



“EXPANDING MY WORLD VIEW”

As a little girl growing up in rural South Carolina, the face of racism was Black people being oppressed by White folks. It would be years before the term “oppressed” became part of my daily language. I only knew it felt bad and created a constant state of apprehension and unease. Children were to be seen and not heard however, no one ever told us to close our ears. So, like all children, I heard things and processed them in my child’s brain, creating a reality that made sense to me.

Hearing that my great-grandfather had been shot dead for intervening on behalf of his son. Watching my father hold the door for any white person behind us while we waited for him to catch up. He always doffed his hat and said “boss” to the white person(s). Noticing that we children always addressed adults as “Mr., Miss, Ma’am, or Sir” regardless of skin color, and yet, White folks of any age addressed my grandmother by her first name. Realizing my mother’s intentionality to bring books into our home that highlighted the strength and dignity of Black people.

Jet and *Ebony* magazines were staples in our home. She subscribed to a graphic novel (comic book) series about Black leaders. I recall a publication called *Journey(s)*; each edition featured the in-depth story of four Negroes that never showed up in my schoolbooks. It’s no wonder that my first report on a historical figure featured Ira Aldridge, the Black actor and playwright who died 30 years before Paul Robeson was born. Mom was intent that we had knowledge of more than the usual suspects: Frederick Douglass, Rosa Parks, ML King, etc.

Having been raised in South Carolina, I sometimes refer to myself as GRITS, a *girl raised in the South*. Awendaw (‘Aw-win-daw), was a rural community on Highway 17N between



Charleston and Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. I grew up in Awendaw and went to school in Charleston, 25 miles away. For me, the separation among Black folks in my home community was socio-economic. I only interacted with them while working in my father's gas station or going to church on Sundays. When I wrote my biography for a doctoral course in human development, I conflated growing up in the country with growing up poor.

The professor informed me that, based on the elements in my story, I was actually "petite bourgeois". I lived in a 2-story house on ½ acre of land *given* to my parents by my maternal grandfather, with both parents and my 4 siblings. We'd attended public and private schools in Charleston or "the city" vs the local schools in our rural community. My father owned and operated a full-service gas station and Mom was a registered nurse. Even white folks in Awendaw recognized that my family was better off than some of them. We were definitely not poor. My blackness came with socio-economic privilege that I now had to include in my reality.

The daily commute to Immaculate Conception School put me in classrooms where I was surrounded by Black students of varying skin tones. Many of the students at this Black Catholic school had light skin, green or blue eyes, and silky straight or nappy blonde hair. They were members of social clubs like Jack & Jill, were mostly Catholic, and went to the same church together. They often walked to and from school together and got to hang out with each other on the weekends. One could have darker skin with the appropriate social connections and fit in.

My siblings and I rode the 25-mile, one-way commute to and from school each day with my older brother, once he got his license. We attended First See Wee Baptist Church in Awendaw, the church co-founded by our maternal grandfather. I only saw these peers on Sundays or at the occasional social gathering sanctioned by my church and approved of by my



parents. What stays with me about these two different interactions is how separated I felt. I had no sense of belonging to either group. Each had decided I didn't fit in; therefore, I had no social capital with either of them. Socio-economic class distinction combined with adolescent "out-group" behavior was reinforced as my experiences with differences continued to add up.

One challenge of people living with a disability was made real when I slipped on the ice during graduate school in Illinois and fractured my right elbow. Having to sign any documents using my left hand was an eye-opening experience. Managing to carry books and a purse while balancing both, driving with one arm confined in a sling, and using the bathroom for any reason was all an adjustment. For the first time, I paid attention to how often folks without mobility issues took up disability parking spaces. The phrase "temporarily able-bodied" became part of my vocabulary as I acknowledged that, at any given moment, I could be forced to live without access to full physical or mental capabilities.

In 1995 I was introduced to the idea of anti-oppression work. Until I participated in a *Building An Inclusive Community* workshop in St. Louis, MO, I only recognized that the world didn't operate equitably for everyone. I'd never been encouraged to think about the whole continuum of difference, nor to consider where I had power by way of my own privilege. The nuances of faith affiliation, physical and mental ability, looks, gender equity, and many other differences didn't stand out, although they were always there. Differences in skin color had been my resting place; I never considered how folks without my privilege moved through the world.

The day-long workshop began gently and built throughout the day into more challenging concepts. After lunch, we were forced to think intentionally about where we exist relative to accessing benefits and privileges in our respective social groups. My introduction to this line of



thinking was an eye-opener. Every individual has some level of privilege as well as disadvantage. The most important thing I learned is to use my voice in the areas where I have privilege and avoid wallowing in my area(s) of challenge.

Two experiences that now shape my thinking:

I'm not leaving you behind...

There's an exercise called The Race where folks line up, shoulder to shoulder, holding hands, and respond to a series of questions by taking steps forward or back. Each question relates to a person's life experience specific to skin color, socio-economic class, heritage, ability, age, sexual orientation, etc. As we respond to the questions, it can become untenable to continue holding onto the hand of the people on either side. As the exercise continues, the group separates such that folks are scattered toward the front, along the middle, and toward the back. Folks are instructed to look around the room and notice where their colleagues landed.

After debriefing with a series of questions, the facilitator instructs participants to run to the finish line on the count of three. In this particular experience, Aliah and I, both Black, were in the back of the room. She refused to run, saying she would never make it, didn't feel like making the effort, etc. I looked her in the eyes and said, "I'm not leaving you behind." When the facilitator counted off, I grabbed her hand and started running. Despite her protests, she ran along with me. We didn't "win" however, we weren't the last to make it. She turned to me and said, "Thank you for not leaving me behind."

That's what that feels like...

Another experience from the same retreat. For this next experience, we sorted into affinity groups. The privileged group has to leave the room while the targeted group members



remain in the big space: women vs men, Black vs White, LGBTQ+ vs heterosexual. For the first two groups, Aliah and I both got to stay in the big room. The last grouping required us both to leave the room. This was a paradigm shift for both of us. We were uncomfortable at being shifted out of our target spots and forced to sit in our privilege and acknowledge it.

Mary, who is female and White, said, “This is what it feels like when I have to leave you and go with the White people.” I felt like someone had splashed a cup of cold water on my face. Aliah just screamed as reality hit her. Putting a face to someone else’s target status and acknowledging your own privilege has both physical and emotional effects. Until I could put a face to my privilege, it didn’t really connect. Now I can’t not see it, feel it, acknowledge it.

Since I began this journey toward *change agency*, I’ve never been able to look at the world the same way. I walk through the world as a temporarily able-bodied, heterosexually presenting, middle-class raised, spiritually grounded, educated, African-American female of above-average height. When I enter the room, all of this walks in with me. I notice how differences affect others in my work and social environments. My world is no longer just black and white. Now that I know what I didn’t know, I can’t *not* know it; I am accountable to do something about it.

Respectfully Submitted

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