

Reflections on a White Man's Journey

John Farragher



John Farragher is an independent organization development and diversity consultant currently working with several Fortune 25 companies.

A respected colleague, Hal Kellner, once said, "White men are fish in a stream. They don't know they're fish, and they don't know they're in a stream but there they all are swimming in the same school, downstream, with the current."

As a young, white, Irish Catholic man growing up in the Boston area, I never had to think about my own race or ethnicity. I never had to make decisions on the acceptability of my physical appearance. Rarely did I have concerns about my physical safety or fear that when a police car approached I was in deep trouble. I could date any girl I wanted, travel anywhere without ever thinking about whether I'd be comfortable there. And, perhaps most disturbing, I never had to have a heart-breaking discussion with my children about how some people might want to hurt them because of their color.

I have always been comfortable being one of Kellner's "fish" and I could have remained as such. I could have glided downstream beneath the conflict and the fishnets. However, once my eyes were opened to see beyond the water in which I swim as a white, heterosexual man I could no longer ignore my biases, misconceptions, ignorance and malice. There was simply no turning back. From my early socialization through the evolution of my career from teaching to organization development, I've been on a journey toward awareness that has forever altered my life and how I interact with others.

My Irish Catholic Socialization

When I was in kindergarten, the nuns at my Boston parochial school introduced my class to "the missions." These were located in Africa and the priests who staffed them were dedicated to bringing the word of Christ to the godless or pagan natives, who we were taught to call "negroes." In each classroom was a statue of a native child holding a large shell on his lap. When we dropped our coins into the shell they tripped a lever inside the statue and the child nodded his head in thanks.

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This was my first experience of difference. The child was dressed in what we supposed were African ceremonial robes and, while we thought he was representative of the native population, his facial features were clearly Caucasian. The lesson for us was pretty straightforward: in this mysterious place called Africa everyone is a "negro," and everyone either has no religion or worships the wrong God. In addition, they're all poor and our money is needed to help the priests feed them and convert them to Catholicism. If they're not converted, they will go to Hell. The underlying message: we are clearly superior. After all, they were over there in the jungle and we needed to give up our lunch money to save them (both body and soul).

The Irish are known for their biases. We were poor. My uncles, who lived in Lawrence,

Massachusetts — known as "The City of Immigrants" — were against anyone who wasn't Irish. They often spoke derogatorily about blacks and Jews. I heard this negativity from people close to me, but my own experience didn't bear this out. While my socialization and religion told me to internalize these negative views, and mimic these beliefs and values, my private reality was different. I didn't understand why these "others" were so disliked, especially because I couldn't see any of these people in my neighborhood. I attempted to also internalize these opposing views. The result was a perverted sense of reality wherein I saw the world chaotically, juggling mutually exclusive perceptions and behaving with myself and others in contradictory ways.

In elementary school I heard people call other people names and I thought that was just what you did. We learned that there are some groups that are OK and some that are not. The ones that looked like me were OK; the others were not. It was their ethnicity and skin color that impacted how we felt about them.

In my teens I learned about Martin Luther King, Jr. and the civil rights movement. This movement was more compelling than anything I had ever experienced before. The stories about discrimination and violence toward blacks were reprehensible. I preached change to my family and friends. They were patient, but basically humored me. My church seemed to be about the same, more or less "tsk-tsking" the bad Southerners but not moving beyond that.

I attended the University of Massachusetts, where many of the students were anti-Semitic. I couldn't understand where all the hatred came from. I shared the dorm and developed relationships with three Jewish men and one Jewish woman. I never had any conversations with them about their religion or culture, although I was curious. I was Irish, after all, and we didn't ever talk about personal things with people.

