

COMMUNITIES THAT CARE



Sapna Agarwal

Artlink

From the beginning of March 2020 through to the present we have asked different artists and thinkers to respond to issues that were being unearthed as Covid-19 took its toll on our communities. Each writer was asked to respond to a simple brief that in some way related to their lived experience, providing the opportunity to open up these issues, to better understand what we could and should have in common.

I live in a house of book lovers. Our family business is a bookshop and the piles of books next to my bed never seem to get any smaller, despite reading constantly. All four of my children have similarly precarious stacks of books or comics close to where they sleep, threatening to topple onto them whilst dreaming. With the loosening of lockdown restrictions came the re-opening of (sadly few) libraries and excitement in the household grew in anticipation of flicking through books again, of coming home with heavy rucksacks full of finds and spending the next few days and weeks immersed in fictional worlds and landscapes. We took our first trip to the library two days after it opened, the first time in almost six months. The rain was relentless but we were undeterred knowing we'd be using our library cards at the end of our journey, and that the library radiators are always on too high so we'd dry off quickly.

But it didn't work out quite as we'd anticipated. Most of the local library staff were rude and unhelpful and some were downright aggressive to us. Why was it they wrinkled their noses as we approached, counting the children again and again, asking, incredulously, if we were a group of four or five? Was it the colour of our skin or the quantity of children that prompted such sighs and exasperation? Why did they feel the need to repeatedly shout orders and instructions at us? Was the assumption that I was stupid or maybe that I didn't understand English? Surely any visiting family should be worthy of civility.

On entering the children's section there were two, nice white families with a respectable one or two children each, spread out and relaxed. The parents didn't have face masks on and, as their children were browsing books they scrolled on their phones, with no-one appearing to observe or badger them to

stay in line.

Looking over our shoulders, conscious of being watched, we hastily made our book selections and tried to squeeze some enjoyment out of our time in the library. We endured another dose of hostility when checking the books out, though with some kind words from a librarian whom we have known for years. He seemed almost overly-friendly, perhaps trying to compensate for the behaviour of his colleagues. As we left we faced another blast of barked orders. Outside, the pissing rain felt more hospitable than the library, which we'd always considered a sanctuary.

As a family, we've spent most of this strange year engaging only with people we've chosen to meet up with. This has meant that our defences have been weakened as we haven't had to put up with the casual daily racism we usually face. But now that most unwelcome feeling of being unwelcome is back. Our eagerly anticipated trip to borrow books, a sharp reminder that, in order to have access to the world, we need to assert our right to occupy a space within it. Perhaps I could and should have challenged the way we were treated but, in the prickly heat of the moment, my words dried up. We were being harangued and in our embarrassment we wanted to get away as quickly as we could. Flight, not fight. And the insidious nature of the staff's behaviour had me doubting my own sense of reality. What had just happened?

On the walk home, we were subdued, somewhat jangled and confused by this unpleasant encounter. Once in the house, we peeled off wet layers and, as is customary after a visit to the library, the children spread out their books over the kitchen table and dived into the fantasy worlds unfolding from the pages

in front of them.

All was silent for some time so I took the opportunity to make my displeasure known to the world. I tried to dissipate my agitation by writing an account of my experience on social media and then began to fill in an online complaints form. Interestingly, the complaints form asked what action I wanted to come out of my complaint. Heartened by the question, I sat with it for a while thinking about what I needed to say to provide them with the clarity, sincerity and insight they needed.

I had been treated like a nuisance because of negative assumptions based on racial visual markers. It's possible the staff weren't even aware of the underlying bigotry guiding their responses to us. Now was in a safe space I was able to start writing from the position of tend and befriend, a way of easing into how a simple visit to a library highlights subtle and not so subtle forms of racism. I write ...

“The only viable remedy to what happened in the library to my family and me is to create a space for the staff to recognise and challenge their prejudices, a space where an open and honest two-way conversation is seen as an integral part of an ongoing learning process. In this ideal world, the workplace culture is inquisitive and encouraging.

Staff will be able to ask questions of themselves and their colleagues, knowing that they are working with people who will support them in confronting their biases without judgement. As a community service and a service to the community, this atmosphere of support and

enquiry would extend into the library itself so that people felt they could learn from one another and grow to feel connected to each other in positive and enriching ways ... as well as borrowing books..”

But in reality their question was just one line in an online form. So I requested confirmation that staff would undertake unconscious bias training and left it at that.

But the thing is, we all hold racist views. We’ve been socialised by a white class system that privileges patriarchy and capitalism over all else. I find unpacking all of this to be painful and unsettling work. My initial reaction is to turn it back on myself which only results in feelings of shame and embarrassment. As a result, concentrating on how to deal with the matter at hand becomes difficult.

