

Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters



Module 6

Activity 3: Addressing problematic AIE stories

Story 1: Fear of the Unknown

This happened during one of our choir tours in Germany. We stayed with host families. My friend and I were picked up by a father, a man of about 40, and his two children. I found the father a scary figure – bearded and untidy. The children were also odd. The first thing that came to my mind was that there wasn't a woman in this family. The mother was missing! I am not sure why, but this also gave me the creeps. I felt fear, shock, all very negative. In spite of all this, I managed to stay cool and even to smile at these strangers.

Our hosts didn't speak English and they couldn't make themselves understood. It was clear they felt uncomfortable because we couldn't understand each other. We also looked at them in an odd way. It probably showed how much we were scared.

My friend and I appeared to lead the communication – us gesticulating, with almost no words. I didn't have any previous experience in communicating with people from other nationalities. But I think that on this occasion I managed quite well. I hid my emotions by going straight to my room after the speechless dinner.

I managed to survive this experience and I feel proud of that. If something similar happened to me again, I wouldn't be so terrified. Maybe I would think about this experience further and, by doing the AIE, I could try to avoid unpleasant situations like this one.

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Story 2: Pride and Prejudice

It was at a reception held by the company where I used to work. It was during Ramadan and I was observing my Muslim colleagues struggling without food or water and was feeling sorry for them. In the evening, however, at the company's reception. I felt disgusted by the behaviour of a Moroccan man. His plate was overflowing with food and he was munching loudly, using his hands as if this was his last chance of getting something to eat. We entered into a heated discussion about the role of women in society, the way they should look and, of course, the difference between "their" women (these were his words) and European women. We disagreed on many points, but our discussion was made even more difficult because we were communicating in German – a foreign language for both of us.

I don't believe this encounter was a surprise for him. He must have been flattered by my interest in what he had to say. I think the man found pleasure in the opportunity to say something about himself. He felt important.

There were some similarities in the way we perceived the situation: each one was defending their ideas; we were relying on facial expression and body language; raising of the voice. Each one had their own way of looking at things which the other was not able to change.

My reaction was good because I like it when I defend my position. I do not mean to impose my opinion, but I am annoyed by such self-opinionated behaviour and people who are not able to take criticism. In such situations I am unable to remain silent.

I don't think the encounter has changed me. People are who they are, and if there is someone I find unpleasant, I just avoid them. Perfect harmony doesn't exist, thank goodness!