Tennessee’s plans for a monument to honor the Scarboro 85.

# REFLECTION GUIDE



## “THE EMANCIPATOR”

Click the title to watch the video.

### CONSIDER

- How did Elihu Embree’s personal life conflict with his professional accomplishments? Does one fact matter more than the other?
- How would you describe Elihu Embree’s legacy to someone else?
- Who do you empathize with in the story? Why?
- Were you surprised to learn that the first abolitionist periodical in the United States was published in Tennessee? Why or why not?
- How does the storyteller portray Elihu Embree’s relationship with his slaves?
- The process for creating historical markers varies from state to state. Why does it matter who writes the text on these plaques?

### DIG DEEPER: RESOURCES FOR MORE INFORMATION

#### The Emancipator

Explore Elihu Embree’s publication as a primary source, available in full online.

#### “Why Historical Markers Matter”

Smithsonian Magazine takes a close look at how historical markers are created in the United States.

#### “He Published the First Abolitionist Newspaper in America. He Was Also an Enslaver.”

Jonesborough-based historian Anne G’Fellers Mason breaks down Embree’s complex and self-contradictory story.

#### “Nancy: The Woman Who Inspired ‘The Emancipator’”

Anne G’Fellers Mason wrote a play about Nancy, one of the people who was enslaved by Embree. Learn more about Nancy’s contribution to the history of abolitionism.



# EDUCATORS' GUIDE

## “THE EMANCIPATOR”

Click the title to watch the video.



### COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

- When and where does the story take place?
- Who is Frames?
- What was The Emancipator?
- What is the story's central conflict?

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- In thinking about Elihu Embree's legacy, how does his personal life affect how you view his professional accomplishments? Does one fact matter more than the other?
- Who do you empathize with in the story?
- How does the storyteller portray Elihu Embree's relationship with his slaves?
- The process for creating historical markers varies from state to state. Why does it matter who writes the text on these plaques?

### ACTIVITY

Remind students of the text on the historic marker that discusses Elihu Embree:

#### FIRST ABOLITION PUBLICATIONS

On this site, in 1819–1820, were published *The Manumission Intelligencer* and *The Emancipator*. Edited and published by Elihu Embree and printed by Jacob Howard, these were the first periodicals in the United States devoted exclusively to the abolition of human slavery.

Ask students to write text for a new marker that includes information they learned from the story. It should be about the same length as the original text — under 50 words.

In small groups or as a class, ask students to share their texts and their opinions of the rewrites. Then discuss any challenges they encountered during the exercise.

### RESOURCES

- [The Emancipator](#)  
Explore Embree's publication as a primary source, available in full online.
- [“He Published the First Abolitionist Newspaper in America. He Was Also an Enslaver.”](#)  
Jonesborough-based historian Anne G'Fellers Mason breaks down Embree's complex and self-contradictory story.
- [“Why Historical Markers Matter”](#)  
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- [“Nancy: The Woman Who Inspired ‘The Emancipator’”](#)  
Anne G'Fellers Mason wrote a play to honor Nancy, one of the people who was enslaved by Embree. This article delves into Nancy's contribution to the history of abolitionism.