

StirFry Seminars & Consulting

JULY 2015

TIME TO GET REAL

IN one of our recent Berkeley trainings, a white man who was confronted by a black woman on his racist remarks, was surprised that she even said good morning to him the next day. This same type of 'surprise' has occurred time and time again in my workshops all around this country. What I find intriguing is that many whites are still mystified by what it means to be authentic, partly because it is rare they have such authentic relationships with people of color. So, I would like to attempt to demystify some of the most prevalent myths about race relations in the United States:

Myth #1 *Whites have to be hyper-vigilant so that they don't re-traumatize people of color by what they say or do.*


First of all, we've had 500 years of don't ask, don't tell...so the odds of whites hurting someone by what they do or say are really good. Second, people of color have been far more traumatized from racism than whites will ever be able to comprehend, so saying something racist is very low on the trauma scale. What angers and hurts the most is the denial, blaming and defensiveness, which is all too familiar to people of color. You see, when whites are afraid of hurting people of color by what they might say or do, what happens is that there's no engagement, no equal risk-taking. As a young black woman once said to two white women, "So, I get hurt, even pissed. So, we work it out. I'm not going to die if you say something racist and neither will you. But when you get scared and say nothing about how you're feeling and keep your distance, then there's no chance of us even having a relationship or even a conversation." Or as David Lee said in my book *Let's Get Real*, when asked what advice he'd give to white people: "Get over yourself."

Myth #2 *Once people of color discover that a white person has racist attitudes and behaviors, they won't want to have anything to do with them.*

In my newest film, *If These Halls Could Talk*, a white female student, Tyanne, tells the black male student, Will, that he speaks too conceptually, needs to stop saying 'we' and start using more 'I' statements. Will, disturbed, looks at her and says that those are the exact types of statements that shut him down because they seem like he is being interrogated. Instead, he would prefer that she be curious about why he speaks conceptually to whites...that perhaps it is because this is the only way they will take him seriously as a black man. Also, that her being a white woman might affect how Will relates to her. When she hears this, she quickly replies, "Well, I have issues with you being a black man." Will looks at her laughing, "I already knew that...now we can talk." Tyanne is shocked. She could not imagine Will would still want to engage in conversation about race after their exchange, let alone strive for a deeper connection.

You see, I think whites have a deep-seated need to view themselves as 'good people' and that good people aren't racists. The truth be told, that is exactly the type of 'liberal' that people of color most distrust. In my film, *Last Chance for Eden*, a white man named Sandy says to the group that if he found out he was a 'racist' he would want to kill himself. I think that is because whites view a racist as someone who burns crosses and wears a white hood or is a redneck living

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in the deep South. The real truth is that we all have deep-seated racist attitudes and behaviors that we've learned living in this racist society. Even people of color struggle with their own internalized racism. It is an ongoing battle to differentiate what is real and what is learned.

What is often missing in the process of creating authentic relationships with each other is curiosity, ownership, self-reflection, and the willingness to change. When that happens, which is extremely rare, a much more intimate and honest relationship emerges.

Myth #3 *Seeing everyone 'the same' or being colorblind is a compliment to a person of color.*

We've all heard someone say, "I'm colorblind." Or maybe even "Little children don't see color." How sweet and how *false*. You see, little children do see color, only they run towards it. It is only when they have been taught to be afraid of color, do they pull back.

Whenever I hear someone say that they are colorblind, I always ask them two questions: *Where did you learn that from? What would it mean if you did see color?*

You see, I love who I am. Being Chinese is very important to me. My culture and my family traditions and history are very much a part of me being me. When whites share that they are colorblind, they miss out on the very essence and beauty of who I am. I don't believe we are multicultural, but rather multiracial, because we know almost nothing about each other's cultures. To many folks of color, assimilation has often meant accommodation—leaving yourself and your people at the door and 'blending in' with whites.

Honoring my people and who I am is more than something you can read about, eat, wear or dance to. If you really want to get to know the real me, then it requires time and curiosity, patience, perseverance, and the willingness to begin where I am, not where you want me to be.

Myth #4 *People of color are tired of educating white people all the time.*

There is some truth to this, but not entirely. Whites need to understand that so often they want to hear the truth from people of color, but only if there's no expression of anger or hurt and if they (whites) don't have to talk about white privilege, aren't held responsible or accountable to change. That is why people of color hesitate about educating whites about racism, because when they do, they are often faced with being blamed, labeled, demoted, isolated or invalidated.

Another common complaint, is that people of color are often viewed as a history lesson during certain ethnic holidays and asked to speak for all their people. This is not only dehumanizing, but also does not allow people of color to speak as individuals or to have a unique voice based on their particular experiences and perspectives.

As someone once said, "If you are here to save our people, then you can go home. If you are here because your liberation is connected to ours, then you are welcome."

Myth #5 *In a discussion around racism, if we all stay calm, meditate, don't raise our voices, remember that we are all 'one', and all use 'I' statements, everything will be fine. (singing Kumbaya is optional)*

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For many people of color, all of these conditions are really more about how whites relate to each other, and because of that, they are just more examples of how people of color must once again accommodate to how whites express themselves and wish to experience the world only through their lens and comfort level. To truly have a multicultural relationship means to be open to hearing other ways of expression, being able to be passionate without being labeled as violent or abusive, seeing differences as a good thing, not something that is negative or divisive.

As “At the Intersection” podcast host Jaleesa M. Jones recently shared during a recent episode:

“We aren’t allowed to waver ... we’re either demons or saints,” she said. “And I think that sort of superhuman -- that sort of super Negro narrative is really still harmful to us because it’s been so heavily indoctrinated into American culture.”

Whenever I hear whites say that we are all ‘one’, I remember the words of Martin Luther King, Jr.: “The only time we are ‘one people’ is during war, taxes, and election time.” For many people of color, to be ‘one’ often means giving up who we are in order to be make whites feel comfortable and safe with us.

I am reminded of a line from the *Horse Whisperer*:

“The truth is always there. Saying it out loud, now that’s the hard part.”

Lee Mun Wah



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StirFry Calendar of Upcoming Events

July 22-26, 2015 ** Berkeley, CA	Cross-Cultural Facilitation Skills for Diversity Trainers, Educators & Therapists: Five Day Intensive (all welcome) Open to the Public
August 8-12, 2015 ** Berkeley, CA	Cross-Cultural Facilitation Skills for Diversity Trainers, Educators & Therapists: Five Day Intensive (all welcome) Open to the Public
August 14, 2015 Blaine, WA	If These Halls Could Talk: A Workshop to Interrupt and Address Systematic Barriers to Access within Higher Education for Diverse Populations Increasing Access with Diverse Populations Conference • Not Open to the Public
August 20, 2015 San Francisco, CA	Cultural Competency for Educators, Administrators & Staff Not Open to the Public

** Held at the Quan Yin Training Center, 2311 8th Street, Berkeley, CA

For StirFry's complete Calendar of Upcoming Events, please visit www.stirfryseminars.com/events

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