

Sometimes You Don't What You Don't Know

By Rebecca Ross

Did you ever have that experience maybe looking in the rearview mirror that you didn't know what you didn't know? You didn't really see any reason to know about this subject. Some call it unconsciously incompetent. Some call it blissful ignorance. Well, this happened to me with golf. I had no interest in golf, didn't care about golf. However, after working for a few companies that had a strong golf culture – We golfed with fellow employees, with vendors, with customers, with sales reps; we golfed with everybody. I thought, how hard could this be? So, I signed up for a golf lesson. Yes, siree, I'm going to take a lesson and then I will know how to play golf. Well, it wasn't that easy. Apparently, in order to properly strike the little white ball with your club, you need to do about 17 completely un-intuitive actions with your body all at the same time, and then relax. Does this instructor not know that my goal today is just to be able to hit the perfectly still, little white ball? Well, I learned a lot that day. I moved from being unconsciously incompetent to being very consciously incompetent; I became very aware of my lack of golf competence. Don't worry this is not going to be a sermon about golf. I am a golf dropout.

We joined All Faiths about two years ago and I started attending the Racial Equity Team meetings. And the more I attended, the more I realized these people knew things that I did not know. I was in that space of consciously having to recognize my lack of competence around something that, unlike golf, was very important to me, so I kept attending meetings. The longer I participated, the more I felt that the Racial Equity Team should be doing things to engage more with our congregation.

That brought to mind an email I received two years ago about a program that my friend Dorothy, who has been very involved in Racial Justice, was leading at Westshore Unitarian Universalist Church, my former church in Rocky River, Ohio.

That program was described as offering: *“the opportunity to talk about YOUR life experience concerning race and racism with two others, one of whom is a trained*

facilitator. For many of us this may be our first opportunity to talk openly about this sensitive and important subject.”

So I called Dorothy to learn more about the program, the goal of which is to have meaningful conversations about race and racism. And I got really excited. I made more calls, this time to members of our congregation. I talked to Marsha Bates and Chris Stotler, and Lewis Robinson, and Rev CJ, and Michelle Gemma, and Marge DeGalbo. I told them about this proposed project that involves small groups - three people: a trained facilitator and two participants - sharing their life experiences dealing with race. Their journey, and how they think it has affected their attitudes about race and racism.

If you read September’s newsletter, you would have seen a summary of the program.

I found that once I began to think about this project, my own stories, my life experiences dealing with race have come flooding into my mind. We’re talking experiences that happened so long ago that I haven’t thought about most of them for 40 years or more. But forgotten or not, they are my life experience and they have shaped my views of race and they have influenced how I move as a white person through the dominant white culture.

So today I want to share with you some of my stories, where I am on my racial journey, and why I am excited about the prospect of bringing this program to All Faiths.

My stories:

Four years old, Fort Worth, Texas: I was playing at a friend’s house; our dads worked together. More precisely, my father was my friend Little Bill’s father’s boss. We chased through the family room while the two dads were watching a boxing match. Was it Floyd Patterson vs Ingemar Johansson in the World Heavyweight Championship? Could have been. The timing fits. They were watching intently and the black man was losing. I know, because I noticed and I said, “Look at the n-word!”

My father turned away from the TV red-faced and shouted louder than I can remember, “Don’t ever say that word! Ever!” I am four years old. Where had I heard that word? I certainly hadn’t read it. I didn’t even go to kindergarten. I didn’t read my first word until the middle of the first grade. . . but I did grow up in Texas and Louisiana.

Five years old, Leigh, Texas: My grandparents on my mother’s side were cotton farmers in East Texas, ranchers, owned the rent houses where their black farm workers lived, owned the cotton gin, were part owners in the general store where everyone, including these same workers, came to buy just about everything (food, fabric, nails, feed, mule collars, coffins and funeral shrouds) and being out in the country so far away from town, my grandfather was even the bank, making small loans and selling on credit to customers. I grew up spending a lot of time at my grandparents’ home and in the store, Taylor & Trice; Trice, that was my grandfather. They had colored-only restrooms and colored-only water fountains and they were all outside; those for whites were inside. Around 1959 or 1960 my grandmother sewed up a cotton-picking sack for me and they took me to the cotton fields and took my photo with the black cotton pickers. I don’t know why, but I have seen the black and white photo and had not thought about it for a very long time and now it strikes me as such a peculiar thing to do. The smiling five-year-old, blue-eyed white girl with a ponytail amongst the black field workers crouching and picking the bursting white cotton bolls.

