

Being Mindful and White In a Multicultural World: Lessons Learned from Participation in an Interconnected Group

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Last fall I began participating in a group at the East Bay Mediation Center on the topic of “Being Mindful and White in a Multicultural World.” Essentially, this was a group for white people to explore identity, diversity and racism through mindfulness. By using practices from various wisdom traditions, we examined lessons learned about race and privilege, how these have limited and harmed ourselves and others, and what we can do to bring greater compassion, understanding and justice to our communities. Although this group has technically ended, the members of the “Interconnected” group have started a Yahoo! Groups dialogue and intend to reunite every month to digest films that investigate issues of race and white racism while continuing our dialog together to encourage each other to act skillfully and compassionately to effect social change in regards to racism.

Let me first point out that upon mentioning my participation in this group to other white people as well as to people of color, the majority questioned the basis of forming an all white group to discuss racism, as historically white groups established around the issue of race have had questionable or outright malicious intentions. In his book *Uprooting Racism: How White People Can Work for Racial Justice*, Paul Kivel explains how such groups can be both supportive and beneficial,

All too often we let people of color take responsibility for challenging racism. We may describe it as their issue. We may fail to see how seriously and continuously it affects us. In an all-white group we have a

chance to explore our questions, concerns, and fears about racism. We have an opportunity gently to challenge other white people about it. We have an opportunity to develop plans for confronting racism and becoming better allies for people of color. Let's take advantage of it! (Kivel, 2002, p.92)

This was the first group for white folks assembled through the East Bay Meditation Center; our hope is that they will host many, many more.

Undertaking this project for personal as well as social transformation was inspired by a recent conversation I had with two dear female friends. One of my friends is a woman of color who identifies as a lesbian and the other is white and heterosexual. We started off talking about dating, which then evolved into a discussion about sexuality and race. Then, I surprised even myself when I admitted that I had not pursued relationships with women or African American men primarily because it seems too difficult due to obstacles posed by society, i.e., there is still a stigma attached to inter-racial and same-sex partnerships. With the realization that I had succumbed to restrictive racist and homophobic social norms, I decided to confront these socially constructed thoughts to liberate myself from them as well as to question the veiled social mandates that govern our personal relationships and thus, are ultimately political. I knew this deep introspection would involve tackling my own latent heterosexism, homophobia, racism, and white supremacy that I have unconsciously inherited.

During a separate conversation my lesbian friend mentioned that she had attended sittings at the East Bay Meditation Center in Oakland. Days later, I looked up their website and found that they regularly host meditation sittings for the LGBTQ community

as well as for people of color, but, at that time, there appeared to be nothing similar for people who did not identify as a member of either group; i.e, me. However, a week later an acquaintance sent out an email regarding a meditation group for white folks to discuss racism to be held at the East Bay Meditation Center. Immediately recognizing this as synchronicity, I decided that although I was much too busy to begin yet another activity, attending this group was vital, and in fact, destined; I joined the group.

I was particularly drawn to approaching the issue of racism through a compassionate Buddhist perspective, since this is a fundamental philosophy and practice I aspire to utilize daily. In a personal electronic mail communication, one Interconnected group member shared his experience, “Through meditation, mindfulness and felt sensation work, our deadness lessens and we have more options for warmth and connection. Our aliveness to these problems increases, and my desire to change the status quo increases.” Our main practices at the Interconnected group were: (1) Breathing meditation (2) Multi-dimensionality exercise (a visualization where we hold two images of ourselves, one as our highest selves or Buddha-nature and the other at a time when we acted unskillfully in regard to race), and (3) loving-kindness meditation, in addition to using movement, silence, small group sharing, theater, films, articles and worksheets that explore our identities, white conditioning, fears, etc. The film we viewed is entitled, *Last Chance for Eden* by Lee Mun Wah, who also produced the film *The Color of Fear*. During my sophomore year of college I worked as the Resident Assistant of a multi-cultural house at UCSC. Recognizing that the majority of students at my college were white, I wanted to aid their process of unveiling their own white privilege. I initiated monthly showings of *The Color of Fear* and distributed Peggy McIntosh’s article, “White Privilege: Unpacking

the Invisible Knapsack,” the very same article we read ten years later as part of the Interconnected group.

