KIMBERLY DANIELLE

THE NINE ASKS

Creating Safer and More Courageous Spaces

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Louisville • Kentucky

"Most of us believe that we effectively participate in dialogue with others, and in fact, we usually are trying to do just that. However, there is much more to effective dialogue than we realize. Kimberly Danielle helps us enormously in teaching us the Nine Asks. In uncertain times, the community may be the answer, and effective dialogue is the vehicle to be in the community. *The Nine Asks* should be read by everyone interested in more sane and life-affirming communities."

—Phil Cass, CEO, Columbus Medical Association

"*The Nine Asks* clarified for me all that Danielle worked to achieve as she guided our organization to a better cultural state. I believe a higher level of cultural competency can be mastered in any organization if the resources and concepts described and developed in this book are intentionally applied. This is a must-have book for any leader wanting to improve their company's culture."

—Mike Johnson, superintendent,
Liberty Union-Thurston Local Schools

"*The Nine Asks* is an invitation to a journey of personal and collective healing. I've seen firsthand how these principles can break down barriers and foster genuine connection, creating spaces where vulnerability thrives and understanding blossoms. This book is a must-read for anyone seeking to cultivate deeper relationships and build a more compassionate world."

—Amanda Golden, cofounder
and managing principal, Designing Local

"Bold and transformative, *The Nine Asks* redefines how we grow, connect, and create safer spaces. Danielle offers a clear and practical framework that allows readers to embrace self-discovery, meaningful change, and true humanity. For lovers of wisdom and those devoted to practicing authentic connection, this book serves as a guiding light. When we trust the spaces we inhabit and the people within them as contributors to our journeys toward healing and wholeness, we unlock the power of our stories to effect real change and speak truth to power. Whether you're taking your first step or continuing a path of growth, this is where the journey deepens—for yourself and the world you impact."

—Tanya McClanahan, Senior Administrator for Education
and Child Protection, Franklin County (Ohio) Children Services

"*The Nine Asks* is an important book that will allow you to discover you. Each agreement invites readers to embrace courage, humility, and accountability while navigating personal, cultural, social, and systemic dynamics. *The Nine Asks* equips you with actionable steps to be more—more authentic, more purposeful, more true. This book is your compass for transforming obstacles into opportunities and paving the way for a more inclusive and empowered future."

—Margaret Mitchell, CEO, YWCA USA

"*The Nine Asks* is a reckoning of innate deep dilemmas perpetuated by social stigmas and procedural practice. Danielle highlights the urgency of self-actualization while illuminating the realities of a dehumanizing society. Each chapter will cause you to pause in evaluating the state of our social emotional well-being while encouraging you to galvanize learning communities that protect these human experiences. This book is timely, necessary, and lifesaving!"

—Ruchelle L. Pride, director, Office of Justice Policy and Programs, CASA of Franklin County, Ohio

"We all want to be truly seen, heard, and loved in all aspects of our lives. *The Nine Asks* gives us a framework that, if practiced with humility, will build trust and courage in any relationship. This is not just a book that you read, put down, and then you're done. It's a manuscript to incorporate into our daily life practices for changing how we show up for others."

—Chip Spinning, executive director, Franklin County (Ohio) Children Services

"Danielle's book is a must-read road map to being your authentic self. An inspiring book with lessons for a lifetime."

—Stephanie Hightower, president and CEO, Columbus Urban League

To Estie, for exemplifying safety, unwavering protection, support to the point of sacrifice, and most of all, for giving and being everything I never knew I needed to feel at home

To my lineage, whose provision of ancestral wisdom, supernatural covering, and intragenerational prayers endlessly affirm my purpose and continual healing

Trigger Warning

There is sensitive content in this book that may trigger the reader, including references to racism, sexism, grief, community violence, police violence, childhood neglect, child trauma, family trauma, bullying, physical abuse, and suicidal ideation. If you encounter a topic that is emotionally challenging, it may manifest in feelings of discomfort and upset. Please take this warning into consideration. Your holistic wellness matters.