Early in my Career

I became a teacher, but after marrying and starting a family, I couldn't make ends meet on a teacher's salary. I thought the phone company could offer a better opportunity. Shortly after I was hired, the Bell System entered into a consent decree with the Department of Justice because of past discriminatory practices, particularly with issues of race and gender. As a result, the company was committed to providing opportunities for the advancement of women. Since the total number of opportunities was fixed it was obvious that this meant far fewer opportunities for us white males. I was furious.

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I had assumed that I would follow a career path similar to that of the managers above me, who, of course, were white men. If I worked hard, my understanding was, I would progress, with the associated increases in salary and prestige. While I didn't know the words at the time, my "sense of entitlement" was being assaulted. I turned my inner frustration into anger toward the women: "I'm supposed to have these opportunities and they're getting them! They don't need the money like I do. They're single or provide second incomes in their families."

I also despised the senior company officials who held meetings to tell us of the EEO plans. They stood before us in their Brooks Brothers suits and proclaimed proudly about the opportunities for women. I thought, "Easy for them to be bragging about these programs. They've already got it made; they're secure with their jobs and salaries." I felt irrationally victimized and resentful. I remember looking over at some smiling women during a meeting. I just hated them — how could they smile? I was losing something I was entitled to because it was my role and it was some sort of inherent promise. My fears were also quite clear — it felt like a threat to my family. They were threatening my family... it was their fault. I was desperate and not teachable at that point.

Eventually, though, my career and salary progressed and I found myself feeling more rational about the situation. I had developed some relationships with women colleagues, which was

helpful in my understanding of their side of the story and in personalizing the issue from "they - the enemy" to "she - the person."

Later in my Career

I was soon promoted into the company's organization development group. In an early assignment I was the consultant to a program to support women and minorities who were working in positions and departments that had traditionally been the exclusive preserve of white men. What I thought would be a "skills, coaching" role rapidly became a "counseling, listening" role. This was my first real experience with what could happen to "nontraditional" individuals attempting to apply their competencies in a new environment. While some were able to perform without interference others were insulted, harassed and sabotaged. I was shocked to see the extent of the hostility towards them, and became accepting and sympathetic to their issues.

In this assignment I became aware of a chasm or dilemma which has haunted me throughout my growth: while I could hold strong views and emotions about one group or another in the abstract, I could not hold that view when I dealt directly with these individuals or groups in person. Every contact I had with these individuals contradicted whatever I previously believed or felt about them. I was in constant conflict between my early upbringing and my new experiences.

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Shortly after that assignment began I was interviewed to be a facilitator for a new company workshop — the Cross Cultural Workshop. The workshop was an intense, confrontational experience where people of different cultures would discuss issues related to those differences. I didn't feel I was qualified to facilitate the workshop and in my interview with the consultant — the first time I had ever been interviewed by a black man — I tried to make that point. He listened carefully and then proceeded to tell me some of what life had been like for him, as a black man.

He told me that he was constantly aware of his blackness, and that as a consultant he had to prepare himself for client reactions to him when he walked into their offices. He asked me if I had ever had to think about such things. Of course, I hadn't. He mentioned a street expression from his community: "Niggers ain't shit!" He said it's what the folks on the street say when a prominent black person is in some sort of trouble. He explained that they say it because it's what they think white people are thinking when that happens. He extended one of his hands towards me and with the other stroked the skin on the back of his extended hand. He looked at me carefully and said "See that skin? That's the color of shit." He didn't ask for a direct response from me, but he watched me carefully as I internalized his story.

At that point I knew I wasn't "in Kansas" anymore. This conversation had hit me in a place that was deeper and scarier and more taboo than I had ever been before in my life. I wanted to deny what he said, plead incomprehension, or excuse myself somehow from the sort of experience he was sharing, but I knew there was enough truth in what he said that I could do none of those things in honesty. He offered me the assignment because he later explained, "[the interview] showed me that you're honest, and that when things are messy and scary in this work you won't run away."

