

Facing the Fear

WHITE LEADERS, DIVERSE COMMUNITIES, AND RACISM

By Patti DeRosa

I live in a suburban community south of Boston, MA that is celebrated for its racial and ethnic diversity (37% people of color, 63% white) and lack of residential segregation. On every block, in every part of town, people of different races live side by side. This is a significant accomplishment and a tribute to the dedicated community activists who made it happen. Yet, a closer look reveals that as in most communities and organizations in the United States, institutional power remains firmly in white hands.

This raises important questions about how white leaders of increasingly diverse communities can be equitable and effective leaders for all the people whom they serve. In my 25 years of studying and teaching about racism, I have found that whenever the subject is raised, predictable obstacles and barriers get erected—most often by white people, whether they be corporate executives or community leaders, social workers or teachers, employees or community residents. They are expressed most intensely not from the overt bigots and haters, but from the “good guys,” the white folks who want to do the “right thing,” and who believe themselves to be caring, open, and fair-minded people.

While this discussion is intended for white folks, people of all backgrounds may find the suggestions valuable and useful. And, as I too am white, I will often use the term “we” to include myself in what I am asking of others. I believe that for white people to be responsible and ethical leaders, we need to:

Face our fears about dealing with racism

When racism enters the picture, white people often panic—we get flustered, defensive, confused, and nervous. We are terrified of having our biases revealed and exposed, to ourselves, as well as to others. But, like pollution in the air, racial conditioning is pervasive, and none of us can remain untouched. The worst sin is not in recognizing the potential racism in our own attitudes and behaviors but in denying the possibility—indeed, the inevitably—of its existence.

Our fear and defensiveness causes us to either try to avoid the racial aspects of situations or to shut down the conversation entirely—thereby controlling the agenda of

what is permissible to discuss. The end result is that racism does not get addressed. Rather than getting defensive when people of color, or other white people, challenge us about our racism, let’s try embracing it as a gift that moves us closer to authentic dialogue and racial justice.

Expand our definition of racism

One reason white folks are so terrified of being called “racist” is because of the way that term is usually defined. If we think of racism as being about bigoted, hate-filled, and violent people, it makes sense that most would want to distance themselves from that label. Racism, however, is much more than that. Being “taught to see racism in individual acts of meanness, not in systems conferring dominance” on our group limits our understanding of racism.¹ This dominance can be as mundane as easily finding “flesh-colored” band-aids that more or less match white skin or as pervasive as the security of knowing (without ever once having to consciously think about it) that the majority of our prominent business and political leaders are likely to be white, just like us. Neither situation requires the individual white person to hold any racial prejudice themselves—the system just works in our favor, as it has since our nation’s founding, regardless of our personal beliefs or actions. This form of racism, known as “white privilege,” is essential to understand.

When white folks are truly honest, we know that there is more “grease on our wheels” just for being white in this society—regardless of how hard we worked for what we’ve achieved, regardless of how poor we are, and regardless of the struggles our European immigrant ancestors faced. I know that I benefit from racism every day—even though I have spent most of my personal and professional life challenging it.

Defining racism as only individual acts leads to only individual solutions that are insufficient to solve a systemic problem. Defining racism as an entire system that works to either advantage or disadvantage gives us a new road map, which is more historically accurate and less personally condemning. Defining racism as personal prejudice and hate is like saying the world is flat—you can only navigate so far with such a limited map before you become stuck.

Learn how to listen

It is often difficult for white people to listen, without judgment, when people of color share their stories and experiences. We rush to debate, rather than understand, the perspectives of people of color, and pay attention only to gather enough information for our rebuttal. Our responses all too often fall into predictable categories, of which I offer only a few:

1. False parallels (“The same thing happened to me...”)
2. Inverting the injustice (“By bringing this up, YOU have offended ME...!”)
3. Outright dismissal (“Race had nothing to do with it...”)
4. Minimization (“It really wasn’t so terrible...let bygones be bygones”)
5. Righteousness (“I’m a good person so I can’t be racist”).
6. Colorblindness (“People are people. I don’t see color.”)

Rare is the white leader who suspends their disbelief and asks “What would it mean if what I am hearing were actually true? What would it mean if all this was happening and I have been blind to it? In what way am I contributing to it? How can I make a difference?” Authentic listening, with the goal of truly understanding and trusting someone else’s viewpoint, is sorely needed.

Educate ourselves

White people have strong feelings about race, but simultaneously have little accurate knowledge that informs those feelings. We define racism on our own terms, and think we know it all, when in reality, we know very little about what racism is and how it operates. Arrogance and ignorance is a deadly combination.

White people must educate ourselves about our own and others’ cultures and histories. People in dominant social groups tend to have little insight into their own identity and status, and tend to think of themselves as somehow “neutral” while everyone else “has an agenda.” In addition, they generally have little more than a superficial understanding and knowledge of the cultures and peoples around them. That means that white folks, especially leaders, need to work harder and make conscious, and conscientious, efforts to learn about themselves and the people they serve. Reading an occasional article or talking with that one Black, Asian, Latino, or Native American friend (yet once again) just won’t cut it (and it also annoys the friend!).

Know that good intentions are not enough

We’ve all seen (or been) these folks. These are the white folks that when racial conflict arises, exclaim “But I didn’t mean to offend or exclude anyone.” They are the ones who list their “non-racist” credentials and say,

“But I marched with Dr. King!” or “My niece is Black” in an effort to exclude themselves from the possibility of being racist. These things are usually said by people who believe in their hearts that they are not part of the problem, using the D.E.N.I.A.L. method—“Don’t Even kNow I Am Lying.” They mean well, and really do not mean to reinforce racism, yet their denials just get them deeper in the hole.

But, intent does not equal impact, and contact does not equal equity. You would not trust your health care to a doctor filled only with good intentions, but no serious training and study in medicine. And if contact, or even love, alone meant justice, then sexism would have been long gone because men and women have lots of loving and intimate contact, yet gender equity is still an illusive goal.

Our “good intentions” all too often create or exacerbate the very problems we claim we want to solve. “Good intentions,” without committed and vigorous reflection, knowledge, and action, are major obstacles to racial justice. Regardless of our intent, we are responsible for the very real outcomes of our actions on people’s lives.

Be courageous

True courage is not acting without fear, but acting despite fear. Like childbirth, learning about, facing, and challenging our own racism can be an extremely long and painful process—but what a gift we receive, and can share with the world, when we courageously push forth.

If we are to be true to the values of justice and equity we claim to hold, we must make a sincere commitment to diversity and inclusion and admit that having all white leadership is not acceptable in our diverse communities, nation, and world. White people must re-learn most everything we thought we knew about racism; share, and relinquish, power and control; support, respect, and trust the leadership of people of color; and work to build alliances across difference. Our interdependent multicultural future depends on it.

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NOTES

¹ McIntosh, Peggy, “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack”, in *Peace and Freedom*; July/August 1989.