

StirFry Seminars & Consulting

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The Privilege of Numbness

Recently, I led a workshop in which I shared a very personal life experience as a Chinese American child growing up in Oakland, California. After I finished sharing, a European American man, Michael, in the front row, raised his hand and declared that he had a story he wanted to share. I was surprised and shocked. Like so many other minorities in a predominantly white audience, I hesitated. Why? Because at that one moment I had to decide: Do I tell him truthfully how I felt about what he said or do I play it safe and listen to *his* story? Each of these scenarios carries a price to be paid both personally and professionally for someone who is a minority. If I tell the truth, I might be labeled as overly-sensitive or, at the very worst, invalidated, trivialized, or not invited to return. If I listen to his story, I leave feeling not heard and angry at myself for not telling him the truth. The latter experience is not my first reaction, but rather one that has been ingrained in me as a means of survival from my family and the history of being a minority in this country. There is a price to be paid if a white male is made to feel uncomfortable, out of control, irritated or angry.

For those of you who know me, you know that I chose to tell him the truth. I told him that before he share his own story, I needed to hear how he felt about my story. He was obviously surprised and explained that his story would illuminate how he felt. Once again, I felt unheard. But, I also felt he was being evasive. I could also feel the discomfort of the group and the sense that we were entering uncharted ground. But I persisted. "No, I want to hear how you felt about my story as a child." He paused and looked upward trying to 'think' about how he felt. After what seemed like forever, he said, "I don't know how I feel about what you said." I shared with him that not knowing how he felt was a white privilege. That perhaps his not knowing revealed a white history of being able to go "numb" whenever the pain or experiences of minorities are shared. And then just as I finished, a white woman blurted out, "I still want to hear his story." Once again, I was at a crossroads and it took all my courage to tell her that before I could hear his story, something was missing for me as a person of color--how did she feel about what he said or what I had shared? How did the rest of the group feel about what either of us shared?

It was at this point that Michael interjected and thanked me. He shared that he had never thought about how he, as a white man, had often bypassed how he felt. And that perhaps what he was really hiding was that he had difficulty sharing his emotions and maybe even hearing someone become emotional. That this numbness was something he seriously needed to look at. He also thanked me for my courageousness in confronting him. His admission was the turning point of the discussion, because soon afterwards, two women from South America shared that they had similar experiences to mine when Michael wanted to share his story and how often they, too, had been 'talked over.'

This 'disconnect' is something I have often experienced time and time again whenever whites are confronted with reflecting upon their own racism. There is either a long silence, a change of subject, questioning the integrity of the speaker, or wanting to interject with their own story.

What is needed from whites is an authentic emotional response to what they've heard from people of color, an acknowledgement of what has been shared, a sense of genuine curiosity, taking responsibility and a willingness to reflect and to change. Maya Angelou once said, "Some may never remember what you said or did, but they will always remember how you made them feel." The truth is always there. Saying it out loud...that's the hard part.