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CHALK TALK: In a teacher's voice:

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Last week, all my classes watched a Ted Talk by Chimamanda Ngozi titled, "The Danger of a Single Story."

A famous Nigerian novelist, Ngozi warns her audience of the dangers of reading and writing a single narrative of a people or a place. Single stories are problematic because they create stereotypes and while Ngozi acknowledges that stereotypes have some truths to them, she also cautions us that stereotypes are incomplete narratives.

Offering examples from her own life, Ngozi points out times where she was both a victim and a perpetrator of the single story. When her college roommate asked to listen to her "tribal music," she was surprised when Ngozi produced a Mariah Carey tape. When Ngozi went to visit her poor servant's family, she was surprised that they could produce beautiful woven baskets, as her mother had only told her that the family was poor, and as Ngozi says, left no room for the idea that they could be anything but deserving of her pity.

After reading news and blog posts about Ferguson, I saw our nation falling victim to the single story. We were dividing ourselves along racial and political lines, creating black and white pictures of a complex issue. Watching conversations explode on Facebook, there was no room for stories where police officers could be both just and brutal, where communities of all colors and races could be composed of worried mothers, peaceful protesters, and angry rioters. Nowhere on Facebook, or in the media, could one support both police officers and communities of color. Whenever I tried to engage anyone in thoughtful conversation, they quickly found a label for me that allowed them to dismiss my words as a "white apologist" or a "sympathetic Democrat." These media narratives were reinforcing our differences, rather than our similarities, another danger produced by single stories.

My students also often fall victim to the single story. My first period journalism class gets assigned "News of the Day," where each student takes on the task of discussing a daily local, national, or international issue. Whenever students found news from the city of Springfield, it always had to do with a mugging, killing, or drug-related offenses.

After viewing this Ted Talk, we discussed how choosing our News of the Week could perpetuate a singular narrative. We talked about how the stories we wrote about our school and local communities had the power to offer our readers multiple narratives rather than a single story of the students, teachers, and our town.



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My ninth graders had just finished a unit on the Holocaust. I spent the duration of the unit complicating their stories. For most of their lives, they had been fed a single narrative: Jewish people were only victims or heroes, and the Germans were comprised of evil Nazis (who were anything but human) and German citizens who did Hitler's bidding out of total fear.

During a teachers conference last fall, I had the luck to attend a session held by curators of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The title of the session was "Some Were Neighbors: Complicity and Collaboration in the Holocaust." During the session, the leaders encouraged us to think of the Holocaust in terms of bystanders, victims, perpetrators, and collaborators. These groups were fluid, and at any given time could be comprised of both Germans and Jews. I brought this back to my 9th back to my grade classes this year, and we spent several days on the online exhibition at the Holocaust Museum, where students saw ordinary citizens (Germans, Jews, and others) become bystanders driven by curiosity, greed, and self-preservation.

They read of citizens who were complicit in looking the other way, and others who collaborated with German officers and then claimed, "I was just doing my job." We looked at photos of groups of people and discussed how bystanders condoned behavior simply by being present and watching silently. When students wrote their essays analyzing the motives and pressures of individuals in the Holocaust, they had moved beyond the "Jews vs. Germans" narrative with which they had entered the class.

The single story does not always manifest as a concrete unit or lesson plan. This year, two new students joined two different sections of my freshman English courses. Both are Hispanic, and both have come from rough inner-city neighborhoods where they live difficult lives.

My students, who are predominantly white, immediately showed subtle signs of being trapped in a singular narrative regarding these new students. They did not actively choose them for group partners, and when something of brilliance was said, it was dismissed, either by a non-response or someone saying a quick "yeah" and moving on.

I made it a point to mix up groups, and purposely highlight key ideas that arose from discussions where these students spoke up. During independent reading, I could see surprise on some of the student's faces when one of the Hispanic boys picked up the *Mortal Instruments* series and expressed interest in the book. I could almost read the inner-monologue in their minds — "Wait, kids from the ghetto like to read? And don't they usually like books about gangs, drugs, and basketball?"

They have bought in to the narrative fed to them by MTV, movies, and news media (and sometimes parents) about what kids from tougher parts of town are like. One cannot come from a rough neighborhood and be intelligent and want to do well in school! The singular narrative goes both ways. These two Hispanic students often complain to me that they are nothing like these "white rich kids who live on those houses on top of the hill." Each group has judged the other before they have truly gotten to know them.

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As teachers, it is our job to notice these singular narratives, both in our texts and in our classrooms. We must offer our students a variety of stories, where every student can appreciate each other for their differences and more importantly, connect over their similarities. We have to challenge students to look past the single narratives created by media, music, and our own ignorance.

The greatest obstacle to changing humanity is the ability to first see each other as human beings rather than Democrats and Republicans, Christians and Atheists, blacks and whites, Honors and non-honors, us and them.

As Desmond Tutu writes, “My humanity is bound up in yours, for we can only be human together.”

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