



A Reasons to be Cheerful project

## Bridging Divides: Allison Briscoe-Smith (Clinical Psychologist)

*A crash course in reaching out to those who feel furthest away.*

**Scott Shigeoka:** I'm wondering, do you think trauma can support someone at being better at bridging differences? And why?

**ABS:** I don't like to frame it as "your trauma was a positive." But I do like to frame it in terms of the way that you survived, the way that you've coped, the way that you've been held in relationship might equip you with tools that help you to do things like be in relationship and to bridge. So I do think that's an option, right, it's a pathway that, people can take their experiences of trauma and what they've learned about the world and be way more compassionate or be way more understanding and empathetic.

I can think about a client, and actually many clients that I've worked with, where their experiences of harm at the hands of people that they loved allowed them to hold great compassion for what had happened to the people who harmed them, that they sought understanding. So that's an incredible skill that we're thinking about, compassion and empathy and how that might open up. Again, I'm not saying that you need to have those experiences to do that, but I've definitely been in relationship with some folks who've survived big traumas, who've come out of it really holding onto empathy in a different way. And I think that's a key skill for bridging.



Photo courtesy of Scott Shigeoka

**SS:** I think about even the work that I was doing as an artist or as a writer, going across the country and — I'm progressive and I'm queer, and I walked into churches and I walked into Trump rallies and, the difficulty and the challenge of listening while also holding that understanding that our points of views are so different. And I'm wondering, for anyone that has to do this kind of work in their professional life, or maybe even in their personal life or their families or their friends, do you have any suggestions or ideas on how we could approach these interactions of differences?

**AB:** Yeah. I think the big therapeutic skill that we often think about or what it is that therapists have to be trained to do is first we have to know thyself. I have to be really really aware of who I am. What are my identities? And what do they mean? When are they salient? Where are my own wounds and traumas?

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And then also getting to be grounded with: what's your value, like your values? Are you leaning into compassion? Are you leaning into listening? Are you standing up to fight against oppression? Those are which again, isn't mutually exclusive from compassion and empathy, but to be really grounded: who are you and what are you doing there?

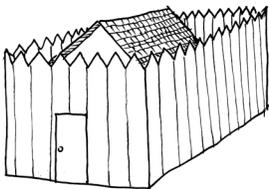
**SS:** It makes me think of how some folks have, they think that bridging means like giving up your own point of view, or it means like being complicit to a system or being complicit to oppression, but it actually doesn't mean that. Bridging is about holding your points of view, but also compassionately listening and understanding others.

**ABS:** So many people think, and I often think, I'm like, "Oh, there's a person who has different views than me. How do I reach out to them and thinking like, how do I reach out and convince them? How do I change them?" And then I think it's also the piece that's really complicated, which we think about in the context of therapy, which is that my job as a therapist is not to receive someone's hate, without boundary. It's not to sit there and have someone come and degrade me or cause harm to me or speak negatively to me. Because then I can't be of service.



Tim Dennell / Flickr (CC BY-NC 2.0)

So boundaries are really important there to protect oneself, but it's also, as you're mentioning too, boundaries about what we will receive on part of our ideas around social justice. How do we actually set those boundaries and knowing, okay, I'm bridging to connect and bridging to listen, but that doesn't mean that I have to give up myself, my identity or my values.



The last piece of what you're talking about too I think is: who's being asked to bridge? And I think so often we're in places that the people who have had the boot on their neck are asked to bridge, the people who've experienced the oppression are asked to bridge or asked or told that they have to.

So I think we've got to do a power analysis as we do this. Who's asking me to listen to their view and why? And who was asking me to reach out and why? And oftentimes, we're really hearing that it's the person that's on the downside of power that's being asked to yet again listen or hold or be quiet or not protest or not stand up.

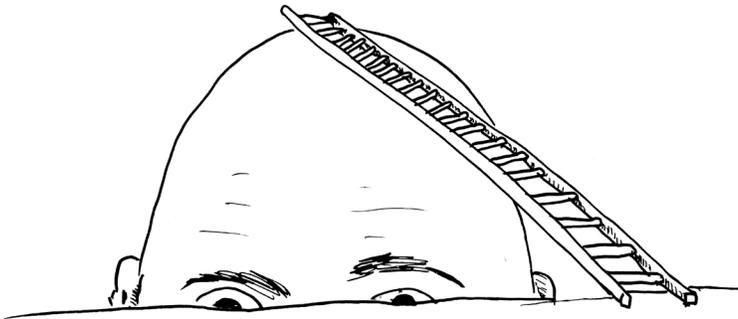
**SS:** Something I think maybe you could speak to is the fears behind bridging. Speaking to the fears of bridging regarding being rejected or not feeling safe or "is this actually going to work?" Can you speak a little bit to the fears that folks might have when they're entering these bridging conversations?

