

Book of Fundamentals Episode Three:

“The First Conversation: Exposure and Engagement”

Episode Summary

In this third episode of The Book of Fundamentals Podcast, Emma talks to Roz Eaton, a Dean of Students at Saint Olaf college. Originally from Worthington Minnesota, Dean Roz describes her experiences growing up in a small town in Minnesota. This is the first of three such conversations between a member of our team and a small-town Minnesotan. These exchanges of experiences are meant to both serve as an example of how difficult conversations could be initiated and to demonstrate the variety in responses based on individual understandings of the world. Episodes three, four, and five are all based in the same series of questions, yet each discussion turns in a different direction. We welcome you to join us as we continue to introduce some key aspects of holding these different conversations.

Key Points

- As a child of immigrants, Dean Roz was exposed to a large number of immigrant families new to the region. Her parents were recognised as being “white” enough to understand the ‘native’ Worthington population, but because of their accents, they were assumed to have an intrinsic understanding of the ‘outsider’ experience.
- Worthington had a significant immigrant population, especially with industries related to agriculture.
- There’s a pride associated with being an immigrant (or a child of immigrants), but also a desire to “fit the mold” of “being American.”
- The exposure to different cultures that schools provide means that interacting with people who look, act, speak, or think differently is less challenging for children, no matter their background.
- As an adult, exposure remains the most productive way to learn about a new culture, even if that exposure is brief: “...frequenting the businesses, getting to know the business owners, getting to know the people in the churches...”
- Engage to the extent that someone can engage; introduce yourself and get to know the people around you.
- Avoid assumptions, don’t be afraid to clarify: “It’s critically important to understand that you’re not dealing with somebody who doesn’t know things. You’re dealing with somebody who’s just moved into a new culture”

Episode Details

Worthington, Minnesota

- Population ~11,000
 - Vietnam War: Fluctuation of Cambodian refugees
 - Schools were a majority non-white → Difficulties with racism
- Private (religious) school and public school
- Several churches in town

Growing up a child of immigrants

- Lots of exposure to immigrant families and populations
- Desire to maintain the connection to “where I come from” → “How do you grow up in a family, in a household with immigrant parents, what does that mean?”
- There weren't a lot of active discussions about ‘what it meant to be a child of immigrants,’ but it's difficult to ignore that experience.

Mindful community building

- Agriculture / meat packing plants provided job opportunities for immigrant populations
- When younger, exposure to new cultures is less shocking and difficult to mentally manage.
- “When does the community stop calling me an immigrant and start calling me a citizen in this town?”
- How are your biases shaping your understanding of immigrants?
 - The perceived difference between individuals renting versus buying homes

Episode Three: Transcript

Emma: Welcome to another episode of our book of the fundamentals podcast I'm Emma and in this episode I will be interviewing Roz Eaton, a Dean of Students here at Saint Olaf. So, this conversation is meant as a way of engaging with our audience by learning from individuals about the context of words and language and communication, specifically in regards to immigration, understanding immigration, and the presence of immigrants or migrants in our communities.. especially the small town communities. So, the next couple episodes for this podcast are meant to give an example of how people may understand each other by talking to individuals such as yourself who grew up in smaller towns in Minnesota, where there might be differences in understanding and interacting with other people and communities. We want to try and talk about those and gain a better understanding of what your perspective is, and what your experience was. So, thank you for joining me today! I am appreciative of your time and your willingness to engage in this kind of conversation, because like we've talked about in former episodes, that's kind of the entire point of this. First and foremost, could I ask you to give a little bit of information about the town you grew up in?

Dean Roz: So I grew up in Worthington Minnesota, which is in the southwest corner of the state. The population at the time I was growing up there was about 11,000 people. It was the county seat, and well I guess we had one private school, the church had a private school up to the age of— I think it was just elementary— and the rest of us were in 2 elementary schools, public elementary schools. And we all came together in the same junior high and high school. So that's sort of the nature of the community. We had a lot of churches in town, the Catholic church, the Presbyterian church, 3 Lutheran churches— 2 of them were, I believe, ELCA, and one was Missouri Synod, there was Baptist, there was Covenant, I mean, there were a *lot* of churches in town.

Emma: So, part of what we've been discussing as part of this project is mindful community building and engaging with members of the community that you might not have done so before. Thinking about Worthington, what would you suggest that people should keep in mind, just specifically about your town?

What aspects of your town are things that people should know if they were going to go and engage with their neighbors, what would you say about your community?

