

*A key issue in living and working with other people is being aware of how you are the same, how you are different, and how you can communicate more effectively. This is a chapter that I wrote in 1997 for the NTL **Reading Book for Human Relations Training, 8<sup>th</sup> Edition**. My colleagues who work in the area of diversity, equity, and inclusion tell me that this chapter is still worth reading. If I were writing it now, I would add something about gender identity—so I am raising that issue right here and now.*

*Like the heterosexual white man in one of my workshops who asked the question in the title, you may wonder what diversity has got to do with you and with your process of designing your life and your career. Well, **that** is what you have been working on in the chapter on **PEOPLE**. How are you and I the same? How are we different? How can we communicate more effectively? My continuing task is to learn more about myself and to learn more about you.*

*If you are planning to live and work only with people who are just like you, then you can skip this.*

## **I'm A Straight White Guy—So What's Diversity Got To Do With Me?<sup>1</sup>**

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As a straight white guy, I keep learning new answers to that question. In the NTL tradition of using myself as an instrument, I have decided to share my learnings so far.

## ***Seven Learnings about Diversity***

### **1. It's me**

Diversity begins with me. I need to understand myself before I can understand you. When I was eight, a Tennessee cousin visited our family farm in Ohio. I could not understand him—because he had an accent. Ten years later—while I was working on a ranch in New Mexico and getting teased about the way I talked—I finally understood that I have an accent too.

When I am about to meet new people, I catch myself thinking, “What are they like?” instead of first asking, “What am I like?” and reviewing a checklist of items such as gender, race, class, age, and sexual orientation. The checklist reminds me of my own identity—and of the impact my identity has on others.

If I meet another straight (heterosexual) white guy, I have one kind of impact. But if I meet a woman or a Malaysian or a homosexual—then I have a different impact. It starts before I open my mouth. The impact comes from the groups—heterosexual, white, and male—that I represent.

I used to argue, “Hey, it’s not my fault that some other straight white guys did bad things in the past!” That may be so, but it does nothing to change the impact my presence has on the other person. And if I use that argument I just show that I don’t understand the fear, frustration, and anger that my presence can evoke. The reaction is not only because “some other straight white guys did bad things in the past.” It is because I as a straight white guy represent individuals, groups, institutions, and societies that are doing bad things *right now*.

If I don’t get that, then it is up to me to work on myself until I do. I cannot expect other people to do my diversity work for me. When I was a doctoral student in 1972, three of the other students were feminists. I will never forget asking those three women to help me work on my sexism. The response was a bolt of lightning: “We have enough of our own work to do. You deal with your sexism yourself.”

When I finally got over my anger at their response, I recognized the sexism in my assumption that women should take care of a man—even to the extent of helping him with his sexism! That is *my* work. I have to face my own fears and doubts—and get my support from other straight white guys who are working on the same stuff.

I also need to regularly work, play, and learn with people who are different from me. I worked with African-American colleagues on seven workshops last year. Each time I learned more about my unconscious racism. These friends encouraged my growth by not letting me off the hook.

Like many Americans, I grew up pretending that everyone is middle class. Until I met my friend Ron Hill in college, no one had ever confronted me on the class issue. Now that I have lived in Britain for sixteen years I am quite aware of social class. I think the British focus on class as a

way of avoiding the race issue—while Americans focus on race as a way of avoiding the class issue.

Recently a course participant talked about being called “white trash” as a child. My first instinct was to feel superior to him—ironically because I automatically assumed that he was racist. Now I am learning to see us as equals. As science-fiction writer Orson Scott Card says in *Speaker for the Dead*: “The difference between [human] and [alien] is not in the creature judged, but in the creature judging. When we declare an alien species to be [human], it does not mean that *they* have passed a threshold of moral maturity. It means that *we* have.”

## **2. It's you**

You are different from me. You are a different gender or color or orientation or class or age—or you are different in other ways. This makes things complicated. Sometimes I feel like Professor Higgins in *My Fair Lady*: “Why can't a woman be more like a man?” Or, even better: “Why can't everyone be like me?”

I keep learning that I cannot expect someone else to be like me. As I learn this, I go through several phases. I have worked through these phases with my racism, my sexism, and other isms—so I think of them as the Ism Phases. I first discovered the Ism Phases as I learned about my sexism.

Like most men, I began at what I call Phase Zero (It Isn't). I did not even know sexism existed. When I did discover sexism, I asked women if they thought I was sexist. They politely said no. And I relaxed into Phase One (It Isn't Me). As women caught on to this, they spoke up less politely and said, “Yes. You are sexist.” So I moved into Phase Two (It Was Me): “Oh. Was I sexist? I'm sorry, I won't do that again.” As if I were cured for life!

### **The Ism Phases**

- 0. It Isn't**
- 1. It Isn't Me**
- 2. It Was Me**
  
- 3. It Is Me**
- 4. I Help You**
- 5. I Help Us**
- 6. I Help Me**

Gradually, the women in my life got through to me that sexism is an ongoing thing for men. I can be sexist intentionally or unintentionally, as an individual or as a member of an institution. Whatever my personal intent, the impact on the woman is the same. As I learned this, I moved into Phase Three (It Is Me) which is an active, lifelong alertness to my own sexism.

