

10th Anniversary Edition

WHAT IF



**SHORT STORIES TO SPARK
INCLUSION & DIVERSITY DIALOGUE**

Steve L. Robbins, PhD

Praise for *What If?*

“Dr. Steve Robbins will open your eyes to seeing things you may never have seen before, in a thought-provoking and creative way. His engaging, inspiring and passionate energy will take you on a life-altering ride, from which you will walk away a more self-aware, accepting, and gracious individual.”

—Linda Esparza—Area Human Resources Manager, Parker Hannifin Corporation, Aerospace Group, Hydraulic Systems Division

“From the first time I heard Dr. Robbins, I knew I could listen and learn from him over and over and over! The content he provides, along with his style and delivery, are nothing short of, simply put, amazing! His knowledge of the human brain, human behavior, and how it all works together to create inclusion is not only informative, it’s fun to learn! He has definitely changed mindsets all over my organization starting at the top with our Senior Level Executives! Dr. Steve Robbins is a true ROCK STAR!”

—LaTricia Hill-Chandler, CDE. Office of Global Culture Diversity and Inclusion, Walmart, Inc.

“Some people view life as a glass half full. Some people view life as a glass half empty. Dr. Steve Robbins will have you viewing the glass of life completely differently and from all angles by challenging you to think more lightly about yourself and more deeply about the world. His incredible sense of humor, exceptional storytelling, deep knowledge, and captivating personal story enable you to grow as a person, professional, and leader. He will compel you to rethink your view of the world. In the end, there is no choice but to become more enlightened by his teachings.”

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“Dr. Steve Robbins is an artful storyteller who blends a witty delivery with compelling content to drop serious knowledge about the neuroscience of unconscious bias and its effects in an insightful and memorable way. He’s revolutionizing the way corporations approach inclusion and diversity programs by challenging us to rethink everything we thought we knew about this work—ultimately leading to a paradigm shift from compliance mandates to results-oriented transformational change. Through the power of curiosity, Dr. Robbins is helping us recognize and mitigate the negative effects of noise, outsidership, and the social pain of exclusion by fostering a culture that is more empathetic and inclusive of all.”

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—Karina Norr-McPhillips, MS, SPHR, SHRM-SCP, VP, Human Resources, Northwell Health

What If?

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TO SPARK INCLUSION &
DIVERSITY DIALOGUE

10th Anniversary Edition

Steve L. Robbins



N I C H O L A S B R E A L E Y
P U B L I S H I N G

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Preface

Wow! It's been 10 years since the original edition of this book made it to print. My publisher tells me the book has done very well. Maybe that's why this second edition gets a chance at making an impact on readers' minds and hearts. Thank you to all who purchased the original and have supported me as I continue to do the work of inclusion and diversity. Right now, I bet some of you noticed I didn't write "diversity and inclusion." There's a significant reason for the switch. Some folks reading this will have a quick, involuntary negative reaction to the change. Many won't notice, and some won't care. There will be people who agree wholeheartedly with putting inclusion first and diversity second. Let me offer some of my reasoning for why inclusion should come before diversity.

A little background: Since the last edition, I have engaged with the work of inclusion and diversity through extensive study and exciting interactions with clients from all over the world. I have the benefit of coming at the work of inclusion and diversity from the perspective of a

social scientist. Many of you know I am a big Michigan State University (Go Green!) supporter, having earned my master's and doctorate from the prestigious Department of Communication Science. Fundamentally, I was trained in the art and science of studying human behavior. If you know anything about the field of communication science, it's a relatively new field that grew out of two more well-known fields, psychology and sociology. It may be easier to understand if I say that I am a social psychologist who looks at human communication. Moreover, over the last couple of decades, beginning shortly after graduating Michigan State, I took strong interest in the study of the brain and how it processes messages. The catalyst for my interest in the brain grew from trying to understand the factors that may have led my mom to take her own life in 1991. Fundamentally I was asking, "How did external and internal messages have such a negative and devastating impact on my mom? I have since accumulated a lot of knowledge in my brain about the human brain, and so I come at the study of human behavior (and inclusion and diversity) with the additional lens of a cognitive neuroscientist. The myriad perspectives that I bring to bear on inclusion and diversity have led me to believe that we put the proverbial cart before the horse. Inclusion necessarily comes before diversity.