Dean Roz: Well, it's been a long time since I lived there, and my perspective on that community was as a child growing up in the community. And the community actually has changed since the time I left. I left there in the early eighties to go to college. Since then, I think— well I don't know, and I don't know how much of it belongs to 'this is what happened' and how much was 'I wasn't conscious of it when I was growing up there.' The number of— the immigrant population has expanded considerably.. And I think, it's only hearing from people who stayed in the town.. but there's a meat packing plant, so a lot are coming through there.

When I was growing up, there were refugees— Cambodian boat people— I remember as a kid hearing that. The international kids that came to school with us, that's where they were coming from that I can have a conscious memory of. So again, I've been gone a long time and I'm not somebody who has stayed heavily involved. I have friends who still live there, and I know that they have now.. that elementary school that I went to, y'know I told you that there were two public elementary schools— they have now combined. There is one that they built, a new one on the south side in what used to be a corn field when I was a kid, and that is I think one of the largest— I think it's one of the largest elementary schools in the state.. definitely the most diverse.. I don't remember the last I knew.. But someone who was my next door neighbor growing up— she taught in that school. She's retired but: The white students were in the minority in the school. And so what I've seen over the years and heard over the years is— there have been some trouble with racism. If you've done any research on Worthington, there was a New York Times piece, interviewing a last driver.. So, it's.. It's divisive.

As a kid growing up there, I would tell you I didn't see a lot of it, but I was a white kid growing up in that community I was also a child of immigrants, so a lot of the immigrants or visiting international people came to my house because my parents were, you know, they were immigrants. So people would say: "oh hey there's somebody coming to visit!" So they all, I mean, they were at our house for dinner. There's a community college there as well, so.. the community college is working on: How do we create a work force the industry would want? What kind of industry is interested in southwest Minnesota, would be an industry that's connected to agriculture and biotech. So, what I've seen is the community putting in effort, and they are specifically, they say: 'look we got a high immigrant population; people who are available to work in these industries and if we are providing the training, then the industry, ideally, the industry finds this community more interesting.. because we have a trained workforce. So I am seeing that, as well as seeing the fussing around, the "This doesn't makes sense, this was our community and now other people have come in and it's changed.."

Emma: You keep talking about community and that's fantastic, I love that. You also mentioned that when you were younger you didn't necessarily notice, because you were interacting with these individuals, these immigrants as well as just the regular population, I assume.. Do you feel like at all when you were younger, that there was any sort of divide that exists between these 2 communities? Even if you ended up sitting at some sort of branch point, or starkly on one side or the other, you keep saying "community" but did you feel like there was a cohesive "set" that you can point to? Or was it more: 'there are these immigrants who had just come' and there is the 'native population' of Worthington?

Dean Roz: No, I didn't feel that. As a kid it was just: You go to school, and here are the people who were in school with you. And you might know, there might be a new family that arrived in town? My memory is that they came through the churches, that the churches were really working hard to bring, you know, to help refugee families come into the community. And as a kid, it was just: "Okay. Here is a new kid in the classroom." So I don't have a memory of it being "us and them." It was just sort of a "Here's a new kid in the class, okay great, let's, you know, here we go." And so I don't remember that much from childhood, I have been more aware of it as an adult who left, and maybe it's as the immigrant numbers get bigger.. could be a change in who the immigrants are, could be part of that as well.. Because the immigrants that I described was more southeast Asian, whereas when I left it became more Hispanic.

Emma: Do you— we keep talking about immigrants, and as I mentioned to you before we started recording this, the term "immigrants" is one of many that can be used to refer to groups of individuals who have moved to this area, and one of the things that we've discussed in former podcasts is the fact that: these kinds of terms are often used as being placed *upon* those populations. We say you're an immigrant because that word fits you at some point, right? But at what point does that necessarily no longer apply? You know, if someone has— you mentioned your parents are immigrants— do you still think of them as immigrants? Is there a point when these individuals should no longer be falling into that category, does that stay with them permanently, or are they just 'citizens of Worthington' now?

Dean Roz: My parents, in my mind, were always immigrants, have always been immigrants, well, they're American Citizens now. But growing up in that household, there's something about that, there's a pride and compassion that wanted to be retained. Like: "I will retain this connection to what I come from," so— I just actually had this conversation with someone else about: "How do you grow up in a family, in a household with immigrant parents, what does that mean?" So, I think there is, I have to think there's a bit of a push and pull in that.. I as an individual may wish to hang on to some of my heritage, and also fit into the community in which I live. When does the community stop calling me an immigrant and start calling me a citizen in this community? I.. don't know when that happens.. I mean. To me, by virtue of: I'm an immigrant— I mean technically we all are— so I'm an immigrant. Who is now a member of this community... and I guess I don't know... you know, because I guess from the one perspective is from the outside, on the other one is from the inside... So I never would want to leave.