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PART ONE
CREATING THE CONTAINER

CHAPTER 1

Why Sharing Stories Matters

The Nine Asks were born from "the village"—the strangers, neighbors, friends, and family we do life with every day. In 2010, I hosted my first learning community as an administrator in a college setting with about twenty-five very demographically different people on the theme of identity and belongingness. Before we commenced conversation and the yearlong experience, I asked what participants needed to feel authentic and to be themselves. They looked puzzled and stunned by the inquiry. Some were immediately uncomfortable. In retrospect, I presume they desired and expected to have good conversations but had no expectation of—or practice with—how to be real and go deeper in fellowship with strangers. However, the only way for genuine community spaces to be archievable is for the container to transform into more than a surface-level conversation in a random moment. We had to be different, and we had to do something different. We had to be better versions of ourselves *for* ourselves and one another.

The good news is that these kinds of experiences are not exclusive to academia. There is an invitation for these moments to happen all around us, all the time. If it is true that we can constantly learn and evolve in the practice of being human, it could be proposed that all shared spaces with other people are like "learning communities."

In these learning communities, we pull apart and put back together different layers of our identities. We do so through the application of tools to enrich conversation and reflection. We slow down our thinking and learning mode to look a little deeper into our personal stories, especially as they relate to our multifaceted and intersectional lenses through which we make meaning of and understand the world. The better we understand ourselves and one another, the better odds we have of being more "radically compassionate" (in the words of Dr. Tara Brach) and more just with ourselves and one another.

One of the many challenges in the practice of social justice work; diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) work; or healing work is being asked or expected to make the learning opportunities as quick, succinct, and surface-level as possible. Some want the work of building the container and making spaces safer, braver, and more courageous to be something that can be checked off a to-do list. How does one talk about trauma in an hour? What is the best approach to facilitate a conversation on implicit bias and systemic oppression in a way that will not offend the delicate nature of someone considered to have disproportionately larger amounts of privilege and status? When is a good time to point out when someone or something is moving in a way that is cognitively dissonant? How does one get from point A to point B in spiritual evolution without getting dirty and messy along the healing journey?

The Nine Asks are not simply a list of words on a piece of paper to be posted on a wall and referenced in case of a human-systems emergency. The Nine Asks is a living, breathing document. It is not a set of instructions for what to do when we get ourselves in trouble with other sentient beings but rather a way of being.

Why Trauma-Informed Social Justice?

Deep virtues and principles have become meaningless clichés to which we have lost relationship and connection. The African principle "it takes a village to raise a child" became a presidential campaign slogan. Technologies and businesses have been named after ancestral cultures and philosophies. Similarly, the lexicon for how to engage with other humans has become too overpopulated with jargon. Once a taboo and intriguing idea, "cultural compe-

tence" now has certificate programs and graduate-level coursework in business management curriculum for those interested in the business case for learning how to honor people and heritage. We attempt to "teach" people to be sensitive, tolerant, and accepting. Businesses can't even agree on proper and universally acceptable terminology, differentiating from cultural competence to cultural sensitivity to cultural humility. Whole departments now exist under the name of DEI or some blend of those words, implying warmth and concern for justice, but their execution typically resembles the most widely accepted and palatable version of human engagement work in the form of policies, practices, and procedures. While cultural competence and DEI efforts are a sign of progress, I implore folks to understand that this is only half of the job of honoring sentient beings. Cultural competence and DEI initiatives may address the present and future experiences people have in human spaces, but it does not address the much-needed attention of the wounds people already possess mentally, physically, and emotionally.

One strategy is not enough in navigating human spaces with effective compassion. Integrative approaches come closer to recognizing the complexity of our experiences and ways of belonging to one another. The act of using resources, services, and frameworks to address the hurts and harms of a person's past is a trauma-informed approach. Additionally, DEI may efficiently create a platform for recognizing folks' identities and unique needs. However, DEI often fails to take into consideration the presence and role of privilege and power and the ways in which both social structures can be misused and abused. Social justice takes matters of DEI a step further by creating space for the acknowledgment of both one's identity and needs as well as one's invisibility and denial of needs caused by disenfranchisement and disempowerment. Through infusion of both principles, trauma-informed approaches *plus* social justice efforts apply approaches, frameworks, services, and resources for individual, collective, and universal healing and resilience. When we trust a space and the people within it as contributors to and supporters of our journeys to be healthy, healed, and whole, we can better utilize our stories for good and change the world by speaking truth to power.

