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41.2961111 Degrees North Latitude, -105.515 Degrees West Longitude; This location, the site of a truly tragic and completely unacceptable loss of life. I sat there as the sun was starting to rise with the heat blasting in my face, lost in emotion, lost in thought, lost in the moment of what it must have been like 18 years earlier when Matthew Shepard was left for dead on October 6<sup>th</sup>, 1998, tied to a buck fence, beat and bruised, left in near-freezing temperatures, completely covered in blood save for the streak of white on his face where his tears had cleaned away his blood.

I was 15 years old when Matthew Sheppard was murdered, I am now 37 years old and that story still haunts me to this day. As part of my career in 2016, I found myself living in Wyoming, 55 minutes away from this location, and I felt compelled to go and pay tribute to Matthew Sheppard, to the man he would never get to be because fear outweighed love and acceptance and overpowered the chord of humanity that binds us all together. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie gives a Ted Talk called, "The Dangers of a Single Story." She says, "The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story...The consequence of a single story is this, it robs people of dignity. It makes our recognition of our equal humanity difficult. It emphasizes how we are different instead of how we are similar" (Adichie, 2009). I wonder what would have happened on that night in 1998 if Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson had a different story of Matthew Sheppard, one that viewed him as an equal human being instead of someone different and therefore someone to be feared and left for dead.

Imagine being a 15 year old white cis-gendered gay man with he/him pronouns growing up on the cusp of Appalachia in rural south eastern America in 1998, and having heard that a young man was murdered (in another seemingly conservative and rural location) because of his orientation and because he dared to live his life out boldly? Murders happen in the United States every day. But I connected to

this story because Matthew Sheppard and I shared a common theme, we were both gay men trying to live in America. We lived a shared experience. I could imagine living in a world where you are consistently told you are less than and do not belong, told you were going to go to hell every day because of something you could not control, or being bullied and made fun of because you were different. I couldn't just imagine it, but I lived it, I shared in those experiences. On October 6<sup>th</sup>, 1998 I could imagine living in a world where a young 20 something year old gay man could be beaten and left for dead in freezing cold temperatures in the middle of nowhere Wyoming because of his sexual orientation. Talk about living in fear of something you had no control over.

I imagine I connected to this murder the way people of color connect to the innocent murders of African Americans and POC in this country such as Daunte Wright, Daniel Prude, George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Atatiana Jefferson, Stephon Clark, Botham Jean, Philando Castile, Alton Sterling, Eric Garner, Akai Gurley, Tamir Rice, Ahmaud Arbery and Trayvon Martin. Rest in Power.

Some Americans cannot fully relate to the Black Lives Matter movement because they are viewing it from a deficit framework. Until they have a "shared" or "lived" experience like members of the African American community in this country (years of inequality, slavery, white-dominance, and systemic racism), it will be hard for them to fully acknowledge the tragedy of systemic racism and gain a full understanding of cultural democracy. We relate to what we know and understand, we use stereotypes and filler to explain what we do not know or understand (Gorski, 303). These stereotypes become damning. Especially if these stereotypes are created by the more dominant or prevailing power bloc (Darder).

"A long history of psychosocial research details the human tendency to imagine our own social and cultural identity groups as diverse while we imagine "the other," people belonging to a social or cultural identity group with which we are less familiar, as being, for all intents and purposes, monolithic...[and that] cognitive reasoning research has demonstrated that when people find

themselves in contexts with which they are not familiar, their decision-making cognition defaults to intuition and stereotyped beliefs” (Gorski, 302). Therefore, we relate to others more like us (in group-bias), we can understand those more closely connected to our cultural identities (Gorski, 304). Though it may be impossible to fully understand another person’s experience completely, an **OPENNESS TO UNDERSTANDING DIFFERENT VIEWPOINTS IS CRUCIAL**. There are always two sides of a coin.

James Banks, in his book, Cultural Diversity and Education talks about creating a multicultural educational experience by teaching both sides of the coin. He talks about the difference between “The New World” and “The European Discovery of America,” and that if you teach it from both viewpoints it can help students understand “**KNOWLEDGE AS A SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION** and to understand how concepts such as ‘The New World’ and ‘The European Discovery of America’ are not only ethnocentric and Eurocentric terms, but are also normative concepts that serve latent but important political purposes, such as justifying the destruction of Native American peoples and civilizations by Europeans...that the history that becomes institutionalized within a society reflect the perspectives and points of view of the victors rather than those of the vanquished” (Banks, 11). This goes for all stories of discrimination (POC’s Rights, Women’s Rights, LGBTQA Rights).

