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THAILAND...

WE CAN DO IT!



MY TURN

■ **Dmae Roberts**



Musings on white privilege

Last year I attended a public radio conference that featured a panel discussion about “unintentional bias.” Unintentional bias is a way of defining unconscious racism that occurs from ignorance or viewing the world through a specific lens that doesn’t include people of color. Panelists presented examples of bias and how it leads to public radio’s overwhelming whiteness. Some reporters of color commented that they are often the only persons of color in newsrooms, which do not reflect the diversity of America. Many of the reporters said they are encouraged to change their voicing style to sound like they fit the public radio sound, which is essentially white.

A network executive, a white woman, rushed to defend her company by cutting in front of a Latino producer who was about to make a comment at the microphone. She felt so strongly about defending their broadcast policies that she thought nothing of asserting her privilege by moving to the head of a long line of mostly people of color. My mouth dropped open. Right there was a perfect example of unconscious white privilege played out in front of the crowd. I looked around the room; it was filled with people of color with stunned expressions. I doubt any of the white attendees thought much about the moment.

Times like this make me re-examine my own actions when I get impatient and speak up. Is it the white part of me that makes me assertive and unwilling to put up with situations that don’t make sense to me, or is it just my personality?

Then I reflect on the differences between my mom and dad. Ma was always impatient and vocal; my dad was quiet and non-confrontational. My mom, a strong Taiwanese woman, let the whole world know when something seemed stupid to her or when she was pissed off. My dad, an easygoing white man, was more willing to accept situations.

It’s difficult to navigate the sources within my biracial identity. Am I more direct and confrontational because of the traits I inherited from my mom? Or is it a product of certain privileges because I’m assumed to be white? Sometimes I believe it’s a mixture of both.

Often, I’m the one who speaks up in a crowd. I’ve been known to organize a bathroom rebellion at theatres and convince the women standing in line to take over the empty men’s bathroom during intermission. I will speak up for someone who is shy or afraid. I have returned bad or spoiled produce I just bought from a grocery store, just like my mom taught me to do. And when I’m dealing with a health-insurance company or a mistake on my

credit-card bill, I use my stern voice and am generally a pill to deal with until I get my account straightened out. In addition, if people tell me how to do something that I believe could be done more efficiently, I let them know what I think.

When I was an actress, I freely auditioned and received many white roles. Even though roles for women with my body type were limited, I’m sure I was given more opportunities than if I’d looked more Asian. The few times there were auditions for Asian roles, I didn’t try out for them because it was highly unlikely anyone would cast me as Asian. I became a good actress because I was given a lot of opportunities to play roles that stretched me, from Shakespeare and musicals to drama and comedy. For most of the roles, it was assumed I was white. This became uncomfortable for me because I felt like I was always passing as a white person. It’s even more complicated to examine the privileges accompanying that assumption.

I have never been racially profiled except as a white person. When I received a traffic ticket, the police officer wrote “white” or “Caucasian” under ethnicity. Each time I’ve seen my medical records at a doctor or dentist’s office, I notice the word “white” written in the file. Even my driver license in the past had my race marked as Caucasian.

Because I’m a mixture of two races, I’m highly attuned to the subtle and not-so-subtle examples of white privilege. As a witness to racism against others, starting with my own family members, I can attest to the different way white people have talked to me versus my mother and my brother, whose Asian traits are more visible. I’ve been out with Asian friends where I was assumed by white people to be the only one in the group able to speak English — and an interpreter for the others.

Once, when I attended a Cambodian-American community fundraiser, an older white gentleman asked me if Cambodians also eat dog. Really? While my inner self wanted to yell at the guy for being an idiot, my outer self has learned to speak calmly and find a diplomatic way to tell people they are essentially being racist. Usually it involves a historical explanation about a myth or stereotype that led to their “unintentional bias” and inane statements. It can be exhausting.

Before people find out I’m biracial, it’s not uncommon for me to hear racist jokes and comments, which leads me to first reveal my identity and then tell them what they said wasn’t cool. That is met with either outright defensive anger or the exact opposite, in which I become the

Continued on page 7