Some people think of me as a "diversity expert." I'll be the first to admit I am not such. If I am an expert in anything, it's in human behavior, and I more consider myself a life-long student of human behavior. In a sense, all of us are students of human behavior, as the human brain is constantly trying to make sense of the world it inhabits, a world with human beings interacting on a daily basis. I just happen to have formal training in it. I examine many aspects of human behavior. In the process I've earned many things. It just so happens that many of the things I've learned can be applied to an area some call "diversity and inclusion." One significant "aha" for me that I have come to firmly believe is that

“diversity,” which I define as when you have more than one person in the room, is nothing, even problematic if there is no underlying foundation “belonging” or “inclusion.” Thus, I am an inclusion guy first. Do not interpret that statement to mean that I believe diversity is less important than inclusion. I highly value both inclusion and diversity. However, without an environment that breathes inclusion, we take the breath out of diversity. Put differently, inclusion unleashes the power of diversity. Exclusion is diversity’s Kryptonite. Consider a relatively homogeneous group of people that don’t get along. What do you think might happen if you inject “diversity” into that group? From an organization performance lens, what you have just done is introduce smart, talented, and skilled people with different experiences and perspectives into an environment that resists them, and often blames them for disrupting the organizational order. Increasing “diversity” numbers might look good, but without a supportive inclusive foundation, the research suggests the “diverse” others you parachute in will suffer what researchers call “social pain.”

Yes, current neuroscience research offers a clue as to why those who feel excluded often feel more tired, more anxious and less productive. Being an outsider without a tribe that values you will light up pain circuitry in your brain. Ouch! Some well-meaning leaders (and “diversity” practitioners), unarmed with the current science that concludes that human beings are hard-wired to belong, can actually do more harm when they attack issues of diversity without softening up the beachhead with inclusion. If an organization truly values diversity, it would cultivate a culture of inclusion so that the numbers don’t turn people into superficial statistics. Doing inclusion right helps one to rightly do diversity.

Please read this new edition with the new lens of “Inclusion and Diversity.” The 10 new stories come from that perspective. The original

stories will also gain new interpretational life with a more updated, twenty-first-century lens. As with my keynotes and workshops, I've tried to keep the stories interesting with a sprinkle of science here, a pinch of emotion there and a good dose of humor throughout. You'll hear a little about my kids, who are no longer kids. As of this writing, my oldest (Nick—no longer Nicholas) is graduated with a degree in actuary science but chose to follow his mission-oriented heart to teach math overseas. He has a Master's in education from that other major university in Michigan. My second son (Zach—no longer Zachary) earned a full ride scholarship to play golf at a NCAA Division I university and is enjoying his time as a student athlete. My third son (Jake—no longer Jacob) will be headed to the best university in the world, Michigan State, to pursue a career in science. If I have a favorite kid, it would be Jacob because of his choice of MSU. Just kidding! It's because he's 6'2" and can dunk a basketball. The youngest, my daughter (Natalie—still Natalie) now has her driver's license and finds ways to verbally and non-verbally remind me that I am now the shortest person in our family. I fire back by quoting a line by Mark Twain in response to tall people commenting at his short stature: "I feel like a dime among pennies." Hah! My beautiful wife continues to light up my heart and mind as my best friend as she teaches me how to be a better parent. It's a tough job for her but she's a trained educator! It's going to be a different world for us as pieces of our Robbins tribe are pushing forward to eventually form their own family tribes, but we look forward to spending more time traveling. On our bucket list is to be in attendance at all four of the majors in professional tennis. We've gone multiple times to the US Open in the great city of New York (actually Flushing Meadow). If anyone out there has connections to get us tickets to Wimbledon, the Australian Open and the French Open, I'm right here!

So, thanks for all your support. I hope to see you during my travels

and attempts to spread the message about inclusion AND diversity, but mostly about the power of caring for people, especially those who you may not initially find to be much like you. If I happen to be a speaker at your organization or at an event that you also happen to be attending, please say hello. It's always good to have a tribe that cares about you. And especially a tribe that might have members that can get us into some major tennis tournaments!

Acknowledgments

Thanks to the many people I've encountered along this journey for your continued support and encouragement. I couldn't do this without all of you. There are many I have met along the way that have helped me to learn and build experiences that I can use to spread the message about the importance of belonging (inclusion) and of caring about others. I express my gratitude to you for your kindness and also for inviting me into your respective spheres to share my message. I'd like to name all of you, but I don't have the space to do so. And as I am now a bit older, I'm fearful that the neurons that once held all your names have either been purged or cannot be easily accessed without some trigger. If you do not see your name here, just know that I have heartfelt thanks to all of you who have invited me into your tribe, at least temporarily.

Thanks to...

My brothers from another mother, Tod, Mark, and Joe for being my tribe when I was temporarily in need of one. And, of course, thanks to

Sharon Wyn, that “other mother” for taking me in as a son when my mom passed.

My wonderful hard-working team at S2S Studios: Carese, Alyson, Sara Jo, and Mallory. They are aligned with my personal mission and put passion into the work of visual storytelling to make the world a better place.

All my Spartan homies in the Communication Department at Michigan State University, past and present. I am not where I am today without the support of the people there, especially those who were my tribe that first semester when my mom passed. A specific shout-out goes to the late Dr. Chuck Atkin and the effervescent Dr. Bill Donohue. My mentors, even though they may not have known the impact they had on me.

