

## **Arab/Muslim Vignette #1**

It's July, 2002. The owner of a stationery shop in central California has advertised for a part-time manager/bookkeeper. One afternoon an employee of the shop overhears the owner say on the phone, "I'm sorry but the position has already been filled." But as soon as she hangs up the owner declares, "There's no way that I'm going to trust a man named Hakim Al... something or other' to have access to our books."

*Question for the reader: Yes, this is after 9/11 and the caller has an Arab sounding name, but why is the owner distrusting this particular Arab or Arab-American?*

### **Commentary to Arab/Muslim Vignette#1**

What we are seeing here, of course, is the backlash of distrust and prejudice directed at Arab and Muslim people, post 9/11. Presumably, because of the devastating World Trade Center attacks by a small number of Arabs and because of the known animosity of Al Qaeda toward the United States, the owner is now suspicious of all Arab people. What part does race play in this backlash? If the attacks had been done by a group of fanatics from Europe, for example, Spain, would we be as quick to generalize our fear to all Spaniards? Or could we more easily separate these extremists from their fellow countrymen?

Tim Wise, Director of the newly-formed Association for White Anti-Racist Education (AWARE), points out that we are more apt to collectivize and demonize people of color than we are white people. This means that if a single Arab or small group of Arabs does something horrendous we are more inclined to see these actions as representing their entire group than if the perpetrator were a white person. For example, when white terrorist Timothy McVeigh killed 168 people in the bombing of the Oklahoma City federal building, we saw his act as a product of a sick individual who was perhaps associated with the militia movement. It did not make us more wary of all white people.

## **Arab/Muslim Vignette #2**

Two white women, Valerie and Diane, are sitting together on a subway. A woman wearing a scarf on her head has just exited the subway car with two small children. Valerie says, "I guess Moslem women are forced to wear those scarves on their heads even when they're in this country. God, I wouldn't last with an Arab guy for two minutes."

*Question for the reader: Valerie is making at least two assumptions. What are they?*

### **Commentary to Arab/Muslim Vignette #2**

This is another vignette which demonstrates a need for greater cultural competency. (Cultural competency involves increasing our awareness and knowledge of other ethnicities and cultures as well as learning to see our own biases and stereotypes that come into play as we interact with people from a different culture.) Hijab -- the tradition of wearing a veil in various forms -- is a religious practice relating to modesty, and is observed by some but not all Muslim (which is preferred to "Moslem") women. It takes a variety of forms, ranging from a scarf over the head to a burqa covering the entire body.

Although in some cases women are required to wear hijab, for example, in Afghanistan, it is often worn by choice. Valerie is assuming the woman is forced to wear the scarf. Valerie also assumes that the Muslim woman is married to an Arab. The majority of Muslims are not Arab so there's a good chance that both her assumptions are not accurate. (The largest group of the world's Muslims live in Indonesia; only 12 percent of American Muslims are Arab Americans.)

There is a tendency for us to view and judge others through the lens of our own value system. From the position of living in the United States in the early 21st century, it may be difficult to see the practice of modesty for women as a choice as opposed to something imposed by the patriarchy. It's impossible to make a judgment either way without knowing a lot more about the woman and her situation. The main point here is that we often assume things about those culturally different from us without really knowing that much about the culture.

Once we realize how much we don't know, we are more likely to start from a place of respectful curiosity.

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## **Asian American Vignette #1**

At a lunch break during a conference, a third-generation Japanese American woman who speaks with a standard American accent and a European American man eat together. He was the facilitator of a discussion group that morning - a group in which she actively participated. As they are eating lunch, he asks her, "Where are you from?" The woman replies "Toledo, Ohio." "I mean," he says, "Where are you really from?"

*Questions for the reader: What do you think about the white facilitator's questions? How do you think the Japanese American woman might feel about them?*

## **Commentary to Asian American Vignette #1**

The white facilitator is probably trying to figure out which Asian country her ancestors are from. However the implication of his question is that she is not from the United States in the same way a white person is. It's very unlikely that he would ask a European American with no accent the same question, "Where are you really from?" Sometimes Asian Americans are seen and treated like perpetual foreigners regardless of how long they and their families have been citizens of the United States. It can be hurtful and irritating to frequently receive an implied message "You're not really American or you don't quite belong here like we (white people) do."

## **Asian American Vignette #2**

During a church potluck dinner, a white father sits with his child, opposite an Asian American woman who is eating her food with chopsticks. The father picks up a pair of chopsticks and starts to eat with them, saying to his child, "See, Americans can eat with chopsticks too."

*Question for the reader: How do you imagine the Asian American woman feels when she hears the father's lesson to his son?*

### **Commentary to Asian American Vignette #2**

The father's comment implies that the woman of Asian descent sitting across from him is not an American. What effect might hearing this comment have on the Asian American woman? And what is he teaching his son?

