



PRACTICING WITNESSING

This is a lesson on deep listening and is a good intergenerational exercise.

ENHANCER OF JOY

Playfulness

DURATION

60 minutes

LESSON DEVELOPED BY

Courtney Goto and Lakisha Lockhart

TIPS TO PREPARE

Before facilitating this module with youth take a moment to recall when you were a young person. Remember a time when you were in transition and needed someone to hold you lightly in that moment, someone to not pre-determine or misuse you but rather help you grow and to truly see you. If you did experience being held lightly, you might have experienced it as something God-given. Did you feel seen, as if someone was able to give back in words and/or action some of the truth or beauty of your life? Did someone offer observations of the things they noticed taking place in your life? Would that have helped you on your journey toward adulthood? Take a moment to record your thoughts and feelings about this experience and these questions in whatever form you prefer. Now shift to thinking about what your group of young people might be experiencing in their lives. How might you be able to hold them lightly and aid them in holding others and themselves lightly through witnessing their life and offering observations? Take note of your discoveries, ideas, and concerns. *While we believe this module will aid young people in holding lightly through witnessing, we also encourage adjusting the module according to the cultural, physical, and communal needs of your adolescent community.*

MATERIALS CHECKLIST

- Paper
- Writing utensil for each participant
- Writing surface

SETTING THE ATMOSPHERE

- Create spaces for pairs of people to be able to talk together and hear one another clearly and

without distraction

SCRIPTURE FOCUS

2 Corinthians 4:18

Purpose

This is a good intergenerational exercise in deep listening. In witnessing, adults help young people to realize more possibilities than they might have imagined, and vice versa.

Objectives

Participants will be able to:

- Understand and discuss what witnessing means.
 - Draw upon the experience of giving and receiving witness to others.
-

Introduction for Leaders

It is important to note that in Christian contexts, witnessing often refers to giving public testimony about one's faith. However, we are using the notion of "witnessing" in a different sense. In terms of cultivating playfulness, when we "witness," we tell people what we observe from our point of view. In other words, we lend a different and ideally a broader perspective. We do so not to challenge or compete with what they see, but to see what they see and see some additional things. By witnessing someone's experience and enlarging it, gently, we help them know what they see is seen but also help them see a bit more. In witnessing, adults help young people to realize more possibilities than they might have imagined, and vice versa.

Gather

Gather (10 minutes)

Warm Up: The Machine

When to Use:

This exercise works best with an intergenerational group and can be used effectively with a multicultural group. The activity can also be used beyond this module for youth and/or adults to begin to think about other perspectives and viewpoints.

Introduction:

- Making a Machine^[1] is a theater tool that is used to get the entire body moving and to build creativity and group cooperation.
- This exercise is designed to help participants become aware of varying perspectives and understandings. As persons of different generations, we often do not reflect on our different or similar perspectives on life.
- This exercise is meant to encourage participants to make contributions in a space where every person's offering is welcomed rather than evaluated or challenged.
- This exercise can reveal a great deal about how persons feel about different concepts or ideas.
- This activity can also aid in community building among all participants as they begin to notice that some of them may have similar perspectives regardless of age.

Directions:

- In this exercise, participants will take either of two roles: (1) those who aid in building the machine by acting as its mechanical parts and (2) those who bear witness to the machine being made, taking note of how the machine works.
- Designate what machine participants are to build (e.g., build a person, build a church, etc.) or ask the group what they would like to build together.
- Once the machine is chosen or decided, invite anyone to start by performing a simple, repeatable movement accompanied by a matching noise that brings to life the "machine" being made. Ask the volunteer to continue repeating the sound and movement.
- Invite the next person to attach him/herself to the first person (like parts in a machine) and also perform his/her own repeating movement and sound. Then others join in (connecting to other parts of the machine that are already in place) until everyone who wishes to be a part of the machine has joined.
- For those witnessing, invite them to take mental and/or written notes about what they are noticing about this machine.
- Invite those in the machine to hold their poses while taking a moment to observe what is going on around them.
- Then ask participants in the machine to turn their bodies toward one another, giving them time to notice what they are seeing and hearing.
- Then invite the parts of the machine to turn their bodies away from one another, again taking time to observe.

Discussion:

- What did they hear and see?
- What similarities and differences did they observe, if any, in how people of different generations expressed themselves in the machine?

- Did they learn anything new about someone else in the group or themselves?
- What did they learn, if anything, about the nature of the machine?

^[1] This is a variation on the “The Family” game in Augusto Boal’s work. Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed* (New York: Urizen Books, 1979).

Engage

Engage (30 minutes)

Activity 1: Talk Story

When to Use: This exercise works best with an intergenerational group and can be used effectively with a multicultural group. This exercise can also be used beyond this module for youth and/or adults to practice witnessing and listening to stories and perspectives of others.

Introduction:

- For this activity, witnessing takes the form of what Asian Americans, who have borrowed from the Hawaiian tradition, call “talk story” or storytelling.^[1] Talking story is a practice of faith in which people give narrative accounts of grace-filled, breakthrough moments in everyday life. Deborah Lee writes, “Talk story reflects on defining moments that have shaped lives and asks, What have I learned? How have, I, [my family,] my people, or my community been transformed? What have I learned through my experiences about love, loss, God, and goodness? Where has there been evidence of Spirit on the way?”^[2]
- In a youth ministry setting, talking story would be practiced in response to what a young person has shared. After listening deeply and well to young people, telling a story in return can provide seeds that might be potentially used by them, not by telling them what to do, but by evoking imagination and opening up the world.

Directions:

- In intergenerational pairs, invite participants to practice “talking story,” describing what it is and the context from which it comes.
 - In the first round, invite Partner 1 to talk for three minutes without interruption about an issue or situation that bewilders or frustrates them.
 - Partner 2’s task is to listen deeply without interruptions or commentary.
 - When Partner 1 is finished speaking, Partner 2 may ask only clarifying questions to make sure Partner 2 understands the issue or situation.
 - Invite Partner 2 to tell a story in response to Partner 1’s concern, using the set of questions provided:
1. Tell a three-minute story about a defining moment in your life that relates to the issue or situation you heard your partner describe. What was your situation?
 2. How have you, [your family,] your people, or your community been transformed? What did you

learn, particularly about love, loss, God, and goodness? Where was the evidence of Spirit?

Remind participants that the purpose of talking story is not to tell a partner what to do or how to do it, but to share a story that suggests that the teller is mindful of the partner's concerns.

In the second round, Partner 1 and 2 switch roles.

^[1] In the African American community Anne Streaty Wimberly has developed something called story-linking which is very similar to Talk Story. Anne Streaty Wimberly, *Soul Stories: African American Christian Education* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005).

^[2] Deborah Lee, "Faith Practices for Racial Healing and Reconciliation," in *Realizing the America of Our Hearts: Theological Voices of Asian Americans*, eds. Fumitaka Matsuoka and Eleazar S. Fernandez (St. Louis, MO: Chalice, 2003), 154. Lee writes about talk story as practice that facilitates racial healing and reconciliation. The reference to family is added to make it more relevant for working with youth.

Reflect

Reflect (15 minutes)

- What was it like to receive someone's story in response to their sharing?
- What was it like to come up with a story in response to their partner's sharing?
- What challenged or surprised them?
- How does their experience deepen or challenge their understanding of "witnessing"?

Send Forth

Send Forth (5 minutes)

- Invite pairs to end by giving gratitude for the sharing and witnessing of stories.
- Invite them each to offer a special prayer for his/her partner.
- Close with a group prayer