My friends from my high school days who continue to support me even when contact is not regular, Dennis, Todd, and Craig.

The folks at Nicholas Brealey Publishing, especially to Alison and Michelle for putting up with my tardiness. I hope my stories make you laugh.

I must thank my family for putting up with a husband/father who was not always home like a “traditional” father. To my kids, I hope you will see past my faults and know that I continue to learn to be a good father. It’s been difficult to know what to do in many situations since I did not have a father figure growing up. Well, I did, but he was not one I would want for any kid. Nicholas, Zachary, Jacob, and Natalie, please know that I love you and will always be there for you. To my wife Donna, thank you for your patience, even-keeled demeanor and enduring love. I know my travels made it feel like you are a single mom at times. I am looking forward to spending the rest of our lives together. Also, to my wife’s mom (Connie) and family for being there and putting up with the little Vietnamese, inner city kid. Thanks to Rita, especially for being the older sister I never had. And yes, I love you, too Mary, Ann, and Gary.

Thanks to you and your families for making family gatherings a reminder of why having a family is so important.

Finally, and mostly, thank you to my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ who died on the cross for one such as me. It is by the power and grace of your unfailing love that I am still alive today. You stand for me, so there is none that can stand against me. Thanks for allowing me to be your servant, even with my many stumbles along the way.

My Story

As I continue to travel around the globe working with various organizations and businesses, I am often asked if I get tired of doing this work—of this thing some have called “diversity and inclusion.” My response is a balanced one. “Yes and no,” I say. The travel and being away from my family are always difficult. And some of the people I encounter in my travels just don’t seem willing or able to embrace the idea that they actually live in a diverse world with diverse perspectives. They can’t seem to give up old twentieth-century patterns that don’t work so well in the twenty-first century. People like that can at times make the work tiresome.

So, on the one hand, yes, I do get tired. On the other hand, I do not. I am energized and sustained by the caring people I meet that support me in this life calling that became clear to me in a crucible of cruelty. It is from that crucible that I get my sustenance and passion for this work. So let me tell you that story.

I immigrated to the United States in 1970. In the midst of

an escalating war in Vietnam, my mother married an American serviceman—not because she loved him, but so that she could bring me to the United States. Let me give you a little context for how difficult that decision was for my mom, for not only was she deciding to give her son a chance, but she was also simultaneously deciding to leave her family behind.

In Vietnamese culture, family is revered and valued. Family defines who you are, why you exist. Vietnamese people don't just say we value family. We actually do it! Family in Vietnam is not just Mom, Dad, and the kids the way we in the United States tend to think of it. The elderly aren't sent away. They are taken in. We don't get upset if a relative drops in unannounced. We break out the *pho* (beef noodle soup)! Family bonds are strong.

So when my mother chose to leave her family behind to ensure that her young son would have life, it was an excruciating decision for her. (Note that I did not say “have a life.” The threat of death was an everyday reality.) She left her mother and father, her five brothers and sisters, and a bunch of aunts and uncles and cousins. She packed very little (because we had very little) and, with her 5-year-old son in tow, traveled literally halfway around the globe to another world.

When we arrived in Los Angeles, I am sure my mom was thinking she had made a mistake.

When we got off the plane and walked into the airport, people were spitting on us. They were throwing things at us and yelling horrible words. I didn't understand English at the time, but even as a 5-year-old, I could tell that the verbal bullets being fired at us came from a place of ignorant, misguided hate. What had we done besides accept America's offer of hope, freedom, and opportunity? If it seems unbelievable that some in this country would do such things to those only seeking refuge

from death, consider the many tales from Vietnam veterans detailing their mistreatment upon returning to the country they had proudly and honorably served. If some could so mistreat their own heroes, imagine being Vietnamese during those years. I suppose the way my mother felt is much like how many immigrants feel today in a climate of protectionism, nationalism and manufactured fear. Standing about 4'11" and speaking with a heavy accent, my mother was a convenient target for unwarranted discrimination, intentional exclusion, and painful ridicule. These injustices invaded her life with regularity, and there was little she could do about it.

The neighborhoods we lived in were not very nice to me, either. Many times I would come home covered in blood from fights. Some fights I started. Others I did not. Many occurred because I was the different kid with slanty eyes from the war. I was called "VC" (Vietcong), "Jap," "Chink," and worse. I was none of those. As the saying goes, "kids can be cruel."

Following these brawls I would find my way to our apartment, where my mother would pull me into her arms and hold me tight for minutes on end. She rarely said anything as she wiped the blood from me with a warm wet cloth. She didn't have to—the tears streaming down her face said it all. She was in much pain. I really didn't understand what my mother was going through on these occasions. I think I do now. With the privilege of raising four of my own children with my wife, I more deeply feel the grief she must have felt as she sent me to school in the morning, wondering how much blood would be on me when I returned from school in the afternoon. I cannot think of anything much worse than having to watch one's own kids suffer.

