



# What Beautiful Eyes

## by Mike Fitter

Mandy and I facilitated the very first group. It was a group linked to a church in a large South Yorkshire village. We had been invited by the vicar. There were two sessions, each an hour and a half long, and about 2 weeks apart.

We really didn't know what to expect, we decided to go slowly, building a relationship with the group, finding out about the people there. After a while, we asked about how things were changing in the neighbourhood and learned that there was concern about the recent increase in new people in the nearby large town - people who were different, in particular people who were described as Muslims.

It felt that there was concern, but not antagonism. Then, a woman in the group said she had been in an NHS waiting room and suddenly realised there were two women sitting across the room with full face masks (niqabs). The woman telling us seemed agitated. I asked what happened. She said she had to leave the room. The way she said it, it sounded like she had had a panic attack.



**Who is Your  
Neighbour?**

[whoisyourneighbour.org.uk](http://whoisyourneighbour.org.uk)

For more information, please email  
[communications@whoisyourneighbour.org.uk](mailto:communications@whoisyourneighbour.org.uk)



## after a pause....

After a pause in which we all took in what she had said, I asked:

“If you had not had to leave is there anything you would have said or asked?”

She replied:

“I’d have asked, ‘Are you a man?’ ”

There was a silence in the room. Then she added:

“But the first thing I noticed was ‘what beautiful eyes you have’ ”.

After we had all got over the surprise, people were curious about what we had heard. The woman explained that she had recently read in one of the national daily papers that Muslim terrorists were dressing up as women to disguise themselves. That is why she had to leave. The group was then able to talk openly about their experiences and how these can be influenced by what they read in newspapers. It felt important that the woman had told her story - sharing it, which she hadn’t done before, enabled her to be less entranced by it. It resulted in people being more open to meeting people not like them, and this was discussed in the second session.



**Who is Your  
Neighbour?**

[whoisyourneighbour.org.uk](http://whoisyourneighbour.org.uk)



## reflecting on what had happened ...

Afterwards, when Mandy and I debriefed, we saw the significance of what had been said. The first experience (beautiful eyes) had been of an experience of shared humanity. But this was quickly overlaid by a media story (Muslims are around and potentially dangerous). Divisive narratives have their impact.

This is why *Who is Your Neighbour?* had been established. To enable people to share experiences that concerned them, and to become more curious, lessen the grip of the divisive narrative.

And a final point about silence. This can be a positive sign, in two ways. It can mean that people are listening, not just waiting for a pause so they can speak.

And it shows that people may need to time to take in what they have heard if important, perhaps surprising, things are said.

The silence following the surprise answer:

“Are you man?”

to the question:

“If you had not had to leave would have said or asked anything?”

supported and enabled the woman to go deeper into her memory and to tell us the first thing she noticed, “What beautiful eyes”. Otherwise, this might not have been expressed. It was a transformative moment in the conversation, and for the speaker.

It is a role of facilitators to value and support this by ‘holding the silence’. In our culture we often feel uneasy with silence in a group and jump in. Some silences are more profound than words.



**Who is Your  
Neighbour?**

[whoisyourneighbour.org.uk](http://whoisyourneighbour.org.uk)