

Fundamentally, it is our collective responsibility as radical black people and people of color, and as white people, to construct models for social change. To abdicate that responsibility, to suggest that change is just something an individual can do on his or her own or in isolation with other racist white people is utterly misleading... It is our collective responsibility as people of color and as white people who are committed to ending white supremacy to help one another."
—from *Killing Rage* by bell hooks

OUTWORD

BY
GEOFFREY
BATEMAN

I have a confession to make. In spite of my progressive sympathies and my ever-evolving socio-political consciousness, I'm racist.

I'm not a cross-burning, white-hooded Klan member, but after much soul searching, I've realized I'm racist.

Because I am a white, gay man from a working-class family who grew up in a small, extremely WASPy mill town in southwest Washington, this isn't shocking. But no one likes to identify with such an ominous label. Especially someone who is educated, angered by social injustice and committed to making some difference in this world of ours. But I'm afraid it's true.

About a year ago, I was driving down I-84 in the hot September sun with a friend, returning from passing out condoms and safer-sex information to naked men at Rooster Rock.

Excited about the ticket he had gotten for the Prince concert that evening, he was talking about his plans for the night when I unexpectedly said, "I hope I don't make you late. If I did, you'd scalp me."

The 'terrible monster inside'

Portland's queer community should wake up and smell the white privilege—and do something about it

Dead silence.

In any situation, this comment would be ugly, insensitive and racist. But in front my friend, a Native American with whom I've engaged in an articulate analysis of our country's problems with race and class, it was even worse.

He looked away from me, out the window onto the Columbia River, silent, betrayed. Another white person full of anti-racist talk, I stumbled and fell, skinning open more than my knees. I felt myself sliced open, exposing this terrible monster inside me.

"I'm sorry," I said, after a few minutes of painful tension passed, sliding by with the mileposts as we neared the city. "Where did that come from? Why did I say that?"

"I don't know," he answered quietly.

I heard the distance in his voice and cringed, my head flooding with apologies and excuses. I stopped myself and merely said, "You know I've never used that word before. As stupid as it sounds, it just slipped out. All I can do is say I'm sorry."

"I know."

Thankfully, my blunder didn't ruin our friendship. But it did change it, as all mistakes



do. Within an hour we were back to laughing, gossiping, talking about race and class and the correct political analysis of it all. We even laughed together later when we told his friend, Monica, about it.

She looked at me in half-horror and half-jest and said, "You know that's the worst thing you can say to an Indian!"

I know. I knew it then, too. Even my mother gasped when I told her about it. Then why did I say it? Where did it come from?

I've come to no certain conclusions, but the reality of my life and that of many other white people is that we're oblivious to people of color. We walk around blindly, immersed in whiteness, thinking everyone perceives the world the way we do.

And as gay men, we're not immune to this. Our alternative sexuality doesn't automatically erase years of racist conditioning. We've inherited this white supremacy from our country's plagued history, and even as some of us try to resist it, this brainwashing remains deeply ingrained in our psyches. It's a sickness we must heal from, and like any major illness, getting

well takes time and a great deal of rehabilitation.

Since last summer, my friend has moved to Pittsburgh, and we talk less frequently. But in our occasional phone conversations, we don't avoid the difficult questions. In December, when I started dating a new boyfriend, he asked, "Is he white?" I said, "Yes." He responded, "That figures."

None of the conversations I have with him are easy, for him or for me. Yet our friendship has always been based on attempting to resolve the tensions between us as two gay men of different races.

Ending white supremacy isn't easy, nor is educating ourselves to think critically about race, even—or especially—for gay men.

When I hear about how many talented and intelligent gay men of color come to Portland to enjoy our "progressive" city and then leave a few years later, disgruntled and burned out from doing our work for us, I know that we as a community have much to learn about racism.

This work is terribly difficult and fraught with many tense dynamics that we cannot resolve in isolation. As a white man, I can't expect people of color to do my work for me. Yet at the same time, I've learned the most about my racism from the conversations and arguments I've had with people of color. I've come to recognize it, understanding my own white privilege and seeing my own culture.

I've also realized that I can't fix this problem alone, no one can. We must work together, people of color and white folk, with patience and good faith. It's a lot to ask. But what else can we do?

■ GEOFFREY BATEMAN is a member of Portland Gay Men Writing, a group of independent writers who contribute monthly to "OutWord."

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