

From the Cornell Interactive Theatre Ensemble [CITE]. . .

CITE's mission:

To give voice and make visible,
through theatre and dialogue,
a variety of points of view within the human experience
in order to enable and facilitate a shift in culture
towards greater honesty, trust, respect, and human dignity.

Along with everyone else you've already met, we too say "Welcome to Cornell!" This is the second year the CITE troupe has participated in Cornell's "One Vision, Many Voices" project. We're glad to have this opportunity to interact with the Class of 2007 and with transfer students entering Cornell this year.

"Being Antigone", this year's new scenario, was created to stimulate discussion about dialogue and conflict in the context of Cornell's diverse community. The scene is structured to echo particular relationships and themes from *Antigone*:

- ◆ The student characters, Marissa and Nick, are alternately representative of Antigone and Ismene. Each one wishes the other would provide support for his/her individual stance against a group norm or practice.
- ◆ In the interaction between Claire (faculty) and Michael (staff), Claire represents Creon and Michael represents Antigone. That said, Claire has had many experiences in her personal and professional life in which she has "walked in the shoes" of Antigone.

When CITE rehearses a new scenario, we spend a considerable amount of time talking about the point of view of each character. This is especially important since, in performance, we spend 20 minutes answering spontaneous questions from the audience about the characters' behaviors, and the feelings and thoughts that motivated their actions. We also spend time talking, from our own points of view, about the issues and conflicts in the scenario. This is an essential aspect of our preparation, because we are each trying to embody a person who is "not me". When your goal is, literally, to step into the shoes of another person, it's important to know the difference between your *own* thoughts/feelings/beliefs and those of the *character*. In the act of expressing your character's point of view, you must respect and believe it.

During our rehearsals and discussions we recognized that, at one point or another, most of us "feel like Antigone". It is fairly easy to see yourself as the one individual standing in opposition to a group status quo. It is much harder to acknowledge when we are "being like Creon." Similarly, all of us long for an ally (as Antigone asks of Ismene), but it is often hard to *be* an ally, especially when there is risk involved for yourself.

For us, this project has been challenging, personally as well as professionally. In the scenario, we play characters who feel so strongly about their own beliefs that they can't acknowledge the opposite point of view has any validity. We recognized, constantly, that we ourselves often fall into a similar frame of mind, here at Cornell and elsewhere. It is especially hard to figure out how to communicate across and through our

differences when conversation has reached the level of conflict. Our tendency is *not* to engage in conversation if we think it might erupt in conflict.

The following quote from Walt Whitman serves as a reminder that some degree of conflict in the expression of opposing points of view is an essential element of education:

Have you learned lessons only of those who admired you, and
were tender with you, and
stood aside for you?

Have you not learned great lessons from those who
braced themselves against you, and
disputed the passage with you?

As we worked on the project, we also reflected on an article in the *Cornell Chronicle*, in which President Jeffrey Lehman suggested that one goal of a university is to "prepare students to be leaders in a world that is multiracial, multiethnic, and multi-religious, where success depends critically on the ability to hold multiple perspectives on an issue in one's mind simultaneously". (*Cornell Chronicle*, January 30,2003)

How does one learn to hold in one's mind, simultaneously, multiple perspectives on an issue? Can we also learn to talk with one another in a way that honors the the *validity* of multiple perspectives? How can I support and respect you when I profoundly disagree with you?

Antigone, Creon and the characters in the CITE scenario cannot, or will not, hold multiple perspectives on an issue in their minds simultaneously. In *Antigone* conflict ends in death. In the CITE scenario no one dies but dialogue is, essentially, killed. There are many ways we "kill" dialogue. Some are:

Disrespecting or deriding points of view different from our own.

Creon represents each of us when we feel so passionately about our own beliefs that we cannot fully listen to the point of view of another. Too often we give in to the temptation to "crush our opponent" in debate; we listen-in-ambush instead of listening-to-understand.

Not noticing or taking responsibility for our impact on others. Asking for information about your impact on another person clarifies how that person received your communication. This interchange creates an opportunity to learn to communicate more effectively the next time. Taking responsibility for the impact of your communication on others is an essential aspect of citizenship in a university community.

Practicing exclusion by labeling individuals or groups as the "other" and not seeing "others" as we see ourselves; by mistreating one another based on learned assumptions, stereotypes, and misinformation.

Giving into apathy or hopelessness by deciding no one will listen or no one cares so why should I bother to attempt to dialogue with someone whose perspective is so different from my own?

Getting stuck in “right/wrong” or “win/lose” thinking

“Right/Wrong” and “Win/Lose” thinking limits our ability to find creative solutions that will move all of us forward.

How can we encourage dialogue from multiple points of view while respecting our differences?

- ◆ Become aware of the blocks to dialogue and actively work to let go of preconceptions, stereotypes, disrespectful behavior, apathy and right/wrong thinking.
- ◆ Listen to others' perspectives with the spirit of learning. Believe that people have knowledge to share that you may never have thought of before.
- ◆ Develop skills to communicate your ideas as effectively as you can.
- ◆ Remember why you came to this great university. Did you come looking for an environment in which to learn?

You are the newest members of our university. You bring fresh perspectives, new ways of problem-solving, new solutions to the challenges facing the Cornell community. What opportunities will you take to make a difference in the quality of our dialogues as Cornellians? Will you manage conflict and validate the diversity of opinions in a way that inspires all of us?

In closing, we return to *Antigone* and the words of Creon's son, Haemon:

Though I am young I know that I speak sense.
None of us are born with perfect wisdom.
To learn in life we first must learn to listen.