

# StirFry Seminars & Consulting

AUGUST 2015

## DO WHITE LIVES MATTER *MORE* THAN BLACKS'?

Recently there has been much debate about the need to say that “all lives matter” and not just that black lives matter. However, I think there is much deeper implication here that we are afraid to address: the enduring belief that whites’ lives do matter more than blacks’ and other people of color, throughout our society and since our inception as a nation.

About three years ago I attended a conference on youth issues and concerns that best illustrates what I’m talking about. On the panel were two high school students, one white and one black. The black student, Yvette, shared that she had just published a book on black girls sharing their struggles to find their voices. The white student, Margo, took exception to Yvette’s book, insisting that this was reverse racism because there were no white girls represented. Yvette looked away in disgust while Margo seemed puzzled and embarrassed. I asked Yvette to tell Margo what came up for her. Yvette shared that all her life she had read books that seldom, if ever, had any people of color depicted, particularly black girls. They were mostly white and male. She was upset with Margo because she didn’t understand that she was writing a book for black girls so they could finally see themselves in all their beauty and intelligence, instead of always having whites be their models for almost every facet of their lives. Yvette looked at Margo and said, “So when you read your books, did you notice I was missing? Did you demand that there be more books that had the faces of blacks and other people of color? Did you insist that this was ‘reverse racism’ to only have white faces or did that just look normal to you?”

I think that what Yvette and other blacks are saying is that their lives and the lives of people of color matter, too, not just those of whites. Throughout our society this contradiction plays itself out everyday in almost every institution. Could President Barack Obama have an all-black cabinet and not be accused or questioned that it might be ‘reverse racism’? Or if Hillary Clinton got elected President, could she have an all-women cabinet and it not be considered ‘reverse sexism’? Now, I know this may sound very far-fetched, but were all the other white male Presidents subjected to the same criticism and racial litmus test when they had all-white male cabinets? Or were the all-white male cabinets once again portrayed as simply looking normal, definitely qualified, educated, experienced, typically professional-looking Americans?

Take for instance the “Racial Assessment Exercise” I use in my workshops to illustrate how embedded our stereotypes have become in how whites are perceived as compared to people of color. For example, when I asked whites if they grew up learning/seeing themselves as law-abiding, hard-working, smart, intelligent, trustworthy, leaders, having one or more college degrees—the norm for what is an American—everyone raised their hands. When I asked these same whites if they grew up learning/perceiving blacks as being on welfare, in gangs, not very smart, high school dropouts, not going to college, having too many children, athletic, on drugs, loud, unambitious, living in poor and unsafe neighborhoods, violent, disrespectful, everyone raised their hands.

This might account for why people of color, from our classrooms to our boardrooms, have to work twice as hard and carry the burden of representing all their people on a daily basis—just to prove they are just as competent, safe, intelligent and trustworthy as their white counterparts. Imagine the stress that this must have on the body and spirit of people of color. As Will, a

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black college student in my newest film says, “I’d love to have a break. Just one day where I didn’t have to think about/experience racism.” And he is only twenty-six years old. Imagine a lifetime of that kind of stress and anguish. No wonder black men have the highest blood pressure in this country!

The last story is something that occurred when I had just premiered my first film, *Stolen Ground* at the Kubuki Theater in San Francisco, and I was informed that a white man named Tom wanted to donate \$200 but only if he could ask me one question. I was intrigued and invited him to our cast dinner. In my film one of the Asian men, Mike, said, “I want whites to unconditionally accept my story.” Tom stated that he would never ‘unconditionally’ accept anyone’s story without knowing all the facts. So, he propositioned that if I could prove Mike’s case, he would give me the \$200. I thought for a while, as everyone in the cast stared at me, wondering how I would reply. “Well, Tom, when a white person tells you something about a person of color, do you believe them unconditionally or do you check out their story to be sure they have all the facts?” Tom slid the donation check over to me.

A recent survey showed that almost 70% or more of whites only have one person of color as a friend and of this cohort, almost 90% share that they never breach the subject of racism despite knowing each other for years. In one of my recent workshops at a major university, a white professor shared that he told the African American President (when they were paired up in a group exercise), that he had many racist thoughts about her when she was introduced to the faculty. When I asked him how it felt to tell her, he was scared that she would hate him or at the very least not want anything to do with him. I then turned to the President and asked her how it felt to hear him say these things. She replied, “I already knew that from day one when I saw the look on your face. Do you really think this is the first time I’ve seen that look? I have seen that look all my life. But, this is the first time a white man, like yourself, was willing to share what was behind that look in person with me. So, now we can talk. Not just about how I felt about what you said, but we can talk about where you learned that from and how you think that affects our students and others of color at our university and in our community.” As someone once said,

*“Our continuing passion should be to part a curtain, that invisible shadow that falls between people, the veil of indifference to each other’s presence, each other’s wonder, each other’s human plight.”*

*Lee Mun Wah*



# StirFry Seminars & Consulting

Innovative Tools for Diversity Training



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### FEATURED WORKSHOP • OCT 2-4 2015

#### LET'S GET REAL : Unlearning Racism • Facilitated by Lee Mun Wah

Friday 2pm to 9pm; Saturday 8am to 6pm; Sunday 8am to 2pm • Quan Yin Training Center • 2311 8th Street, Berkeley, CA

This retreat is about confronting some of the issues that keep us all from talking to one another about race/racism. It is also about discovering new ways to begin that conversation, how to create a bridge to talk about our differences, exploring what opens us up and what closes us down, and finally, 101 ways to become Culturally Competent in our relationships and workplaces.

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*If These Halls Could Talk*!)

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\* Some restrictions apply • Expires September 15, 2015

## StirFry Calendar of Upcoming Events

<b>August 14, 2015</b> Blaine, WA	If These Halls Could Talk: A Workshop to Interrupt and Address Systematic Barriers to Access within Higher Education for Diverse Populations • Increasing Access with Diverse Populations Conference Not Open to the Public
<b>August 20, 2015</b> San Francisco, CA	Cultural Competency for Educators, Administrators & Staff Not Open to the Public
<b>September 11, 2015</b> Berkeley, CA	A Cross Gender/Race Conversation Not Open to the Public
<b>September 28-29, 2015</b> Honolulu, HI	Cultural Competency for Leaders Not Open to the Public

\*\* Held at the Quan Yin Training Center, 2311 8th Street, Berkeley, CA

**For StirFry's complete Calendar of Upcoming Events, please visit [www.stirfryseminars.com/events](http://www.stirfryseminars.com/events)**

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