



And then it became personal

By David Wick, April 19, 2021

"I want to get in the car, now!" Irene said with a worried look on her face. Knowing something was wrong, we did just that.

I had noticed a man and a woman walk by just as Irene said these words. "Did you see what that man did?" she asked me.

I replied that I did not, but Irene exclaimed that he gave her "the look" and she felt the need of a protective barrier, inside the car. We were parked at a gas and food stop along I-5 between Eugene and Roseburg. This took place 10 days ago.

Irene and I have been together for 21 years, and racism has been a topic of discussion, and at times tension. However, this is the first time with me that she has taken defensive and protective action like this.

"The look" she experienced was the glare of a white male toward her, a woman of Asian heritage, which carried messages of disrespect, hatred, you don't belong here, I may hurt you.

When I learned of this aggressive act, I was furious. The expression of my anger was met with Irene's looking in my eyes and saying, "We are not going to confront this, I am a target. I know that would invite greater hostility and could be dangerous."

We talked further, and I knew she was right. We got back onto I-5 and drove toward Ashland.

I have recently been upset and disturbed when seeing news accounts of hate-filled attacks on Asian women that are horrific, damaging, and can be deadly. Images of childish elementary schoolyard bullying comes to mind when unprovoked rage strikes out against someone seen as different. That is horrible to see anywhere, and I also think with concern about my two nieces who are also of Asian descent. But

with this aggressive act toward Irene, it became personal. Who the hell do you think you are to illicit such fear and anxiety like this?

Racism has no boundaries. Two weeks ago, the Ashland Tidings published an editorial that said in part, "Although we all like to think our cozy and welcoming communities are too evolved for there to be much racism nowadays, such is not the case." It said further, "As always, on a 'hearts and minds' level, it is up to each good person to stand up for those who need our help. Speak out when we see or hear racial bigotry. Reach out to members of racial and ethnic minorities in our communities. Patronize their businesses when it makes sense to do so. And, at a minimum, treat others the way you want to be treated yourself."

I have found that racism and prejudice not only live on the streets in my communities, but it also lives within me. I have had uncomfortable conversations and painful revelations due to my thinking and actions with Irene. I am a white male of privilege, and I have grown up in an American culture that has racism and prejudice interwoven in the fabric of daily life. So much of the messaging is subtle and invisible, but the undeniable imprinting is made.

Acknowledging the racism, bias and prejudice in my own life takes courage, compassion, and accountability. Acknowledging it in my home, my community and in other people takes the same. This is essential to create communities of inclusivity, well-being and equality — communities we want to live in.

It pained me to read articles about racial discrimination in the lives of Irene Kai, Belinda Brown, Amy Peterson and Gina Duquenne, wonderful people of BIPOC identity in our community and important contributors to our well-being. Walking in their shoes hurts.

I find the journey of life to be very challenging and I believe our job here is to continue to experience and grow from the many lessons before each and every one of us. Inclusivity and valuing differences are major ones, millennia old. Said succinctly, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." This also becomes, very personal.

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