

Latino/Latina Vignette #1

A European American woman and a Mexican American woman go on a day trip together to the beach. It is a beautiful sunny day. As the two strip down to their bathing suits, the European American asks the other woman, "Do you tan?" The Mexican American woman looks exasperated and responds, "Of course I tan, what are you talking about?"

Question for the reader: *Might you have wondered the same thing?*

Commentary to Latino/Latina Vignette #1

If we live, work and socialize in a predominantly white world, it is likely that we will have distorted ideas about people from other racial and ethnic groups. People of color don't have same luxury to be ignorant about white people since they are forced to frequently interact with us and information about white folks is omnipresent. If we assume the white woman's question was sincere, how else might we go about finding the answer?

Latino/Latina Vignette #2

A white woman sees a construction crew starting to build something across the street from where she works. She sees a few men standing in a circle who appear to be the crew-- one is a red-haired man with freckles, the others appear to be Latino. Curious about what is being developed there, she approaches the group. Assuming that the red haired man is the foreman, she asks what is going to be built. Behind her, a man with a heavy Latino accent answers in a friendly voice, "I just bought the property. I'm building one house for my family and two other houses to be sold."

Questions for the reader: *How would you have felt if it had been you who had asked the question to the red haired man?*

Commentary to Latino/Latina Vignette #2

The white woman makes the mistake of automatically assuming that a white person, not a person of color, is going to be the one in charge. When it becomes obvious that we have made this kind of mistaken assumption, we often feel embarrassed or even caught. We have inadvertently expressed out loud what we, on some level, believe inside. The most helpful response here is not to berate ourselves but to recognize that we probably need to examine our stereotypes regarding Latinos or people of color in general.

Latino/Latina Vignette #3

A white woman working for a county mental health agency is in the midst of organizing the registration table for a conference that begins later in the day. A Latino co-worker who is a psychologist asks her how he can help. She replies, "I don't really need you here. Why don't you go help out in the kitchen." He snaps back, "I'll just pretend I didn't hear that" and walks away.

Question for the reader: *Why do you think the Latino psychologist was upset?*

Commentary to Latino/Latina Vignette #3

We don't really know where the white co-worker was coming from when she made the suggestion to go help out in the kitchen, but the Latino psychologist was obviously offended by it. One way of understanding his reaction is to remind ourselves that in this country persons of color have often been relegated to serving white people in various ways - maids, janitors, valets, wash room attendants, gardeners etc.

Historically, many whites have assumed that members of non-white groups have inferior intelligence and are less capable of performing complex mental tasks. This history of demeaning people of color has a

consequence: sometimes they may be sensitive around issues related to intelligence and status.

This sensitivity is not limited to people of color but applies to all of us. When we have been repeatedly put down and disrespected in a specific way we become especially tender and more easily triggered in this area. If the Latino psychologist confronted the white woman about her suggestion that he work in the kitchen, she may have replied, "I would have said the same thing to a white person." And she may have.

It's also possible that the women's comment was based on a, perhaps unconscious, stereotype about Latinos being more suited for menial tasks than for mental work requiring organizational skills. We don't know. It is this sense of uncertainty that often plagues people of color when they interact with white folks. Is the white woman just preoccupied or is her attitude toward me as a Latino, an attitude she may be loathe to admit even to herself, leaking out in her directing me to the kitchen?

Latino/Latina Vignette #4

Two white women, Barbara and Anna, live in a semi-rural area in California. They are discussing the dense growth of poison oak around their houses after a winter of heavy rain.

Barbara: "I'm going to hire some Mexicans to cut down ours."

Anna: "Isn't that dangerous? Won't they catch it?"

Barbara: "Oh, I don't think they're bothered by poison oak."

Question for the reader: *If you were Anna, how would you have responded to Barbara?*

Commentary to Latino/Latina Vignette #4

Wealthy and middle class white folks often hire people of color to do work requiring manual labor. This may contribute to their unconsciously feeling superior to folks of color even if, on a rational level, they believe in equality. From this position of superiority they are less likely to truly respect the needs of people who are not white. In this case Barbara seems to believe that people of Mexican descent are somehow biologically different from whites - such that they are immune from getting poison oak. On some level is she believing that Latinos are a different kind of human or a different kind of species? It reminds me of a comment I heard about poor people when I was a child: "Oh, they don't mind being poor."

Latino/Latina Vignette #5

Written by a Latino:

I live in the Bay Area in California, which is quite racially diverse. One time, while travelling for business, I was in the Spokane airport. I'm surprised to notice that all the people walking through the airport are white. I see a group of four young white men, college age - talking, laughing and playfully rough housing with each other.

