

Superficial prejudices that blind us to the truth

By Ruth Ostrow

Often the things that upset or disturb us are our greatest teachers, for what they tell about ourselves and others

I RECENTLY had an encounter that helped change the way I perceive people. It was at a personal development workshop.

There was a woman I really didn't want to work with. I kept praying that I didn't get teamed up with her for any of the "sharing" we needed to do together.

I was, quite simply, put off by the way she looked. She had the appearance of a real bimbo. Long, bottle-blond hair, big breasts that were peaking up out of her skimpy dress, makeup that made her eyelashes look like meaty tarantula thighs, and a high-pitched, chatty voice that demanded attention.

Mumbling snide remarks to myself, I figured I was not going to get a very deep or accurate insight from someone who needed to be that overt, that sexually bombastic.

To make matters worse she reeked of cheap perfume that made my nose water. I have a real issue with noise and smell fascists who don't act with sensitivity to those of us who can't tolerate sensory overload.

Each time we were told to find a partner, I studiously avoided her, moving across the room, going to the toilet.

But finally I was nabbed.

"Anyone who has not worked together yet, I'd like you to team up for this one.

"Please team up with someone you've been avoiding. These people are often pushing your buttons, something in them is making you uncomfortable and these are the exact people you should be working with," said our coach. He had been watching me closely and pulled me towards the blonde woman, smiling warmly.

We had to talk about our childhoods. I briefly recounted mine. She briefly recounted hers. And by the end I was staggered.

She lost her parents tragically. She was fostered out, abused, she had battled depression all her adult life and had twice attempted suicide. All spoken with matter-of-fact simplicity.

"I try to make myself look nice," she said, blinking away tears.

"I try to make the effort. Sometimes, I feel so bad I don't want to leave the house.

"But if I look good, if people are admiring me, I feel a little better about myself." I felt like such an awful person, so full of prejudice and unkindness.

This life lesson was repeated during a poetry class I attended a while later.

Again we had to work with the person next to us.

My heart sank as I turned to a very dowdy fellow wearing a stained, brown cardigan, with plastered down hair.

But when he read his poem it was so beautiful it made me cry. Later he read it to the class and was applauded for his insight and passion.

Unlike the nerdy image he put out to the world, his words were erotic, moving and exciting.

It is perhaps a cliché, but so worth repeating. We should listen before we speak, observe before we judge.

The things we notice are so often not the truth, rather a version that we filter through our own fears, conditionings, anxieties and thwarted dreams.

Furthermore, we lack compassion.

Groomed to be competitive we rarely see things through another's eyes.

We perceive shallowness in dolled-up women only to find when we talk to them that they have lost a child, or their husbands cheat on them, or they were abused as children. There is so much pain inside people and often the facade is a brave and heroic attempt to greet life head-on rather than wallow.

It takes a lot of effort to style hair, colour it, put on makeup and dress a certain way, and it is not always misguided egoism.

Nor is the converse a sign of anything.

For instance, people who are very overweight are not necessarily greedy or lazy or undisciplined, rather may be battling with huge emotional issues.

My friend Jo Anne Baker, a leading Sydney sex therapist, tells me that many obese people -- male and female -- were abused or hurt as children.

By the end of the personal growth workshop I had become friends with the blonde woman.

And our coach was correct. Often the things that upset or disturb us are our greatest teachers, for what they tell about ourselves and others.

Here is what I learned. My own prejudices are not of an overt or racial kind, but of a more low-grade, insidious and ridiculously superficial nature. Which I sadly think tends to be true for many of us.

I once made up a whole story about a very elegantly dressed man I saw at a party. I was highly bemused to see he was wearing a pair of really cool shades inside, even after the sun had gone down.

As I observed his posture and stance, regal, very stiff, I told myself he was either insecure or a poseur. Later in the evening I was introduced to him.

He was, in fact, blind.

This is a true incident witnessed by friends. And isn't it a perfect ending to my column? There are none so blind as those who will not see.

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