Ten Years Old, Houston, Texas: The race riots of the 60s. There was fear; I felt afraid. I’m guessing my parents mostly kept us away from the news, but I’m sure we heard some of it and we heard comments from other adults and our friends. The fear seemed very real to me. Black people were angry, they were rioting and burning down cities and they were going to come to our neighborhood, and we were going to have to barricade ourselves in our homes; maybe we would have to use our guns to save our lives.

Twelve Years Old, Downers Grove, Illinois: My father was transferred from Houston, Texas to Chicago and we moved into a brand-new house in a brand-new development in the far-western suburbs of Chicago. And race disappeared; it melted away from my life. I ceased to see Black people. My little brother was 18 months old when we moved there, and about two years later driving through our suburb, my mother at the wheel, my little brother now three years old saw something, that to him was remarkable. He pointed out the window and said, "Look Mommy, a brown man." When we learned that we were moving North, for the first time living north of the Mason-Dixon line, I imagined a world where black and white and brown families lived together on the same street. I quickly learned that the peaceful multiracial world that I had imagined existed up North didn't exist, at least not in my world. In my high school of almost 3,000 students, I think there was one black student; he and his family were from the British Virgin Islands.

Sixteen Years Old, Downers Grove, Illinois: My brother Billy asked our dad a question about race that he struggled to answer. To set the stage, I need to introduce you to my older brother, two years older than I. As a teen, he had a way of lobbing incendiary bombs into our dinner conversations. So here we are at the dinner table: Mom, Dad, five-year-old little brother, eighteen-year-old brother, Billy, all having a pleasant meal when Billy spouts off, "Marijuana should be legalized!" This was not the way to have peace at the table, especially not with my dad who was loud, direct and opinionated.

Or how about S E X - that's how it was said at our house, if for some reason you had to broach that topic. "Premarital sex is a good thing. I was talking with Steve's mom about it this afternoon." Talking to your friend's mother about this? And you think this is a good conversation to have with our very conservative father? Do you have a death wish? So, you've got the picture.

One day Billy accused our Dad of being racially prejudiced, which he strongly denied. So my brother countered with, "What would you say if Becky dated a black guy?" Silence - as my father considered his response. My brother did not wait. "What about

a Mexican?” Again, I don’t know exactly what my father wanted to say, but his hesitation told me a lot. Now impatient Billy blurts out, “Well she is dating a Mexican!” I am? I know this may be difficult to accept that this somewhat intelligent sixteen-year-old didn’t know that she had been dating a Mexican for more than six months. But Bob and I were in the same Spanish class and my grades were way better than his - how could he be Mexican if he didn’t speak Spanish?

One day four college coeds: a WASP, a Jew, and two black girls decided they wanted to go to a fraternity party at another college some distance away, but they had no transportation. So they made their way out to the interstate and put their thumbs out to hitch a ride to that college town. They didn’t have to wait long before a beautiful, gleaming Lincoln Continental pulled over to the berm. It was driven by a middle-aged black man, impeccably dressed in a business suit, starched white shirt and silk tie.

Maybe you're wishing I would get to the punchline already about what happens to the WASP, the Jew and the two black girls. But this is my story – **Eighteen Years Old, Fulton, Missouri** - and this was me with my three best college girlfriends: Tina, Ronnie, and Nancy. Tina and Ronnie were the brains behind this idea; they were the ones who knew about and were invited to the frat party, and they invited Nancy and me along. Imagine my surprise when we walked into the frat house and Nancy and I discovered that we were the only two people there who were not black. No surprise, I felt like I stood out. I tried to get comfortable in my skin. It never happened. I felt that all eyes were on me. Were they? No one was unkind or discourteous to me, but no one asked me to dance, no one even spoke to me. Tina and Ronnie had a great time and we all stayed until the end to make sure that all four of us got home together safely.