A few minutes later I decide to use the restroom. While standing at a urinal, I hear somebody in a jesting voice yell out, "Hey Jose!" I turn my head and see one of the young white men from the group looking at me and laughing as he leaves the restroom.

Question for the reader: *What mind set might have led the young white man to make fun of the Latino?*

Commentary to Latino/Latina Vignette #5

The Latino who wrote this vignette comments:

"My name is not Jose; I'd never met the man who called me that. It felt like a racial putdown. When I was growing up I sometimes heard white people refer to Latinos as 'Jose'. There was a popular comedian who made up the character Jose Jimenez. Jose was ignorant, naive and stupid. Everyone laughed. Actually all he had to do was say was, 'My name ees Jose Jimenez,' and everyone would start laughing."

People of Color Vignette #1

(no one race or ethnic group specified)

A large business has been making an attempt to diversify its staff. Over a one-year period it went from employing three to twelve persons of color. During a Human Resources meeting, the HR director mentions he's been thinking of asking the company managers and the HR staff, all of whom are white, to attend a racial diversity training.

The assistant HR director says, "Is this really necessary? I don't pay any attention to someone's race. As far as I'm concerned there's only one race and it's the human race. Aren't we all on the same page here?"

Question for the reader: *In what ways do you agree and/or disagree with the assistant HR director's comment?*

Commentary to People of Color Vignette #1

In one sense the assistant director is correct. There is no biological or genetic basis for race. The genetic variation between people of two different racial groups can be less than the variation within the same group. Biologically there is only one "race."

On a practical level, however, being a member of a particular race has a great impact on one's life -- for example, in terms of the likelihood of getting certain jobs or of being stopped by police. We can't wish that impact away by saying that we are color-blind. James Baldwin termed this kind of color-blindness "willed ignorance." When white folks "don't pay any attention to someone's race," they sometimes end up assuming that a person of color's experience is the same as theirs, that what works for them also works for a person of color. For example, if I, a European American, feel safe in a particular work environment, I then assume that a black employee would feel the same.

Moreover, there are physical and cultural differences between groups of people. Recognizing and celebrating these differences is part of what makes human life so interesting.

People of Color Vignette #2

This is a story relayed by a white woman:

While visiting my friend in the hospital I went up to the nursing station to ask the white charge nurse about my friend's discharge time. There was a man of color standing in front of me attempting to convey to the charge nurse that there was an error in the paperwork she had given him. The man spoke with an accent.

Although I had no difficulty understanding his words, she apparently could not make out what he was saying. Rather than ask him to repeat what he had said she simply turned to me, a familiar looking white

face, asking "May I help you?"

I just pointed to the man and took a step back.

Questions for the reader: *Why do you think the white charge nurse turned away from the man of color? What do you think of the white woman's response to the question, "May I help you?"*

People of Color Vignette #3

In a women's support group there are five white women and one woman of color, Rita, who is part black and part Latina. The facilitator is also white. During the third group meeting Rita talks about the difficulty she and her husband are having getting a mortgage to buy a house. She explains that a white couple she knows who have a similar financial situation were given a mortgage by the same bank the month before. Jennifer, a younger group member, quickly interjects "I know just what you're talking about. Me and my friend got turned down for an apartment the other day and it had to be cuz of our piercings. It's pretty much the same thing - discrimination plain and simple." The facilitator turns to Rita: "Rita, what do you think of what Jennifer just said?"

Questions for the reader: *As a person of color, how might Rita feel about Jennifer's statement that the two discriminations are the same? If you were the facilitator how would you have responded?*

Commentary to People of Color Vignette #3

A white person may try to equate an experience s/he had in order to show empathy or gain rapport with the person of color. Often a facile comparison such as the one above does not ring true to the person of color. Piercings are a life-style choice; race is not. One of the first steps in racial healing is for us to simply listen with our hearts to what people of color are telling us about their experience of racism without minimizing it, comparing it to ours or manipulating it in any fashion.

We don't really know what it is like to live our entire lives with a skin color that often puts us at the bottom of the power structure. An open

and curious attitude can bring us a long way toward a deeper understanding. When the facilitator asks Rita what she thinks of Jennifer equating the two kinds of discriminations she puts the burden of explaining racism onto Rita who may be needing support herself.

Ideally the facilitator or another group member would step in as a white ally and do some educating about racism here - it is well known that black people are sometimes turned down for mortgages merely because they are black.

