

I Don't Think of You As Black

By Naomi Tutu and Rose Bator

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This story is really about intention and impact. In the best of all worlds we would be able to reflect on the impact of our words before they come out of our mouths, and hopefully, choose words that do not negatively impact others. But the reality is that we are largely socialized to consider impact only when it is likely to have repercussions for us. We all say things blissfully unaware of the effect on the people we are talking to, or even thinking that what we are saying to another will be seen as positive. Very often the impact, regardless of our intention, is negative.

Often the experience of those who are discriminated against is that when they give voice to the impact of words or actions they are accused of being oversensitive. How often have you heard or said, "I did not mean anything by it" or "I really did not mean that". Being in honest conversation means being willing to hear not just your intention but the impact that your words have on another. Our first reaction is to be defensive, and try to justify our statement or position. The true conversation comes when we agree to hear the other's story, openly with our hearts. It is hard to speak of your hurt and just as hard to hear the impact of your words on another. Yet, if we are to build a community, if we are to have true relationships with one another, we must be willing to speak truthfully and to hear clearly.

How often have we written someone off because they said something stupid and hurtful to us? How often have we backed away from a relationship because we have sensed anger in the other person? That is the way of survival, of protection. What we offer here is a story of deciding to be vulnerable, to speak our truth and listen to the others as a way to build trust and relationship.

Naomi

I had been on a speaking tour in Cleveland. Because Rose lives there, we had several opportunities to talk and I asked before I left if we could continue some of the conversations we'd begun. So for the next many months our conversations took place by phone or via the internet. We talked about everything, from my children to the state of the world. One day in one of our conversations I asked her whether she felt that my being a black woman affected her perception of me, our friendship, and our conversations. She replied "I don't think of you as Black." I was stunned, angry and just fed-up. It's not that I had not heard those words or sentiments before; I had, too many times. I just had never expected to hear them from her. So often, white South African people would say to African-Americans, in my hearing, "Of course you are not like our Blacks." When I first came to Kentucky I soon realized that many white Americans were more comfortable with me, an African, than they were with African-Americans. Over and over White people seemed to think it a way to compliment Black people to tell them that they were in some way different from other members of their race.

Rose likes to say I bit her head off as soon as she said that. I like to remember that I breathed deeply, counted to ten and then asked very politely, "What do you mean you don't think of me as Black?" Whatever the truth of how I reacted, that statement became the focal point of a conversation that we continue to have to this day. What did she mean? What did I hear? Why do almost all people of color tell about similar statements said to them and almost no white people do? (Though I must admit that since then I often tell Rose I don't think of her as white!)

We use this story often to open our workshop Bridging the Divide, as an illustration of one of the danger areas in conversations that deal with race. We continue to unpack the elements that make it so dangerous in our ongoing conversation, and gain new insights about our thought processes almost every time. Whenever we share the story almost all the people of color in the

room will start nodding in recognition and will often share their version of the story. The statement is not always the same but the message people of color usually hear is, "I accept you, but in order to do so I must ignore one part of who you are. Your blackness is a negative I am willing to overlook because I like you."

I think it is often very hard for people who have not had the experience to fathom what it means and how it feels. So I am forever grateful to Rose's mother. When Rose told her what had happened she said, "What if someone said to you I don't think of you as a woman?" I know many women who have had just that experience. The message given to them is that when they act a certain way they can be accepted as one of the boys, and not like other women.

For me this story is about being reminded of separation, exclusion and denial. Through this experience I have come to believe even more strongly that we will not build a whole world by pretending to not see difference; we can build it by seeing and valuing wholeness.

Dear Rose,

I can't believe you said that you don't think of me as Black. To me that is one of the greatest insults and injuries of racism. It tells me that I am OK as a person if you can ignore this one fact about me. And, it is not a little fact. How can you not think of me as black? As soon as you see me you have to see a black woman. I'm not saying that Black is all that I am, but it is a huge part of who I am. The fact that I am Black has been a significant part of my experience in this world. It feels as though you are trying to erase a part of me. It makes me so angry that white people feel as though they can say something like that and seem to think it is some kind of a compliment. I have heard that kind of thing all of my life, and I must admit it is one of my button-pushers.

To me it not only says that you need to erase a part of me in order to accept me, but it also says that you have the power to do so. You, as white have the power to decide when you will make race and issue and, I, as Black should feel glad when you say you are not making it an issue. And of course, whenever we try to say that race is not an issue, it becomes a huge issue, the elephant in the living room. For me that statement ranks in arrogance and obliviousness with, "I don't see color, I just see people." That one absolutely fries me. You cannot live in the US or South Africa or most countries in the world and be unaware of color. And why wouldn't you want to be aware of color. We are made differently to add diversity and flavor to the world. No one would think that is some great thing to say, "I don't see roses or daffodils I just see flowers", or even, "I don't see pink or red roses, I just see roses." For me, ending racism is not about pretending that we are all the same it is about accepting and enjoying our diversity. I love being a Black woman. I hate many of the experiences I have had because I am black but I love the fact of being black, just as I love the fact of being a woman.

