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## A Road Trip to South Dakota: Proof of Empathetic Human Hearts February 25, 2020

It's an office day and I have much to accomplish but before doing anything else, I need to report on my pro bono speaking trip to South Dakota last week. (And many thanks to The Transformation Project SD; the South Dakota ACLU; Sioux Falls Pride; and Equity South Dakota for sponsoring my visit!)

As many know from my social media postings and Ellie 2.0 radio show, I went to SD to speak on the need to protect younger transgender humans and on how all of us can get past "Othering" of any human. This was prompted by the SD Legislature's consideration of HB 1057, a bill that would have criminalized healthcare for any trans-identifying person younger than 18 years of age. Yes, as originally written, the bill would have made it a felony for doctors, nurses and other healthcare providers to provide gender-affirming medical care (such as puberty blockers) to younger transgender humans.

HB 1057 is part of a national effort, led by conservative organizations, to marginalize transgender persons. As of two weeks ago, there were twelve states where such bills had been introduced. Hopefully, none of those bills will become actual laws.

After HB 1057 passed the SD House, it was sent to the SD Senate. Fortunately, the week before I was to travel to South Dakota, the Senate killed the bill in committee—this came after intense lobbying by LGBTQ organizations and the business community; the latter got involved because of the message that the bill's passage would send (e.g. that SD is unwelcoming to LGBTQ persons) across the nation.

I still went to SD because year after year, anti-trans legislation has been introduced by a small group of state legislators. The constant marginalizing wears at the human spirit and I wanted to boost that spirit in South Dakota.

On the Friday the 21<sup>st</sup>, I met with LGBTQ students from Augustana University, a Lutheran-affiliated college, where we talked about challenges of coming out as gay or transgender. This came after having lunch with a 66-year-old transgender woman who came out as her true self two years ago. (We talked about the challenges of family members who are unaccepting or judgmental.) Finally, later that evening, I met with faith leaders where we talked about how they could be better allies to the trans community.

My talk on Saturday the 22<sup>nd</sup>, "Bridging Divides," was attended by approximately 60 people. In that talk, I shared how we humans face two kinds of divides—one division "Othering" is internal where we often think we're not good enough. I related that this in turn makes it easier for thought leaders to create external divisions/"Othering" of

humans who are “different” from “us.” I offered tips on how to reset the conversation and get past both divisions; additionally, the audience participated in an exercise where I demonstrated that actually, everyone (regardless of skin color, religion, LGBTQ status or anything else that’s used to “Other” people) has been made to feel “Other” in one way or another.

Apart from reporting on the above, I wanted to document something incredible that happened—or better put—that didn’t happen during my trip.

In the course of two and a half days in the state, I was able to give a radio interview on SD Public Radio ( <https://listen.sdpb.org/post/ellie-krug-bridging-divides> ) (the interview occurred while I was still in Minneapolis); I also was on a panel of trans folks and allies on SD Public Television’s “South Dakota Focus” show (that show isn’t yet posted online); and before I spoke on Saturday the 22<sup>nd</sup>, I was interviewed by the local television station, KELO (<https://www.keloland.com/video/bridging-divides-a-transgender-lawyer-brings-her-message-to-sioux-falls/4350545/> ).

During the public broadcasting shows, the hosts repeatedly reported that they were receiving comments from listeners/viewers. On the air, they shared some of the comments, which were favorable. Once we got off the air, I asked, “Okay, so now please share with me the hate comments you received.” In response, for both shows, the answers were, “None, Ellie. There aren’t any hate or negative comments.”

I thought, Wow. That wasn’t at all what I expected.

The KELO TV piece has generated a lot of views of my [elliekrug.com](http://elliekrug.com) website and several Facebook, Instagram and Twitter followers. Despite all of that, I’ve not received a single negative comment about me, my work, or transgender/LGBTQ humans in general. Again, that’s pretty extraordinary! (Although, frankly, historically I’ve not received many negative comments at all.)

Maybe the lack of negativity reflects that my message about compassion for self and for others is so universal that it’s difficult to take issue with it. As importantly, I’m viewing the positivity as more proof of something that I repeat often (including in SD): that the vast majority of humans have good empathetic hearts, and when called upon to exercise those hearts, we show up in droves. It’s just that fear and not paying attention get in the way of us showing our empathetic hearts.

My takeaway from South Dakota: people really want us to get past the things that divide us. Almost all of us want to live in peace—for ourselves and for others. This is a message I’ve been voicing for the past three years. My experience in the state to my west only reinforces the power of that message.

The experience also shows that I need to show up in new places more and more with a message of hope and believing in the good of most humans. You can be sure that I’ll continue to do that!

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