People are not born racist or discriminatory. This is a learned behavior. They pick up on the social cues from their communities, family, friends, religious organizations, etc. “In an intervention that has now attained the status of a classic, Jane Elliott used simulation to teach her students the pain of discrimination. One day she discriminated against the blue-eyed children in her third-grade class; the next day she discriminated against the brown-eyed children. Elliott’s intervention is described in the award-winning documentary, The Eye of the Storm” (Banks, 13). The intervention shows how students picked up on social cues and turned hateful to people who were “different” than them within a day because they were granted more privilege than another group for something so minutely different such as the color of their eyes. Elliott specifically asks in her debriefing with the students, “Should we

discriminate against someone just because of the color of their eyes”? And the kids answered NO. She then asked, “So should we discriminate against someone because of the color of their skin? Again...the kids said, NO (Elliott).

The Civil Rights movement has laid the foundation for the future. The abolishing of slavery has only been the law of the land for 156 years (The 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment), woman have only been allowed to vote for 102 years (The 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment), desegregation has only been the law for 67 years (Brown vs. the Board of Education), women have only been guaranteed equal pay as their male counterparts for 58 years (Equal Pay Act of 1963) and gay marriage (Obergefell vs. Hodges) has only been allowed and acceptable in the USA for 6 years. Once oppressed, it is hard to ever get ahead. Though the country is becoming, by law, more and more equitable, foundational change takes time, and it takes even longer to change longstanding views and beliefs, especially across 328,200,000 people.

Growing up I was very active in the Boy Scouts and the Catholic Church. Both of these organizations have strongly shaped who I am today, a lot of the values and lessons I learned from both organizations I use in my everyday life, but both of these organizations also were completely against who I was as an individual (for both taught being gay was wrong, a disease, a sin, not normal). So for all of the “be good, do your best, treat people with respect, be kind, love your neighbor” rhetoric, there was also that lingering hypocritical message of “If you are gay, you cannot participate, you have a disease, you are going to hell” so I did what any person could do...I hid.

**WORDS, STORIES and ACTIONS MATTER!** Adichie in her Ted Talk states, “Stories Matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispose and malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity.” What if the Boy Scouts and the Catholic Church taught the story of acceptance and love instead of threatening to take away your Eagle Rank or let you burn in the fiery pits of hell.

When I got to college, the small, private, liberal arts college that I attended, had a club on campus called the Campus League of Students for Equal Treatment (CLOSET). The administration and Board of Directors took offense to the club and refused to recognize them as an official club on campus. So everywhere I looked (Church, Scouts, School, the news, society) I received the message that there was something wrong with me, something not normal, something bad.

Because of incidents like the death of Matthew Sheppard or the consistently negative views of homosexuality that were present in my life, I spent the first 28 years of my life playing out a character in my own life instead of playing out a truly authentic, genuine version of myself. Society dictated this action, dictated this fear, and created this sense that to be gay was to be wrong, even after I came out to my parents, my mom would always warn about “showing my gay” for fear that I would be beat up or murdered.

**REPRESENTATION IS EVERYTHING.** If instead of having all of these negative viewpoints and opinions in my life about homosexuality, could you imagine what would have happened if we discussed a gay character in a work of literature or seeing a gay character portrayed on a television show or in a movie in a positive light? On May 7<sup>th</sup>, 2021, a twitter user uploaded a circulating meme about Spongebob Squarepants and Patrick. Earlier in the year it was announced that Spongebob was indeed a gay sponge. The twitter user implied that Netflix was forcing queerness onto viewers with many unnecessary gay characters. Netflix’s revolutionary response via tweet, “Sorry you have yet to realize that every gay person is very necessary.” Thank you Netflix.

Luckily for me, I grew up in a middle-class family with access to housing, food, and opportunities. I attended a middle school with teachers who truly cared. **EDUCATORS WHO TRULY CARE.** I remember when I was in 4<sup>th</sup> grade, I was not doing so well academically, especially in science and math. I had a teacher who purchased a Jurassic Park Calendar and said she would give it to me if I could bring up my grades. I loved Jurassic Park. She encouraged and pushed me to constantly focus and be a better

representation of myself. By the end of the semester, I had brought up my grades, got the calendar and owe her for genuinely caring about her students. (Thanks Adrian Rogers). "Studies summarized by Darling-Hammond (2010) indicate that the academic achievement of students of color and low-income students increases when they have high-quality teachers who are experts in their content specialization, pedagogy and child development...the quality of instruction, not the race of the students, was the significant variable" (Banks, 15).