The Gift of Giving Our Stories

The first opportunity we are given to begin our own story-sharing process is in personal introductions. Arguably our most powerful moments exist in saying our names and declaring with pride and absolution who we are. Altruistically, we have the agency to tell people who we are and how we show up in the world the moment we open our mouths to speak. However, what we typically do, particularly in the career-driven and object-oriented culture of the United States, is tell people what we do or what we have. Whether coming across a new colleague at a conference, a fellow employee in the workspace, or even a passerby in leisure spaces, we often begin our exchange with others by asking, "What do you do?," or we volunteer information about our job. This is especially true if we believe that our job is important or fulfilling. However, our jobs are not *who* we are; they are *what* we do. Our jobs give us access to money so that we can pay bills. Sharing this information does not give someone a broader sense of what we believe we have been called to do in the world and why we say yes to that calling on a regular basis. We intentionally engage in superficial conversation because it's easier.

Chances are you have had a mentor or an elder instruct you to keep your personal and professional lives separate. This training has aided humans in being well prepared to share our success stories. We share all the lotus and none of the mud. All the roses and none of the thorns. All the beauty and none of the ashes. One could argue that the creation of social media platforms has exacerbated superficial, surface-level, and transactional communication. We may not know someone's motivation for life, their deepest inspiration, or the twinkle in their eyes that makes them genuinely smile. However, through social media and networking platforms, they may share where they work, what their title is, what they studied in school, and their level of educational attainment. Depending on one's comfort and transparency, we may even have an idea of the kind of home someone has, how their family members look, what kinds of objects and entertainment they spend their money on, and maybe a rough idea of their income bracket. While this information may give us context clues about an individual's book cover, it does not give us insight into the soul of their story.

The ugly truth is that most of us, by the time we reach adulthood, no longer seek a deep connection with folks. We reach a certain age and decide we have enough friends. Transactional conversation with acquaintances becomes exhausting. We don't even respond authentically to the standard inquiry, "How are you?" It takes too long to share. Nobody wants to hear the truth anyway. And depending on the level of drama and trauma in our families and histories, we even, at times, hide from toxic blood relatives and complicated friendships to delay or deny the risk of disappointment. Who wants to go through the discomfort of sharing your story, only to be obligated to other people's "stuff" in response and return? Sometimes it is difficult to face your own issues, let alone trusting and believing someone else will be properly equipped to hold space for your story. Adulting and human existence in general can be overwhelming. As one of my friends and colleagues often says, "People do what they can." We are capable of managing only so much physically, socially, emotionally, and spiritually. Once we reach the limit of what we can handle, the residue slips from our hands. Understanding emotional capacity on a basic level, we can find it challenging to entrust the innermost secrets and stories of who we are with folks whom we perceive to be neither interested nor able to handle the truth of what lies behind our masks.

The sticky wicket of not wanting other people's stories and not wanting to share our own stories is that it sentences us to the imprisonment of doing life with one another in ambiguity and cluelessness. I never truly get to know you, and you never truly get to know me. Therefore, it makes it almost impossible for you to treat me with care, love, and respect; and vice versa. It's easier for you to hurt me if you don't know me. If you perceive me as a stranger who is wholly and completely disconnected from you, you have no incentive for extending empathy and compassion. Instead, your representative crosses paths with my representative, neither of whom is our most authentic selves. We transactionally interact with each other and hope to get our basic needs met without seeking a relationship. We just want to be left alone in an existence where our neighbors don't know us. We avoid social interaction. We text instead of talk. We avoid

all opportunities to have genuine connection with others. We miss the mark of the experiment being social creatures. Ultimately, you don't know me, you don't trust me, and you are incapable of knowing my value or worth as it relates to who I am, why I exist, and what I believe my purpose is. You may know what you see on the outside, but without meaning or context from me, you will never know my why.

Why is it so difficult for us to share our struggle and survival stories? Are we afraid of being disappointed by others? Do we fear embarrassment if folks discover we're mortal and imperfect? Are we afraid of looking and sounding weak? Are we blocking the risk of feeling heaviness, shame, and guilt from which we have not yet healed?

What if, in telling our stories of loneliness, it made us feel *less* alone? What if sharing our struggle and survival stories frees us *and* someone else in the process? Could our stories be the levies that need to break and release the raging waters of the storms inside of us? Might we be good Samaritans through our stories with lighthouse anecdotes that serve as warnings for folks who are lost in darkness and need guidance to navigate a way to safety? Could the telling of our tales make us better bystanders? Is it possible that our survival imparted us with a responsibility to tell others that experiences are indeed survivable? What if the power to heal yourself and others exists partly by speaking the truth about your battles—won and lost—and how you made it over?

