

African American Vignette #1

Written by a white woman:

Our spiritual community was receiving some training in the practice of Council - each person listening and speaking from the heart. One of the exercises involved remembering a person in our childhood who was a strong spiritual influence. I immediately thought of Lena, a black woman who lived with our family for many years as our maid and cook. We lived in an all-white suburb of New York City, where there was (and probably still is) an unspoken and unwritten rule that you were never to sell your house to a Jew or a black person. However, you could employ one as a live-in servant in your home.

And so I spoke affectionately of Lena, who was part Cherokee, divorced, and mother of a daughter who lived in New York City with relatives. Lena prayed unabashedly and sang hymns as she worked. She comforted me, my sister, and my mother whenever there was a family upset. She was a rock in a storm and I loved her fiercely. I knew she loved me as her "baby."

After sharing my memories of Lena I was shocked at the response of an African American woman in the group. Crying and shaking, she told me how disturbed and disappointed she was to hear what I had said. I had no idea why she was upset.

Question for the reader: *What aspects of the white woman's story might have been particularly upsetting for the African American woman?*

Commentary to African American Vignette #1

The white woman continues:

"I asked her to please tell me. This is what she said: 'Although you clearly spoke about Lena with love and respect, you didn't indicate in any way that you understood the conditions of her life which had made it necessary for her to work in a white family's home as a servant, while her own daughter was farmed out to relatives.' "

"I had to admit that this part of the reality of Lena's life was only dimly present in my consciousness. Even as an adult looking back on the situation, I had not fully comprehended or acknowledged the conditions of her life or the privilege of my own. This was a turning point for me. I thanked the woman for turning on a light in my conscious."

African American Vignette #2

A black woman, Ayeesha, and Roger, a white man, are working closely together on the promotion of a new product. While they are taking a dinner break during a long work day, Roger ventures to bring up the subject of race. He asks Ayeesha how comfortable she feels working for the mostly white company. He wonders if she's noticed any racism on the part of other employees. She hesitates and then replies, "Well, last Friday after staff meeting I heard Brian and Anita (who are both white) cracking up. Brian was imitating the (black) voice of Kingfisher from the old Amos 'n' Andy show. I found it incredibly offensive.

"Roger crunches his face in disbelief. "That wasn't racism, Ayeesha! Brian doesn't have anything against black people. He's always clowning around. I think you're being too sensitive. I hear women make fun of how men talk all the time. I don't like that either, but I just laugh it off. "

Questions for the reader: *Why do you think Ayeesha hesitates when Roger asks her if she's noticed racism on the part of the other employees? What do you think of Roger's response?*

Commentary to African American Vignette #2

One pattern sometimes occurs when white folks and folks of color talk about race. The person of color brings up a racial incident that is disturbing to her or him. The white person asserts that the person of color is misperceiving and then brings up a situation where he himself was a victim, implying that the situations are of equal impact.

In this vignette, Ayesha hesitates before answering Roger's question. It's my understanding that many people of color are reluctant to talk about race with European Americans because they think it's a minefield. (European Americans often feel the same way -- but that's a different discussion.) Whites tend to take these discussions personally and then react defensively. Roger had difficulty with the fact that Ayesha was upset hearing the voice of Kingfisher, a stereotypical black buffoon created by white people, imitated by a white co-worker. He immediately discounts her experience and goes on the offensive, cutting off the possibility of any further communication.

African American Vignette #3

A white woman hears a black co-worker complain about stomach problems, which his doctor says are aggravated by stress. She offers him a guided relaxation tape to help reduce his stress level. A few days later he returns the tape to the woman and thanks her. The following dialogue takes place.

Her: How did you like the tape?

Him: I couldn't stand that guy's voice.

Her: Really? But he's black!

Him: I don't care what color he is! I didn't like it.

Question for the reader: *What might have been upsetting to the black co-worker about the statement "Really? But he's black!"?*

Commentary to African American Vignette #3

The white woman seems to be assuming that her black co-worker will relate positively to the voice on the tape merely because it is that of a black person. Let's see how it sounds if the situation is reversed: a black man gives a different relaxation tape to his white female co-worker.

Him: How did you like the tape?

Her: I couldn't stand that guy's voice.

Him: Really? But he's white!

Henry Louis Gates, Jr. writes on this issue: " (There is) a resentment at being lumped together with thirty million African Americans whom you don't know, most of whom you will never know. Completely by the

accident of racism, we have been bound together with people with whom we may or may not have something in common, just because we are "black." Thirty million Americans are black, and thirty million are a lot of people. One day you wonder: What do the misdeeds of a Mike Tyson have to do with me? Why do I feel implicated? And how can I not feel racial *recrimination when I can feel racial pride?*"
(Henry Louis Gates, Jr. *Colored People: A Memoir from Colored People*, copyright 1994, Alfred A. Knopf, a division of Random House, Inc.)