When you said that it really made me stop and evaluate our friendship. Earlier in my life I would probably just have written you off and simply stopped calling and emailing you. But I feel as though I have been led into this friendship for my growth and so I have decided that I will challenge you on this statement. It makes me angrier and hurts more that you said it than if you were just some casual acquaintance. Because I feel that in the months since we started getting to know each other I have opened to you and have gained much wisdom, guidance and support. So it feels like a real betrayal. I feel like I heard a part of you that I hoped did not exist. (A year ago I probably would have said the real you.) But I believe that all the people I have come to know in you are the real you. The one who believes in my abilities when I doubt them, the one who will make silly animal sounds in the middle of a conversation, the one who encourages me to cry, to give voice to my anger and fear, and the one who can make a stupid

racist comment like that. So I guess I will stick with all the different parts of you and try and find out what was going on in you when you made that statement. What were you thinking and what did you think you were saying? Did you think about how it could possibly sound to me?

So I am sticking with this conversation trusting that we will learn how to navigate the minefield of race and remain friends.

Naomi

Dear Naomi,

I feel grateful that you have enough trust to share your honest reaction. It lets me know that this friendship is worth the work to you. It also helps me hear some really important information about you and about me.

I understand, like I never have before, how your skin color has impacted every part of your life experience. I remember that you once told me that being black is something that you can't hide from others in order to feel safe, like other groups of people who experience prejudice: "people who are gay can choose to keep silent, but everyone sees my color as soon as you leave my home in the morning." You spoke of "getting yourself ready" to walk into your workplace or a restaurant, like steeling yourself for battle. I heard those words and did understand them at the time, but apparently did not grasp the depth of them. I guess I never will. As a light skinned person, color has not been a key self-identifier for me, at least in this country. It hasn't had to be. I don't feel judged because of my skin color and it hasn't been the source of my acceptance or rejection. My sense of worth is not tied to my skin color, or at least my consciousness of my skin color.

I can hear your experience, believe you, and also care about your experience, yet not know it from the inside, and not know how core a part of you it is. So I have learned, yet again about the nuance of my learned racism that not recognizing skin color and all that goes with it is another way of making you and your history invisible.

Your challenge has encouraged my self- reflection. I have had to go down a loop deeper into why I did say that I don't think of you as a black woman and if it really is about my unconscious need or desire to erase a part of you.

I do acknowledge my ignorance in understanding what those words mean to you and their deep roots in your life. I hear that color DOES determine your life experiences in many ways. And I also need to say that the comment was not intended as a "compliment." I know that you experienced it that way. I honor that. Yet, I need you to hear that that is not what was going on in me. Rather, it was a description of what is in my mind when I think of you. Of course I see the color of your skin! And yet, for me, the color of either of us is not the determining characteristic. I experience you as a unique individual, not simply a member of a race, though I know that it is part of who you are in the larger world. I know you as a person who both struggles and triumphs over the challenges of your daily life, who is passionate about justice and our responsibilities to the world, who loves her family, and friends, who has suffered and also has healed, a woman of faith as well as doubts.

And, I do know that racism has played a singular and indescribable role in your life story. Your honesty in pushing this conversation also causes me to review my life story and wonder about my own key lenses. I think that my mother was right in directing me to compare your experience of racism with my experience of sexism. Sexism is part of shaping every aspect of my life. I used to imagine how my life would've been different if I'd only had one little chromosome switch! Even the men who are the closest to me do not really understand the

impact of sexism on me or how it permeates and mediates every structure and institution in our culture. From the lens of the role of sexism in my life, I have begun to understand the role of racism in your life.

Again, I feel gratitude for the chance to journey a treacherous path with your companionship.

Rose

Questions for Journaling or Reflection

- ◆ What is one memory you have of an experience related to race?
- ◆ What feelings did you have?
- ◆ If there were other people in the story, what do you think they were feeling?
- ◆ How would you express your feelings about your own race?
- ◆ Have you ever imagined being of a different race? Why? What did you imagine the experience would be?
- ◆ Listen to a song or some music that comes to your mind as an expression of your race or gender.
- ◆ Spend a few minutes drawing or painting after you have reflected on your race.

Guide and Resources for Book Discussion Groups

Sample

- ◆ Does anyone in the group identify with Naomi's experience? Why and how?
- ◆ Does anyone in the group identify with Rose's experience? Why and how?
- ◆ Think about the identities that people cannot hide. What are the stereotypes held about these identities?
- ◆ What is the cost of not being able to hide an identity?
- ◆ What are the identities that people can hide? What are the stereotypes about these?
- ◆ What is the cost of hiding a part of who you are?

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