Receiving Stories with Grace and Gratitude

I can hear it now. Someone reading this has likely comforted a friend or loved one in said person's time of need and kindly extended the invitation to "call me whenever you need to talk!" You may have even been sincere . . . in that moment. Then the hour of need passed. A new day dawned, and on this new day, you have depleted your desire to be a support system. After your special moment of assistance and advocacy had its sunrise and sunset, have you ever evaded human contact as if you were the sole survivor in an elementary school dodgeball game? Have you ever avoided a phone call or ignored a text or email message because

you didn't want to obligate yourself to listening to someone talk? Are you reading this chapter right now instead of getting back to someone who believes you were really going to "call right back"? I get it; you're not alone.

It takes a ready mind and spirit to hold space for someone, especially if the conversation could be long or difficult. As adults, we manage so much to try to be well. At the end of a long day or a full week, we may have very little capacity to "get it right" in each of our relationships. But when and where we are able to listen, we can practice being *better* listeners. If someone has entrusted us with their story, we have essentially been asked to do more than just listen; we have been chosen as a recipient of the gift of their story. The sharing of deeper thoughts, feelings, and emotions is a sacred practice, and the gift of receiving these virtues should be honored as such.

As laborious as it may feel to hold space for someone, there will be moments when we must be present and do the work of centering someone else's voice. Sometimes it's not about us. We forget how incredibly difficult it is for someone to share. We might miss that when we have been chosen as a listener of someone's story, they are simultaneously choosing to be brave and courageous through vulnerability. It took guts for them to say *anything* at all. Are we up to the task of being worthy of their trust? Further, how do we equip ourselves to hold space compassionately and empathetically for a story of struggle and survival in a trauma-informed way?

Here are three suggestions on how to be gracious receivers when we receive the gift of hearing—and learning from—others' trauma stories:

1. *Receive the story as* their *truth.* Perception is reality. When hearing someone's story, the struggle or suffering they share may not sound as devastating to us. The solution or path to survival might be simpler, in our opinions, than what the storyteller might see. It's not our job to fact-check or verify elements of the story. We have no right to assume they are exaggerating, blowing the experience out of proportion, or being dramatic. Being a trauma-informed person means

no gaslighting. (Gaslighting is a form of psychological manipulation where an individual tries to confuse or convince their target that what they felt or experienced is not real.) We have no right to tell someone their trauma did or did not happen. It means not giving opinions on whether we believe a person was right or wrong. We were not asked to critique folks' lived experiences; we were asked to listen, and we were trusted to hold space. Listen. Hold space. That's it.

2. *Do not give suggestions or advice (unless asked).* No one knows a person's story better than the person who lived it. How can we begin to tell a person what they should have done? How they could have better responded? What they should have noticed or perceived? And the absolute no-no: what we would have done. In the moment someone shares their story with us, be present in noticing there is a sentient being with feelings sitting in front of us, asking us to show up for them with empathy and compassion. It's not our story; it's their story, and they are sharing what happened. Past tense. Our job is to support them in the present tense.
3. *Keep the storyteller centered in* their *story.* It is possible that there could be instances when a story is shared with us, and it triggers our own thoughts, feelings, memories, and emotions. Their hurt might remind us of hurt we have felt and might even take us back to the pain. It is also within the realm of possibility that their pain might recall ways that we caused someone harm. It is human nature to not want to imagine ourselves as the perpetrator of pain or the recipient of pain. Though it can be difficult, we must regulate ourselves enough to have empathy without making the moment about us. We must find a way to show compassion and understanding even in moments when we want to defend ourselves or others in the story. We must remember this is not our story. We are the receivers, and the storyteller is the author as well as the main character.

It has become easier to believe there is no worth or value in deeper connection, but that's not true. In the spirit of the Zulu principle of Ubuntu, which believes "I am a person through the existence of other people," we must believe in the power of being connected to and impacted by one another. Humanity is worth the labor of creating safer spaces. And those spaces are reliant on our investment in our stories—and one another.

CHAPTER 3

Ask #1
Be as Honest and Vulnerable as Possible

Think about how many transactional and surface-level conversations we have on a daily basis. Some of us are so desperate to avoid having conversation of any depth, meaning, or value that we isolate ourselves and avoid human contact even in public places. Have you ever taken the stairs to avoid riding in an elevator with others? Do you make a beeline for the self-checkout lane in grocery stores to avoid trivial conversation? Have you ever hoped your potential plane or train seat neighbor misses their trip so that you can travel alone in peace? If you said yes to any of these questions, don't feel bad. You're not cruel; you're human. How curious it is that humans have been designed to be social creatures, and yet, more often than not, we do everything in our power to avoid human interaction?

