

00:06

All right, I'm going to go out on a limb here. I'm going to say that every single one of us in this room made drawings when we were little. Yes? Yes? OK. And maybe around the age of like, four or five or something like that, you might have been drawing, and a grown-up came over and looked over your shoulder and said, "What's that?" And you said, "It's a face." And they said, "That's not really what a face looks like. This is what a face looks like." And they proceeded to draw this. Circle, two almonds for some eyes, this upside-down seven situation we have here, and then a curved line. But guess what? This doesn't really look that much like a face, OK? It's an icon. It's visual shorthand, and it's how we look at so much of our world today.

01:00

See, we have so much information coming at us all the time, that our brains literally can't process it, and we fill in the world with patterns. Much of what we see is our own expectations.

01:15

All right. I'm going to show you a little trick to rewire your brain into looking again. Did you all get an envelope that says "do not open" on it? Grab that envelope, it's time to open it. Inside should be a piece of paper and a pencil. Once you have that all prepped, please turn to somebody next to you. Ideally, somebody you don't know. Yeah, we're doing this, people, we're doing this.

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(Laughs)

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Great. Everybody find a partner? OK, now look back at me. OK, now look back at me. You are going to draw each other, OK? No, no, no, no, wait, wait, wait, wait. I promise this is not about doing a good drawing, OK? That's not what we're doing here, we're looking, this is about looking. Everybody's going to be terrible, I promise, don't worry. You're going to draw each other with two very simple rules. One, you are never going to lift your pencil up off the paper. One continuous line. No, no, trust me here. This is about looking, OK? So one continuous line never lift the pencil. Number two, never, ever, ever look down at the paper you're drawing on, OK? Yes, it's about looking. So keep looking at the person you're drawing. Now put your pencil down in the middle of the paper, OK? Look up at your partner. Look at the inside of one of their eyes. Doesn't matter which one. That's where you're going to start. Ready? Deep breath. (Inhales) And begin.

02:51

Now, just draw but notice where you are, you're starting there and you see there is a corner, maybe there's a curve there. Notice those little lines, the eyelashes. People are wearing masks, some aren't, just work with that. Now just go slow. Pay attention and draw what you see. And don't look down. Just keep going. (Murmuring) And just five more seconds. And stop. Look down at your beautiful drawings.

03:20

(Laughter)

03:22

Right? Show your partner their incredible portrait. It's so good, right? I want to see them. Hold them up. Can you guys hold them up? Hold up, everybody. Oh my gosh. Are you kidding me? You all are amazing. OK, you can put your drawings back down, tuck them under, put them on the paper.

03:46

That was wonderful. I mean, they're all terrible, but they're wonderful. Why are they wonderful? Because you all just drew a face. You drew what you saw. You didn't draw what you think a face looks like, right? You also just did something that people rarely do. You just made intimate eye-to-eye, face-to-face contact with someone without shying away for almost a minute. Through drawing, you slowed down, you paid attention, you looked closely at someone and you let them look closely at you. Good job. I have found that drawing like this creates an immediate connection like nothing else. Alright.

04:32

So I call myself an illustrator and a graphic journalist. I draw, I tell stories. I spend time with people looking and listening. And I take the words of the people that I speak with and I put it together with drawings that I do, mostly from life, just like you all just did. I found that drawing like this does a lot of things that photography can't do. So when somebody points a camera at you, how do you feel? A little objectified, right? When I'm drawing, I hold my sketchbook low and it keeps an open channel between me and the person I'm drawing. A lot of time somebody will see me drawing and they'll get curious. They'll come over to me, and a real, authentic conversation begins.

05:18

Let me give you an example. So a while back, I wanted to do a drawn story about how the public library serves our elders. But after spending a few days kind of lurking around with a sketch pad, looking over older folks' shoulders and asking them what they were reading, I wasn't really getting the story. Until I stumbled upon Leah. Leah is the first, and at the time was the only, full-time social worker dedicated to a library in the nation. Turns out, public library definitely serves our elders. It is also a social service epicenter of a city. This is Charles. Charles works with Leah. And he does outreach within the library to folks who are experiencing homelessness. And he took me around, I carried my sketch pad and I was drawing everything I saw, and he showed me a very different library than I'd previously seen.