If, when I look at my parents and my friends who immigrated to the U.S., they don't want to leave that behind. They will bring their traditions and share their traditions. And in their mind, there is no; it's fine. I'm an immigrant, I'm born and raised here, and that's fine with me. But from the outside, if I'm being identified as an immigrant, is that a negative versus positive? I suppose it depends on *why*.

So I mean, I look at my parents when I, you know, I commented that my parents were immigrants in this community... They had different accents. And people would come to them and say: "Hey there's, you know, there's a visiting scholar from the Cameroon. We had a lot of people from the Cameroon, visiting scholars, and they'd go to church with us, we'd have dinner.. So I grew up with people coming through the house from all over the world, which, growing up in southwestern Minnesota, is quite a cosmopolitan way to grow up.

And so we were exposed to all kinds of culture. But that was *my* house. And that was dependent upon my parents. And I think people saying, “oh, they're an immigrant family who can understand the immigrant experience, let's make certain they're in touch with the immigrants..” So, I think my perspective is quite skewed that way..

Emma: I appreciate that, even if it is skewed, because again, not to overstate what we've already said multiple times, but a lot of this is just about, you know, how important having a conversation with someone is. So if what you bring to the table, what you bring to a discussion with someone is ‘well I had all sorts of people from all kinds of cultures that I was interacting with,’ you know, how does that shape you? And your ability to interact with different cultures now and today?

I did want to push back to one of the things you mentioned, which was that you were interacting with a lot of these cultures and that you had a whole mix of identities that were represented around you growing up. That may be an abnormality both in your time as a child and now but, Do you think that it was a positive abnormality to have that sort of influence and all sorts of cultures that you were exposed to? Are you grateful for that, or do you think about it at all?

Dean Roz: Yes, very grateful for it. I mean, that is, our perspective on the world is broader. And that's what our parents wanted. Our parents were very clear about that, having a broader perspective. If, you know, your parents are immigrants, and our perspective— they have traveled the world before— they, you know, each of them had traveled. Mom had physically traveled around the world before, and my dad had as well. So, they were very clear that: You get, this is an experience that is, you know, “We have this opportunity to meet people from all over the place.” I don't remember them saying: “Not everybody has this opportunity,” but I was aware not everybody has this opportunity, because, you know, people would approach mom and dad and say: “Hey, you understand this immigrant experience.”

My parents *weren't* the only immigrants in town, I do know that. But I wasn't talking with other kids about: “So what's it like at your house?” You can look at me, I mean, I fit in with everybody because I'm white, so look like everybody else. I'm not Scandinavian, but... It's sort of.. So, my own experience going out into the world— the small world—. The only struggles I had— not *only*, I didn't have the struggles of looking different from other people. I did have the: “Things at home work differently than what happened in other people's homes.”

Emma: We talked about, as part of this project, providing some sort of handbook, and how we can't really do that, but one of the things that we did also discuss in relation with that is the idea of “Caution signs.” You can't tell someone how to have a conversation because that depends entirely on the individual and the context that they're bringing, right, but what we *can* do is maybe point out a couple things that should be avoided. So in one the other episodes we talked about the words “assimilation” and “incorporation,” and how “assimilation” has a somewhat negative ring to it, because it means that you're erasing aspects of someone's identity so that they fit in with the broader group of individuals.. You've talked a lot about cultures interacting, and not necessarily mixing, but having a lot of exposure to other cultures.. And so along with that, I was wondering if you had anything that you would want to mention in terms of maybe a caution sign for someone

who is maybe not having the kind of experience that you had— you had a lot of exposure— for someone who doesn't, if they wanted to start these sorts of conversations, is there anything that you could point to and say: “maybe avoid this or maybe think about this before you start talking to someone?”

Dean Roz: So I guess, there was, you know, as you're talking about, we had families in town that had been there for generations— they're not immigrants. We had sort of— we'd grown up together, and to me, an immigrant is someone who arrives. At least, as of my experience, was arrived in my time, and came from a different culture. Well sorry, a different culture than Worthington Minnesota.

