

# StirFry Seminars

Each year, at this time, we are inspired by the possibilities of another beginning. Yet, if we have not learned from our past, then we are doomed to repeat the same mistakes. It has now been over twenty years that I have been doing diversity work and making films on racial and gender issues. And so, the most asked question still remains: What changes, if any, have I observed?

The answer is not as simple nor as complex as it appears. Like most diversity trainers, the changes are not always noticeable nor measurable. At the moment of a workshop, you can often sense the emotional awareness that takes place, but has that been enough to instill the desire for change? I am not sure. Even after all these years, I am amazed at how unaware and naive so many workplaces still are, when it comes to truly understanding and practicing diversity. Why after so many years and billions of dollars invested into diversity trainings are we still so slow in making the needed changes? Why are there still so many discriminatory lawsuits and seemingly endless stories of folks of color and women still feeling unheard, unacknowledged and devalued? Why after so many years are white women still the major benefactors of affirmative action?

The truth lies not in finding blame with one particular group, but in the very premise of diversity itself. For too many years now, we have been indoctrinated that diversity is meant to simply respect and understand each other. To many, that has become a mantra without any accountability or need for change. More recently I have been asking a much more penetrating question: “What do you understand? What do you respect?” And in the same tenor, “What don’t you understand? What don’t you respect?” You see, I think that these types of questions need be asked and the answers that come from them, need to be heard and discussed as an essential part of a dialogue on diversity. To me, we have been a nation of “don’t ask and don’t tell” for the past five hundred years and the time has come to be real with each other.

Not so long ago, a black Bermudan interrupted my workshop and asked a very poignant question: “Why would whites ever want to give up racism? They benefit every day and in every way.” I shared with him that I could see he was very upset, but that I was the wrong person to be answering his question. I told him that the most appropriate folks to answering this were the whites who were here today. And so, I called on all the white Bermudans to come up on the stage to answer his questions. What took place was an incredible dialogue that rocked the audience and brought about a greater honesty and understanding than anyone had ever witnessed before.

You see, it would have been easier for me to answer his question, but that is what we do all the time as facilitators and diversity trainers – provide answers and fun exercises, but not necessarily facilitating nor supporting in an authentic and much needed dialogue between folks who are afraid or angry towards each other. Diversity needs to be practiced with the very people we have been taught to see as inferior or dangerous. We need to look at where we learned our prejudices from, how it affected us, and how those images affect our daily interactions and inactions, and finally, how willing are we to take personal responsibility for changing.

And so, as this new year 2007 is now here, what will we do differently? What actions will we take to make this a more equitable world? What aspects of ourselves will we question and change? When will we begin this much needed dialogue with those we love and with those we have never truly gotten to know? For me, that is the challenge and the hope for this coming year. Will it truly be a “new year” or simply the same old rhetoric? If not now, then when? If not you, then who? Be the change you wish for.



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