06:17

So computers that I assumed were for checking-out books, or, you know, looking at emails, were in fact a lifeline for folks who are searching for jobs and housing. The sinks in the public restroom, they are a laundromat and showers for folks who are sleeping on the street. A library is a safe, quiet place where anybody can go and find resources and rest for free. See, the moment I stopped looking for the story that I expected to see, an entirely new and richer truth was revealed. I found this to be true with everything and everyone I've ever drawn.

07:04

OK, so I draw from life, right, like you guys did. And so I built myself a mobile studio in the back of a swanky Honda Element -- So that I could go anywhere, talk to anyone at any time and then draw and paint and sleep in the back. It is very cozy.

07:21

I was on the road in Utah, drawing and talking to people, when I spotted on the side of the road a hand-painted wooden sign. It said "Bootmaker." I stopped. A tall, white, handle-barred mustache man wearing a cowboy shirt, opened the door and found me, a sketchbook-carrying, jumpsuit-wearing, urban, lefty lesbian, smiling like, waving like a dork.

07:47

(Laughter)

07:51

When I spotted the stuffed cougar on the wall behind him, this vegetarian thought she knew all she needed to know about Don the bootmaker. But there we were. So I asked him if he'd just show me quickly a little bit about his craft. He agreed. And we ended up spending the whole day together, as I drew out Don in his workshop, and he told me about the sudden death of his beloved wife, about his deep, deep grief, and about this hunting trip that he was planning, and so looking forward to taking with his son. Every tool in that shop held a story. And he was so, so happy to share it with somebody who was genuinely curious and interested. By the end of the day, Don and I looked very different to one another. And this drawing, which ended up in my visual column in the New York Times or as Don likes to call it, the fake-news media --

08:52

(Laughter)

08:55

now hangs framed on the wall of his big game trophy room.

09:00

(Laughter)

09:02

(Applause)

09:06

So I was getting ready to start on a new drawn story when the pandemic hit. And overnight I was, like so many people, just unable to do my job. It was my own mother who suggested that I teach drawing to kids. Kids who were about to lose their routines, be stuck at home, and to help give parents a much needed short break. Now I'm trained as a social worker, but I'd never taught kids before. But the night before school closures in San Francisco, I went on Instagram and announced that the next day we'd try something called DrawTogether. 10 am. I sat behind my drawing table in my home studio and my wonderful wife pointed an iPhone at me and pressed "Go live." And what I thought would be 100 kids, ended up being 12,000. All eager to draw a dog. The next day, 14,000 kids came and we drew a tree, and that drawing exercise that you all just did. What was supposed to be five minutes for five days, ended up being 30 minutes a day,

five days a week, for months. And yeah, we talked about line and shape and we learned about perspective and light and shadow. But what was really going on was we were actively looking our way through a global catastrophe together.

10:50

See, drawing slows us down. It keeps our hands moving so we can pay attention to things that we usually overlook or that we ignore. Studies show that drawing is one of the most effective ways for kids to process their emotions, and that includes trauma. It helps us talk about hard things. We say something in DrawTogether, it sounds hokey, but it is true. Drawing is looking and looking is loving. If we can give kids the right supportive environment, drawing helps them let go of perfectionism and fear of failure so that they, unlike you and me, and especially those of us who might have freaked out just a wee bit when I said earlier we were going to draw, right? We can let go of these harder self-judgments so we don't have to undo them later in life.

11:56

OK, I don't expect you all to become drawers. But I do know that all of us, kids, grownups, everyone in this room, we can all be better at looking. Because this is not a face. And when we live like this drawing, we miss out on all of the depth and detail of the world and people around us. This is a face. And this is a face. And that is such a face. (Laughs) And these are faces. And if you slow down, I promise, pay attention and really look. You will fall back in love with the world and everyone in it. And after the past few years we've had, I think we all desperately need a chance to look closely at one another and at ourselves, and tell the real truth about what we see.

13:04

Thank you.

13:05

(Applause)