



How Does a Peacemaker Find the Strength to Engage in Emotionally Charged Conversations that Create High Levels of Stress?

Juilee Parpart

ABSTRACT

This essay chronicles the development of a white suburban educator from a difficult childhood to an unlikely protester. Her experiences are framed as three confessions: coming to understand herself as a Peacemaker; recognition of privilege, inequity and injustice in race relations; and fear of complacency. Her odyssey is illustrated by reflections on her upbringing and the realization that racism was subtly embedded in her worldview. The author gives examples of relationships and experiences that changed her perceptions of people of color. A particularly compelling story involved her taking a recently released Black prisoner into her home. The author relates how she has found meaning in life by helping others reach their potential.

Keywords: complacency, educator, privilege, protester, racism, reflections

As a White Suburban School Teacher, I Must Confess...

It's nearing bedtime on June 11, 2019 as I grab a book from the coffee table. The title, The Road Back to You-An Enneagram Journey to Self-Discovery invited disdain and skepticism. With limited options of reading material, I crawled between the sheets, confident in immediate slumber. However, the print leaped from the pages, grabbed me by the shoulders and shook me.

This book was reading me! It was stealing my breath and shattering my comfortable self-perception. The Enneagram is a tool that explains nine personality types starting with Type Nine, the Peacemaker.

So here's my first confession. I'm a Peacemaker-avoiding conflict at all costs and disconnecting from the passion to live my best life.

The Creation of an Empathetic Peacemaker

This shouldn't have come as a surprise to me. I was raised the oldest of five in a lower middle-class suburban neighborhood. There were no shortages of family events that required skills for bringing people to a state of peace. As a middle-aged adult, I fit the pattern of a typical child brought up in an alcoholic, abusive home. My resiliency score is off the charts which is a source of pride for me so why be upset that I fit the label of Peacemaker?



Reflecting on my heritage, I'm proud of my immigrant Polish lineage. In fact, my paternal uncles have traced our family line back to Poland in the 1600's. How amazing is that?

Semi-annual family reunions were filled with stories of how our ancestors came to America and made a life for themselves in the Midwest. The family tree was unrolled over a picnic table as we eagerly searched for our little branch compared to our cousins. I was always aware that my story was connected to these ancestors I had never met but who had pursued their version of the American Dream.

Their dreams embraced a predominantly white, Catholic community where everyone dressed the same and followed all the rules. 'Dad' worked a white-collar job and 'Mom' worked as a housewife. And somehow, my father thought telling racist jokes at parties was acceptable. Since I had not seen my father most of my childhood, I found myself frequently confronting him until he learned that racist jokes were, in fact, unacceptable.

My maternal lineage is also from Poland. The stories I heard were dominated with themes of struggle for survival amidst strict cultural norms and generations of assimilation. My ancestors were expected to work hard and adhere to their Polish heritage in the face of racial discrimination. Great-Grandmother Frances often shared her memories of growing up on a Minnesota farm with her seventeen siblings. I would listen for hours fascinated with the part of our family history that I was intimately connected to through my existence. We enjoyed cabbage soup, goat milk candy and the truly traditional polish sausage called kishka.

A Call to Action in America

Here's my second confession. I have never been able to comprehend how the Constitution states that "all men are created equal" ...except for women, blacks, Mexicans, Native-Americans and any people of color. In my community, in advertising, in national policies, I was experiencing cognitive dissonance and my own oppression from the white men of the world. Watching the famous doll experiments on YouTube reminded me of my own childhood and how I rarely saw black dolls at KMart or advertised on TV. And as an elementary teacher, I often see the effects of racism played out in the classroom. Although I teach for inclusion, it's clear I need to expand my instruction which is why I enrolled in the course, Race and Cultural Diversity in American Life and History offered through the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. The content of this course opened my eyes to the depth of racism as a social construct and the systemic nature of racism since the days of slavery.

My best friend in first grade was a black girl named Literia Seals. I loved her chunky braids and her funky barrettes but her big, brown eyes and her warm smile made me feel like fresh-baked cookies. I saw her color and loved every part of her. We shared an understanding about life that left a huge void when she moved away.

In high school, I wanted to date the kindest man I ever met. But I was barred from dating him for the simple fact that he was Mexican. Why wouldn't my parents want me to date a kind man?

My upbringing was filled with diversity but I didn't fully appreciate it until I moved to my current community. Our next-door neighbor was rumored to have ties with a local 'dismantled' group of KKK. I believe it to be true as even my dog would not go near him, sensing his underlying hatred. Imagine his discontent as we welcomed a newly released black prison inmate into our home!

This was a man my husband had befriended while working as a correctional officer; pledging his assistance during parole hearings that ensured his release to our care. My eyes were opened the first night of his release with \$50 in his pocket and the clothes he was wearing.

He was expected to secure his birth certificate, a state ID and employment within 30 days after being incarcerated for over twenty years. Since 2001, it has been one of the greatest joys in my life to witness this man, my friend,

rebuild his life by becoming a husband, multi-property owner and a Knights of Columbus leader in his church community.

It's June 2020. I am coping with recently completed chemotherapy, a pandemic and the opportunity to raise my voice for racial equality. How does a Peacemaker find the strength to engage in emotionally charged conversations that create high levels of stress?

In the words of Virginia Wolf, "You cannot find peace by avoiding life." Life is meaningful when it revolves around helping our fellow humans reach their highest potential.

Actions Speak Louder Than Words

My final confession is that I've been afraid of being complacent in the face of adversity, hiding behind my white privilege and not knowing what to do or say that will have any significant impact on systemic racism.

But then, I rise up and choose to participate in a protest march with 30,000 people wearing masks and chanting "Black Lives Matter!" to the world. Please don't tell my oncologist.

I educate myself by reading books, watching documentaries and blogs on black America.

I purposefully support black owned businesses.

Most importantly, I fully engage in difficult conversations armed with factual information and notice the fear dissolving.

What am I afraid of...that someone won't like what I say?

They might be offended? Or worse...they won't really listen like I do.

I won't walk away. I choose to elevate our humanity and bring truth to the statement that "all men are created equal."



About the Author:

Juilee Parpart, MEd, is currently a Reading Specialist, in a school district located outside Chicago. Her interests include nature walks, energy healing, oil painting, and traveling outside world pandemics. She has two grown sons trying to entice her to move to the beautiful state of Colorado.