Twenty-nine Years Old, Marshall, Texas: My younger brother, Charles, was eighteen when our grandmother died and we went to Marshall, Texas for the funeral. After a few nights of staying at the Holiday Inn, Charles and I decided to escape the boredom of another evening in the hotel room with our parents. We followed the

sound of loud rock music - now we're talkin' – down the hall to a large, rather dark room, except for the disco lights - where the music was coming from. Outside the door were stationed three young black adults who were selling tickets to what appeared to be a dance party with great tunes. We stopped to chat and found out it was a "Teamsters" Dance. Can anyone go? Sure, just pay five dollars. Okay. Well, I didn't know that unions had dance party fund raisers, but we didn't mind supporting the Teamsters and it sounded like a great party. We paid, walked in and went directly to the dance floor and in a few moments our eyes adjusted to the dim light, we found that we were the only two white people there among a sea of young black people dancing. We were at a Wiley College – an HBCU – “*Teensters*” dance party and we were welcomed.

Forty Years Old, Cleveland, Ohio: I was hired by a large corporation to launch a new business unit. I had to direct pretty much every aspect of the launch and of course recruiting and hiring talent was part of that. These were good jobs and they paid okay though not as much as comparable jobs with our parent corporation. I started getting some good resumes in response to our ads and began interviewing candidates. Something happened that was kind of interesting, and then it happened again and again, and it became more than interesting. I bring the candidate in for an interview, they are well-qualified, educated, smart, professional, good communicator, and black. And I make them an offer and they accept. What's so interesting about that? As I considered these candidates, I am convinced that they will decline my offer because with their qualifications they surely can command more in the marketplace than I am allowed to offer. But that is not what happens, they accept, again and again. And now I begin to wonder. – If they were white, would they have been further along in their career path, in their salary progression? Would they have had more advancements at this point and I never would have been able to afford them?

Forty-Seven Years Old, Marshall, Texas: My husband, Brad, our ten-year-old son, Robert, and I were visiting Aunt Geraldine and Uncle JT. It was great. Their three kids were there, hadn't seen them in ages, all very accomplished: a college professor, an

attorney, and a judge. During conversation after dinner, Uncle JT is talking about something, a topic that I will never ever be able to recall, because during the course of it he used the N-word, multiple times, just as naturally as he might have used the word butter, or truck or any other word. Brad and I were shocked. We saw the embarrassed look on the faces of my cousins, his children. And no one said a thing; not my aunt, not one of his children, and shamefully, not me. While we did talk to our son later about what happened and how wrong it was, in that moment, we became part of that silent white solidarity in not saying a word. I became very aware of my lack of competence in knowing how to deal with this kind of situation.

Sixty-Eight Years Old, Atlanta, Georgia:

Guess where Brad and I were the day before Ian hit? Atlanta, trying to get home from a vacation in the British Isles. We were in Atlanta for four days; more precisely, we chose a hotel close to the airport, in College Park and College Park is 82% black, 11% white. Wherever we went, out to lunch, to the restaurant near the hotel, the BBQ joint down the road or the Planet Fitness, Brad and I stood out a bit. I really needed a nice long workout, so at the gym I had time to think about how I couldn't find another white person in the place except for Brad. And to consider how I felt about it. And then I realized that I didn't have to answer the question of how I felt about being one of two white people in this huge fitness club. My takeaway was that I felt my race – as something. I felt my race, an experience that has been a rare occurrence in my life.

There is no doubt that these life experiences have imprinted on me. These and many more that I will never be able to recall as individual events because they are so tightly woven into the fabric of my life that they can't be singled out or separated. They have shaped me and my views on race and racism. And I have only talked about a few of my experiences dealing with people of color. What about the 90+% of my waking hours that were spent in my insulated dominant white culture world?

So where am I in my journey? I am on a quest to move from being consciously incompetent to consciously competent. That means that I am working on this skill, but I have to pay attention and focus, because it is not innate. I did not grow up in a multi-racial world; I grew up in a very segregated world.

I believe this is a spiritual quest to move closer to understanding what it is to be a minority in the dominant white culture. I know that I will never truly understand, because I have not lived it. But I also believe that if I am open, and if I can admit that there is much that I don't know then I can truly listen and can actually hear when a person of color speaks their truth; that I can hear it without getting defensive even if I feel that I have a great defense. Will a Black person speak their truth to me if they are shut down, dismissed, told that they just misinterpreted, that they have hurt my feelings? Doubtful.

I appreciate the opportunity to share with you some personal stories of my racial journey.

I hope that others will want to join in on this journey and participate in this small group listening program that we hope to offer early next year. If you are interested or just curious, ask me about it.

(No, my Dad never even suggested that I break up with my newly-identified Mexican boyfriend.)