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OPINION

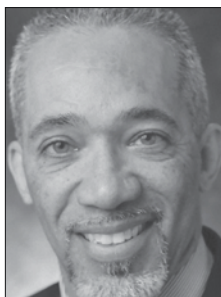
Remembering My History and Who I Am

An act of terrorism and nothing less

BY DANTE J. JAMES

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Sitting on Father's Day reflecting on my father, while at the same time swimming in the aftermath of the massacre in Charleston ("tragedy" is just such a benign term), I thought of who I am, and who and what I am connected to. My father was the grandson of a slave, his father the son of a slave. I have photos of my great grandfather



taken after emancipation. I am the great grandson of a slave.

The conversations about race, racism, bigotry, the confederate flag, historic oppression; these conversations are not abstract discussions for me, nor for many others who can trace their immediate lineage to slavery.

I knew the son and grandson of a slave, my grandfather and father. I can still feel my grandfather's beautiful, smooth, dark leathery skin, wince at the remembered harshness of his whiskers, and hear the gruffness of his voice. They are both long since gone, and the chance to, as an adult, hear the stories of how lives were lived is no longer avail-

able. It is my obligation to not forget, to consciously remember, my history and who I am.

The events of last week, last month, last year, and the years gone by, create a constant weariness in me, and those who look like me. We can't always articulate it, but as black folks, we are always wondering what the next horrific example of racism will be. Wondering what new story will emerge describing how we were experimented on by the government, (the most recent NPR story describing a World War II experiment when black men were locked in a room and subjected to chemical weapons to see if dark skin was more resistant than white skin). I am tired. I am weary. I am motivated to try to help non-black folks

understand.

But why do I need to explain why the confederate flag is a gross reminder of what my father, grandfather and great grandfather had to suffer? Why do I need to explain why diffusing the conversation about racism by describing the murderer as "mentally unstable" does not acknowledge the fact that the immediate cause of his acts in that church, murdering those African American men and women, was racism, not mental illness? Why do I need to explain that the problem is not with black folks, but with white folks?

My current job is to address institutional racism in government. How do I help my peers, my colleagues, my bosses understand the need to say something, to express that they

hear, see and feel the pain that this mass murder has caused? This was an act of terrorism, nothing less.

The perception of constant attack on blackness; whether by killing or failing to care, killing or failing to provide needed and deserved services, killing or ignoring, killing or failing to speak, killing or refusing to lower a flag in respect, all are wounds that infect the system, the system of a person's biology or the system of government.

I and all who look like me will persevere because that is who we are and what we do. My father, grandfather and great grandfather deserve no less.

Dante J. James is director of Portland Office of Equity and Human Rights.

When Claiming an Identity as Transgender

Some thoughts for folks with questions

BY ARIEL HOWLAND

Often when I talk to people who are questioning their gender or are confused where they fit in the gender universe, they'll express very similar concerns. Some examples are wondering if they have a right to use the word transgender to describe themselves, wondering if the word applies to them, wondering if they are trans enough, etc. So here are some things that I tell people when they are pondering this stuff and some other information everyone should know.

The modern meaning of the word transgender is an umbrella term for anyone that doesn't fit into the gender norms of society based on their gender identity and/or gender expression who wants to claim the term. This meaning was popularized by activists as a way to build bridges between transsexuals, genderqueers (people



who have a non-binary gender, no gender, a combo of male and female gender, who have a fluid gender, etc.), cross dressers, and everyone else that is gender variant in some way so that they could fight gender based oppression. Many people incorrectly assume the term is just a synonym for transsexual. Most transgender activists still use it as an umbrella term.

It is really powerful for gender-variant people to claim an identity as transgender, genderqueer, transsexual, etc. It makes other trans people feel less alone and it educates cisgender people (those who feel comfortable identifying as the gender they were assigned at birth) about what it means to be trans. It disrupts the assumption that everyone is cisgender.

There are real differences in levels of privilege in transgender communities that shouldn't be ignored. How much transphobia someone experiences or how much privilege they have doesn't determine if they are trans, only how they

feel about themselves. It also doesn't matter if they want to take hormones and get surgery. Many trans people don't want to take hormones or get surgery. There isn't one correct way to be trans. It's also not appropriate to respond by policing people's gender identities.

For many transgender people having their gender identity invalidated is a frequent experience. The most common way this happens is that other people assume their gender based on appearance and then use incorrect gender pronouns or gendered language. For example saying "Have a nice day miss" to a trans man invalidates his gender identity as a man. Another example is saying "She went to the store" to refer to a genderqueer person who uses "they" as a personal pronoun.

When people misgender trans people or assume what their gender is, that is a type of transphobia. A good way to avoid this is to ask "What pronouns do you prefer?" which is much preferred to asking "Are you a boy or a girl?"

For various reasons many

people have an urge to engage in "gender policing." This is when someone decides to bother, harass, or attack people because their gender expression stepped outside the expected norm. This happens to everyone but it especially impacts trans folks.

Here are some examples. When a little girl is told she can't play soccer because it's not ladylike. When a trans woman is told she's in the wrong bathroom no matter what public bathroom she uses. Gender policing is a way to reject the validity of trans people's genders and maintain the gender status quo.

It's important to understand that transgender, transsexual, and other terms have specific histories and frameworks associated with them. Transsexual is a medical term and is often used as part of a personal identity as well, such as transsexual man or transsexual woman. I will sometimes use the word transsexual to describe myself, but only rarely.

I personally hate it when other people call me a transsexual. This is because the medical field has an ugly his-

tory of pathologizing the gender differences in people. The term transsexual is also often associated by MTF (male to female) and FTM (female to male) transsexual descriptions. Some folks like these terms and that's fine. Everyone should use the language that feels good for them. For me, male to female implies I used to be a man. I don't like that because I disagree that I was ever a man. When MTF is written by itself it implies I'm a freak and not a woman. I don't like that either.

Another thing to keep in mind is that transgender, transsexual, etc. are western terms. There are many different cultural perspectives on what the meaning of gender is. Gender diversity has occurred in some form in every historical period and region of the world. However it's important not to project western cultural ideas on to everyone.

Ariel Howland is genderqueer and a trans woman. She is an activist, a professional speaker, and an aspiring writer. You can follow her work at queersocialjustice.wordpress.com.