

Jemma Spruston Pt. 2 | Discover Stories Episode 90

Tanya Griffiths 0:00

Um, so, going on to our next question, what strategies have you found effective in addressing the stigma and judgment surrounding homelessness, addiction and mental health within your communities?

Jemma Spruston 0:59

I think that there are two key methods that I use that come to mind well more than two but some that come to mind are stories and education and encouragement, I think I would, yeah, those are the three that I kind of land on. And so sharing stories allows me to provide contexts for people. There are a lot of misconceptions and a lot of assumptions. Even in the question stigma and judgment, there's a lot of stigma. You mentioned it earlier, you mentioned marginalization. And you know, going back to something that I said, or that we that we both talked about earlier, this depersonalization that can often happen, this dehumanization stories work against that. And so when I meet someone, and they ask what I do for work, and I tell them, you know, I work in the Downtown Eastside, often their response is, "oh, wow, good for you." Or, "oh, wow, that must be really hard." Or, "oh, wow. Mad respect." I don't think anyone's actually ever said mad respect to me in response to that, but that sort of, that sort of response, that sort of meaning, and that's where I have an opportunity to come in and say, "Well, yeah, you know what, it is a difficult job. It is, at times, a difficult environment to be in. I can't deny that, but it is my community, and it is a beautiful community, and I love my community," and just using my own personal experience as a way to gently push back is the wrong word, but gently offer a different perspective than the one that they appear to be to be carrying. And I'm very blessed. I come from a family who has always had everything that we've needed, and within that there are, within my, you know, kind of social circles and family context, outside of my Downtown Eastside community, there occasionally comments are made that are very clearly missing misinformed. And that's where I can again, step in and say, "well, actually, context is important, and I can provide that context," and I can say, "you know, actually, it's not as simple as finding a job. You know, I worked with someone who had a very intense physical injury, and from that, developed their substance use disorder and now in in trying to return to work, there are a lot of barriers that they are now faced with." I feel like I'm not explaining it well. When I can bring a sense of personalization to a generalization, I find that that is that that seems to be helpful for people of saying, "Oh, wow, really that that's cool," or,

"Oh, wow, really I, I wouldn't have imagined that that was actually a real thing that people go through," or, "Oh, wow, I've, I've never met anyone who's experienced that sort of thing." And fair enough, you know, I don't, I don't fault anyone for not knowing what they don't know. I certainly don't know anything or everything. Hopefully I know something. I certainly don't know everything, and so I don't fault people for what they don't know. And that's where I have an opportunity to provide context, to bring context to these generalizations and these assumptions that are made, and that's also where education comes in. Of we live in a society that is very that places a lot of emphasis and respect on the scientific method and academia and empirical evidence, and what can we prove, and what have researchers found, and actually there's a lot of research out there about mental health, about addiction, about mental health care and the response and the approaches that we use. A lot of research out there about society and social barriers. And so when I can provide that element of context as well, of actually, there have been studies, and, you know, hopefully I'm able to bring specific studies to the into the into the conversation. So it doesn't sound like I'm just making things up, but I can say, actually, research has shown us that that's not quite the case. And from from my learning and my knowledge, it's actually said this, and it's actually said that, and it's actually kind of challenged that common school of thought. And, you know, obviously not coming in as some expert, because I'm not, but again, providing education for people because you know our you probably know more about this than I do in your in your counseling education, but we make assumptions, we make generalizations, and our brain does that to help save us time, help save us energy. We develop these cognitive shortcuts that help us navigate life and experience and understand the world around us. And of course, there's the flip side to that of when I start making assumptions about other people based on what I don't actually know of their experience. That's when I become really misinformed. And so if I see someone sitting on the sidewalk, you know, smoking, smoking some kind of drug, or engaging in some kind of behaviour that I don't understand, my brain is going to try and make sense of it anyway, and that's where my assumptions come in, and that's where my generalizations come in. And if I don't have any other source of information, if I don't have someone else saying, well, actually, research has shown and actually, in my experience, this isn't the case. If I don't have anything like that, speaking against my assumptions, I'm going to keep holding those assumptions, and that's going to keep perpetuating stigma. So yeah, stories, education and then also encouragement. I always try and encourage people to step outside of our self-referencing frames. Again, you know, we all have these self-referencing frames. It's how we it's how we process what we're seeing in the world, because our experience is really the only experience that we personally have firsthand. And so I'm going to, when I see something that I don't understand or that I don't know about, I'm going to use my experience to try and make sense of it. And so we see that, you know, for example, with