Ask #1 is to be as honest and vulnerable as possible. Of the Nine Asks, the request for people in human systems to be transparent and ready themselves for real conversations is paramount. This is arguably the most important Ask. If we don't get Ask #1 correct, the other Asks do not matter and are not possible. Ask #1 sets the tone for the conversation. It is the entry point into the invitation for authentic human engagement.

Red Light: What to Stop, Look, and Listen For

Meaningful conversation does not have to be operationalized or micromanaged. And it doesn't have to be weird. Human beings and our stories are fascinating all by themselves. Make room for people to blossom, especially if we desire to genuinely connect with others, and let simple connection be enough. It can be a stretch to push past our discomfort. In fact, in many cultures—including and especially in US culture—deeper, non-surface-level conversations can be perceived as awkward and abnormal. The practice of Ask #1 battles a general and ongoing resistance to feel our feelings and to expose our feelings to others. Might any of the following roadblocks be in your way of practicing Ask #1?

We don't want to feel our own feelings. For some, deep feelings—especially if they are distressing—are not to be revisited. We may know that emotions exist underneath the surface, but we may experience apprehension in sitting still in the feelings. It is easier to be transactional. It is simpler to get the work done without human relationships. However, suppression of emotion over time can make us sick. Although our feelings may not be comfortable or pleasurable all the time, allowing them to be felt and released is key to holistic wellness.

We don't trust people with our emotions. If I do not trust myself with my own emotions, then I most certainly will not trust anyone else with them either. Some people have had sincere disappointments after trusting that a person was a safe space for them to share, only to find out the person did not have capacity to be a worthy recipient of their thoughts and feelings. While we have rights and reasons for why we may not trust certain individuals with our thoughts, feelings, and emotions, it ultimately hurts only us in the end if we never make any attempts to trust anyone with anything. Humans are designed to be social.

We fear falling apart and not being able to pull ourselves back together. Many folks are afraid of losing control should they express their emotions and then not being able to regain control. The good news is that our bodies are designed to heal themselves when we are hurt. We have the potential for our brain functions

to recalibrate after emotional moments. And what if the parts of us that we are worrying about losing need to fall away or shed for us to grow?

We don't want to feel weak or dysfunctional. The desire to be strong in appearance is one that many can understand. This false sense of strength and security is especially prevalent in BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and People of Color) communities and especially among women in racialized non-white bodies. The laws of nature teach in very explicit ways that harm and even extinction can be the results of weakness and dysfunction. It is in our best interest, we believe, to appear as healthy and strong as possible. However, no one is strong all the time.

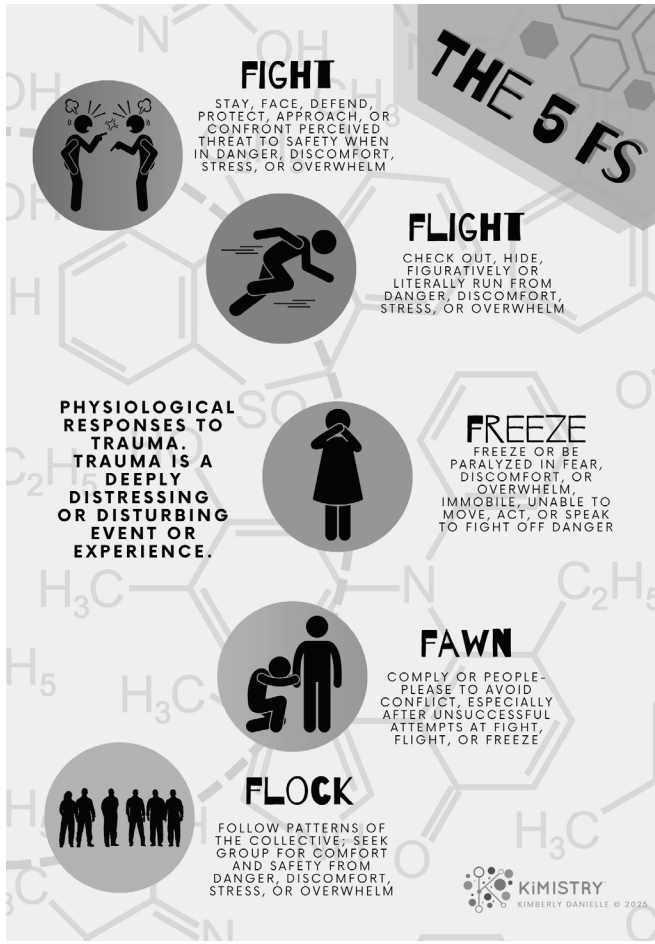
We don't want to feel unrelatable. In our original states, none of us desired to be outcasts. In fact, in our early days, our safety was incumbent on us fitting in with the group. Standing out was dangerous. Sometimes standing out and being perceived as othered *is* dangerous. When we have the experience of being unrelatable, it can feel isolating.

