

## Strawberry process

During my time at Worldwork 2008 in London, knowing that our theme was *Doorways to Diversity: Seeking a Home in The World*, I was deeply aware we were in a London that is FULL of people of all races and cultures; I was also aware that there were British citizens, for whom this had always been 'home' who felt threatened and sidelined by all this 'foreignness'.

I wondered about how I, in the conference, found it so easy to talk with 'strangers' within the setting of Worldwork, and yet felt how different this was as I stepped outside the venue – when I was much more aware of personal space & boundaries, and the stereotype we in India carry of 'cold, unfriendly Britishers' ... and this gave a push to what can be called my 'Strawberry Process'! Here it is:

I would often go to Russell Square nearby to eat my packed lunch or store-bought salad, and some fruit - sometimes with one other or a few friends, a couple of times alone. One sunny afternoon, I found a place on the only bench that had one unoccupied space in a otherwise very crowded garden, and I noticed that the other woman - 30-something, light skinned, big briefcase, smart shoes - and I quickly checked each other out in sideways glances, but kept eating on in silence, staring out in front.

I thought to myself – “What the hell, I want to talk with her, why do I act so differently inside & outside the seminar; let's risk it...” and as I thought that, SHE turned and started up a conversation with me. She happened to be originally from Germany, and had lived here for 7 years; she felt people here were not as friendly as back home! Then she got up to go back to her workplace, and an elderly, large and jowly, very well (read 'expensively') dressed gentleman – now he WAS definitely English – took her place.

He did not even do the sideways-glance thing.

By that time I'd reached the strawberry-box course of my meal, and impulsively held out the box to him offering him some. For a full few seconds his jaw hung open, then he went “Are you sure?”, and when I nodded impatiently, he said – Ah how delicious this sounded I'd only READ sentences like this in books: “Oh, I don't mind if I do.”

I soon offered him another, and he politely asked if I'd like to save some for later, and laughed out loud when I said, “You know, I really don't like 'later'”, and had another strawberry ... and then told me that he was 84 years old, used to be a professor at the nearby London university of some science subject, that I can barely recall or pronounce, and today he had made a 2-hour bus trip here because a student of his was now the professor, giving an important talk, and he wanted to show his support for the 'young man'. Soon he got up to leave, “Mustn't be late now” ...walked off to the gate, but suddenly turned and came back and awkwardly gripped both my shoulders and smiled shyly into my eyes and went off. It just felt so good.

Later that afternoon, in my small group I told of my encounter, of how happy I was to give in to impulse to reach out, and we went on to talk of 'risking' – in all its different manifestations. On our last day together, a woman in my small-group brought a big box of delicious strawberries to share, to celebrate this event, she said, and our own coming closer together!

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