On our first evening at Interconnected we were instructed to pair up and share our first memory about recognizing race. Suddenly, I was transported back to the age of five. Clearly I recalled the scene: I was walking behind my grandmother in the parking lot of a grocery store. Two African American girls around my age were happily trailing their mother to their car. As they passed one of them paused to offer me a piece of her Bubblicious bubble gum. Smiling in gratitude, I unwrapped the gum and popped it into my mouth, savoring the fruity flavor. The girls ran off, and without warning, my grandmother turned to me and yanked the gum out of my mouth while snapping at me for taking candy from strangers. Although I don't recall her exact words, she called attention to their race; that was the first time I remember thinking about racial differences and it was a painful memory. When I learned the Golden Rule in fifth grade and the story of Martin Luther King Jr.'s friend who stopped playing with him because he was black, I felt a profound sense of sorrow as I recalled the generous girl in the parking lot. At that time I was not aware of the history of slavery and oppression and how this translated to modern racism. It dawned on me that many of my memories involving race are painful, and yet I am a member of the group with power.

During the same Interconnected class, we were prompted to share the last encounter we had with race that struck us. Instinctually, my mind conjured up incidents where I was felt the presence of sexism or sexual harassment where race may have been a factor. A voice inside me hungered to say that I have it rough, too. At this point I realized how much easier it is to relate to the world through my oppression as a woman in a

patriarchal society instead of owning up to my privileged status as a white person in a racist society. Eventually, the incident I recalled involved both race and gender. It was a hot summer day. I opened the window and noticed that a group of six male African American high school students who were loitering on my neighbors' front porch. Two days prior a smaller group of students, perhaps some of the same guys, had been sitting on my front steps. After debating what action I should take, if any, I decided to practice my assertiveness and kindly asked them to leave, they obliged immediately. This happens occasionally since I live in a central location and in front of a public bus stop and across from a large public high school. In the second scenario, however, when I pointed out their behavior, one of them called me racist and none of the guys budged. It was an obvious power struggle and I had no idea how to respond. A weak attempt at using humor, I explained that these were private residences, not the bus station, yet only received more hostility. One guy called me a 'racist bitch.' Taken aback, I threatened to call the police if they did not oblige. At this point it did not seem worth the effort. Although I ended up calling the police, I petitioned for a bench to be placed at the bus stop so that people would have a place to sit and thus would not feel inclined to use our steps. Being called a racist bitch honestly made me wish I had never been assertive in the first place, yet I know all too well from working in the field of violence against women that similar tactics are used to keep people from voicing injustices. Nevertheless, as a white woman I honestly harbored shame about institutionalized white racism, however, at the same time I acknowledged the fear I felt as a woman living alone, as in this incident it was me against six guys. Retrospectively, I wondered if I would have responded or felt differently if it was a group of six white guys. Ultimately in that situation I had access to more power

because the authorities were behind me, however, every now and then when groups of black male students pass my home I wonder if they carry animosity towards me and would ever retaliate. Needless to say this incident really shook me up and called into question my thoughts about race and gender. After this happened I reexamined my thoughts surrounding: white privilege, class, and police support; race and class; masculinity and power; the racist legal system that disproportionately targets and convicts people of color; and the false fear that white people have been taught about people of color and black men in particular.

The truth is, I do not often think about race. I have that luxury because I am white. Even though I am aware I possess white privilege, so far, I have done very little to change the racist system that I directly benefit from. One night during Interconnected group we were speaking about the unseen ways the U.S. demonstrates racism, one of the facilitators mentioned that the U.S. proudly boasts an extraordinary Holocaust museum but we lack museums that address slavery, the “Trail of Tears,” and other tragic acts of racial injustice that occurred throughout the history of the U.S. It was not until the facilitator pointed out this intentional omission that I realized that these museums were missing. This example illustrates one of the ways in which seemingly small and often unseen things like this can minimize the severity of racism and continue to negate justice, equity and equal treatment to certain groups of people. It is like we (white people) resist recognizing how the past resides in the present; we want to “get along,” but without feeling uncomfortable, guilty, or giving up our privileges and power. This is why identifying our privileges and becoming aware of the ways in which our society ignores and perpetuates racism is a crucial first step to transcending racism. Although I am a feminist and gender student and

am cognizant of how all of the 'isms' are intertwined, I have not actively worked towards racial justice or even pursued discussions about race, other than my sophomore year of college and my two years in the Peace Corps where I joined the volunteer diversity group. I am glad that I have taken this additional necessary step to expand my awareness with the hopes that I can be part of the solution and not the problem.