addiction, I can control my alcohol intake. I don't have alcohol dependency. So why does someone else I can find a job and keep a job and find myself housing and show up to work. So why can't someone else? I don't use cocaine, I don't use meth, I don't use heroin. So why can't someone else? Physical exercise and diet and social activities work for me in taking care of my mental health, I'm fine by doing those things. I don't need medication, I don't need counseling, I don't self harm. I don't, you know, engage in risk taking behaviors. So why do others? You know, people just need diet, exercise and friends, you know, and we have and that's where our self-referencing framework really does other people a disservice, and really does ourselves a disservice, because we lack the nuance and the contextualization. And so I always encourage people and myself, you know, let's step outside our experience and our frame of reference for a moment. And let's imagine. Let's be curious. You know, let's be curious about what might be some of the reasons, what might there be that we don't see again, not trying to make assumptions about people's experiences, but opening ourselves up and opening up our minds to the idea that diversity and us all being different means not just characteristically, not just trait-wise, but actually means that the way that we just opening up our minds or ourselves to to the idea that there's always more to the story, you obviously have education and experience in this area as well, from a from a slightly from a slightly different angle. But is anything that I'm saying kind of landing?

Tanya Griffiths 12:08

Everything landed. Everything landed deeply. I'm actually, I would love to take notes right now from you. If anything, I'm going to re-listen to this entire interview, because I'm just in shock with how you phrase things so beautifully, with the sense of encouragement for people to really sit with all the things that they don't know and really give that space. And it's true, we don't know what we don't know until it becomes what we know, usually in a setting that is very confronting. And I really am seeing all these like threads come together in terms of how you talk about how stories work, against the personalization and and and just the power that stories hold in reconstructing narratives, because we're also talking and we're also giving space to the narratives that haven't been given much weight, or they've been pushed aside and it's a really difficult thing to sit with and to talk about, because at the end of the day, we're asking people to hold space for very difficult dialogue and conversations. And how we approach that, or how it can be as effective as possible, is really to be willing to listen and to be willing to be open and to be willing to give the possibility of change a chance, because when we hear these stories, and we really respect that and we honour that, then we're also understanding that if we were put in the shoes of somebody that went through all that they went through then where they are now, would

make sense. And in that making sense, there is also this second hand form of anger, because many of the circumstances that brought a person to where they are now could be because of just forms of oppression or systems that are way bigger than us that work in the favor of others. And not at all for the rest. So, yeah, I really appreciate you talking to that and also giving very concrete ways for people to go about this and to really open up the conversation and make things possible for people to see things differently.

Jemma Spruston 15:28

No, I love what you said, and it's so so true. We hold these narratives, and a lot of the time we don't even realize that we're holding them and you know, we may have never heard a different narrative. And I loved what you said about the possibility of giving change a chance. I love that. Definitely gonna write that down, yeah? But I think, yeah. I think stories open kind of open the door. As cheesy as it may sound, I think stories really open the door, because stories are what engage people, right? If I start by spouting off facts to someone who's just made kind of an ignorant comment about some sort of social issue, if I just start spouting off facts you know, they might disengage. There's an air of pretentiousness there. On my part, that's not necessarily a very helpful approach. But if I start with a story, if I say, "Hey, this is what I've seen, yeah, and, and these are people, and these are people that I care so deeply about. These are names and faces and lives." To me, this is not a group of you know, people, people will say home homeless people or people experiencing homelessness. Well, yes, that's okay, that that is a that is a demographic that exists within society. But I don't know people experiencing homelessness. I know people, and I know names and faces and their stories, and I know Tanya, right? I know people and yeah and so stories just kind of engage others who have, maybe yeah, made a bit of an ignorant comment, or have kind of revealed an unconscious bias or an assumption that they're making that maybe isn't totally fair. And and then that's where the education piece can take place. Yeah? You know, beyond this anecdotal story that I can give you, I can say I'm actually there. There are things to back this up, yeah. And then comes the encouragement of, I never want anyone to walk away from a conversation with me feeling ashamed. There is so much that each of us don't know. And you know, like, we both said, we don't know what we don't know. And there have been times where I have really needed to learn something and to catch up to speed on an issue that I'm just ignorant about and that I've all these unconscious and automatic biases and assumptions about and people have had conversations with me where they have, you know, berated me and really criticized me. And I've had conversations where people have really invited me, invited me to think about things differently, and invited me into conversation. And I can tell you, both of those types of conversations have had major impacts on me, but the but the conversations that were

