

Brief Encounter with the Taos Institute

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“That’s Just Your Story”



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Like most people living in cement forests in big cities, I always dreamed of having a small yard full of flowers, bathed in rosy morning clouds and sunsets, watching the flowers bud and bloom. This dream finally came true in the spring of 2019, after we moved from the 29th floor apartment of a skyscraper in central Nanjing to a small villa in the suburbs.

After settling down, our new life began and my husband was keen to begin gardening. He also liked flowers, and soon I could see the results of his efforts: a yard full of different colored and types of flowers. I wasn't happy! The garden looked so disorganized and incoherent. And there were even white gardenias, a sign of bad luck in traditional Chinese culture. I tried to persuade my husband to change his planning, but he didn't seem to listen. My impatience grew, and finally he responded “That’s just your story” and walked away.



In the days that followed, we didn't speak to each other, each thinking the other unreasonable. Slowly we also realized that the sentence “that’s your story” has two meanings. Yes, it can be a way of dismissing the other, but for a constructionist it is to recognize the possibility of multiple realities. And in this recognition we also reduce the tendency to blame each other or ourselves.



So we began to dialogue. My husband first explained that, “If we plant only one or two kinds of flowers, we are likely to have flowers blooming in only one season. But my hope is that we can enjoy different flowers in different seasons. Moreover, flowers of all colors and appearances symbolize the richness and happiness of life.” All of this seemed very reasonable to me, and I began to soften. Then he asked me, “Why do you prefer such order and uniformity over variety?” Here I had to reflect. As a female, I was taught from an early age to keep my living environment clean and tidy. Chaos and disorder were always criticized as uncivilized and unsanitary, while simplicity and consistency represented purity and cleanliness. And in my academic community, I had come to appreciate the values of simplicity and consistency in research.

After listening with respect and voicing our understanding of each other's thinking, we became creative. Why not combine our perspectives? We could have a variety of different flowers in the yard, but on the fence around the yard, we would plant only climbing roses. As for thinking that white flowers are unlucky, we also agreed it is only a superstition. Later we even planted some vegetables and fruits. Most important, by listening with curiosity to each other’s stories our partnership blossomed.



I also shared this story with my students and many wrote to me about how it helped them. A student who had been frustrated by her grandparents’ frugality with food, wrote about how it encouraged her to listen to her grandparents. “After I heard the story of their starving, because of food shortage when they were young, I understood their treasuring of food.” A student who had been treated harshly by a supervisor wrote of her discomfort, until “I used this sentence to effectively protect myself...I said in my heart, ‘that’s your story.’ And with a smile on my face, my mood mellowed.” To understand the possibility of multiple stories is invaluable.