Another article we read, entitled *White Supremacy Culture* compiled by Tema Okun, points out how organizations unconsciously adhere to white, dominant standards in the work environment. This article struck me because I have been grappling with race relations at work since I recently began working in an extremely ethnically and racially diverse neighborhood where a majority of the community members we serve are African American or Latino. Unfortunately, it seems to be the case that many non-profit organizations that aim to bring justice to society conform to funding standards that practically compel them to model the same hierarchal structure that creates social power imbalances. Since I am a manager, I am aware that power dynamics are skewed in my favor. This fall I began the application and hiring process for a position I directly supervise. Race raced to the forefront of my mind when two equally qualified candidates applied, one white woman one African American woman. Because we identify as a feminist organization, I felt that when there are two qualified candidates and one represents the dominant culture we should make a point to hire the minority. It was then I learned that organizations can neither discriminate nor hire based on race. Voicing my opinion on this matter to my supervisor was intimidating because racial issues remain an elephant in the workplace. Wondering how my own whiteness automatically led me to feel more at ease with the white candidate, I also wondered how the African American

candidate felt while interviewing with two white managers (my supervisor is also white). Since the position we were hiring for was based in a predominantly white, affluent area, I questioned who would be more effective at relating to the students. At the end of the day I could not declare that I wanted to hire the African American candidate because she was qualified *and* black, instead saying that she seemed more qualified and thus a better fit. Ruminating in these thoughts made this process uncomfortable, and yet I must not forget that I was the one with the privilege and decision-making power. Perhaps my discomfort was due in-part to that power, however, I realized that my unease was only a miniscule taste of what it must be like to consider race from the point of view of a person of color in a racist society.

Near the end of the groups' time together I experienced my most challenging night at Interconnected. In a theatrical presentation based on a real life story of one of our fellow group members who is a social worker at a house for underprivileged youth, I played the character of a black, male colleague. The scene illustrated my character reprimanding a young black student for playing hooky. Because the student skipped school he subsequently became targeted by the police and questioned. During the questioning the student made a snide comment to a police officer and the cops became violent with the student. My character angrily censured the student for talking back to the police officers by yelling at him and castigating him for being stupid because he should know that as a black man he will be targeted, that the world is unjust, that one wrong move could mean losing a promising future, that he could end up in prison or dead, etc. We repeated the scene numerous times so that the social worker could try different approaches and hear different voices speaking to her that could guide her to find

compassion for herself in that situation. The experience catalyzed a profound realization that, just as the world is gendered (something I think about often), it is also racialized, that is, race plays a guiding role in our interactions and daily existence whether we view it as an issue or not. That night, I left class feeling completely unsettled, angry and hopeless. On the drive home I grieved at how unfair it was that that we didn't have time left at the end of the group to discuss the role-play. Overwhelmed with self-righteous indignation, my mind raged, "I need closure, I have to go home and finish a paper tonight, how could they leave me hanging like this? I can't get distracted lamenting about race right now, I'm too busy!" That was when a little light bulb went on in my head. Examining race for white people is an option, we can turn the switch on or off whenever we choose, it is part of our privilege. In that scenario, the white social worker felt distraught because she wanted to intervene and speak to the young man in a more compassionate manner, yet she questioned her intuitive response because she did not belong to the same racial group as the student. This situation was obviously very distressing for her, however, when we examine how difficult and emotionally taxing it must have been for both of the African American men involved, we see that these interactions are not relegated solely to an emotional level, race relations dictate their daily survival. These two men, and other people of color, do not have the option of receiving closure at the end of the night and moving on; they have to think about and deal with race constantly. As a white person I have the luxury to remain oblivious to racism. Even though I lead a busy life, dedicating three hours a week to race issues, as one Interconnected group member admitted, "Is a small price to pay for a lifetime of privilege."