## **Asian American Vignette #3**

Two white couples are sitting together at a restaurant waiting for a third couple (Kevin, a white male and Lyn, a Japanese American female) to join them for dinner. One of the men asks his partner "What time did you tell Kevin and his little lotus blossom to meet us here?" His partner frowns and tells him that the expression he just used is offensive. "You know her name. Why don't you use it?" He responds: "Oh come on! I was just being playful. Do we always have to be PC?"

*Questions for the reader: If you were sitting at the table, would you find the use of the expression "little lotus blossom" offensive? If so, why?*

### ***Commentary to Asian American Vignette #3***

In this vignette, the white man is referring to a woman of Asian descent as his friend's "little lotus blossom". Yes, lotus blossom evokes a pleasant image, but the speaker is being disrespectful. 'Lotus blossom' refers to the woman's Asian ancestry in the same way 'beaner' refers to someone of Mexican ancestry. Such terms tend to reduce the person to a caricature. The name lotus blossom also speaks to the tendency of white men to exoticize Asian woman. A common stereotype of Asian women is that they are pretty, delicate, fragile and compliant.

Saying that someone is PC is often a way of writing off what a person is saying without considering its merits. The term, I believe, was invented by Rush Limbaugh to dismiss many of the values and concerns of those on the political left.

### ***Asian American Vignette #4***

A small private college offers courses in fashion design and textile arts. It is the first day of a introductory design class. About 35 percent of the students are Asian American and about 5 percent are students from Asia. As the white teacher is struggling through some of the names of the students while calling roll, she sighs and says "Why can't you have normal names which I could pronounce like Richard or Margaret?"

*Question for the reader: What is the basis for this teacher's concept of a normal name?*

### ***Commentary to Asian American Vignette #4***

It may be easy to empathize with the teacher's difficulty in pronouncing unfamiliar names. However her message seems to be: only Anglo names are normal; Asian names are not. This message is closely associated with the notion that white people are the norm;

everyone else is some sort of deviation from this norm. Can you imagine a Chinese American teacher saying to students Michael, Hugh, Donald and Lorraine, "Why can't you have normal names that I can pronounce?"

### **Asian American Vignette #5**

I am one of two Asian American men who work for a non-profit organization in northern California. Even though I've worked for this organization for six years, I am still called the other man's name - sometimes by people I know fairly well.

*Question for the reader: What might be an explanation for this?*

### **Commentary to Asian American Vignette #5**

The Asian American continues:

This reinforces my experience that some white people operate from the stereotype, "All Asians look alike."

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### **Indigenous Vignette #1**

An American Indian male client enters a white psychotherapist's office for the first time. The office is quite expensively decorated. On one wall are several dreamcatchers, on another wall is a colorful Navajo rug, and on the table facing the client's chair is a large Hopi Kachina doll.

When the therapist sees the client silently taking in all Indian objects, she exclaims, "As you can see, I love to decorate with Native American art." The client shifts uncomfortably in his chair and casts his eyes downward.

*Question for the reader: Why might the American Indian client be uncomfortable with therapist's statement "I love to decorate with Native American art?"*

## **Commentary to Indigenous Vignette #1**

It may be difficult for many to see what might be offensive to the Indian client. A white person appreciates and displays Native American art. What's the problem? One problem could be based on the fact that the white therapist is relating to the sacred Indian objects as decorative art. Some American Indians might see it like this: We've been dominated by the white man ever since he took over our land.

And now he's taking from us again - acquiring our traditional spiritual objects, using them out of context and without awareness of their special meaning and power in our culture.

This isn't to say that it's always wrong to purchase American Indian objects or art. Some Indians depend on these purchases to support themselves. However once we have a fuller picture of how a Native American might view these purchases hopefully we can act with respect and sensitivity.

## **Indigenous Vignette #2**

Written by a white woman

I had an eye-opening experience while working in a Mayan day care center. (Mayans are indigenous people, mainly from Mexico and Guatemala). At first I had many judgments, including the belief that the children were not being adequately stimulated by the environment.

It also seemed that the parents who volunteered at the school were doing far too much for the children. I was worried that the children would not develop skills for themselves. However, after working in this environment for a few months, I realized that the Mayan parenting style yielded incredibly patient children who had an ability to be in the moment and take joy in small things. I then began to see how narrow my ideas of child rearing were. This was a life changing lesson for me

that has generalized into a much deeper appreciation of cultural differences. Now I try not to immediately judge behaviors or customs that are a part of a different culture.

*Question for the reader: Is it hard for you to believe that parenting styles other than the ones you subscribe to could be beneficial?*

### ***Commentary to Indigenous Vignette #2***

This vignette brings us into the area of cultural competency. Cultural competency involves increasing our awareness and knowledge of other ethnicities and cultures as well as learning to see our biases and stereotypes which come into play as we encounter those of a different culture. The white teacher was able to broaden her perspective to see what Mayan culture positively provided the children, even though it was different than what her own culture offered.