

Bruce's Diversity Detox: Tips for kicking habits of bias Part 2

By Bruce Jaobs

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Expert Forum



#2) Be prepared to screw up

If we wait to get “cured” of all our bigotry before we get busy resisting bias, we’ll wait forever. The truth is that, immersed as we are in a culture of explicit and implicit bigotry from birth, none of us will ever be 100 percent “cured.” You and I will never be bias-free creatures. As my mother used to jokingly quote the apocryphal man

who saw his first giraffe, “There isn’t any such animal.” At least not here, in the land of white flight and glass ceilings and the Washington Redskins football team and the casual acceptance of its being controversial to speak about equal rights for gays.

I have racial prejudice and sexism and homophobia and ethnic chauvinism in me and so do you. The only question is, are we willing to look at it in ourselves and in others and commit ourselves to doing something about it, or aren’t we?

Admitting that you and I are going to sometimes say and do bigoted things is *not* an excuse for being bigoted. To the contrary, *refusing* to admit it becomes the ultimate excuse for failing to face our biases or to change them. When white people declare to me, as an African-American man, that they “Don’t See Color” and they’re “Not Racially Biased,” I brace myself for whatever racially-prejudiced silliness might come next. When a Korean-looking woman approaches me and addresses me in plain Ohio-sounding English about how we both have the same hometown, that slapping sound in my head is me tamping down my own little flutter of bigoted surprise.

My own cultural screw-up stories are too numerous to number: The time I appeared surprised upon meeting an Asian-American woman I’d only talked with on the phone and she (correctly) called me out for my having assumed she was white; the time I heard a Native American person casually use the word “skin” (a shortening of “redskin,” sometimes used as insider slang self-appellation the way some blacks use a shortened version of the “N”-word) and I then thought I was entitled as a person of color to use it myself and was summarily dope-slapped for it; the times I have run into other well-dressed black professionals in overwhelmingly-white dominated corporate settings and I have felt an unpleasant thing inside myself and then realized it was an ugly voice within me saying, *This person reminds me of how conspicuously I stand out.*

That’s bigotry, folks, whether it expresses itself as self-loathing or disparagement of others or both.

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We are trained, however, to deny our dire need to face the music. We take a couple of workshops or we read some books or we make a few new friends and we pronounce ourselves all better. Sometimes the diversity industry is itself complicit in such facile shenanigans – selling expensive band-aids while ignoring the deeper social illnesses. But anyone who is honest will tell us that fighting bigotry – in ourselves and in other people – is a process that never ends. We learn as we go; we purge and we struggle; we cast aside more and more baggage . Over time we become, hopefully, both fairer and happier. But we are never totally “cured” and we are never finished. Not with this nation’s history in our bones and its nonstop messages in our ears.

So don’t listen to the shallow happy talk, and don’t listen to the radio and television rage-talkers, either. Go ahead and have the conversation, or ask the question, or put up the challenge, when you decide it is the thing to do – having first informed yourself with the greatest awareness of yourself and others that you can muster. But know that no matter how respectful and aware you try to be – as is your responsibility – you are still going to sometimes screw up. When you do, take your licks. And learn from them. The true test of your seriousness about fighting bigotry isn’t whether you fall down. It’s whether you get up again and keep fighting.