

## The Passenger in Row 22<sup>1</sup>

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The captain announced that we were number one for takeoff and asked the flight attendants to take their seats. While walking to the rear of the aircraft, an attendant stopped and spoke quietly with the passenger seated three rows in front of me. She asked the middle-aged man to remove the briefcase from his lap and place it under the seat in front of him. He refused. When he wouldn't comply, she raced to the rear of the plane—just as the plane moved onto the active runway and began accelerating.

The pilot suddenly aborted the takeoff and steered the aircraft onto a taxiway where it came to a complete stop. Several crew members converged in the aisle around the passenger, telling him that we could not leave until he placed his briefcase under the seat. He initially refused. After further conversation with the flight crew, however, he stood, opened the overhead compartment (which was full), removed a bag, replaced it with his briefcase, and closed the compartment once again. The owner of the bag that had been removed snarled at him. Several passengers yelled insults; other comments directed his way suggested that we should “open the door and leave this ‘jerk’ behind.” It was a hostile crowd.

The flight crew diplomatically negotiated a compromise through which the disruptive passenger situated his briefcase in the overhead compartment; the displaced bag was fit into another compartment further back. Most of the conversation occurred in quiet undertones, but I overheard the lead flight attendant say, “Next time say so, and we’ll be glad to accommodate.” With this detour, we lost our place in the queue,

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significantly delaying our departure. After we finally took off, I heard several passengers angrily complain that this delay would cause them to miss their connecting flights.

Later when I went to the rear galley for a cup of coffee (and curious because I now expected to miss my own connection), I asked the flight attendant what had transpired. She told me that the passenger, a devote Muslim, was carrying the Koran in his briefcase. Religious beliefs regarding his Holy Book prevented him from setting it on the floor or laying it at his feet. Once the cabin crew understood this, they accommodated him by shifting the passengers' carry-on luggage. What most people interpreted as the inconsiderate act of an obstinate man was actually the reflection of a deeply religious person behaving in ways that were consistent with his most fundamental beliefs. That experience illustrates several things.

### **Building the Foundation**

First, things are seldom what they seem. Just as the passenger in row 22 acted on his cultural norms, the other passengers interpreted his actions on the basis of theirs. Our respective cultural norms could not have differed more. Clearly, we cannot assume that we understand everything that we see. Second, as society becomes increasingly complex, we will encounter more opportunities for cultural misunderstanding. The potential for conflict will increase as people act on what they know and in ways that reflect their own world-views. Third, understanding differences demands more than a simple appreciation for other beliefs and practices. It requires specific cultural information as well as the tools of cultural analysis to interpret the meanings that underlie these differences. Fourth,

these skills of intercultural understanding will not emerge by accident; they must be consciously learned and systematically developed over time.

### **Suspending Judgment**

Inter-culturalism has clearly been part of the adult education agenda from the onset. From the social programs addressing the needs of new immigrants during the 1800s to the ESL programs of today, adult educators have worked with learners from diverse cultural backgrounds. As society becomes more complex, we should pay greater attention to learning about culture and understanding differences. Before we do that, however, we must make two conscious decisions: First, we must suspend judgment regarding actions and meanings that we probably do not understand. Second, we must decide that we will respect these differences even when they make us uncomfortable. This does not mean attempting to conjure positive feelings that we don't have. Rather, it requires a conscious decision to act in ways that are consistent with acceptance, regardless of how we may actually feel.

### **Building Intercultural Understanding**

So how do we gain intercultural understanding? Again, the airline passenger example can be instructive in suggesting several steps: (1) *Observe* – Consciously observe intercultural interactions. We frequently fail to recognize the meanings underlying behavior because the assumptions we bring prevent us from seeing what is really happening. We also seldom look. (2) *Engage in conversation* – There is no substitute for conversation if we want to understand differences. This requires a willingness to engage

in conversation. It requires time to build relationships, as well as a commitment to ask respectful and appropriate questions and seek to understand. (3) *Examine assumptions* – We need to identify and examine our assumptions when viewing behavior we are trying to understand. By inappropriately assuming that we understood our fellow airline passenger's actions and the motivation behind them, we initially drew some very faulty conclusions. (4) *Construct logical explanations* – We need to construct a logical explanation for specific behaviors based on their cultural context. Once we understood that the passenger in row 22 respected his God and his Holy Book more than he feared the wrath of other passengers, his behavior appeared very logical and appropriate. (5) *Reconcile differences* – Having checked our assumptions and understood what is really happening, we can then reconcile differences. Understanding does not inevitably lead to harmony, but it is a necessary pre-condition.

### **The Outcomes**

This process of observing intercultural interactions, engaging others in conversation, examining assumptions, constructing explanations, and then reconciling differences can lead to several consequences. First, it increases the likelihood that potential conflicts will be resolved. This is certainly consistent with the literature of negotiation and conflict management. Secondly, this process of critical reflection on one's assumptions can also transform how we feel and the way we think about differences. Most of us cannot conjure up positive feelings about things that we don't like. We can, however, consciously engage in a process of critical reflection that has as its product, new understandings. Feelings may well follow actions, as this example shows.

## **Contribution of Adult Education**

The adult education literature suggests ways through which we can help build a more inclusive society. As educators, we already have many of the tools, particularly the process of critical reflection. The transformational learning literature documents how critically examining assumptions can generate new ways of thinking. As issues of cultural differences become more important in an increasingly pluralistic society, we need to use our roles as adult educators to build understanding, respect differences, and resolve conflict. We will meet others like the passenger in row 22. As adult educators we must use our tools and skills to help build a more inclusive and harmonious society.