We don't like feeling helpless, needy, and incapable of taking care of our problems. Helplessness—whether real or perceived—can feel petrifying. Sometimes opening up to reveal your deepest, darkest secrets also exposes one's ineptness. For most, there is a comfort in feeling as if things are under control. Unfortunately, sometimes we just aren't OK. Sometimes we need help to become regulated, rebalanced, and stabilized. It is not possible for us to do it all on our own.

We are in the practice of supporting others but not being supported. Caregivers, go-to people, and leaders tend to have difficulty opening up and being vulnerable because we are simply out of practice. We don't ask for help; we supply the help. We are very rarely checked on by others, though we make it our business to ensure the needs of everyone else are being met. If you are not in the practice of being checked on and taken care of, not being open or vulnerable may be a manifestation of not being *asked* to be open and vulnerable over time. Giving others our talents, time, and treasures is principally a good thing. However, if we condition ourselves and others to expect us to only give and never receive help and support, then extreme caregiving can

become a liability to our personal wellness. Unfortunately, we can train ourselves and others that our stories and needs are not important enough to share in comparison to others.

We fear our emotions will be weaponized against us. Heaven forbid we open up and get vulnerable with the wrong person, only to have said individual use our words or actions against us. The experience of betrayal, harm, and manipulation is a paralyzing hurt. When the tension goes beyond mistrust and transitions into threat, the five *f*'s (fight, flight, freeze, fawn, and flock) kick in. Trauma triggers activate our mind's best attempts at implementing coping strategies to save and protect us when a perceived threat presents itself. Trauma elicits five emotional responses which we cannot prevent or control:



Fight: Confront the threat
Flight: Run away from the threat
Freeze: Get stuck when facing the threat
Fawn: Give in or give up to the threat
Flock: Follow group action amid the threat

The five *f*'s are physiological responses to trauma, and when activated, they send us on an emotional and behavioral cycle that is difficult to interrupt. Our brains do what they must for our perceived protection. For some, protection means never again opening up or trusting anyone with our thoughts and feelings.

We don't want to be associated with stigmas and stereotypes. Although there is no such thing as normal, in so many ways, we try to have a semblance of a normal life. The perception of normal is what is most widely accepted and, therefore, protected and kept safe. The admittance that we are slightly adjacent to or, for some, far from normal can be a very dysregulating feeling. Abnormal identity and behavior are almost invariably stigmatized and stereotyped. Humanity has a well-documented record demonstrating risk for a life of lower quality or harm when stigmatized and stereotyped.

We don't know how to go deeper, or there's nothing deeper to access. Though there is often more to an individual than meets the eye, most do not dig deeper and search for reasons why they feel how they feel or do the things that they do. Many accept their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors at face value and believe that there is not a more substantive cause. They might just believe that "it is what it is and it ain't what it ain't."

Yellow Light: Proceed to Practice with Caution

Practicing Ask #1 has one major ingredient: trust. Before going any further, it must be boldly and clearly stated that no one owes us anything—including their trust. We have not automatically earned folks' confidence in us, and subsequently we do not automatically earn folks' stories. There is an opportunity to earn trust in every moment and in every interaction. Without trust, there are no safer, braver spaces. Without trust, there is no value in the Nine Asks.

The routinely displayed effort of earning trust is the linchpin to all functional relationships in human systems. Once we earn trust, we can attempt to be honest and vulnerable with other people. But how do we practice the virtue of gaining others' trust on a granular level?