In *Uprooting Racism*, Kivel presents a pyramid of who holds power in society. Not surprisingly, the top 1% of the socio-economic scale governs 47% of the resources and wealth, followed by the next 19% of the population who control 44% of the net financial wealth. Surprisingly, I learned that there is a buffer zone that separates these two affluent groups from the remaining 80% of the population. Although this group primarily originates from the 80%, their functions of their jobs are to maintain the status of the ruling class by appeasing the masses and quelling any threats of revolutions. Naturally I would think that congressmen and other public officials would preside in this category, but I was shocked to find out teachers, social workers, law enforcement, etc. belong to this group. People in caring jobs unconsciously carry out the work of the ruling class by maintaining the social hierarchy and taking care of the people at the bottom of the pyramid and giving them hope that they can succeed if they work hard. For the first time I seriously began to contemplate how I directly contribute to this system of domination. What actions do I take that have the effect of quelling the masses? Automatically moving from race to gender, I realized that by teaching women's self defense classes and encouraging women to run for office, I was taking the focus off the group with power: men. Perhaps a more effective tactic would be to work with men directly to stop men's violence against women, or lobbying male politicians to support female candidates. Several months ago I confessed that I was struggling with envisioning a positive outcome for students I work with in Richmond, CA, recently named one of the 10 most dangerous cities in the U.S. What journalists are defining as "black on black violence" is the result of a racist structure that disenfranchises and divides groups. Hip-hop and rap music encourage violence between members of the same race, yet when we examine the

demographics of the group that holds the power in society as well as in record-producing companies, we see that white men are still at the backbone of black on black violence because ultimately they reap benefits from this divisive violence. Studying gender catalyzed my awareness of the role men (especially white men) execute in maintaining a sexist climate that tolerates men's violence against women. Similarly, our racist society proliferates due to white men's unwillingness to recognize white supremacy and thus change the status quo. Changing the status quo, in both the case of gender and race, would demand that white men would have to give up a portion of their power. When the social worker and I discussed this dilemma we both arrived at the same conclusion: it will take a revolution for white men to give up their power. We wondered if we should lead the revolution, and questioned how are we being complicit by helping people advance in a system that is inherently racist and sexist. Wouldn't our energy be better spent reforming the system, after all? I am definitely not advocating a revolution at this point, especially a violent revolution, but I possess a newfound enthusiasm to learn about Riane Eisler's partnership model, with hopes that we can transform our society from one of domination to one where sexism, racism and exploitation are not the modus operandi.

People who possess inappropriate privileges may not be cognizant of their abusive role that condones and perpetuates power imbalances based on socially constructed differences if they have learned not to examine identities or differences. In her article McIntosh claims,

I think whites are carefully taught not to recognize white privilege, as males are taught not to recognize male privilege...much of their oppressiveness is unconscious...To redesign social systems we need first to

acknowledge their colossal unseen dimensions. It seems to me that obliviousness about white advantage, like obliviousness about male advantage, is kept strongly inculturated in the United States so as to maintain the myth of meritocracy, the myth that democratic choice is equally available to all, (McIntosh, 1988).

After a month carefully considering my role in condoning and perpetuating a racist system, I realized that I have certain influential powers, one of them is the right to vote, and the other is to speak out against injustices, including racism, sexism, homophobia, etc. To not intervene would be irresponsible of me, as I have benefited from a privileged status my entire life.

I had an opportunity to speak out in response to a discussion on a large listserv I belong to, regarding the controversial Jena 6 case. One respondent had included an article from the Christian Science Monitor that I felt represented a white supremacist point of view. While reading this email I noticed nausea setting in, a sure sign that I was emotionally disturbed by what I read. Had I not honed my skills to recognize and confront my own white privilege, I very well may have dismissed the opportunity to respond, hoping another student would, because again, “I just don’t have the time to respond to things like this,” and let’s not forget the other common excuse, “I am not an expert on racism. Someone who is more qualified than me should respond.” Instead, I took responsibility and replied:

Although I feel somewhat disheartened by the Christian Science Monitor article as well, at the same time a part of me is relieved to see that we are discussing race. Despite the fact that it can be uncomfortable to do so these

conversations are crucial to building the necessary understanding that can promote positive actions.