African American Vignette #4

Written by a white woman:

My friend who is white and I are shopping in an upscale clothing store in a racially mixed area in Oakland, California. We are looking through a rack of blouses. Noticing the high prices on the tags I say to my friend, "I don't see how black people can afford to shop here."

Question for the reader: *What assumption is the white woman making here?*

Commentary to African American Vignette #4

The writer of this vignette continues:

After I made this comment my friend said, "That's a racist remark. There are plenty of middle class black people." This was a real "ah-ha" experience - directly showing me how I was stereotyping all black people as being low income.

(Author's note: Here is an instance of one white person taking up the task of educating another about racism.) Her matter-of-factness helped me take in what she said without being defensive."

African American Vignette #5

Two white women are sitting across from one another in a lunch room cafeteria talking in subdued tones. Terri is telling Lauren how she

feels about Sandra, a new black employee in the retail store where they both work. "I really like Sandra. I don't really think of her as black. She seems almost white."

Questions for the reader: What do you think Terri means when she says that Sandra "seems almost white?" How do you think Sandra might feel if she overheard Terri saying this?

Commentary to African American Vignette #5

The implication here is that Terri likes Sandra because she seems like a white person. For some whites saying that a black person seems almost white might feel like a compliment. But this implication would likely evoke deep pain and anger in many black people. First of all, it's actually an insult to be told that someone likes you because the person thinks you're not like others in your racial group. The message here is that there is something wrong with being black; being white is better.

A second problem is this: sensing the discomfort that whites may have around non-whites, African Americans and people of color in general often feel they have to leave substantial and meaningful parts of themselves at the door when they enter white environments. This is, no doubt, one reason why some people of color are reluctant to join groups which are predominantly white, even when the group welcomes them.

As white people who want to heal the racial gap, we might look inside to see if, on some level, we really would rather have people behave within the norms of white behavior. Being aware of the limits of our comfort zone and experimenting with taking steps beyond it are an important part of this healing journey.

African American Vignette #6

An African American psychiatrist was the keynote speaker at a professional conference. Afterwards, several psychologists, two white and one black, were sitting together in the cafeteria eating lunch and discussing his speech. "I thought he was very articulate" commented one of the white psychologists. "Yes, and he carried himself in such a dignified manner," responded the other.

Question for the reader: *The black psychologist could have been uncomfortable with the two comments made. Can you imagine why?*

Commentary to African American Vignette #6

You might be wondering, "What in world can be wrong with complimenting this black speaker?" Maybe nothing is wrong. But sometimes these kinds of comments express a subtle element of surprise - a surprise based on the belief that this black person is an exception. He doesn't fit our stereotype of the black male. When I become aware of this kind of reaction in myself, I (gently) ask myself questions like, "Why wouldn't he be dignified?" or "Would I make this kind of comment if the person were white?"

African American Vignette #7

Written by a black woman

My son, Eric, was attending a preschool where the majority of the kids were white. About a month after Eric started school I began getting calls from his white teachers complaining they couldn't get him to cooperate. We had several meetings, and they wanted to know what was going on at home that was causing him to act out in school.

This went on for several months and then Eric came home saying he wanted to be white. A few times he even claimed that he knew about some magic pills which turn black people white. I called a meeting with his teachers and told them that for some reason Eric was uncomfortable being black and wanted to be white, like the majority of the children in the school. There were several interracial kids, a few Latinos and a couple of other black children, but he was the darkest child there. I told them I thought this had something to do with his behavior problem.

They listened to my concern for about two minutes and then started to "explain" how it's perfectly normal for children to daydream they are someone else. One of the teachers told me that her son used to change who he was every week: a fireman, a football player, then a truck driver. I asked her, "Has your child ever come home wanting to

be Black?" And she was like, "No, but it is kind of the same thing." I said, "No, it's not the same, because your son can be a fireman. My son cannot be white."

(Adapted from a personal narrative by Jacasta Cummings in *Skin Deep: Women Writing on Color, Culture and Identity*, Elena Featherston (Editor), the Crossing Press, 1994. p. 55)

Commentary to African American Vignette #7

Apparently the white teachers didn't even want to consider the factor of race or skin color difference when trying to find out the reason for Eric's behavior problem at school. When the mother tells them that she thinks skin color is a significant factor they immediately discount her explanation. One teacher provides what she thinks is an equivalent example - her son wanting to be a fireman, football player, and a truck driver.

This could have been an opportunity for the white teachers to listen and learn about what it's like to be a member of a racial minority. In this area the black mother is the expert. The teachers could have asked the mother: "What do you think is happening at school that makes Eric want to be white instead of his own skin color?" and "How do you think that connects with his not being cooperative in the class?"