My mother thought she had brought us to a better place, and in many ways, she had. Undeniably, the United States was a much better

place to be in than Vietnam at the time—but it wasn't the place she had been told about. It didn't live out the concept she held in her head. It didn't make a reality of "We hold these truths to be self-evident . . . that among those rights are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

Little by little, the injustices chipped life away from my mom. The man she married turned out to not be the coolest guy. He forced my mom, raised with Catholic influences, to have an abortion. I still remember the day we went to the hospital for the procedure. I didn't know what was happening; I just recall going to the hospital with my mom emotional and visibly distraught. When we left, she once again had tears running down her gentle face. When I later found out why we had gone to the hospital, I was filled with an unforgettable pain and anger.

For many reasons, I was never close to my stepfather, that uncool guy. It's difficult to become close to someone who beats you when you're one minute late for dinner, and then beats you again for not finishing the dinner you couldn't eat because you weren't hungry from the first beating. But he found a way to be close to my sister, Diane, his flesh-and-blood daughter. In 1984, he was convicted of sexually assaulting her. To this day, I still do not know when his awful offenses began; I just know they resulted in my sister's running away from home with a friend in the summer of 1985, when she was 13 years old. Later that summer, my mom received a phone call that would devastate her.

By that time, we had moved to Washington State in pursuit of jobs and to escape some of the hate we had endured. The man on the other end of the line, a King County sheriff's detective, delivered the horrible news that the girl my sister had run away with had been found murdered in the Seattle area. The detective said he believed that this girl's death was linked to a string of unexplained deaths of young women in that area, known as the Green River killings. When my mom asked about my sister, the detective could offer only a glimmer of hope: "We have been unable

to locate your daughter, Mrs. Robbins.” I remember my mom falling to her knees, sobbing so hard that her body shook violently. Though there was a chance my sister was still alive, most likely in grave condition, I think my mom knew her family was now short one life. I knew it, too.

That fall I headed back to college in Michigan with a heavy heart, weighed down by the knowledge that I likely would never see my sister again and the pain of knowing that my mom was suffering so greatly. Within my mother’s small frame was the strongest woman I had ever known, will ever know. But no amount of strength could lift the enormity of the hurt that crushed her spirit every hour of every day. She did her best to mask that pain when we talked on the phone, but sometimes there was no hiding it. No one knew it at the time, but in the solitude of my dorm room that year heavy tears often flowed from my eyes. There were many late nights in which I sat alone in the dark, rocking back and forth, not knowing what to do for my mom, what to do for myself. At times, I didn’t know if I could make it one more day. It is by the grace of God that I continue to see sunrises.

My mom tried to take her own life in 1989. I had no knowledge of this until recently when a friend from Washington showed me a videotape of my mom on a Seattle-area television program. It was a program about parents who had lost a child. On the videotape was a dispirited woman visibly distressed by the cumulative events of her life. The woman on the screen was my mom—but she was not. Asked about how she coped day to day, she told the program host that she continued the struggle for one reason only—her son.

The next two years were difficult for my mom, I’m sure, but she never let on, always protecting me from the pain that wreaked havoc on her emotional, spiritual, and physical being.

June 1991 was a wonderful, happy time etched into my life and, I suspect, into my mom’s life, too. That’s when I married my wife Donna,

a stunningly beautiful woman inside and out who filled gaps in my life, many unknown by me at the time.

My mom and Donna hit it off right away, though from casual observation they looked to be very different. A mental picture of their first meeting sticks with me. My mom is embracing my future wife with the kind of hug often reserved for long-standing family members and friends. It's kind of an odd scene, this tiny dark-haired Vietnamese woman locked together with a six-foot blonde who would one day be her daughter. It would take nearly 15 years before I recognized how that meeting would come to symbolize the work that I do.

Five months after my wedding, I was thick into my graduate studies at Michigan State University when I received a phone call from my mom back home in Washington State. We shared the events of our lives that past week. I don't recall the specifics. Before ending our conversation and hanging up, my mom softly said, "Long, you have Donna to take care of you now. I love you very much." I told my mom I loved her, too, and looked forward to our next phone call. But the next phone call from Washington State was not from my mom.

A little more than a week later, the phone rang. Donna answered and, following a brief conversation, handed the phone to me. I could tell something was terribly wrong. Sitting on the bed in our room, I found myself speaking with an officer from the Benton County Sheriff's Department. He asked if I was Steve Robbins and if I knew a woman named Nancy Robbins. "Yes," I said, "that's my mother." Thoughts, many unsettling, were running through my head at that moment as a brief silence fell.

"Mr. Robbins, I am sorry to have to tell you, but we just found your mother."

