

Reflections on Systemic Racism and White Privilege

Sunday, June 27, 2021, by Craig Snider

We can do better...

Many events this past year have raised the specter of systemic racism throughout the country. Most white communities are oblivious to the problem because they generally don't see or experience it. Even when they do see it, they often see it as something other than what it is - a mistake or misunderstanding.

I grew up in the Oakland hills during the 60's and recall the days of the Black Panthers. High School sports were often tense when my mostly white, Skyline High, faced off against Black High Schools, like McClymonds. Black kids were bussed up to Skyline and their lockers were segregated in one of multiple school buildings. I never knew whether this was by choice or design. It wasn't a problem for me and I had other things to worry about ..girls, sports, college prep, etc. The concepts of white privilege and systemic racism didn't exist in my mind.

Fast forward twenty+ years and I'm working for the US Forest Service in remote rural areas of Utah and Oregon. The Forest Service leadership wants to improve the racial diversity of its workforce and regularly recruits Black students from the Historically Black Colleges and Universities in the South. While it's easy to find Black kids to work summers at the Forest Service, most don't return. Retaining non-white employees is a problem, so the Forest Service creates a Civil Rights Action Group (CRAG) to address the issue. I volunteer for the CRAG, hoping to understand the problem and lend whatever skills I have. The CRAG includes subgroups of women, Black, Hispanic, and Asian/Pacific Islander employees. These groups seemed to have one thing in common: dealing with systemic sexism and racism, coming knowingly, or unknowingly, from white men and women. At the time, I was bewildered that there wasn't a white men's group, since they seemed to be the primary source of problems for all the other groups, both within the agency and the surrounding communities. I felt we needed an additional group of white men to ask the hard questions about ourselves, our relationship to women and people of color, and to ask whether white men might be hindering the recruitment of women and minorities. However, this suggestion fell on deaf ears.

Years later, I attended a CRAG meeting in Portland, OR that included a racism workshop titled "Color of Fear". The workshop featured a documentary by the filmmaker Lee Mun Wah. Mun Wah had done something profound. For 17 hours, in Ukiah, CA, he facilitated a dialogue about race between 8 men - 2 white, 2 Black, 2 Asian and 2 Hispanic. He edited those discussions down to 2 hours and produced the film which was the basis for the workshop. For me, it was



the first moment I began to feel “woke”. As each man tells his story, one thing stands out - a white guy, David Christensen, can’t believe what he’s hearing. He insists that the people of color are basically getting in their own way, the world is open to them, and nothing is holding them back but themselves. David does an amazing job of showing how white people can be blind to racial injustice. It was painful to watch, yet I could feel a part of me sympathizing with him. Deep down I had assimilated many of the same views but wasn’t truly aware of them. I was more blind than I thought. At long last, Mun Wah asks David a simple question: “What if all the things you’ve heard [about systemic racism] from these men were true?” David pauses before replying, “Well that would be a very sad world” and as he slowly awakens to this reality, he begins to cry.

I was so moved by this that I pitched the idea of becoming a facilitator for the “Color of Fear” workshop to my boss, and he agreed. Having seen the film himself, he felt the workshop would raise racial awareness among our largely white workforce and hopefully bolster our efforts to recruit people of color. Months later I travelled to Oakland, CA where I attended a “train the trainer” session for the “Color of Fear” workshop. It was during that workshop, that I experienced racism firsthand - during lunch. It was a two-day workshop and I lunched at a nearby dim sum restaurant with another white guy. At this restaurant, carts roll by the tables and diners choose various small plates from the carts. Service was great, food delicious. So fun.

The next day, we were challenged to eat lunch with someone different than ourselves. I surveyed the room and spied an older Black woman with gray hair twisted into finger-sized locks. She agreed to join me for lunch, but where to go? I suggested the dim sum place from the day before and off we went. At the restaurant, the first thing I noticed was the time it took to be seated. There were tables available, but no one helped us. I finally got a waiter’s attention, and we were seated. As we chatted, awaiting the first cart, I learned this woman was a college professor from back east. Oddly, no food cart was forthcoming. Again, I had to get the waiter’s attention to bring a food cart; but when it came, it had only dessert. I had to direct the wait staff what to bring. I began to feel bad about recommending a restaurant with such poor service when I turned and studied the room. There was only one Black person in the restaurant, and she was sharing my table. All other tables were being well served. When I turned to face my lunch companion, I could see the disgust in her eyes and I knew. I explained to her that the day before, with two white guys, the service was great. She nodded and said, “Yep, poor service, poor service” - a common occurrence in her world.

That was over 20 years ago, and I wish the subtle and not-so-subtle forms of racism didn’t exist today, but they do. When I hear a white person say that racism doesn’t exist here, or it’s just a few bad apples, I think back to these episodes in my life that showed me I had the white privilege to not have to see or deal with it. In my view white folks that claim that racism doesn’t exist have not walked in the shoes of a person of color. And while white people can never truly know what it is to be a person of color in the U.S., we can do better. Imagine what

the world would be like if white people were more curious about the experiences of people of color. If rather than denying their lived experience, we listened to their stories and realized there are things we can do to effect positive change. It may be uncomfortable, but it's necessary for a better future for all of us.

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