

Why is it so Difficult to Talk About Race?

“Though this nation has proudly thought of itself as an ethnic melting pot in things racial, we have always been, and ... continue to be, in too many ways, essentially a nation of cowards. Though race-related issues continue to occupy a significant portion of our political discussion, and though there remain many unresolved racial issues in this nation, we, average Americans, simply do not talk enough with each other about things racial.” Eric Holder, US attorney general Feb 19, 2009

Mr. Holder was describing the general population, but he could have been talking about academic communities- including our own University of Rochester. We academics tend to pride ourselves on being too logical and fair-minded to succumb to petty prejudices. The majority of academics believe that discussions about race and ethnicity centered on our own campus are therefore unnecessary. Opportunities to discuss race within the university generally draw only very small groups of individuals. When the Provost and Vice Provost held town hall meetings in various locations around campus to discuss diversity efforts, the turnout was modest at best. Most of 8 or so individuals at the Medical Center town hall were Faculty Diversity Officers, who meet on a monthly basis anyway. While it is true that we all lead busy lives, it is also true that discussions of race tend to be uncomfortable. As academics we are no different than the general population in that regard.

The Diversity Book Reading Group, facilitated by Stan Byrd, Manager of Multicultural Affairs and Inclusion for the University's Department of Human Resources recently read and discussed, “Race Matters” by Cornel West. The following quote from the first chapter of the book provides us an important context.

“Since the beginning of the nation, white Americans have suffered from a deep inner uncertainty as to who they really are. One of the ways that has been used to simplify the answer has been to seize upon the presence of black Americans and use them as a marker, a symbol of limits, a metaphor for the ‘outsider’. Many whites could look at the social position of blacks and feel that color formed an easy and reliable gauge for determining to what extent one was or was not American. (Ralph Ellison, “What American Would Be Like Without Blacks” - 1970).

Ellison's quote provides us with a simple and easy understanding of the foundation of oppression (be it racism, sexism...etc). The basic premise is I am X, you are Y, Xs are better than Y; therefore I am better than you. We would submit that Americans still have a conservative, ‘pull yourself up by your own boot straps’ (I have done it, why can't you), capitalistic (us versus them...and I want more), Judeo-Christian, Euro-centric, American Dream perspective. We receive messages (from the moment we are born) about who we are and who we

are not; including why we would not want to be 'the other'. Many of these messages are communicated non-verbally. It feels like it is in our DNA. Thus, this quintessential American dream is a lie for many including our earliest immigrants.

Those who have been marginalized (who do not see themselves explicitly included in the 'dream') are most aware of the lie. Those who are mainstream (who have the "privilege" of not noticing that they are inherently included) do not want to give up the "dream". Unfortunately the ghost of the dream is everywhere: in the news, media, our classrooms (elementary, high school and higher education), our churches, our institutions and our government.

So – why is talking about race so uncomfortable? To talk about race means you have to look at your own circumstance, whether you are mainstream or marginalized and this can be a painful endeavor. To open up to discuss your particular circumstance in a group, you have to access deep emotions (including fear) means processing layers and layers of "baggage" related to race, class/caste, sexual orientation, etc. Many have 'inherited' generations of this angst, fear, loathing, anger, disgust, disbelief and mis-information about race. The thought of discussing it with another (particularly someone not in your situation) is fraught with much built up fear (conscious or unconscious). Many have also 'inherited' years and years of nihilism. Nihilism in West's book is identified as a central threat to Black Americans. Many are living lives of coping with a sense of horrifying, meaninglessness, and hopelessness. It can become a numbing detachment from others and self, and self-destructive. For those experiencing this sense of nihilism it is often too painful to discuss. For the 'others', it may be too painful to put yourself in the shoes of the other and recognize all the ways in which you collude in keeping this sense of nihilism in place. Note: when mentioning nihilism, all disfranchised, marginalized, ostracized, oppressed people are included.

In an academic setting, it is far too easy to intellectualize issues of diversity. Yet institutions and groups that have been most successful at becoming more diverse have found that these conversations cannot be purely intellectual to move forward. As we strive to become a more diverse University, it is incumbent upon all of us to join in these conversations. The most progress for individuals and organizations will be made if we deal with these emotions honestly and in ways that support our individual/mutual development and growth.

Vivian Lewis

Associate Dean for Faculty Development- Women and Diversity

Stan Byrd

Human Resources - Manager Multicultural Affairs and Inclusion

<https://blogs.rochester.edu/diversity> Posted: April 16th, 2009