So how do you, what do I recommend, is the— again.. From my perspective as a child, it's “here we are in school together, we're doing things together. We go out, you know, you go out into the community.” Now my community, Worthington, has changed from when I was a kid, so you go to town and the businesses are different. And as an adult that is appealing because you go out and “oh, okay now there is a, there are a couple of restaurants—” we didn't have a lot of restaurants when I was a kid anyway, we didn't have pizza delivery, pizza in my town was frozen. There is— and it's been a few years since I've been back, but there is a bakery that I can go to, that you can go to this bakery and the baked goods that you can get are different culturally from the Scandinavian, German, Norwegian, and Swedish, which is what the community was heavily, settled by originally, at least in the time when I was a kid..

So I think it's, you know, frequenting the businesses, getting to know, getting to know the business owners. Getting to know the people in the churches, and I don't know how much the churches are populated— I don't myself currently go to church, but that was a place where, you know, as a kid it was in the schools, but it was also in the churches, where, you would see people who are new to the area, and then you would see the families helping, and saying: “well this family needs clothing, what have you got your house?”

I do, as you were talking, I remembered a comment from my mother: The people who had moved to town, who were newer in town, and were able to buy homes, that seems to be considered.. you know, because when they bought a home they were investing, and they were investing in their own home, they were investing in the community.. People who are coming in and renting, then it was just— and I think it would be, I mean, I remember associating in my mind: Well I guess that makes more sense, cause when you're renting, you're not as invested in your property.. which isn't to say: “oh, they keep their bushes neat and everything painted...” It was just, my mom's comment was along the lines of: “Well, you know, then you know you've got somebody whose intention is to stay, at least for a while, who is investing in the community, investing in the neighborhood.. is now a neighbor.”

The neighborhood I grew up in, there weren't rentals. The rental properties were in other parts of town, and even then I wasn't certain where they were because that wasn't... something... there's a little bit, I knew there were some rentals a couple blocks away... And by “rental” I don't mean that it was dumpy, I just... it was there...

So...I think, engaging them to the extent that somebody can engage, and if a new business arrives in town, to frequent the business. The new restaurants— I know my parents would say “Oh, there's this new restaurant in

town and we would go and meet our friends there.” There was an Asian restaurant that wasn't there when I was growing up, or say, Mexican restaurant that wasn't there when I was growing up.. Frequenting those businesses, and getting to know those people–

Emma: Just the exposure to them, that in and of itself.

Dean Roz: Right, yeah, and again, my parents are a little unusual, because they themselves were immigrants and my dad was a physician so he had most people coming to town, well anybody who came to his office, but... So I would say that, I struggle a little bit, even today when we have international students who may be supported by people outside of the institution, an American who wants to be very helpful– an American– Somebody who has grown up here, a domestic, and I won't say they themselves– at times can be overwhelming. I am the same way. You are the same, with “Oh! I wanna welcome you! I'm going to be super helpful!” And I may overwhelm.

And so I think, it is critically important to get to know somebody, you know, to introduce yourself to someone, to get to know them a bit, and then to ask: How is this going? I think we want to be helpful and offer our help, and that is appropriate, and how we do that is a bit of an art. Because it's also critically important to understand you're not dealing with somebody who doesn't know things. You're dealing with somebody who's just moved into a new culture. And remembering that is super important, as opposed to assuming: “well I know this place, and I'm going to get you all oriented, cause you know nothing about it.. Cause you must not have grass where you're from...”

So it's.. Being careful not to make assumptions. It's also– I would recommend, go out and learn a little bit. And be careful with what you learn, because if I march in and say: “Oh well, I see you're from Southeast Asia and you eat this, and I read that this is very popular there...” So it is.. You know, it is that art. How do you do that? And I think it is, it can become difficult for people– it's like “Oh gee, if it's so much work, why would I even try?” But I think, most people, fundamentally, are, you know, “I'm interested in knowing who my neighbor is. I'm interested in welcoming them. I'm interested in.. they can be helpful to me, I can be helpful to them.” You know, this.. mutual.. mutuality about us.

Emma: I really like that. Well, that was exactly what we've been discussing from the beginning, and I really appreciate how nicely you summarized all of that, and pointed out some of those key things that we do want to make sure that people are thinking about when they're interacting with these individuals, that they may or may not know anything about. So, thank you for that. I think that that wraps up our third episode of the Book of the Fundamentals ,and we're so thankful to have had you ,thank you for talking to me today.

Dean Roz: You're very welcome.