OPTIMISM AND TRANSFORMATIVE DESIGN



Transformative Design, my class about design thinking that makes a real difference, run with Meghann (Dryer of IDEO) and Bernie (Roth of Stanford Engineering), opens again soon in the d.school.

I got thinking seriously about its themes this weekend at a fund-raising event organized by Castilleja School, where Helen teaches and Molly learns, on the theme of “Optimism” – engaging possibility. Optimism at the heart of social change.

Not inappropriate in these times.

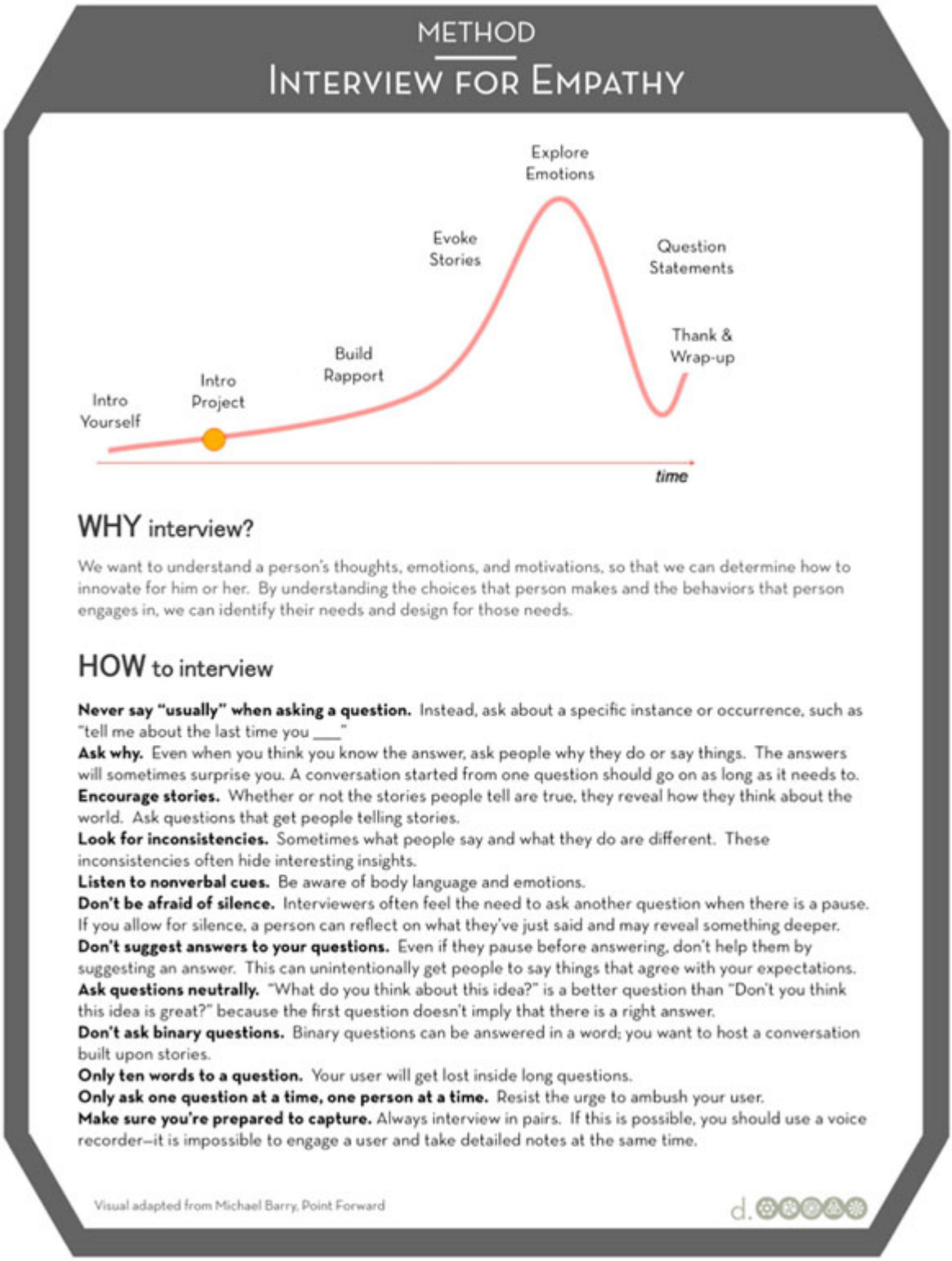
Zainah Anwar shared with us her great effort to create a feminist caucus in Islam.

Jill Tarter gave us a cosmic perspective with thoughts about the possibility of extra-terrestrial life (an optimistic counter to “The Day the Earth Stood Still”).

Cory Booker, Mayor of Newark, foregrounded listening in any address to social hardship. Classic anecdote – he visits a senior resident in a run-down housing project, wanting to offer help. She takes him out into the neighborhood and asks him to describe what he sees. Cory lists the problems, hardship, poverty, urban ruin, and, as he does, she grows more and more impatient with him, eventually saying he can do nothing for her. Why? Because, if that is what he sees in the neighborhood, that is what he will perpetuate. He needs to see the potential and possibility.

We heard Tim Brown (IDEO) on design thinking and the crucial importance of empathy, collaboration and risk taking, making mistakes – all key components of optimism.

Elizabeth Vargas, Anchor journalist with ABC News, did a fine job of interviewing.



Anna Deavere Smith wound up the inspiring evening with three of her monologues (she interviews and listens to people then acts out their words). They were about the way that struggle is at the heart of optimism – a mid-west rodeo rider's experiences of medical care (a flat rate of 1200 dollars to sort out the kidney the

steer kicked), a medic in a charity hospital abandoned by state and federal agencies in the wake of hurricane Katrina, a feisty feminist governor of Texas facing cancer.



This is extraordinary “documentary theater”. Anna is precisely the “representative”

– listening, respecting, conveying, authentically witnessing those whom she represents, in her own voice. It is a model of *political* representation

(Inspiring for the class – listen and witness in your design work, and also resonant for me, because my new book on the archaeological imagination has an extended discussion of eighteenth century debates about authenticity in the voice from the past.)