"Is she okay?" I asked.

“I’m sorry, sir, but your mother was found in her bathroom and she was not alive.” Shaking, I asked what happened. “Apparently your mother took her own life. She had hanged herself from the showerhead.”

I could not say anything as the weight of the pain crushed my vocal cords and my spirit. I shook as the tears drowned my eyes and a lifetime of events, good and bad, raced through my mind. I really don’t recall much after that. I do remember the waves of pain that rocked my body.

A few days later I was in my mother’s apartment sifting through her belongings, trying to comprehend what had happened, what was happening. Many questions drummed through my head. Why did my mom choose this path? Why didn’t I see the signs? Why wasn’t I there for her? The answers were nowhere to be found. The questions only ignited more questions, and my quest to answer them tormented my sleepless nights.

The more I thought about what my life would be like without my mom, the more I began to reflect on what my life had been like. Many experiences long silent in the deepest depths of my mind surfaced. Not all were pretty. I came face to face with the reality that I did not like myself much. More specifically, I did not like being Asian, being Vietnamese, being me.

More questions busied my thoughts. How does someone who looks like me get the name *Steve Robbins*? Why do I have a perm? Why have I had a perm since junior high? How come I can find Asian women attractive but have never been inclined to date one? In a different context, these questions might have been a bit funny. In this particular context, they burdened my soul. Recognizing that you’ve spent a lifetime suppressing large parts of your true self is powerfully painful.

After my mom’s burial, I returned to Michigan with more questions than answers. A chapter in my life had been closed, and new ones were

about to begin. At the time I did not know what would be written on those future pages. I just knew I had to press on.

As I look back today, I see how the painful experience of my mom's death shaped who I am and what I do now. It was her death that led me to become more interested in and sensitive to issues of inclusion and diversity. Her suicide directly influenced me to study how to talk to ourselves, our internal talk (intrapersonal communication), and ultimately led me to study the human brain. It also led me to a deeper self-examination—one that would tear scabs off old wounds, but would also lead me to the core of who I am, of who my mom taught me to be. I would come to understand and put a label on the hate I had for myself. In the world of race studies, it is called “internalized racism.” I hated myself because the messages I encountered in the world taught me to hate myself. Those messages created a negative mental model of people like myself. I had internalized the many negative messages about Asians, and specifically about Vietnamese people.

The many people who discriminated against my mom and me I remembered to be white. That did not teach me to hate white people. Far from it, it taught me to want to be white because white people were not being discriminated against. As I came to more fully understand what was happening, I also came to appreciate who I really was (and am) and what my mom had been trying to teach me all along about my heritage and history.

To be honest, I am still dealing with internalized racism today. I suspect I will be dealing with it for the rest of my life. But that's okay. I better understand the “dis-ease” within me now and how it plays out in society. I also understand what I've been called to do. All my past experiences, good and bad, beautiful and ugly, have equipped me to do the work I do around inclusion and diversity.

My mom sacrificed 26 years of her life to make sure that I could have

life. She faced cruelty many times, too many times, during her short 47 years on this planet. I am certain she was not the only one. Many others face similar pain today. The reality of people needlessly suffering fuels the work I do.

When I go out to speak and to work with organizations, my motivation is a bit selfish. You see, I want people to understand that the work around inclusion, diversity, and cultural competency is not about political correctness or a better bottom line. Neither is it about compliance or protecting against a lawsuit. It's not even about changing demographics. No, at its core this work is about caring about other people, treating them with dignity and respect because they are human beings who deserve such. It's about standing up for justice in the face of injustice. It's about standing up for those who have been told to stand down.

I believe the negative baggage around “inclusion and diversity” was created and is carried forth by people who are blind, at least partially, to the myriad realities of our world, and who have not fully realized that doing the work of inclusion and diversity is truly about being a nice, caring, and compassionate citizen. It's about creating a sense of belonging for those who yearn for belonging. It's my guess that the vast majority of people would like to be called nice, caring, and compassionate. A large part of my work is to urge, encourage, and teach others to walk the talk of being nice, caring, and compassionate. If more of us would sincerely and genuinely do that, our world would be a much better place—a world where fairness and justice would rule, a place in which we cared for our neighbor even when our neighbor doesn't look like us, a neighbor from a half a world away.

I do this work to honor my mom and little sister, and to do my part in making sure that fewer people face what my mom faced. Why? Because I imagine that if, while my mom was alive, more people had stood up for justice, as a shield between her and injustice; if more people had

protected her from the cruelty of ignorant and unmindful people; if more people had said, “You can’t do that to her because she is a human being who has been given unalienable rights that supersede politics”; if more people had done those things in the midst of my mom’s tears and my sister’s suffering, I know that my four children would have a grandmother and an aunt to play with today. No, this work is not about numbers and statistics; this work is about real lives that suffer every day from the social pain of exclusion.

