

Director's Corner

Intent vs. Impact Unlearning Racism

by Beth Hall

With all the anticipation of a crisp fall, leaves changing colors and students thinking about transitions, the seniors in particular were hushed as they watched their classmate come to the front of the high school assembly to demonstrate his unique mathematical proof for the Pythagorean theorem, which he "discovered" as a junior. One of only a few people in the world to create a unique proof, it was heartening to see John's classmates rise up and give him a standing O for something too often associated with nerdhood and rejected by the ever cool-seeking teenage assembly before him.

My daughter's school introduced a new program for graduating seniors this year, which they call Senior Moments. To kick it off they invited John to demonstrate his proof. It was an outstanding moment of pride and celebration not only for him but for the school as well. With such an exciting start, they couldn't understand why they had trouble recruiting the rest of the senior class to take their turn to share some skill or talent they take pride in with the rest of the school. The school had a great idea, inspire younger students from within with the great accomplishments of the graduating senior class – the intent was fantastic. But the impact of beginning with a student whose accomplishment was literally world-class left the rest of the seniors hesitating to step forward, fearing that their own talent or accomplishment would fall short or seem mundane by comparison.

In anti-racism work and diversity training that I have participated in, I have learned that there are two issues regarding racism: intent and impact. Together, they describe the challenge of racism, where many "good hearted" people don't mean to hurt anyone, yet in fact are being racist without realizing it or recognizing why. How often do we find ourselves explaining our own sense of the intent of our comments or actions, ("I didn't mean it that way!") as certainly the teachers and administration of my daughter's school would do with regard to their Senior Moments curriculum? Over and over, people of color say that specific words are insulting, and identify actions that connote white privilege, and they do not feel we who are white hear or understand. Why doesn't that matter more to us? Shouldn't the impact of our words be perhaps more important than the intent?

I am distressed that it is so easy for me (and perhaps other white folks?) to hold our own experiences and sense of the world with regard to race and racism in equal standing with those who live

the daily experience of not being white in America.

I think it is part of white privilege to think that we don't have a culture or cannot define "whiteness." Whiteness is privilege, it is thinking as an individual rather than a group. We are privileged to be able to receive benefits and outcomes that are often directly related to our output. Whiteness is power; it is the assumption that we can use our own internal barometers to understand everyone else's experience because unconsciously we see ourselves as the measuring stick, the "norm." Whiteness is believing that race is invisible and racism is being eradicated because we don't experience it ourselves.

I have children that are almost adults, who are people of color. I work where I am the only white person in the office. But still I learn daily that I know less and understand less than I thought I did. Last year, I participated in a screening of Le Mun Wah's movie "Last Chance for Eden." Overwhelmingly the take home message for me was the degree to which we, white people, learn on the backs of people of color. It becomes their "job" to help us understand and make the message of racism "palatable" so we won't feel "too" guilty. I am struck with great sadness that I have inadvertently placed this burden on my children, my friends and total strangers of color, no matter how hard I work to avoid doing so.

Recently I saw a screening of "Mirrors of Privilege, Making Whiteness Visible" by Dr. Shakti Butler, (another film I highly recommend). The film is filled with white people talking about the ways racism impacts us and what we can do to stand up and change our own community as anti-racist advocates. With Peggy McIntosh, Tim Wise as well as many other advocates for white anti-racist advocacy, I found the film inspiring to think about how to affect the IMPACT of racism in my own community, as opposed to simply focusing on a shared INTENT to be "colorblind" or avoid racist actions myself.

I don't believe there is time for the indulgence or privilege of a breather; people of color struggle with race their entire lives, for us, for white anti-racist the struggle is the same. At times, I do feel beaten down and discouraged, I also rally at the thrill of the journey and the cherished friendships I can make with those who march as well on the road to respect and value for all.