

## CONFESSIONS OF A RECOVERING RACIST

*My “aha” moment*

**By Donna M. Hauer**

I HAD JOE PEGGED on the first day. A handsome, intelligent, confident African American man, extremely well mannered and well read but cautious, with a chip on his shoulder. He was masculine and reserved, an active participant, respectful, and though small in stature, he carried himself with the intensity of Malcolm X. Other students in the group, including me, the group’s cofacilitator, were a little—no, very—intimidated by him.

The program we were running was a pilot, a collaborative effort between our office and residence life. It was a very new approach that focused on the interconnectedness of different types of oppression. Participation was open to students interested in issues of diversity and was strictly voluntary and cocurricular. We were bringing undergraduates together in a structured setting, providing opportunities for informal interaction and diversity education with the goal of breaking down stereotypes and building allies by building friendships. The name of the program, Nexus, means connection. As co-leaders, Tina and I provided reading materials, speakers, videos, and facilitated discussions to guide the process. We had found from previous experiments that the best way to wreak havoc with students’ assumptions was to introduce them to others different

from themselves—cause cognitive dissonance—and get out of the way. While this was before Beverly Daniel Tatum’s *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* the practice indicated in that title was certainly common. We wanted students to understand the interconnectedness of different types of oppression, rather than staying stuck in their own issues.

That was my problem with Joe. He was definitely stuck in his own issue—racism. That was understandable, given that he was a black man, but I wanted him to be open to learning about the other oppressions. Or maybe I wanted him to learn about my oppression. He seemed only distantly interested.

So I was disappointed but not surprised that Joe was a no-show the evening we discussed GLBT (gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender) issues. Sure, he called to apologize and explain his absence, but I knew the real reason: homophobia. A lesson in heterosexual privilege would have served him well. While he probably believed he’d heard it all before, I wanted to teach him a thing or two.

While Joe treated me with the utmost respect, I never really got the sense that he thought I knew much about this diversity stuff, despite my years of experience in the field. After all, I was a white woman. Yes, I was an

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out lesbian, so that gained me a little credibility, but it was no contest when compared to the struggles of one not so able to have his difference be invisible. While I agree with Audre Lorde that “there is no hierarchy of oppression” (p. 9), Joe’s stern exterior and recitation of civil rights history validated African Americans as the only true winners of the Oppression Olympics. I was painfully aware of my white privilege and my ability to choose whom I would come out to and whom I would rather not come out to, albeit this is a mixed blessing.

As a young black man, Joe didn’t have that option. There was no rest for him. No passing zones. No letup from the constant stereotyping and instant fear he evoked: women clutching their purses a little tighter in his presence, the clicking of car doors locking as he passed. While I could never walk in his shoes, I did appreciate and understand the difficult road he had to navigate in this racist culture, all the assumptions made about him solely based on color of skin rather than content of character.

So I was surprised to get a call from Joe early one Monday morning; he insisted that he needed to meet with me about something he could not discuss over the phone. I returned his call promptly, setting the time and place, still curious as to why he wanted to get together with me. Why not Tina? She was a person of color, and they clicked. What could I possibly offer someone like Joe, who had appreciated but learned nothing new from Jane Elliot’s presentation (Elliot is the famed founder of the brown-eyed/blue-eyed experiment) on campus the week before? My experience and wisdom were not pertinent.

PROMPTLY AT 3:00, Joe arrived, looking as cool and serious as ever. I closed my usually open door to answer his tone of formality and confidentiality.

He wasted no time getting to the point. Isolation. Loneliness.

Understandable. There certainly weren’t many students of color living on campus. Unfortunately, these feelings were all too common. I was waiting for him to elaborate on themes I had heard over and over from students of color studying and living at a large, impersonal, racist, predominantly white university. I settled in.

“My boyfriend broke up with me.” He went on to share his story of a first love ended—not by his choosing. He had answered an ad. . . . They’d been dating a while. . . . He’d thought things were going well. . . .