But I can’t just leave what happened in the library at that. If only there could be acknowledgement that confronting and challenging daily discrimination that can often go unchecked is something that everybody needs to do. Perhaps then there could be more compassion. More opportunity to learn and make change, to accept difference. After all, taking responsibility for ourselves means we might also begin to take responsibility for each other.

To my mind, finding common ground is the central foundation for a more cohesive community. Our communities are made up of many different people, each with something in common, be that a shared interest, a personality characteristic, geography, history, religion, politics or ideals. Each of our cultures and family traditions are shared and passed on through our food, music or in stories we tell. Our communities form our identities, we learn from

and about each other, and grow to understand who we are, in relation to the wider world. Yes, there is always disagreement, but there is also common ground. To illustrate; when I think of some of the friendships that have come into being through my children, I understand that some of my friends have wildly varying world views. We work hard to transcend any differences because we place higher value on the connections between our children.

If a community is to function there needs to be a sense of kinship, built on mutual exchange where people can depend on each other (taking) or help each other (giving). This ebbs and flows over extended periods of time, between many different members of the community, with people giving and taking, each in their own way. Everyone's existence gives value to the whole, even if that's not always acknowledged in the most obvious ways. This dynamic equilibrium is the backbone of any eco-system.

We are currently in a particular moment in time when, each of us in our own insecure little bubbles, we are having our differences whipped up into a frenzy of fear and mistrust. Within this assumptions are made that, if there's disagreement over one issue, then there must be disagreement across the board and like beach-combers caught in shifting sands, we drift further and further apart from each other.

To dissolve this polarisation, we need to build bridges between our distinct communities and create a different sort of dialogue. We need to actively seek common ground, navigating our differences to find shared aims, experiences or understandings. Searching for this doesn't dilute commitment to a cause, but rather advances a search for peace and equity. When mutual respect and humility are present then disagreement, difference and diversity bring added

insight and strength to communities.

This must involve self-care, the opportunity to look closely at ourselves and our circumstances to work out what we need to do to make our lives about more than just survival. As well as helping us to thrive, self-care is a necessary tenet of social justice work. When busily involved in campaigning, I know I run the risk of burning out if I don't make time and space to look after myself. Likewise, people who feel cared for, listened to and respected have less need to display aggression or hatred towards others. Therefore, looking after ourselves and each other should be embedded in all we do in order that we can continue to grow and learn. This is a necessary part of a caring community. On an inter-personal and informal level, I might text someone who I know is having a difficult time to ask about their day, I might offer to pick up someone's groceries, or look after a friend's children, and any of those people might offer to help me or someone else they know.

Within our wider communities this is evident in responses to Covid; many mutual aid groups have popped up. Some of these are incredibly organised systems to help provide for people, through online forums, helplines being staffed by a rota of volunteers collecting and delivering essential items to people who need them. People can sign up to help out, ask for help, or both. Others are more organic, where people share their worries, ask for and offer support, whenever it is needed. For example in my own neighbourhood, through a WhatsApp chat, the conversation moved seamlessly between people recommending TV programmes to a number of neighbours realising they had the same exploitative landlord, joining forces to take him to court. There is real strength to be garnered when people come together. Requiring help and asking for it is so often seen as some sort of moral lacking. An

unfamiliar virus and global pandemic made it socially acceptable to show vulnerability.

I home educate my four children. At the end of every year we learn about human rights to coincide with the anniversaries of the UN Declaration of the Rights of the Child and the UN Declaration of Human Rights. Our conversations often centre around the difference between 'want' and 'need'. The defining factors of 'need' can be subjective at times but the fundamental fact remains that we all have needs. Mainstream society extolls the virtues of the individual, satisfying their own needs but a different way of thinking might bring about sweeter results.

Which brings me back to the library and the unfriendly staff. My hope is that, once we had left, staff members gathered together all their colleagues for a chat. Maybe they talked about why the family that had just left caused so much agitation. Maybe they did this over a cup of tea with a biscuit, and talked through the mistakes they had made in handling the situation. Maybe they talked about how to put it right or stop it from happening again. Maybe they learned a little about each other's lives and the stresses their colleagues are dealing with at the moment. And maybe, just maybe, the next time a large, brown family comes in through the door, they take a deep breath and remember what they have learned.

Once reciprocal understanding has been achieved, maybe it'll be easier to look otherness in the face and see it for what it is; an integral part of any community.

Maybe.

Artlink

Established in 1984, Artlink is an arts and disability organisation. We believe participation in the arts has an important role to play in realising personal and social change.

Artlink Edinburgh & The Lothians
13a Spittal Street
Edinburgh EH3 9DY
artlinkedinburgh.co.uk

Artlink is a company registered in Scotland No. 87845 with charitable status, Scottish Charity No. SCO006845

With support from



LOTTERY FUNDED



@ArtlinkEdin



ArtlinkEdinburgh



artlinkedin

info@artlinkedinburgh.co.uk