I attended a high school that offered AP, Honors and College preparatory classes and had access to a guidance counselor (Thanks Nancy Schliesman) that promoted the importance of education and the need to continue education by going to college. My parents valued education and understood the importance of continuing education as well and they pushed for both my brother and I to attend college, get a degree, and hopefully raise our socioeconomic status to live a better life than they have lived (The True American Dream), and after all education is supposed to be the great equalizer.

When I was growing up, my father was an alcoholic. He was mentally, emotionally and physically abusive to my mother. They had gotten a divorce when I was three years old. When I was seven, my dad tried to murder my mom. Luckily, my dad was not successful, my mother gathered us all up and moved us away to start a completely new life in a completely new state. My mother is my hero. She has taught me the meaning of love and compassion, she has taught me what it means to persevere and be resilient, to overcome all odds. Because of this, I have always appreciated the role of hard-working women in the world. They can do anything they put their mind to and are equal to men. My mom was in charge of the household, she did not need a man to make a living or to run her life. This was an early lesson that I learned from her and I respect her for being able to show that to me. When I was in 5<sup>th</sup> grade, my mother remarried. My new dad showed me what it means to be a true fatherly figure and has been an active part of my life ever since. He has shown what it means to live a life on an equal playing field as a woman.

I'm white and with that comes a lot of privilege. It was never something that was taught to me, and something that was never really discussed. As an educator, I have done several activities where we ask students to put beads in a cup, based upon the race/ethnicity/gender of individuals close to them. At the end of the activity, students are always pretty upset about the "lack of diversity" in the cup. But the reality is, a person cannot help that they grew up in a X-majority community or an X-minority community and that because of that, the people they interact with can be very limiting. I grew up in a white community, which means my school was predominantly white, my doctors were all white, my church was all white, my friends were all white, and therefore I interact more with white people (in-group bias) hence my cup is mostly reflective of that. This is not something to be ashamed of or feel guilty about, just like privilege. Ince you recognize you have it and how you have benefited from it, you have to stand up and defend others who do not have such privilege. Critical Race Theory is not about feeling guilty for your underserved privilege but standing up and saying this must stop. Critical reflection is important and necessary, because if you never stop to think critically about a topic, you can never really ascertain whether it is right or wrong and more importantly how you feel about it. We are conditioned to use stereotypes to fill in gaps and to accept socially constructed views on topics. **CRITICAL REFLECTION IS NECESSARY TO KEEP YOU IN CHECK.** "One of the more painful parts of the critical reflection process entails acknowledging or recognizing one's own privilege as a member of a group that has received unearned opportunity and advantage" (McIntosh, 1989 as quoted in Howard). Howard states, "What is crucial about acknowledging privilege is that failure to begin dismantling these privileges once the individual becomes conscious of them is, in many ways, tantamount to acting in discriminatory ways. Therefore, it is not enough for the individual to say, 'I have privilege...' but...must take active steps to ensure that future actions do not reinforce the remnants of that privilege" (Howard, 119). Howard states, as summarized by Ladson-Billings,

“Perhaps the most important aspect of developing cultural competence, critical reflection, and the adaptive unconscious, and of dismantling privilege, is to recognize that neutrality is equivalent to acting against equity, fairness, and justice...” (Howard, 119).

As Charles Anderson and Ajay Sharma explained in their EPE framework, “As people move through the world, they have numerous experiences. These experiences produce a smaller number of patterns. As people begin to recognize these patterns, they offer an even smaller number of explanations to make sense of their experiences” (Brown, 51). Our experiences shape who we are. We have these “lived” experiences, and they define who we are, how we think, the way we act, and the lens with which we see the world. I have always tried to be the best because society has always told me I was the worst. Steele, as quoted by Gorski, states, “...whenever we’re in a situation where a bad stereotype could be applied to us—such as those about being old, poor, rich, or female – we know it. We know what ‘people could think.’ We know that anything we do that fits the stereotype could be taken as confirming it. And we know that, for that reason, we could be judged and treated accordingly. (p. 5), (Gorski, 313).

Having lived as a member of a power bloc (my whiteness) and having lived as a member in a minority group (LGBTQA), I feel that we need a curriculum and educational philosophy that will embrace all students where they are at, and encourage them to always challenge the status quo. Multicultural educators need to always remember that they need to truly care about their students, which requires them to remember there are two sides to every coin and that they need to be open to differing viewpoints, that words, actions, stories and representation matters and they need to be self-critical as a measure to check where their bias is and how that could affect their students.



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