Practice Example: "Open Hands, Open Hearts"
After the third disturbingly emotional prayer service in a month, Abby, the committee chair of the women's ministry, invited a special guest to present on trauma and healing. Abby introduced Deidre, the speaker, with a personal testimony of their work together, and Deidre made her way to the podium, welcomed by cordial smiles and golf claps. The attendees were prepared to tune out, when the speaker got their attention by going against protocol and asking, "Is it OK if I come closer to you and don't stand behind the podium?" The crowd cautiously nodded in approval. "Squeeze your hands in a tight fist," Deidre requested of the attendees as she walked to the center of the room. The women acquiesced as sixty seconds ticked by. Noticing their growing discomfort, she explained, "Some of you want blessings and gifts placed in your palms, but you can't receive them if your hands are clenched shut." A few of the women sat up in their seats. She then asked the group how they were doing but called for them to answer by reflecting on how their bodies felt. Brows furrowed and lips bunched, twisted, and pulled to one side. They had not considered any links between their dispositions and physical states.

Deidre asked again, "Where do you feel the stress of the last few months in your *body*?" She scanned the room and made eye contact with the women. As they touched their bodies and mumbled, she affirmed them and called out their responses. "Yes, your shoulders," to a woman in the front. "Your back, mm-hmm," to a church mother near the exit door. "You feel it in your head? Sure," she affirmed to a younger woman near the refreshments table. "Ah, your chest. Yes," she acknowledged to another in the rear. Deidre inquired further and asked if anyone experienced strange body aches with no medical diagnoses. More raised their hands. She then asked about how folks were sleeping. As she prompted them, looking at the women and talking to them directly, they softened and began conversing with her. Deidre then confessed about how stress and trauma had impacted her respiratory system and led to her treatment for skin disorders and insomnia.

The women viscerally reacted. Some froze; others stirred in their seats. Most were uncomfortable with the vulnerability, but all were fully attentive. She carefully balanced information dissemination on physiological manifestations of stress and inheritable trauma with responses to their inquiries. When the room felt tight with emotion, she made space for it by either pausing or verbally acknowledging the tension and discomfort she sensed among them. In moments when she recognized the room needed bravery, she offered tender narratives from her own life and family. When she made room for compassion, they inched closer to her energetically. The more she offered, the more the women shared. The deeper she divulged in content, the further the women sought to go in their revealing—eventually in both verbal and written formats. Some spoke with trembling voices. Others shed tears silently in their seats. By the end of the event, the women prayed over one another, talked in small groups, and waited for individual time to hug and chat with Deidre privately.

What happened from the start to the end of this women's ministry meeting that shifted the mood of the room? The answer is Ask #1. Was Deidre a phenomenal orator? Not necessarily. However, Deidre knew that Ask #1 and its implementation of honesty and vulnerability would be the dealmaker or deal-breaker in gaining trust and connectivity with the women. She applied several elements in her practice of Ask #1 that sped up the process of rapport building. Let's examine how she did it.

Beginning the practice of Ask #1 can be rough and rocky. Deidre recognized that although the women chose to come to the meeting, they were emotionally guarded. She used multiple conversation prompts as opportunities to invite the participants to engage in dialogue with her (and even with one another). Sometimes the spirit or energy between people speaks at a much higher volume than verbal language. These moments require us to pay emotional attention to the presence of nonverbal cues. Deidre acknowledged the subject matter was difficult. She paused when she noticed their faces and bodies were communicating messages that words could not convey. She respected their depleted capacity and allowed the room to adjust when vulnerability felt heavy.

Sawubona is a South African term from the Zulu culture. Its translation means, "I see you." This meaning is deeper than literal

optics of visually seeing a person. It involves feeling and receiving the human existence and the beingness of the person in front of you. The response to Sawubona is Shikoba. *Shikoba* means, "I am here." The relationship between Sawubona and Shikoba means, "Before you saw me, I did not exist." The practice of Sawubona and Shikoba is to make people feel visible and seen in a deeper way. Deidre repeatedly conveyed to the women that she saw them, desired to honor their whole existence, and wanted to hear their real stories.

Repeating back dialogue to a storyteller is another way to demonstrate active listening and mindful presence. Deidre repeated back descriptions the women used to communicate their physical aches and pains. Then when the conversation grew personal, she attempted to share what she perceived as the intention and emotion behind their words and gestures. "When you shared _____, I felt _____." In doing so, she demonstrated the impact and value of their vulnerable stories on her. Deidre listened curiously and affirmed their bravery. There was no pressure to share *anything*, nor was there pressure to share *everything*. Some storytellers were just brave enough to tell the truth. A few storytellers were ready to be both honest and vulnerable about their emotional battles. Regardless of the level of depth, whenever someone spoke up, Deidre simply looked them in the eyes and replied, "Thank you for sharing." A statement of appreciation and affirmation can go a long way. She let them know how amazing they were for pushing past fear and being brave enough to explore sensitivity in the truths of their stories. She modeled that sharing stories can change lives and speak truth to power.