So, I do this work because I know firsthand the mountaintops and valleys of our world, and I want more people to experience the mountaintops. I can’t and don’t want to do this work alone, so I go out to touch people so that we can work side by side to make this a better place, especially for the generations to come.

Yes, I know this all sounds very idealistic and pie-in-the-sky, but as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. so eloquently said, “I’ve seen the mountaintop,” and it’s a wonderful place. Let’s all work together to be path makers, creating many paths to the mountaintop. It will be hard, painful work, an uphill battle littered with unbearable mind-sets and seemingly insurmountable circumstances. Yes, it will be that and likely more. There will be times when you will want to give up. I have experienced those times on many occasions. In those times, do what I do: I imagine my mom sitting on the floor telling my four kids the wisdom-filled stories she told me as a kid, and as she finishes she gives them all a great big hug. Before they all get up to leave, my mom tells my children to love and take care of each other, and to be path makers, not path blockers.

There is a Chinese proverb that says, “Tall trees face strong winds.” I invite you to be a tall tree with me. Read the stories in this book within the context I have given you. Share them with others to spark inclusion and diversity dialogue. Practice curious and crucial conversations. Take

advantage of teachable moments. Do all this and more to become a “tall tree,” and when the strong winds hit, know that there are other tall trees in your presence. You may not see them, but they are there working around you, with you, and for you. And I am one of them. You are never alone in doing this good work. Good work is never done alone.

Ready?

Introduction

The stories in this book are meant to inspire you to see your world a little—or even a *lot*—differently. To get the most out of them, read them with an open mind and a willingness to entertain new perspectives. If there are times when you want to say, “No, it’s not that way,” pause and consider the book’s title: *What If?* Ask yourself what if it *could be* that way? Temporarily suspend your current reality and imagine a different one, perhaps one even more different than what I have suggested.

After you have spent some time reading the stories, think about how the concepts apply to your daily life—at home, at work, and with your family and friends. Talk with others about how the stories can be used to create an environment of continuous learning. You will find that the stories present concepts beyond those inclusion and diversity. They touch on many aspects of fundamental human behavior. Organizationally, they can provide many insights into the building blocks of a productive workplace, including leadership and mentoring, creativity and innovation, and organizational culture and engagement. And they

explore how to effectively engage a global world increasingly defined by encounters with new people, new ideas, and new things.

This book will help you to be more cognitively flexible and behaviorally adaptable. If this sounds inviting to you and your organization, here are a few general suggestions to get you going. (In addition, there are specific questions, activities, and assignments at the end of each chapter.)

- Hold a series of brown-bag lunches to discuss the stories. Schedule the series strategically, ideally following a diversity-related organizational event so that you can continue the momentum.
- Emphasize continuous learning in your work team by using the book as common reading for each member of the team. In your regularly scheduled team meetings, spend 15 to 20 minutes discussing one of the stories. You will likely find that the stories spark other conversations beyond inclusion and diversity.
- Use the stories in your organizational newsletter. If you have a newsletter specifically devoted to inclusion and diversity, that's even better—definitely incorporate a story. (Remember to get permission from the publisher, Nicholas Brealey Publishing.)
- Use the book as common reading within your inclusion and diversity council and affinity groups. This can help stimulate discussion of various issues and opportunities.
- Get the organization's leaders to read the book or, at a minimum, to read selected stories from the book. The stories will give them different lenses through which to see inclusion and diversity, whether or not they currently "get it." The goal here is to reframe inclusion and diversity as a twenty-first-century issue that needs to be kept alive in their leadership meetings.

- Use the book as a catalyst for practicing storytelling and “story listening.” It’s interesting how much we can learn about our world and ourselves when we are asked to tell our stories and listen to the stories of others. Stories create context for others to understand us and for us to understand others and, maybe more importantly, ourselves.
- Use these stories as part of a mentoring relationship to spark dialogue and share experiences both inside and outside your organization. You will find that we are all on a journey of learning, and we are all at different places along the path. Everyone has something to share, a perspective worth hearing.
- You may find that you want to journal your thoughts as you read each story. It can be very rewarding to look back and see how your thoughts have progressed, your lenses have broadened, and your awareness has heightened. Use the stories to help you recognize and eliminate subtle (and not so subtle) slights that serve to devalue, exclude, and invalidate the stories of other people.
- Write your own stories!

REFRAMING
THE
WORLD

“Be less certain. Be more curious.”

—**Steve L. Robbins**

The Right Environment

There is a small pond on our property that provides my family with all sorts of fun. In the winter, it's a makeshift skating rink that allows me to prove—over and over again—that humans were not designed to maneuver on ice, nor should two sharp blades be attached to shoes and used as a mode of travel. Come summer, after the bruises have faded from my rear, the pond transforms into a delightful fishing hole.

