

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

By Bruce Jaobs



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#1) Understand that most of us are good people with bad ideas.

True, the groups planning hate crimes, and the mobs who spat upon black legislators and hurled racial epithets during the health-care-reform wars, and the Holocaust deniers, and other assorted residents of alternate realities, are people twisted into possibly irreversible states of inner sickness.

But the rest of us -- and it is a BIG rest of us -- are people who mean well but who inevitably behave badly and believe seductive untruths. How can we not? Our society nurtures bias from birth. Such as, to take one example, the millions of white Americans who do not see or acknowledge the ways that white privilege shapes their days, from the ways they are spared racial profiling by police or summarily offered lower-interest mortgages to the ways in which whiteness is taken for granted as invisibly "normal" while non-whiteness is considered culturally peripheral and "ethnic." (Take a look at what's in the "ethnic" hair care aisle in your nearby big-box store, and what's in the plain old "hair care" aisle, and you'll get the idea.) Or, to take another example, the millions of black Americans who, in response to the awful decimation of poor black communities (including the literal caging of a huge proportion of eligible young black men), angrily blame gays for the social undermining of black masculinity and community life -- as if black gays cannot be strong men, and as if gays created the poverty, drug addiction, unemployment, crime, and ensuing cynicism and trauma that afflict so many low-income black neighborhoods.

What if we, the non-wingnut-but-still-often-bigoted majority, confronted one another's bad ideas while acknowledging the basic goodness of one another's personhood? What if, to take the two examples I have mentioned, blacks called well-meaning whites to task for ignoring their own white privilege -- not from an easy presumption that such whites are permanently morally compromised, but instead from an insistence that well-meaning whites have the ability and the responsibility to pursue greater awareness and justice? And what if those who respect gay rights called anti-gay blacks to account for their prejudice -- not from an easy presumption that such blacks are helplessly hateful, but from an expectation that blacks who have themselves fought persecution ought to damned well do better than kicking the next available target?

What I am trying to point out is the difference between merely saying, "You complacent white racist!" and saying, "I expect more of you than a complacent

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ignorance of your own white privilege." And the difference between saying, "You pathetic black homophobe!" and saying, "I expect more of you than your simply taking your own turn at kicking someone else down the stairs."

There is a powerful secret at work here that you and I can use: Recognizing the essential goodness of someone's personhood gives us the power to hold them accountable for their bad ideas and bad behavior. It validates the best part of them -- while empowering us to set higher standards for what is acceptable.