

RACE AND CLASS AT MT. TOBY AND IN WIDER FRIENDS CIRCLES
Random Thoughts to Begin a Conversation

We are all people of good intent. No one chooses to be racist or classist. Perhaps we first need to commit to remain in the conversation (and be open to change) even when we are uncomfortable. Looking at oppression must be a life-long process. No one suddenly arrives and “gets it” for all time.

Racism and classism pervade all of American society. No one escapes. The first step in removing our blinders is acknowledging our insensitivity, ignorance and culpability.

Looking at how we oppress others is more than learning to be “nice”.

All of us are diminished by classism and racism, those of us who perpetuate oppressions and those who are targets. And too many benefit from them.

This is hard, hard work. We will not always feel good. However, the fruits include living more ethically and seeing a world more clearly in all its rich hues and complexities.

Please focus on NOW, what is happening here at Mt. Toby and among Quakers. Don't flee back to the past with such stories as Earlham's once not allowing interracial dating. Classism and racism is right here alive in our midst today.

Out of choice and necessity I, like many People of Color, am bi-cultural, moving easily in middle class White and Black circles and among many Black income-levels. I doubt this is true for most Whites. I invite you to expand your comfort zone.

Children of Color usually recognize race at a far younger age than Whites. What is your experience and what can you learn from it?

Why do so many Anglos see White as normative? Junot Diaz, the Dominican Pulitzer Prize winner, encourages his students to say “White” as often as they use various terms of color. It can be an eye-opener.

In some ways “People of Color” perpetuates considering Whiteness as normative. Perhaps such terms as ALANA (Asian-, Latino-, African-, Native-American) are more accurate but then the acronym excludes many cultures.

Why are some Whites using the term “majority minority” to indicate their diminishing numbers in this country? What is the problem with calling themselves a minority?

You do not need people of lesser income or ALANA to lead (or even partake in) a rich conversation about race and class. If, for example, we adults catch ourselves crowding out youth by taking up too much air space, would we wait for children to initiate the dialogue before we did anything? It is usually painful, excruciatingly painful for me to

shepherd White people's/affluent people's awareness. At times the consequences have been grave. Please don't ask me to do it again.

Class and income are not necessarily synonymous. Why do some upper middle class people view a professor differently from a police officer although their salary may be comparable?

There is a difference between income and wealth that shapes perspectives, how we live, and how we are treated. Yes, there is a decided income gap between Whites and most ALANA but the wealth disparity is even greater. Wealth includes all assets. Consider a Latino and a White person making the same salary. More often the White parents owned a house and willed the proceeds to their offspring so they too can now buy a home... the White family who has assets to support a college education... The stocks and IRAs to support old age...

Recall how classism pervaded Business Meeting conversations about whether to support casinos. No matter one's position, why did I hear such judgments as "they can't afford to gamble." Why, as far as I know, did only one Friend point out that more affluent folks also gamble and with acceptance (on the stock market)?

Class means different things in different communities. When my parents met, my mother was a maid for White folks and my father had been a bellhop, yet they were always part of Boston's middle class African American community. Even when I was homeless I continued to share that identity.

Class assumptions are so pervasive it is probably impossible to always be on target, but I encourage people to struggle with it. For example, at Mt. Toby it sometimes seems that a Prius is taken as a sign of social consciousness and not also of privilege. Priuses didn't exist 16 years ago, and I suspect driving my 1997 car may use fewer resources than if I could afford to buy new every six or so years. Another example, do we assume at committee meetings that everyone has access to a computer and is comfortable using it? What about the privilege of eating organic? Of being able to travel to demonstrations?

Not everyone wants to go to college! Not everyone has the privileges that make college an option! A degree is not a measure of intelligence!

Contrary to popular thinking, drugs are no more prevalent among Blacks than Whites. (Statistically, rural White and suburban youth partake more often, but Blacks are persecuted far more and imprisoned in even greater numbers.) Question all stereotypes!....

I believe the recently published book on Quakers & race is entitled *Fit for Freedom, Not for Friendship*. (Disclosure: I have not read the book and I recognize there can be limitations when writers strive for alliteration.) Many Quakers are progressive and I cherish the mutual friendships I have with many of you. Freedom? Friendship?... that is not my question. However, Friends can be exclusive and can discriminate. It begins with

making invisible people who are different, perpetuating a limited understanding of the experiences that shape their life. Interactions too often reveal distortions and oppressive thinking and behavior.

Two specific examples from other Meetings... In 9th grade I became a regular attender at Quaker Meeting. When I moved to NYC as a young adult it was a natural to seek out a Meeting. I found one in my neighborhood, an overwhelmingly Latino-Afro community. I walked in that first Sunday and a White man approached me in the hallway and asked, "Can I help you?" There are two ways to ask that question—one is neutral, if not exactly warm, and the other is with suspicion. He was definitely transmitting distrust and that I didn't belong at *his* Meeting. Even when I told him I was there for the service, he didn't greet me and offer a welcome. I entered the Meeting room and of course it was all White! I never returned. A second example... My children were young and I was pleased to have found a New Hampshire Meeting that seemed to welcome all of us. However, the Meeting was in a rented space and was hoping to build its own place. After each Meeting there was a push around plans and fundraising. I had no money to contribute and felt that in their eyes I therefore had nothing else to offer. I stopped going.

I thank Mt. Toby for intentionally making its Retreat affordable. Is there anything we can do about other Quaker happenings from Woolman Hill to Yearly Meeting to make them economically welcoming? Mt. Toby is generous with their financial support but I have to ask and sometimes that is hard. When I was co-directing a theological center that offered a plethora of programming, we would offer a suggested sliding scale but these words were always added: "More if you can; Less if you can't." Each participant would decide with no questions asked.

LISTEN. LISTEN. LISTEN.

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February 8, 2013