



How We Are White

By Gary Howard,

From the Southern Poverty Law Journal, Teaching Tolerance.

The break is over and I am ready to begin the second half of a four-hour multicultural curriculum workshop. Twenty-five teachers and staff are scrunched into 2nd grade desks, all eyes and White faces turned toward their one African American colleague, who has asked to address the group. He announces that he will be leaving this workshop immediately and resigning at the end of the year. He has lost hope in their willingness, and ability to deal with issues of race.

After he leaves, a painful silence grips the room. I realize that my planned agenda is no longer appropriate. Gradually the participants begin to talk. Their comments are rife with guilt, shame, anger, blame, denial, sadness and frustration. It becomes clear there has been a long history leading to this moment. Together they are experiencing a collective meltdown over the realities of race and their own whiteness. One faculty member remarks, "I feel so helpless. What am I supposed to do as a white teacher?"

In my 25 years of work in multicultural education, I have encountered an almost universal uneasiness about race among White educators. Since the publication of my book "We Can't teach What We Don't Know": White teachers, multiracial schools, many people have shared their stories with me. A White teacher from California reports, "I realize that I have contributed to the failure of my students of color by not being able to drop the mask of privilege that I wear. Another White teacher writes, "I thought I was going crazy. It was helpful to hear that other White teachers feel similar confusion."

As White educators, we are collectively bound and unavoidably complicit in the arrangements of dominance that have systematically favored our racial group over others. In my own family, the farm was in Minnesota that I cherish as part of our heritage was actually stolen from the Ojibwe people only a few years before my great-grandparents acquired it. This is only one of the countless ways I am inextricably tied to privilege. I did not personally take the land, yet I continue to benefit from its possession.

But privilege and complicity are only part of the story. The police officers who brutally assaulted civil rights activists during the Selma march in 1965 were certainly White, but so were many of the marchers who stood on the Edmund Pettus Bridge with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. on that awful Sunday. It is true that three White men dragged James Byrd to a horrific death in Jasper, Texas, but it is also true that many White townspeople and a predominantly White jury condemned this act of racist violence.

In the course of my work and personal reflection, I have discovered there are many ways of being white. Some Whites are bound by fundamentalist White orientation. They view the world through a single lens that is always right and always white. White supremacist hate groups represent one particularly hostile form of fundamentalist White orientation, but there is also an uninformed and well-intentioned version that simply has never been exposed to other perspectives. This was my orientation from birth through my high school years, when I had never met a person who wasn't white. Fundamentalist White teachers often say, "I don't see color. I treat all my students the same."

Other Whites live from an integrationist White orientation, where differences are acknowledged and tolerated but still not fully accepted. Integrationist Whites are self-congratulatory in their apparent openness to racial differences, yet often paternalistic and condescending of people of color. In this way of being White, we prefer to keep the peace, avoid confrontation and maintain control, rather than actually get to the core of our separate truths and unique racial perspectives. Integrationist White teachers say to students of color, "I know how you feel," even when we have no real connection to their reality. This was my first orientation when I first began "helping" Black kids in the ghetto in the 1960s. I thought I was the answer, rather than the question.

Finally, there is the transformationist White identity, which is a place of humility and active engagement in one's own continuing growth and reformation. Transformationist Whites have acquired a paradoxical identity, which allows us to acknowledge our inevitable privilege and racism while at the same time actively working to dismantle our legacy of dominance. Transformationist White teachers know it is our place and our responsibility to engage issues of race and multicultural education in the classroom.

White educators do have a choice to grow beyond our ignorance, denial, and guilt. There is a journey, which I envision is like a river that carries us through many, confusing currents and treacherous rapids, but which eventually can lead to a place of authentic multicultural White identity. Ultimately, good teaching is not a function of the color of our skin. It is much more closely related to the temperament of our mind and the hue of our heart. We did not choose whether to be White, but we can effect how we are White. This is both our challenge and our hope.

In the last few years I have returned several times to work with the elementary staff who experienced such a painful meltdown over issues of race. With courage they have stayed on the river, chosen to look deeply into the reflective pool of their own difficult history together, and have come to a place of honesty and renewed commitment to a multicultural vision for their school.

At our last meeting, when the painful event was alluded to in discussion, a newly hired Asian American asked, "What happened?" A veteran White teacher responded, "It's a long story we need to share with you. It will help you know who we are."

Gary Howard is currently President of the REACH Center for Multicultural Education in Seattle. He is the author of "We Can't Teach What We Don't Know", available from REACH 206-545-04977