

A Conversation about Anti-Racism

Today we're going to have a conversation about Anti-racism, from the perspective of a black man living in Toronto, Canada. All black men have had unique experiences, and we've all experienced some type of racism in our lives. We all know what it feels like to walk behind a woman on the sidewalk as they clutch their purse and walk across the street.

We know what it feels like to walk in an elevator, to find a different woman, and this time, in our minds we're thinking about what we can do to make her feel at peace and comfortable because we don't want to scare her and come across as a threat. This dual mindset about our own sanity, and the consideration for others should not be necessary, and it can be traumatic.

I for one have had too many of these experiences that at first might seem like nuances, however I don't have to think too hard about a specific recent example to share with you, because I experienced an unfortunate one just 2 weeks ago.

It was the middle of May, and it was one of those days where the sun was finally shining after a long cold winter, couple that with the pandemic, and getting outside, with good weather was a very special time. I go for my afternoon walk to the grocery store, the birds are chirping, I'm waving to the neighbours, all is good in the world. Generally, I'm a pretty positive guy, glass half-full, optimistic type of person. And as I'm returning to my building with groceries in hand, in a great mood, the security guard pulls me to the side and asks if he can chat with me, I'm like ok, as long as you keep your 6 feet distance and it's all good, what would you like to chat about?

And he says to me, we've noticed that there are some weights missing from the exercise room. We know you like to exercise, and one of the staff members thinks it was you that took them, do you mind returning the weights?

My jaw dropped. I was like, no, I did not steal the weights, I'm terribly offended, and why would you think I stole them?

But I'm not naïve, it didn't take me long to realize to myself, wait, I live in a building with about 600 residents, it's predominantly white, and after living here for 5 years I do notice that there might be 2 black people that live in this building. And out of the two, I'm the one that likes to exercise, so when you filter it down by race. It's clear as to why I became the lead suspect.

Now, I had a couple of words with the security guard, however I knew I wasn't talking to the person in charge. Considering we're in a pandemic, the Property Manager's office was not accepting visitors at the office door, so I wrote her an email.

I wrote it in a professional matter however I called it for what it was, a racial accusation that I did not appreciate. The Property Manager wrote back immediately, literally 4 minutes later, and the response was, I'm not racist, I don't think my staff is racist, and this is probably just one big mis-understanding.

The Property Manager is white, and believe me, for a visible minority, we've had quite the share of mis-understandings because of the colour of our skin. I wrote her again explaining to her that her response was bias, not empathetic at all, and for her to make such a statement without any form of investigation was inappropriate. And she responded again, by letting me know that she could not help me any further, and that I was to stop emailing her at the office.

I escalated it of course, wrote the District Manager at Head Office, and finally received a response with empathy and an apology that I was originally looking for. But even though I received it, it still doesn't make it right.

Today I'm going to talk to you about the importance of understanding Anti-Racism and how to transition from passive, non-racist behaviours, to active involvement to ensure racist behaviours are called out.

The reason why this is so important is so that black communities, around the world, can get justice against brutality and trauma, and create a society where equality across all races are accepted and received.

So, what is the difference between being non-racist, and being an Anti-racist?

Let's look at the murder case of George Floyd. Derek Chauvin, the officer that had his knee on George Floyd's neck, clearly had a disregard for George's life because of the colour of skin. He looked at him as less than human. For 8 minutes and 46 seconds he squeezed the life out of his neck. And within that time, 2 minutes and 53 seconds George Floyd was unresponsive. He was dead. His last words were 'I can't Breathe,' and before that he called for his deceased Mama. He pleaded that 'these guys are going to kill me'. It's clear that Derek Chauvin is a racist. But the other 3 officers, as of yesterday have been charged as well, for aiding and abiding a murder in the second degree. They were complicit. They stood there and watched it happen! So it's not enough that they were not racist. Being passive is violence in itself. In this case, it was

far more important for them to be Anti-racist, they had the opportunity to save the life of George Floyd from being strangled by their colleague – and instead, they chose to do nothing.

Silence is violence.

From a Black Man's perspective, that knee was a metaphor. No matter how successful, how educated, how charming, how positive we may be, no matter what we do, it feels like we have a knee on the neck from the oppressor.

To be non-racist is not enough. Let me repeat that. To be non-racist is not enough. We all need to be Anti-Racists.