When the pond was created a number of years ago, it was stocked with bass and various pan fish. Those fish have survived and thrived with very little human intervention. Despite Michigan's frigid winters and warm, muggy summers, they flourish. The environment seems to suit them rather well.

If you enjoy fishing and have kids, as I do, there is nothing much better than having a pond stocked with fish right in your front yard. And if the fish are bass and pan fish, that's just icing on the cake. Why, you ask? Let's just say intelligence is not among those species' strengths, especially for the pan fish. Put another way, if those species were the only

ones people fished for, there would be no need for fish stories. The only thing difficult about catching those fish is making sure they don't swallow your hook.

I get a kick out of fishing with my kids in our pond. On such occasions I rarely get to drop my line in the water, partly because I spend a good deal of time untangling my kids' lines, putting worms on hooks, and making sure fish are the only creatures being hooked. (If you ever want a random body piercing, I invite you to join us for an afternoon of fishing.) Another reason I don't fish in our pond much is that bobber fishing with a worm holds little appeal for me. It's not that bobber fishing is beneath me: Catching fish is always better than not catching fish. But, with that said, I like challenges, and for me fly-fishing is a more inviting challenge.

I don't fly-fish for just any old species. Some of my younger years were spent in the Pacific Northwest, where the fish of choice is trout. For me, it was rainbow trout. I fondly remember warm summer days when my mom would take me to a creek near our home and I would spend hours hunting rainbows. They are not easy fish to catch, especially for a 10-year-old. They are smart and wary, challenging the angler to think about how to approach them, how to present the bait. Needless to say, hooking a big rainbow was one of the more exciting things I had done up to that point in my life.

While rainbows can be difficult to catch, when you get one on your line, that's an appropriate reward for a plan well executed. Just watching a rainbow jump out of the water flashing its namesake range of colors is a beautiful thing. So, I have an affinity for rainbow trout, something I want to pass down to my kids.

That's why I decided to plant some rainbows in our pond. I wanted my kids to have the experience of delicately placing a fly in front of a feeding trout and then waiting for the water's surface to break as the fish

sucked in the bait. The fight afterward is great, but it's the presentation and anticipation of a "hit" that makes fly-fishing a great sport. I began the search for a trout farm where I could get some of these beautiful fish. It wasn't easy, but I finally succeeded. Excited, I called the place.

"Stoney Creek, may I help you?" an enthusiastic young woman answered. I asked if I could speak with someone about obtaining some rainbow trout. "I'll get my dad," she said.

After a few minutes I heard, "Yes, this is Steve. I hear you need some information about our trout."

I told Steve that I wanted to plant some rainbows in our pond, and he promptly asked me a number of questions regarding the size of the pond, its water source, what types of fish were already in it, and so on. I answered as best I could: "a half-acre... underground spring... bass and pan fish."

"Hmmm," Steve responded. "Do you know the temperature of the water?"

"It gets into the 70s during the summer."

Again Steve responded with, "Hmmm." Some type of language he had picked up from being around fish all day, I surmised. "I don't think the environmental conditions as you've described them are well suited for rainbows."

"Why's that?"

"Rainbows need highly oxygenated, cool water, ideally between 55 and 65 degrees. They can survive at slightly warmer temperatures, but it puts a lot of stress on them."

"So you don't think I can put rainbows in our pond?" I asked, obviously disappointed.

"If you do a few things to get more oxygen in the water and put some big logs into the pond to give the trout some shade, they will have a good chance of surviving. All you can do is try." He added that those changes

also would benefit the bass and pan fish already in the pond—a point I didn't consider seriously at the time. With renewed excitement, I asked if he had the equipment I needed to oxygenate the pond, and he said he had aerators that would do the trick. The logs would be a cinch—we had a number of fallen trees on our property. I then asked Steve how many trout I should get and what size they should be. Steve asked me how big the bass in the pond were.

“The largest one I've caught was 18 inches,” I said.

“Hmmm.” The fish talk again.

With cautious optimism I queried, “What's the problem?”

“No problem,” he said. “Just that you'll have to get some big trout. Bass can eat fish nearly as big as they are, or at least they'll try. If you don't get the right size trout, they won't have much of a chance in a small pond like yours. You'll need 10- to 12-inch trout to be safe. About 25 to 30 of them will do.”

A few days later I drove out to Steve's farm and picked up the trout and the aerator. Steve reiterated the importance of setting up the aerator promptly and getting the logs in the water, not only for shade but also to provide some cover and safety for the trout. He was concerned that relocating the trout would make them weak and vulnerable to the bass, so they would need places to hide. I told him I would get everything set up pronto.

I brought the trout home and, with kid-like eagerness, released them in the water. They all survived the trip and, after getting their bearings, swam off into the deeper parts of the pond. I then began to set up the aerator, but it was getting dark and a refreshing evening rain had begun. I told myself I would get to the aerator and the logs the next day.