White folks often tend to downplay the factor of skin color or race in circumstances like these. They don't have to deal with racism day in and day out as many people of color do. Moreover, white people are frequently uncomfortable discussing or even acknowledging the impact of race in a situation especially in the presence of a person of color. It's a painful and often confusing area that most of us would like to avoid.

African American Vignette #8

Written by a white woman:

Because I work in a medium sized organization as a diversity coordinator, many people express their opinions about racism to me. In 2002 a white man stopped me in the hallway and said, "Denzel Washington, Halle Berry, and Sidney Poitier all won awards at the

Academy Awards last night. So what is their (African-Americans') problem? What do they want?"

I said to him, "I think the problem is that people of color in general don't have equal access to resources. You assume that because a few black actors achieve success all blacks are better off." The man countered, "African Americans just have to work hard enough, pull themselves up like the people who won the awards. I come from a working class background, and I pulled myself up, so what is their problem?"

Questions for the reader: What do you think the white man is trying to say about African Americans? How might you respond to him if you were the diversity coordinator?

Commentary to African American Vignette #8

Two main areas where black people are accorded celebrity status and large sums of money are entertainment and sports. Seeing progress at the top in these two fields does not accurately reflect the progress of the average black person. For example, in terms of wealth, the average Black family today has only one-eighth the net worth or assets of the average white family. (Dalton Conley, Sociologist; Race: The Power of Illusion. Episode Three: The House We Live In. Shown on PBS in 2003. <http://www.newsreel.org/films/race.htm>)

The question of why there is such a disparity in wealth between black and white people is a complex one. To reduce it to the notion "black people just need to work harder" i.e., blacks are lazy, is to fall into stereotypical thinking. Moreover, it completely leaves out the impact of institutionalized racism and its corollary, white privilege, which have made it much easier for whites to accumulate wealth. For example, given that one of the primary ways for most Americans to accumulate net worth is home ownership, the following fact is revealing: "Between 1934 and 1962, the federal government backed \$120 billion of home loans; more than 98 percent went to whites." ("The Houses that Racism Built" Larry Adelman, San Francisco Chronicle, Sunday June 29, 2000)

African American Vignette #9

A young white woman is doing some volunteer work at a county housing project. As she enters one of the buildings, she asks an African American man, the manager of the housing project, if he is the janitor. He tells her he is the manager. After the woman leaves, a co-worker asks the manager if he is upset about the interaction. "No", he says. "It happens all the time."

Questions for the reader: Do you think there is a lesson to be learned for the white volunteer in this interaction? If it's true that the black manager is not upset about the interaction, how might he be thinking about it ?

Commentary to African American Vignette #9

The stereotype of African Americans not being capable of handling jobs that require mental ability is unfortunately still with us. It gets reinforced by the fact that black people often have less access to such positions. Stereotypically we tend to associate black folks with physical work like cleaning.

We are not necessarily responsible for holding such stereotypes. For many of us they have been a part of the air we breathe. We are responsible, however, for being aware that we hold them and for being open to experience and information which may prove these stereotypes false.

African American Vignette #10

Written by a white female magazine journalist:

Years ago I worked at a nonprofit organization. I was told (by my boss) to hire a black woman to handle PR because our organization wasn't diverse enough. So our search committee did outreach and found one. When I called her references, they asked me incredulously, "You're going to hire Marilyn to be a PR person?"

We hired her even though she didn't have great writing skills. We gave her no additional training, and her supervisor didn't even give her honest feedback. And guess what? Marilyn didn't really work out.

My boss said, "I think we're going to have to fire Marilyn." I said sarcastically, "Why? She's still qualified. We hired Marilyn because she was black. She's still black." Fortunately, Marilyn extracted herself from a difficult situation by leaving us for a more appropriate job.

Questions for the reader: *What are your thoughts? Were those at the top of this organization committed to diversity?*

Commentary to African American Vignette #10

For affirmative action to be effective, an organization's commitment needs to go beyond the goal of merely appearing diverse. In this situation not enough effort was put forth to hire a qualified black public relations person who had the necessary skills for the job or to train the new employee to be successful in her position.

When affirmative action is carried out in a half-hearted way it is likely to fail. Such failures tend to erode support for future attempts at diversifying the work force as well as support for the policy of affirmative action itself.

The comment, "We hired Marilyn because she was Black. She's still black" can be taken several ways. I surmise that the white woman is saying, with a hint of irony, to her boss: The only reason we hired Marilyn is because she's black. She still fits the criterion of being black - so why are we firing her?

African American Vignette #11

During the 2003 war on Iraq I went to an interfaith peace rally at the Federal Building in San Francisco. After I joined a group of people singing peace songs, the leader of the group asked me to pass out some song sheets. We were singing in a busy area, and I didn't really know who was there to attend the rally so I just went along asking people if they wanted a song sheet.

