

# THE SEEDS AND ROOTS OF CONNECTION

By Drea Gallaga

This fall, at the school where I teach, we've been discussing and practicing civil discourse skills with our students. To counter the divisive time we're living in, we've asked our students to practice conversations about topics such as race and politics that are traditionally called "difficult," but which we're working to norm calling "unpracticed."

The two most important guidelines for these conversations have been "put relationships first" and "practice radical empathy." With these principles, we have fundamentally held community as our highest value. Why? What is it about a culture of connection that allows us to change? Why should social entrepreneurship education in particular be concerned with lifting up connection and community as guiding, fundamental principles?

Building a relationship-based community requires that we see each other as members of the same group, bound by threads connecting our hearts and minds. When your thread is pulled, it tugs at mine. Even when we have different experiences and perspectives, and even when we can't actually see the connection, we are still inextricably tied together. Understanding that we are truly interconnected is not an intellectual exercise: this understanding calls me to see and appreciate how you and I are different, and it allows me to be seen by you in turn; it demands that we recognize each other's pain, practice compassion, and then, take action.

Becoming an expert in empathy and relationship-building is a life-long journey, and I know the work we've done this fall is only one step. But I also know that learning how to build a connected community will allow my students to do authentic and impactful work in the world through social entrepreneurship, service, and community engagement--and that this will reach into their daily lives too. As we learn to be changemakers, our search for vital, lasting, equity-centered change can sprout from our interconnectedness. In this way, we can all co-create the world we want to live in.

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Once upon a time there was a humble weaver. Every day, she fingered warp and weft, wrapping strand around strand, making structures where there had been only threads, focused solely on this work.

One day, she saw the selvages were rough, were uneven, the edges drew her in, she loved those raw, uncertain margins, knowing they were evidence of her work and the work of those who spun the thread.

Because of that, she paused. And she looked beyond the fabric in front of her to see those to whom the garment would be gifted, and she dreamed of what it would take for them to love the whole as she did, the warp and weft and the selvages. Because of that, she said to the spinners, what is your story? And they brought her the greatest diversity of thread, an ecosystem of fibers: thick, rough, smooth, bulky, wooden, soft, silver, rainbow, and she took those and wove and wove until her fingers were raw and the garment flowed with stories.

Until finally, she learned enough to pause again and say, Once upon a time there was an artist, a crafter, a weaver of practicality and of beauty, in the margins and the whole.