

Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters



Module 2

Activity 3: Stories of encounter

Worlds away

This happened five years ago when I was at a conference in Limerick. A group of people came into the hotel lobby using a sign language that was foreign to me. I was taken aback at first, and also a bit embarrassed.

Apart from me and the bigger group, there were two other people around – the hotel receptionist and my eldest son. The receptionist, seemed flustered and a bit annoyed. She was noisy, banging things against her desk.

My feelings were all over the place. How was I going to talk with them? They seemed worlds away from what I was able to do. I looked at how they communicated flawlessly without the labouring syntax of English. I looked to see if there was at least one person among them that I could communicate with on my level. No one!

My son, on the other hand, started communicating with people from the group and I could see smiles appearing on everyone's face. Before that their signs were sharper and larger, like they were upset. They had also been annoyed that no one was there to help them. Alroy seemed delighted that there were people he could communicate with. He smiled and waded into the group. I, for myself. I felt like a fish out of water, out of my depth almost. And yet, I did have sign languages – South African English and Afrikaans; American Sign Language; British Sign Language and Irish Sign Language – but they were communicating in a different one.

I realise now that my thoughts and feelings were not really good practice. The best reaction from me would have been to get everyone to sit down and find one person at least to communicate with. I didn't have to get anxious. I learned that even though my communication was not at their level, they could see I was well-meaning. They were not annoyed at me, but at their situation. Nevertheless, it has taught me that no matter how difficult communication is with people, you can always draw on the knowledge that you have.