People of Color Vignette #4

We are a day or two into a ten-day spiritual retreat in which there are a significant number of people of color. We sit in a circle for "council" and pass a "talking-stone." We each speak, or not, as we choose.

According to the form of the council, we do our best to speak from our hearts, from the truth of the moment. The talking-stone first comes to several people of color.

One person takes the stone and speaks with enthusiasm about the diversity in the room. It is something that many of us have been keenly aware of, but which no one has yet mentioned aloud, "Hey guys, we're all here. Look around. This is incredible." The stone continues around the room. Much of what is said is a positive acknowledgement and celebration of the diversity in the room. The stone then comes to Cheryl, a white woman who says, as she weeps, "I hadn't even noticed that we were different. I am not responsible for what my ancestors did." Then she speaks for some time about the suffering she has experienced in her own life.

Questions for the reader: *Why do you think Cheryl felt the need to defend herself? What might have been difficult about Cheryl's behavior for the people of color at the retreat?*

Commentary to People of Color Vignette #4

Cheryl was disturbed by people of color acknowledging and celebrating the presence of racial diversity in the room. She said she didn't notice. On the one hand this might be something quite positive. She sees beyond differences of skin color; we are all human beings. On

the other hand being a a member of a particular race has a huge impact on one's life. Ignoring racial differences can be a way of denying this impact. Cheryl then states that she is not responsible for what her ancestors did. She reacts to the acknowledgment of racial diversity in the group as though she has been personally accused.

White people often feel afraid when people of color bring up the issue of race or racism. One fear is that people of color will demand that whites take personal responsibility for all past and present manifestations of racism in this country. Another fear is that if people of color speak about race, they will become angry and target the whites who are present. None of what Cheryl might have feared seems to be happening in this situation.

People of Color Vignette #5

Written by a white woman

I have never thought of myself as a racist, but just recently I've realized what a segregated world I live in -- even within the progressive circles of the San Francisco Bay Area. Reading Alice Walker, Leslie Ann Silko, bell hooks and other non-white writers, listening to their interviews and talks, and watching movies and television programs about them has given me the illusion of being in relationship with non-whites while allowing me to remain comfortable in my privileged white skin. These intellectual exercises have kept "the other" at a safe distance, where I relate only in abstraction."

Questions for the reader: *When you are in a group of people, do you think to notice whether or not people of color are present? Are there people of color in your life?*

Commentary to People of Color Vignette #5

Breaking out of an all-white world can be challenging for many white people - especially for those of us who don't interact with people of color in our work settings. This is true even for white folks who are extremely interested in other cultures or who are specifically doing white anti-racist work. We may truly want to seek out friends of color

but are faced with difficult questions such as - What are my motives for wanting friends of color? Where would I go to meet them? Would I be accepted by people of color? What if I say something stupid or offensive? Sometimes we might need to examine our motives when reaching out to folks of color. Examples of unhelpful motivations might be a desire to eliminate one's white guilt, a desire to present a hip image to others by having diverse friends, or a desire to be educated about racism. All these motives contain an element of using people of color. An African American conceptual artist, damali ayo, has created a web site called rent-a-negro.com which plays off this very inclination. She has already received more than 500 requests for her services! If you are interested in "breaking-out," one of the first steps is to notice how white your world is. Often when I'm in a group I look around to see if there are people of color present. Many times they are not. Often white folks are so accustomed to being in all-white situations that they don't even realize when people of color are absent. A second step could be to set an intention to widen your circle of acquaintances and friends. Such an intention can help you identify opportunities to connect with people of color and can encourage you to extend yourself further when such opportunities arise.

People of Color Vignette #6

During a radio interview with the author of a book on Buddhist meditation practice, the talk show host asked whether the author had attempted to reach out to people of color. The author responded by saying, "Yes, I'm offering the meditation workshops in both prisons and juvenile halls."

Question for the reader: *Do you see any problem with the author's response?*

Commentary to People of Color Vignette #6

Here it seems that the author made an automatic and probably unconscious association between people of color and crime. People of color can be found in a vast array of settings, but prisons and juvenile homes were the only ones mentioned. Many of us who are white would probably make the same association.

Because some of us have very limited direct contact with people of color we are more likely to draw conclusions about those groups on the basis of what we see on television. For example, within the African American population there clearly is a problem with crime in some of the poorer urban black communities. But many black people believe that the media over focuses on the crime aspect in these poor urban areas and under focuses on what's right with blacks who live in other areas.