the most empowering, and that really changed my perspective, not out of a sense of guilt, but out of a sense of realization and clarity. The conversations that did that were the conversations that were invitational and encouraging and that didn't focus on reprimand, but focused even if I, you know, deserved it, but that really focused on, "hey, let me, let me show you something different, and let me encourage you to keep looking at these different things, and I invite you to think about it this way instead and see where that goes." And I'm here to support.

Tanya Griffiths 20:32

Yeah, yeah, yeah. I think what you just shared definitely highlights the importance of creating safety within these conversations, and how safety allows us to open up in ways where, if we were feeling threatened in a conversation, we are more likely to hold on to our beliefs and what we've known for so long, because that provides us some sense of safety, because they're concrete and they're what we've known, and they're essentially what has led us to where we are now. So the possibility of being changed isn't really given a chance because there is that lack of safety. But that being said, like, I totally understand, like, whether a lesson is a lesson at the end of the day. And, you know, granted when we do feel a little threatened, our nervous system is also just more activated and dysregulated. So to be able to get to a place where we can actually integrate what we're learning that will eventually take some time. Yeah, that'll definitely take some time to get to that place.

Jemma Spruston 21:54

Exactly. Yeah, no, that that was, that was so well said the moment that people start feeling defensive. I think it's the moment that they disengage. And so I could respond to their judgment with judgment of my own. But then they'll become, they'll likely become defensive, and they'll likely disengage. And it's through engagement that, like you say, there's, there's the possibility to give change a chance. And yeah, so I don't ever want goes back to that piece of I don't, I don't ever want anyone to walk away from a conversation with me feeling like they've been shamed, yeah, by me, because that's not my place, yeah, and that's a really horrible experience for them. And that, that shame, that sense of judgment that they are experiencing from me, like you say, the nervous system kicks in. The nervous system goes into high alerts of you know, her words, whether she means them or not, are presenting a threat to me. And so Absolutely, I'm going to hold on to what I know, to what is safe for me, and that presents us defensiveness and then disengagement. And yeah, that's not, that's not how understanding is. Is going to happen? Yeah, it's not going to happen through disengagement. So yeah, thank you. Thank you so much for that.

Tanya Griffiths 23:41

Yeah, yeah, no, no, it is. It's so interesting. And also, another thing that I'd love to add is that this is also showing me how important it is to also give ourselves grace, especially when we see how our way of thinking, or perhaps the way we perceived a certain community as actually very hurtful and harmful, and how perhaps what we've learned growing up is also the result of the very same systems that have brought people into marginalization. It's also understanding that shame is it's hard for something beautiful to grow from shame, because shame is holds a lot of judgment towards herself, too, and albeit, you know, these are very big feelings to sit with and to hold space for. I think there is also. Know, a lot of beautiful things that can come when we give ourselves grace and that okay, like this is what I thought about before, and I'm being invited to think about things differently, and I feel a bit sad that I thought this way, and now I can choose differently or and now I can educate myself better. There's like this, you know, this, this give and take with our feelings of like honoring that, that sense of shame because of the hurt, but also re-narrating it to yourself and saying, I can, I can be better, or I can do better.

Jemma Spruston 25:46

And I can do differently.

Tanya Griffiths 25:47

And I can do differently, yes, mhm. Yeah. And as we come to a close of our conversation today, I'm curious, and this is sort of hand-in-hand with our previous question. But what changes would you like to see in how society perceives and accommodates individuals with disabilities, both visible and invisible?