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**ABS:** Yeah, I think that's the thing that gets us a lot before we even think about bridging and, bridging as, "How do I speak to a person? How do I engage with the person or people with whom I'm really different?" And so I think that goes to, and especially in the context of trauma, our fear response. "Will I be rejected? Will I be hurt?" And I think that's both emotionally, but also for a lot of folks physically as well.



So I think in order to bridge, it's really a courageous act because you have to be able to articulate that there's something on the line, that if it was easy, then we'd all be doing it. It was easy to talk to people that have the opposite beliefs than you, then we'd be doing that all the time. And we're having this conversation because of our polarization and that it's easier to not be in dialogue. I think about that in terms of trauma. I think about that in terms of race-based conversation — that's where I help a whole lot of families and a whole lot of organizations. That people often for a long time have avoided talking about race.

"Oh it's a bad thing. I shouldn't talk about it. Colorblindness means that I'm OK, I don't even see it." It's all these ways of avoiding, which means that what happens is that people didn't become skilled at engaging in a conversation about a hot topic and meant that they didn't learn or practice. And so now here we are with people without a whole lot of skills around engaging in race-based dialogue or the whole conversation collapses because we were afraid of engaging in the first place, as opposed to, "I'm gonna take a risk, I'm gonna try it out. I'm gonna, I'm going to make a mistake."

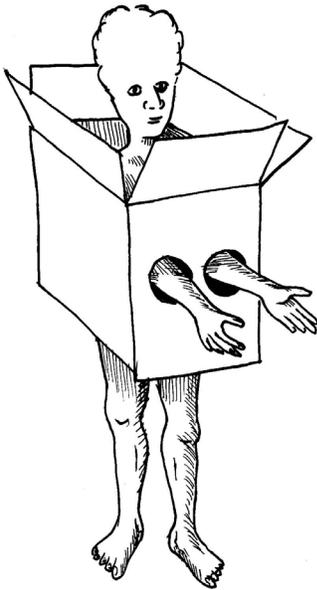
This is also coming to mind. I was talking with someone who was saying, coming from a really good place: "I just really want to make sure that I do this right, that I have this conversation right." And I think there's a way that we approach even bridging -- "I really want to do this right" — which constrains us to not being able to make a mistake or not be able to recover from our wounds. And I think to go back to trauma, I think, I'm in service with people who have undergone and who survived incredible traumas and they've survived all of that. So they also taught me that having off conversation is not the worst thing. Having a hard conversation where your feelings get a little hurt isn't the worst thing. So I think that's, again, a place that people with trauma might come a bit more equipped is that they have perspective about life and that having a hard conversation and not doing things perfectly isn't the worst thing.

**SS:** And so there's all of these risks involved with the work of bridging, and then there's this courage that needs to come from us in order to do the work. And so I'm wondering, like, why is it important for us to have this courage and to talk about race and to bridge differences. Like, why should we encourage others to do that?

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**ABS:** I think the evidence that we have right now is that not engaging in conversations hasn't worked. I think that we, I think, especially in the times of a pandemic and being separate from each other physically, emotionally, I think our relationships have become so important. They were important before, but to really feel it now, I think it's heightened. And then I don't think it's a coincidence that we're also having a national reckoning around race and how we treat each other at the same time that we're having a pandemic where our relationships are so important.



**SS:** I'm curious, is there a potential or an opportunity for healing from this work of bridging and what might that look like?

**Allison:** Not only am I convinced that it can happen, I demand it. It's a necessity. Because much like you, I come from backgrounds of people who've been oppressed. I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for the resilience of my great great great grandmother or the person who survived the middle passage. So I, as much as I'm overwhelmed by how bad things can get and disappointed in the polarization that we're experiencing that seems to be heightened, I'm also convinced and dedicated and tasked with ensuring that we do. And I think that's why bridging is so important. I think that's why a focus on what is positive and what it is there and what is available is so important so that we can connect.