I moved into Phase Four (I Help You) as I became a feminist. I was actively helping women deal with sexism from men. I was on their side, helping them all the time. Drowning them in help. Eventually, a few women told me that they did not need my help nearly as much as I needed to give it. If I really wanted to change things, they suggested I talk to men. In Phase Five (I Help Us), I put my energy into helping men deal with sexism.

I am still a feminist but my focus in Phase Six (I Help Me) is on being a masculinist. I am learning with other men to become more masculine in a way that gives us dignity and pride as men while respecting our differences from women and our equality with women.

These phases may sound like a neat linear progression—the kind that many straight white guys love to use. And that is true for Phases Zero, One, and Two. But I have learned that I need to pay attention to Phases Three, Four, Five, and Six simultaneously. It is my duty as a human being to remain alert to my own isms, to support those who are put down, to confront those who are on top, and to develop my own sense of myself.

You are the one who knows who you are. In the USA, there are Politically Correct terms for people. I recently learned that my Politically Correct term for someone may not be her Personally Correct term for herself. I referred to a woman in my group as a Native American. She reacted by saying that any one of us in the room who was born in America could be a Native American. She said, “I am an American Indian.”

You may notice that I choose to write in a way that is Personally Correct for me while accepting what someone else says is Personally Correct for her. So, for instance, I do not capitalize white and I do capitalize Black.

Since you may change what you want to be called, I have to keep listening—and honor your decision to change. When Cassius Clay changed his name to Muhammad Ali, he gave first priority in interviews to Howard Cosell because—while other sports writers kept using the old name—Cosell immediately called him Muhammad Ali. As the Belgian singer, Jacques Brel, says in one of his songs: “If we only have love, we can use our own names.”

### **3. It's us**

Diversity includes all of us. There is a paradox about inclusion. Almost every time I speak inclusively, I exclude someone. I took a Jewish friend to the beautiful cathedral near my home. During the service, the minister inclusively welcomed “Christians from all over the world” and excluded my friend.

Although I was born in the USA, I have lived in Britain since 1982. I still work regularly in the USA, where I hear “inclusive” statements about “everyone in the country” that exclude me. I get frustrated by discussions of diversity



that ignore the world outside the USA. Diversity is also an issue in Canada and Mexico and on other continents beyond North America. Diversity includes all of us—everywhere.

When I became disabled seven years ago, I was frustrated and angry. I began meeting regularly with two support groups. I need to spend time being “us” with people like me. In these groups we are all disabled so we all understand each other without having to explain everything. That’s one way of defining a culture—when you and I are from the same culture, we don’t need to explain things. When you and I are from different cultures, we need to explain many things.

Now I understand why other people form support groups. As a straight white guy, I didn’t see the need for all the women to sit together or for all the Blacks to eat together. Of course, I am usually surrounded by people just like me so I don’t need to think about forming a group.

For straight white guys, one of the great benefits of dealing with other cultures is that we eventually discover our own culture—just as I eventually discovered that I have an accent. Straight white guys are learning to talk with each other—and to be proud of who we are. That’s important. I find that when I am proud of who I am, I can more easily accept other people who are proud of who they are.

One way we can work together is to be allies for each other. As a disabled person, I have allies. These are people who offer me the help I need and if they don’t know what I need, they ask. Allies don’t take over. They open the door for me—but they don’t carry me through it.

As an ally, I speak up for an Arab friend who is not in the meeting. As an ally, I object to sexist jokes in a group of men. That takes a lot more nerve than doing it in a mixed group—which is why I don’t always manage to get my mouth open.

I first learned about allies from watching my father. He was a lawyer and he spent a lot of time in rooms where there were only straight white guys like him. But he spoke up for the people outside the room. And he got those people into the room.

I have learned not to expect thanks for being an ally. In fact, I may become a lightning rod for the anger and frustration of the people I am supporting. I have learned that this means you trust me enough to risk being angry. And if I listen to you, then you will listen to me. We're in this together. It's us.

#### **4. It's up**

In many parts of the world, straight white guys are the dominant group. The only thing stranger than this fact is that most of us who are straight white guys don't think of ourselves as a dominant group. "Hey, I'm not a group, I'm an individual." But that is the privilege I have as a member of the dominant group—I can think of myself as an individual. People in subordinate groups don't have that freedom.

So a white person says to a Black person, "Why do you people blame all whites? I personally am not prejudiced." And there it is: the white person expects to be treated as an individual—and simultaneously talks to the Black person as a member of a group: "you people."

As Robert Terry points out so brilliantly in *The Parable of Ups and Downs*, Downs (subordinates) are very aware of how Ups (dominants) discriminate against Downs. Downs are quite smart at dealing with Ups. But as soon as a Smart Down gets into an Up group, he starts acting Dumb Up.