I came to an older African American man wearing a fedora hat and a suit jacket who I thought looked out of place. I asked him, with a slight edge in my voice, if he intended to stay for the rally since the

song sheets were only for those staying. He took a sheet saying he planned to stay.

I felt awkward about the interaction realizing that I had treated him differently from other people. He was the only African-American in the crowd, and I assumed he didn't belong there. Later I introduced myself to him and apologized for treating him rudely. He smiled and told me he forgave me.

Question for the reader: *Have you ever assumed that an African American wasn't part of an event or a group, only to discover he or she was?*

Commentary to African American Vignette #11

At times we may wonder why more people of color don't attend certain events or join groups which are predominantly white. Progressive political groups often talk about the need to do outreach to communities of color. If a person of color anticipates the kind of awkward interaction, one indicating that he doesn't really belong, portrayed in this vignette, it is little wonder s/he stays away.

In this case, the white woman did realize the assumption she was operating from and apologized.

African American Vignette #12

A middle school with a racially diverse population has had some incidents of students using racial slurs. A meeting is called to put a stop to this behavior. After a black parent complains that a group of white boys called his son the 'n' word, a white mother stands up and says "I agree that using the 'n' word is totally unacceptable. But some black girls called my daughter "Honky" during a soccer game. "Isn't that name just as bad?"

Questions for the reader: *How do you feel about what the white mother said? In what ways is calling a white person "Honky" equivalent to calling a black person the 'n' word and in what ways isn't it equivalent?*

Commentary to African American Vignette #12

Of course any use of racial slurs is offensive and should not be tolerated. However, some argue that because of the power difference between whites and blacks the slurs 'honky' and 'nigger' are not equivalent. Tim Wise, a prominent white anti-racist activist has this to say about the two words. ...“Nigger’ was and is a term used by whites to dehumanize blacks, to imply their inferiority, to ‘put them in their place’ if you will. The same cannot be said of ‘honky’: after all, you can’t put white people in their place when they own the place to begin with....”

When a group of people has little or no power over you institutionally, they don’t get to define the terms of your existence, they can’t limit your opportunities, and you needn’t worry much about the use of a slur (i.e., ‘honky’) to describe you and yours, since, in all likelihood, the slur is as far as it’s going to go....”

Wise continues with this story. “The lack of symmetry between a word like ‘honky’ and a slur such as ‘nigger’ was made apparent in an old “Saturday Night Live” skit, with Chevy Chase and guest, Richard Pryor. In the skit, Chase and Pryor face one another and trade off racial epithets during a segment of Weekend Update. Chase calls Pryor a ‘porch monkey.’ Pryor responds with ‘honky.’ Chase ups the ante with ‘jungle bunny.’ Pryor, unable to counter with a more vicious slur against whites, responds with ‘honky, honky.’ Chase then trumps all previous slurs with ‘nigger,’ to which Pryor responds: ‘dead honky.’ ”

African American Vignette #13

A black man and his white co-worker are having a discussion. The white co-worker describes an individual he recently met at a conference: “He’s just a normal person, nothing special, just your average white Anglo-Saxon Protestant male.”

Questions for the reader: *Do you see any problem with what the white co-worker said?*

Commentary to African American Vignette #13

The white co-worker may or may not have been speaking tongue-in-cheek, but his description points to a view that many white people unconsciously hold: being white or being a white Anglo-Saxon Protestant is the normal generic identity by which all others are measured.

This view can have harmful consequences. One consequence is that it encourages white people to think that it's okay to ask people of color to always play by their rules since to behave "normally" is to behave like a white person. It's more difficult for a person of color to feel comfortable in an environment which is predominantly white if she senses that she is expected to "act white" and that parts of herself will not be welcomed.

African American Vignette #14

It all happened so fast I might not have noticed. No one blinked an eye, no one winced, no one commented. I was working in the Public Relations department of a large corporation and we were doing a special event at a local middle school, which had a very racially diverse student population. I arrived at the school early in the morning and was supposed to meet Mr. Johnson, the assistant principal, outside.

It was still pretty dark out and as I got out of the car I could see two men standing across the parking lot. As I approached, I saw that the tall one was white and the shorter one was black. I walked up to the white man and said, "Mr. Johnson?" As I asked, I realized he had on custodian's coveralls. He gestured toward his companion, and the black man came into focus. He was wearing a suit jacket and a dress shirt and slacks -- obviously the assistant principal.

Question for the reader: *Can you remember an incident when a stereotype led you perceive something about a black person that wasn't really accurate?*

Commentary to African American Vignette #14

The author comments:

My first, almost unconscious, perception had been of the man's race. I automatically chose the white man as the one in authority, without looking further to see who they really were.