Green Light: Go Forth and Be Great

Being honest and vulnerable is hard and emotional. It is perfectly understandable that asking people to bare their souls (or at least their authenticity) is a tough request to extend to others. Sometimes deep discussions make challenging thoughts feel more real. It might evoke frustration to find words to accurately match feelings. For those who have experienced deeper hurts, harms, and traumas, the telling of stories and narratives can stir up emotional currents

that feel dangerous. Sometimes it evokes anger and tears. Saying a brave thing aloud may unlock discomfort and apprehensions folks don't realize they have or even fears they thought had been conquered but, in fact, have never truly subsided. Sometimes it takes real conversation to understand ourselves and to be understood by others.

Ask #1 does not require folks to be fearless in compassionately engaging with others; it asks us to do it afraid. Asking or telling someone to be unafraid can sound insensitive and may diminish the involuntary but very real somatic and physiological experience of our feelings of fear. We may not choose to be angry, nervous, sad, uncomfortable, or threatened; however, logic, reasoning, and others' (good) intentions don't change the reality when we feel heavy feelings. Instead of urging folks to be fearless, Ask #1 implores us to stretch ourselves to be a little braver when we are invited to gift a piece of ourselves to someone.

One of the most humbling and beautiful experiences is bearing witness to human beings who fight through fear to find their voices and share their stories. Sure, there is much at stake when weighing the pros and cons of being vulnerable *or not*. The good news is that in a safer, braver, and more courageous space, there are rewards for the risk of being vulnerable. The invitation to be open and transparent is less common than we might imagine. So many of us have innumerable examples of an awareness or belief that, "Nobody cares, nor do they want to hear the truth." Imagine, then, the phenomenon of folks coming together as strangers, contributing to the co-design and co-creation of a safer, braver, and more courageous space, and being transformed by the experience. Consider what a cathartic surprise it might be for a person to have no expectation of engagement or connection with anyone and then to feel seen by the exhibited compassion of a stranger. (Even people with whom we are familiar may essentially be strangers until we accept the opportunity to connect on a personal or deeper level.) Creating relationships, connection, and familiarity is an invaluable gift we can give to others all the time. Our reward is earning trust and, subsequently, one's authentic voice and story.

So much sensitivity surrounds our stories. They are deeply personal. Ask #1 is not requesting for people to bleed out their stories and divulge all their personal business. The DNA of our

stories includes the emotional equity of every experience we have ever had. Each reflection and memory, whether shared or sitting silent in our souls, has connections to arguably inexplicable feelings that are not necessarily ready to be offered for the consumption of others. For some, vulnerability feels volatile. It requires an incredible amount of empathy and compassion to be a worthy recipient of someone's story and voice. Sometimes we are not aware of the live, ungrounded wires in our stories: parts and pieces of loose and, at times, dangerous energy that has not yet been properly channeled. It is imperative that every story told be managed with the utmost care.

We are all worthy of being seen. Making someone feel seen and allowing their stories to be truly heard also brings transparency and awareness of their gifts, talents, abilities, strengths, and anointing. I have been humbled and grateful to be entrusted with stories of human perseverance, resilience, survival, grit, and personification of miracles. Some of my emergent teachers buried children, were formerly incarcerated, live with HIV and AIDS, battle mental health and mood disorders, immigrated from refugee camps, survived horrific abuse, and more. While these are harrowing tales, the vulnerability also shown a spotlight on their amazing grace. In speaking their truths, they began to recognize the tone, tenor, and melody of their memoirs.

Through regular practice and eventual embodiment of Ask #1, flat and transactional information can transform into manifested empathy, care, and compassion. Like Deidre, we can support people feeling seen, heard, valued, and appreciated. We can reverse doubt that we don't want and that we can't handle honesty. We can convince others that they are worthy of an audience and that their stories matter. The next time an opportunity presents itself to either listen or share sincerely, earnestly, and genuinely, embrace it! Hold the space. Be present in mind, body, and spirit. Imagine open hands and the precious gift of a voice being placed inside. Vow to let nothing happen to the gift. Hold the space and embrace the moment. We are ready.