I am sitting in a meeting with a potential client in London, frustrated by the negative reaction to my American accent; I smile politely and pretend I'm not bothered as the client jokes about whether people in the company would understand me. I'm being Smart Down. The next day I am having lunch with two clients from Poland, blithely chattering away in English before I realize that one client is having difficulty understanding me because English is his fourth language. I've gone right into Dumb Up.

#### **5. It's down**

As a straight white guy, I learned a lot from my disabling injury. People either stared or looked away. People asked my companion what I wanted to eat—assuming that physical disability equals mental disability. Suddenly I was Down instead of Up.

So what do I do when I am Down? As former NTL president Lennox Joseph says, my work as a subordinate is to move ahead on my own journey and pull the dominant ones along.

Pushing on the Ups wears me down; I need to focus on what I can do for myself. This does not mean giving up or giving in. We will only get social justice if we continue to fight for it. The key is to fight *for* social justice and not fight *against* the people who are dominant.

Some fifteen years ago, I joined a team of ten consultants to run a series of workshops. I was the only white Anglo male on the team. After the first day's session, everyone gathered for a drink—

except me. Martha Romero, the team leader, came to find me. I said I was working on tomorrow's session. "No you're not," she said. "You're hiding out because you're in the minority. I'm Chicano and I know all about that!" She was right. I had just had a tiny taste of what it's like to be Down.

So, do I now really understand? Do I understand the fear of a young black man who is surrounded by a group of white guys? Do I understand the pain of a woman who has planned an advertising campaign only to be fired once the campaign is launched? Do I understand the fear of a gay man who knows he will lose his job if anyone discovers his sexual orientation? Do I understand the anger of a woman in her fifties who loses her job to a younger woman? Do I understand the frustration of a senior engineer from Kazakhstan who is desperately trying to keep up with a course in English—his fifth language? Do I understand the anger of a lesbian who is told she just hasn't met the right man? Do I understand the rage of all sorts of people when someone like me says: "I'm a straight white guy—so what's diversity got to do with me?"

No. I cannot really understand. But I'm working on it. And even if you are *not* a straight white guy, you can work on it too. Each of us is subordinate only some of the time.

You know a lot about the Down part of your life. You have to, in order to survive. But you are also dominant. Answer these three questions: Do you know where you will sleep tonight? Do you know where you will eat today? Do you have shoes?

If you answer yes to those three questions, then you are wealthier than the majority of people on the planet. That is difficult to remember because most of us look up the ladder at the people who are better off than us—rather than down the ladder at the many people who are worse off. That's why the *Culture Visa*—which I developed with George Simons—includes "wealth" among the many ways that we define ourselves culturally.

## **6. It's difference**

Up and Down—inequality—describes life the way it is much of the time and the way we remember painful parts of our past. Difference—equality—describes life the way it is some of the time and the way we can envision the future.

I am rather tough on straight white guys. But I am concerned that straight white guys can too easily become the scapegoat. History is not encouraging here. My persecuted Puritan ancestors escaped from Europe and set up their own exclusive religious communities in North America. So the answer is not to reverse the Downs and the Ups.

I have noticed that when I attack able-bodied people for being Up, they get defensive. Sort of the way I get defensive when a woman attacks me for being Up. What me, defensive? I'm not defensive!

So I keep learning to focus on difference whenever I can. I can't be blind to Up and Down—nor to the money and power that reinforce that split. But I don't have to accept that perspective as the only one. Sometimes we are not dominant or subordinate—just different.

Years ago, when I was working with students on a race-and-sex desegregation project, we did an outdoor training course. Eventually we came to a twelve-foot wall. We had to get over the wall as a team. Suddenly, all sorts of differences became equally valuable. To get over that wall, we needed the athletic ones and the clever ones, the little ones and the big ones.

Any wall that faces us can either stop us—or challenge us to find a new way over. I find the model of Social Construction and Appreciative Inquiry very helpful here. We construct society by the way we describe it. We have the power to choose which stories we tell about the past and to choose which visions of the future we imagine.

The Social Construction and Appreciative Inquiry research shows that almost all social advances are first described in utopian writings. For example, 19th century utopians dared to imagine that women, people of all races, and people of all classes would be able to vote. We can dare to imagine that people of all kinds will be able to live together and learn together.

As Margaret Mead says, “Never doubt the ability of a small group of people to change the world. Indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.”

## **7. It’s love**

Many years ago my extended family had a painful day-long argument about the future of our family farm. Late in the evening, my mother finally brought us all back together. Since I was just beginning to learn about working with groups, I asked her how she had managed to do that. She said, “It’s about love, isn’t it?”

Recently I was thanking Mom for raising me so well and she said there really wasn’t much to being a good parent: “We just provide you with a good growing environment. And we love you.”

I think that describes what we as trainers do in T Groups. It also describes what each person in the group does for everyone else. You and I offer ourselves as “a good growing environment” for learning about diversity. And the key to making it work is that when you and I challenge and confront each other, we each believe that the other person is worth the pain and the risk and the love.