It is astounding to explore the myriad ways in which white people (myself included) unwittingly condone and perpetuate white supremacy and racism. It is virtually impossible to be white in this multi-cultural, multi-racial world and not participate in racism. If we want to create a new paradigm based on equality and equity then we have to actively work towards ending racism; and that begins by (mainly white people) examining our own prejudiced beliefs and inappropriate "privileges." If we do nothing because we believe we are "good white people" because we don't *feel* racist then we have become perpetrators of the system of domination.

Just as the white students may have claimed that they didn't understand the implications of hanging nooses because they were not aware of the heinous racist history (first of all--bullshit), but hypothetically speaking, although that action may not have had the intention of being a racist hate crime, the impact of the action is much different. So, similar to sexual harassment, it is always the recipient of the behavior who gets to decide what it is, not the person perpetrating the behavior. Similarly, the person who wrote the article for the Christian Science Monitor can't decide if the town is a good and safe place for African Americans to live; only they can decide that, and even then it may not be the same for everyone.

I would hope that most white people in this community have begun the process of analyzing white privilege/supremacy, however I am attaching a brief introductory article by Peggy McIntosh, entitled, "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack." I hope that we continue discussing race and becoming more aware, so that, with compassion, we can work towards justice.

Desegregation will break down the legal barriers and bring people together physically, but something must touch the hearts and souls of men and women so that they will come together spiritually because it is natural and right.

-Martin Luther King, Jr.

There may be times when we are powerless to prevent injustice, but there must never be a time when we fail to protest.

-Elie Wiesel

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

-Martin Luther King, Jr.

It is important for white people to first admit that they are racist due to being raised in a racist culture. This admission implies a restructuring of our worldview, which has immense implications for our future lifestyle. The domination, inhumanity, cruelty and violence that created the legacy of slavery still exist today albeit, less visibly, in the form

of modern racism. The brutal image of slavery and abuses against Native Americans and other racial groups is still incredibly painful and heartbreaking to accept, so many white individuals resist identifying with the perpetrators of that abhorrent violence and thus disassociate with that legacy and thus with their own responsibility as current oppressors in a modern racist society. As McIntosh asserted, white people are taught to distance themselves from these issues at a very young age, employing defensiveness when they are unable to move beyond feelings of sadness, shame, guilt, embarrassment, hopelessness, fear and anger. Externalization also occurs, where people neglect to critically analyze the present situation because they believe they had no responsibility for what occurred in the past. I believe the overwhelming majority of white people in the U.S. suffer from latent self-hatred triggered by an epic history of perpetrating heinous acts of systematic violence, which has only been fortified by remaining complicit to institutionalized abuse and complacency in general. Because the initial feelings of sadness, shame and anger are so unsettling, we become overwhelmed and retreat into ignorance, which feels safer than living with discomfort. In this way, white racism denies white people the opportunity to achieve our full humanity, oppressing us as well. Again, this disassociative process denies our ownership in the problem and thus creates reluctance to take responsibility for solutions; we become paralyzed. While it remains taboo to discuss racism, racism becomes more difficult to identify and at the same time more embedded in economic systems that become increasingly difficult to alter.

Recognizing one's own identity as a racist white person with inappropriate white privilege is painful yet imperative in order to transcend the current status quo. It is vital that white people work with other white people to unveil the myriad ways in which we are

complicit to a white, male dominator paradigm. As perpetrators of racial violence, the responsibility lies with us, just as with men's violence against women the people responsible for change are men; it should never be the responsibility of the systematically oppressed and disenfranchised populations to emancipate themselves. We need to examine our prejudices and reluctance to give up our power in order to cultivate compassion for ourselves so that we may move beyond the debilitating states of guilt, anger and defensiveness. We must replace self-hatred with self-love as the first critical step to loving others and becoming effective allies.

I have begun the process of being mindful and white in a multicultural world. Doubtless, it will be a lifetime endeavor. All the isms are intertwined. We are all one. As long as one person is oppressed, we are all oppressed. I know this, but as the Tenzin Gyatso, the 14th Dalai Lama admonished, "It is not enough to be compassionate. You must act." Now it is time for me to act. I know I am not alone in this imperative endeavor. I beseech you to join me.

References

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