Did he say “boyfriend”? My mind froze on that word until the reality produced a quick thaw.

He described his first attempt at sharing his experience of love lost. “I called my mom yesterday because she’s my best friend and I wanted to talk with her about having my heart broken.” His whole demeanor softened. “It didn’t go well. Hell of a Mother’s Day present.” Tears were welling in his eyes.

My face blushed a bright Christmas sweater red as I tried to mask my shock and remain an attentive listener. Torrents of admonishments flooded my conscience. How could I have been so blind, so judgmental, so wrong about him? At the same time, I wanted to share my accumulated wisdom of years in the trenches, or should I say out in the trenches? Losing my best friend, common family concerns, knowing holidays are not the optimal coming-out times in case things don’t go well, and so forth. Arm him with as much information and as many resources as possible. I was

thankful he was at a place with out faculty, staff, and students with whom he could identify, rather than having no one or nowhere to turn to. I just listened, fighting my urge to mount my soapbox.

Joe poured out his heart, spilling a painful coming-out story—a variation on a theme I had heard all too often. Isolation. Loneliness. Struggles of a student studying and living at a large, impersonal, homophobic university. He had come to terms with his own identity after years of denial and strife. He knew that his Baptist minister father would not embrace his truth, but he counted on his mother, a single parent raising an only child. They were close.

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But she, too, was disappointed. As much as he tried to explain, she recited back typical societal rhetoric: "It's just a phase. You need to get over this. You need to pray about this. That university has put this craziness in your head. . . ." She claimed that he was no longer her son, or at least not the same one she had sent off to college. Obviously, this mother was not ready to hear that her child, her pride and joy, her best friend, was gay.

I tried to reassure Joe that just as it had taken him time to come to terms with his sexual orientation, his mother would also need time. "Be patient" seemed too small a condolence for someone who had just lost lover, best friend, and mother in a matter of days. His issues of isolation and loneliness were complex, like his identity.

What a different impression I now had of this courageous, sensitive, lovesick young man. Having not shed a tear for ten years, he had spent all day Sunday crying alone in his room, feeling unimaginably isolated. No pamphlets, referrals, or resources would heal the hurt at this point. We cried together.

We set another meeting, and I offered to do anything he could identify that might be of help.

He had one request. Could I call his mother? He was concerned that she didn't have anyone to talk to about this. She wouldn't want anyone to know.

I assured him I would, hoping my gulp wasn't audible.

Before Joe left, I confessed and apologized for the judgments I had made. Usually, I prided myself on the accuracy of my "gaydar," but clearly, my internal gadgetry had missed the signals. Obviously, it wasn't programmed to detect layers of identity.

I thanked him for confiding in me and providing me with an "aha" experience I would never forget, a completely unexpected turnabout: I was the one stuck in my own issue, unwilling to look beyond color to consider that we shared an oppression and a community. How wrong I was about Joe not understanding the interconnectedness of oppression. On the contrary, he lived it daily.

I'm just lucky he didn't have me pegged on the first day.

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#### NOTES

Tatum, B. D. *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria? And Other Conversations About Race*. New York: Basic Books, 1997.

Lorde, A. "There is No Hierarchy of Oppressions." *Interracial Books for Children Bulletin*, 1983, 14(3), 9.



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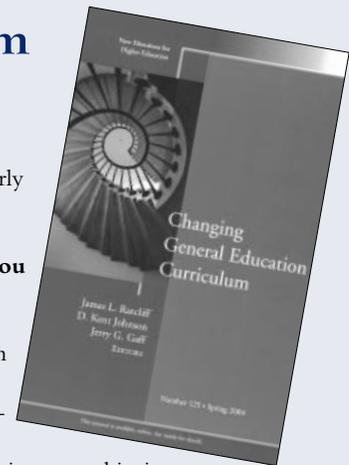
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