Jemma Spruston 26:25

So many ways. I, yeah, this definitely connects back to some of what I've said already. I would love to see a greater societal and systemic awareness of our assumptions, of our biases, of the privilege and power dynamics that are still very much at play in our world. In many ways, we've come very far from where we've been, and we also have a long way yet to go, and that's an uncomfortable truth that that we have to sit with. And yeah, I would, I would love to see a day where people are given the benefit of the doubt, where we are curious rather than condescending of other people's experience and behaviors, where we are aware that there's always more to the story. There are always things that we don't see, that we don't know about, and yeah, that ability to step outside of our out of our self referencing framework, and it's called visible and invisible disabilities are are each so

unique in and of themselves, but also intertwined. And I mean, I live with a visible and invisible disability, and what that means is, sometimes I look fine, other times I very much do not look fine. And yet, there's, there's a lot more going on than people necessarily see with their eyes. And sometimes, sometimes everything is very much they can see with their eyes. But what I've found, is the times that I have, and again, I can really only speak from my experience, but the times where I felt most supported were the times when people didn't ask, "what is happening, what's wrong with you? What's going on? Why is your body doing this alarming thing that I can see?" But when they've asked, you know, "Is there a way that I can help? If not, then I'm just going to be here with you." Yeah, and, "you can tell me what you want to, and you don't have to tell me anything you don't want to." So I think, I think it comes down to selflessness. Yeah, selflessness. I'm going to make myself open and available and safe for individuals, one on one in the moment and on a broader level, I'm going to examine my own assumptions. I'm going to remember that there's, there's more than meets the eye to pull up a cheesy quote, yeah, and I think from that, that is where systemic change will happen.

Tanya Griffiths 30:08

Yeah, yeah, absolutely. I think that you put that very beautifully, and I wish, and I hope for the same many things that that you just described as that ability to be selfless and generous in our time for others.

Jemma Spruston 30:35

I feel like I could talk about this all day long with you. Like there are so many questions that I want to ask you and, like, tell me your thoughts, and let's talk for four hours. Unfortunately, we can't, and that would probably be kind of boring for people. Yeah, no, this is, this is good stuff, so I thank you for having these conversations. They're so important.

Tanya Griffiths 31:01

Yeah, no, I'm honestly, every time in every interview that I've hosted, I'm just in awe, like, there's this there's this time where I'm just like, wow, or I'm in awe, or I'm shocked, or I'm amazed, or, and it really is, because I see people who are who are just so passionate about what they do, and they're working towards a future in which everybody is treated as a human being, deserving of love and care and support and that, and that moves me, and that moves me so much, because I'm like, wow, what a beautiful, equitable, safe future that that you know, all these people are creating and breathing life into, and what a gift it is

to just hear it and to hear all of these stories. So I really genuinely appreciate you coming here and sharing yours and some of the ones that you know have also impacted you. And I feel like both of us are in such a reflective state right now.

Jemma Spruston 32:22

Yeah, yeah, yeah, and there's, and there's always, there's always so much more to say. I'll probably walk away from this conversation kicking myself for not mentioning something. Or I'll probably think of some I don't know. I'll probably think of something like, oh, I should have said that. That would have made me sound really smart or something. But no, it's, it's like you say at the end of the day, we're all human, and it's messy and it's beautiful and we just are.

Tanya Griffiths 33:01

Yeah, yeah, and whatever comes up in the moment is also what needed to take up space. So I am so yeah. Well, before we end, is there any last words that you'd like to share?

Jemma Spruston 33:17

I think just thank you again for having these kinds of conversations and for holding space for them to happen and just kind of a broad encouragement to anyone who hears this to to have these conversations in their own lives. I was about to say, we're all in this together, and it made me think of High School Musical. And I was like, girl, don't go there, but I did, but, but, yeah, we really are, we really are all in this together, and so have these conversations. They're so important and they're so needed. And connect. Yeah, connect. Let's connect to each other.

Tanya Griffiths 34:18

Yeah. Well, thank you so much, Jemma for connecting with me today, and for everybody who is tuning in, I really appreciate your time and your energy and for showing up today.

Announcement 34:32

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