Well, I got busy. The “next day” turned into “next week,” which turned into “next month.” As time passed, I noticed signs that something was wrong. After putting the rainbows in the pond, I often watched

for rings of water gently disturbing the pond's serene surface, signaling that the trout were rising to the top to feed. Initially, I observed frequent flurries of surface-breaking activity in the morning and evening hours as the trout rose to grab their bug-filled breakfasts and dinners. But over time the telltale rings, the observable indicators of trout life, gradually faded. By the time I put the aerator and logs into the pond, it was too late.

In their own way, the trout had been telling me they were struggling in their new home. But I didn't listen or pay attention. I assumed that, since they are considered to be strong fish, the rainbows would be okay until I had time to create the environment that would give them the best chance for survival. I waited too long, and the trout paid the price.

I learned a valuable lesson about having the right environment when planting trout. No matter how strong and healthy the fish were when I put them in the pond, unless I was willing to change the environment, taking their needs into consideration, I was doomed to lose them. The lesson was an expensive one: Big rainbow trout aren't cheap.

What's in Your Pond?

People are much the same as rainbow trout when it comes to their environment. We put a lot of stress on people when we don't develop an environment for them in which they can survive and, ultimately, thrive. The emotional, cognitive, and physical energy it takes to cope with an unfriendly and intolerant environment will drain even the best and brightest of their potential. The stress will eventually take its toll in the form of inefficiency, poor performance, absenteeism, and even declining health.

In the same way that I didn't take responsibility for the newcomers

to our pond, many organizations don't provide for the needs of new employees. Worse, they blame the people themselves for their inability to thrive in an environment that's not conducive to their even *surviving*. Organizations often blame people for problems that have their roots in structures, systems, and scripts. Situational, organizational factors depriving "new fish" of a healthy workplace are commonly seen as dispositional, individual traits. That is, problems are seen to lie with the individual. And when individuals are seen as the "problem," usually little effort is made to uncover systemic issues of exclusion, inequity, and intolerance.

Just as there are real and meaningful differences between various species of fish and the environments they need, there are real and meaningful differences between people and their workplace requirements. Whether the differences are between people of color and white folks, between Baby Boomers and members of Generation Y, or between men and women, failure to develop an open-minded and respectful organization that takes people's needs into account makes us less efficient and hampers our ability to compete with organizations that have created truly inclusive and conducive environments.

Like me with the knowledge I gained from trout farmer Steve, some organizations do their homework and become aware of the meaningful differences between people. They become enlightened about what it means and what it takes to be truly diverse and inclusive. But, also like me, some don't do anything with that knowledge. These organizations conceptually understand the need to change their environment or culture, but they feel no urgency or motivating passion to do so. Important knowledge is not activated. Strategy is not executed.

Often, there is an underlying belief that the existing environment should be adequate for anyone because it suits the majority of people already there relatively well. But evidence points to the contrary. Indeed,

differences do matter. And those organizations that understand this fundamental concept will be the most competitive in the future in terms of recruiting, hiring, and retaining the “best and brightest” candidates, a pool that demographers say is only growing more diverse.

If I were to do it again, I would put the aerator and logs in the pond well before I put in the trout. The pond would be prepared before the trout arrived, ensuring their best chance of survival. It really wouldn't take much effort on my part to develop an environment in which trout could thrive. If I had done what I knew I needed to do, my family and I would now have the benefit and thrill of catching rainbows right in our front yard. And as trout farmer Steve said to me, if I had taken the steps to make the environment good for the trout, I also would have made it better for the bass and pan fish. Doing right for some actually can make things better for all. Wow, what a great concept! An inclusive environment that respects the many, as well as the few, is the hallmark of successful organizations in the twenty-first century.

Improving the Pond's Environment

To help you start improving the water in your organization's pond, here are some questions to ask, an activity, and an assignment for this week.

1. **First glance.** Historically, who has survived and flourished in your organizational “pond”? What steps have been taken to develop an environment conducive to the survival of all “fish”?
2. **Looking inward.** What is your own experience in the pond? Are you flourishing or barely surviving? What about the environment needs to change for you to thrive? For others to thrive?
3. **What if?** What if the next generation of employees contains new species of fish? How will you make sure your pond is ready?
4. **Activity.** Ask participants to assess the water quality of your pond by identifying five or six cultural characteristics of the organization and how they contribute to a healthy or unhealthy environment. What new fish might be entering your pond soon? What conditions are necessary for them and the existing fish to flourish? Work together to identify the elements needed for your new and improved organizational pond. Determine action steps needed to create the type of pond environment in which everyone can flourish. And then do them!
5. **This week's assignment.** Identify one deficit in your organizational pond that *you* can begin addressing immediately.