



Reflection, connection, action

We need to open our eyes to address racism in our society

I realize that I have lived in a white bubble for a long time, and it is now that I am breaking the bubble, my mind and my heart wide open.

About six weeks ago, I joined a Conversation Circle through Professional Dimensions, an organization of 360 diverse women leaders in the metropolitan Milwaukee area committed to supporting one another in our personal and professional growth, while utilizing our

*“Our lives begin to end
the day we become silent
about things that matter.”*

— Martin Luther King, Jr.

collective resources to enhance the lives of women and girls in our community.

In 2006, a small group of PD members, led by Gwen Jackson, Mary Dowell and Pat Gorence, came together to explore how the organization could take a leadership role in making a sustainable difference in our community on the issue of racism. Drawing inspiration from the mantra “Reflection, Connection, Action,” committee members set out to create spaces for brave conversations to occur through facilitated Conversation Circles with a small group of racially diverse women in one another’s homes. Ten years later, I offer musings from my limited experience in a Conversation Circle.

I didn’t know what I didn’t know. I thought I was “evolved,” open, aware; and at the same time, I knew I had so much more to learn.

I believed for a long time that “white privilege” meant white people who were born rich.

Since that wasn’t my experience, “white privilege” didn’t apply to me or my family. I grew up in Wheeling, West Virginia, and later in a suburb of Pittsburgh. I had no lived experience of a racially diverse community.

In many white circles, I hear statements like: “My parents and grandparents were poor. They needed to work hard to take themselves out of poverty. Why can’t black people do the same?” Or, “White lives matter, too.” Or, “How can they complain about police brutality when the percentage of black on black violence is so high?”

In the Conversation Circle, I have been introduced to a history that I did not recognize because it is a history that white people are not exposed to, and therefore we cannot appreciate the ways our past influences our present.

James Baldwin, American writer and social critic, wrote in the 1960s: “People who imagine that history flatters them (as it does, indeed, since they wrote it) are impaled on their history like a butterfly on a pin, and become incapable of changing themselves, or the world. This is the place in which, it seems to me, most white Americans find themselves. Impaled. They are dimly, or vividly, aware that the history they have fed themselves is mainly a lie, but they do not know how to release themselves from it, and they suffer enormously from the resulting personal incoherence.”

Tim Wise, passionate speaker and author of a number of books, including “White Like Me: Reflections on Race from a Privileged Son,” suggests that unless we are willing to interrogate our systems and understand our history, we will continue to rationalize racism. We will continue to ignore the facts that:

- » Black men and women with a college degree are nearly 50 percent more likely to be unemployed than white people with college degrees.
- » White households headed by a non-college graduate have, on average, twice the net worth of a black household headed by a black college graduate.

If we are not willing to interrogate our systems and understand the truth of our history, we will ignore the fact that no white person wonders if he or she has been stopped by the

police because of the color of his/her skin; denied a bank loan because of the color of his/her skin, etc.

If we don’t understand what came before, we cannot appreciate what is happening today.

We cannot understand an uprising against police brutality if we don’t appreciate that unarmed blacks are three times more likely to be shot than their unarmed white brothers and sisters.

I am grateful for what I am learning in the Conversation Circle, and it is hard to face the reality that my lack of awareness has contributed to ongoing racism.

This experience has been an invitation for me to break open the bubble. This article is an invitation to my white brothers and sisters who have power and influence to consider a serious review of our history, to look to understand the challenges for people of color, and to lend your voice, your power, your influence to changing the systems that keep us stuck.

I have hope that we will not be silent; that we will Reflect; we will Connect...We will ACT! ■



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