We need somebody, anybody to pull the knee off the neck of those that are being discriminated against, we need you to take the knee off the neck when you see racist behaviour happening in front of your eyes.

We need Anti-Racists Activists from all walks of life.

Whether you're Black, or White. Brown or Asian. Male or Female. Gay or Straight. Able or Dis-abled. We need you to be an Activist.

And I get it, being an Activist is not easy. A conversation about race is not easy. We all don't have the right words or the right terminology. This webinar is already uncomfortable. But Change does not come from comfort. We must be uncomfortable to shake up the status quo in society today.

When we practice Anti-Racism, we begin to un-earth systemic racism.

Systemic racism has been obscured by the platitudes of a passive society.

And we don't have to look too far to see the statistics. We're still in a pandemic, and in the US, where blacks make up of 16% of the population, they made up 26% of the deaths during this time. That's speaks to the disproportion in healthcare.

When it comes to Employment. 16.7% of Blacks are unemployed compared to 14.2% of white population.

11.9% of Black are in the labour market yet they're 17% of the essential workers. This includes:

Grocery Store Clerks, Warehouse workers, Post office workers, Cleaning Services, Healthcare, childcare, social services, and they make less money.

On average black workers get paid 73 cents on the dollar for white workers.

The typical black household has 1/10th of the wealth of the typical white household. White's household average wealth is \$171,000, while blacks are \$17,600.

Smaller Earnings and less savings make it difficult to build wealth and get through tough times like this pandemic.

To compound the problem, names that are black sounding are less likely to get an interview. And in the US, a University degree doesn't necessarily save black people from systemic racism, because blacks with a degree have less wealth than a white person that hasn't graduated from high school.

Now, I must say, many corporations are jumping on the bandwagon and are speaking out against racism, which is hopeful. There is an awakening happening, and we're starting to get sense of the urgency of now.

But the truth is the hard work hasn't started yet.

How many corporations will stick around and actually do the work?

Diddy, one my favourite entertainers, wrote a post yesterday that said:

"To our friends, clients, partners and industry as a whole. We appreciate you joining the revolt but just know, this isn't just a one-time thing. This is a battle we face as a community every single day of our lives. This is not a one-day event for us. We welcome you joining the fight but only if you are fully committed."

We need to hold each other accountable.

We need to become activist in our lives, in our jobs, and in our communities.

The reality is black people can't be the ones to change the problems created by non-black leaders.

Changing systemic racism involves more than just a tweet, a black box on instagram, or a hashtag. It will involve difficult conversations, including non-black leaders, and brave souls around the world that will keep the conversation going even when it is not sexy to do so!

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This leads us to examine our own souls, our own behaviours, and where we have influence. We must look in the mirror to make the change.

My favourite, Barack Obama once said:

“Change will not come if we wait for some other person, or if we wait for some other time. We are the ones we’ve been waiting for. We are the change that we seek!”

So I’m going to ask you a philosophical question:

Take a moment and envision what a world without racism could look like. What is the world you want to create?

Now that you have that vision, what are the behaviours of an Anti-Racist person?

This type of person is kind, compassionate, they empower others, they lend a hand, and are bridge builders to others, regardless of the colour of their skin.

Now ask yourself, where are the places that you have influence?

Your family, your friends, your workplace, your government, even the places you do business with! You can affect these people and these places with your good word, your good deed, your hard earned dollar, and your passion.

You are the creator and catalyst of change, it starts with you!

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Earlier I told you about the story of being accused for stealing weights for no apparent reason, well, simply because of the colour of skin. That could have been prevented.

The security guard that approached me, he could have simply asked me, "hey, I know you work out often, and we seem to be missing weights, have you seen anybody that might have taken them?" I would have said "No, but I'll keep my eye out."

It's better to ask instead of to accuse.

He also said that it was his colleague that thought I stole the weights, if this was true, he could have called it out right then and there and told them that racially profiling and accusing someone is not right.

The Property Manager, instead of her minimizing what I was saying, and truly not listening to me, she could have simply shown empathy, had a conversation with her staff about discrimination, instead of sweeping it under the rug.

She had a choice, like we all do. And the choice is not black or white. It's a matter of right or wrong. Better yet, in this moment, you have a choice, you can simply be non-racist, or you can be Anti-Racist. You can be an Activist and help create the change we so desperately need in the world!

John Robinson Jr.