To develop my competency for this workshop I attended intense awareness training focused on race and gender. These events forever changed my life. I was a bright guy who thought I knew a lot, and what I didn't know I could easily learn. What I discovered in these events was that I truly knew **nothing**. I was disturbed to discover how much my socialization and experience had limited my view of the world. I was an arrogant, presumptuous snob who

appreciated nothing that was not part of my own life experience. In the company of different "others" I realized that their language and their stories were beyond my full understanding and appreciation. It was not simply a matter of vocabulary; it was a matter of how I had lived my life and they, theirs. I was truly shaken. I felt I couldn't trust myself because what I thought was true was only a tiny part of it all. My perception of reality was so limited.

These training events were also a blend of enlightenment and discomfort...if not pain. It seemed that I was constantly at war with this internal army of bigots. My intentions were good, and I was brought up to be a decent person. In a focused environment, however, I frequently found myself saying or doing something insensitive, or at least discovering some ugly reality within me that I needed to work on. I found that I had strong negative associations with many groups of people, even though I may have had positive connections with specific members of that group. For example, I regarded gays as weird, threatening and scary people. I had difficulty considering them objectively at all. The topic itself would result in a strong, negative, visceral reaction in me. I was conditioned against ever having another man touch me. I still hold that reaction. I may not panic, but I'm certainly not comfortable. The important point, however, is that I know that the "problem" is within me, not them. It is my reaction that I need to work on. This realization — identifying and owning where the problem really lies — has been key for me.

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The more I facilitated the company workshop, the more I learned. I was continually exposed to the life experiences of people who would never have been part of my world otherwise. Over time I developed a level of courage and skill that helped me seek out relationships with people from whom I could learn. One black woman shared some of her life details with me and then told me, "I don't need to hear about your life because it's on TV." Initially I was hurt by her comment, but at the same time I understood what she meant. And, her comment gave me the added opportunity to feel what it's like to have someone tell you your life is not worth sharing: an example of "walk in my shoes" learning that I have found essential to my personal growth.

The outcome of this learning and these experiences for me has been simply this: this work — working with "isms" and difference — is the **only** work to be done. Starting with the shock of the interview situation with the Cross Cultural consultant, through my own voyages in self awareness and working with innumerable "others," today I have found my life to be much richer and fuller. I hope, also, that I have contributed to other's growth along the way.

Final Thoughts

These experiences — participating in or facilitating training events, advocating for diversity in business meetings, serving as a "betrayal" of my race or gender, being a learner, coach and friend, have taken me down a completely different career and life path than I could ever have imagined 40 years ago. Along the way I experienced no great epiphanies, blinding insights, or high drama which furthered my growth; instead, my trip was comprised of many, many human stories which gripped me more than anything in my life experience to date. I know I have learned from those stories and those who told them. The process has been non-linear and unpredictable, like a series of loops or learning cycles with increasing depth and substance each time. These final thoughts highlight these loops, which, by the way, I'm still cycling through.

First, and by far the most important, I had to **accept the reality that white men have**

been **"in charge"** of our society for the past 400 years. In that capacity we have been the lawmakers, the judges, the artists, the critics, the norm setters, the moralists and the police. We have overvalued things, persons and institutions that are Western, white and male, and devalued everything that wasn't. Our "rightness" came from self-fulfilling logic; a type of circular thinking that makes a behavior or ritual of white men superior simply *because* it's a behavior or ritual of white men. Conversely, any behavior or ritual of women or persons of color must therefore be deemed inferior simply because it is theirs. That this may not have been conscious on our part is irrelevant. We have been prisoners of our own limited view of the world, as well as arrogant in our reluctance to accept any other view. For us as white men to grow we must first surrender this assumption of superiority. It is essential for our growth that we move to a state of simple acceptance of the validity, value and importance of experiences and values of others without interposing our own "Yeah, but..." thinking.

White men tend to think of "diversity" as a body of knowledge that contains descriptors of "other people." We, white men, do not think of ourselves as but merely one group possessing characteristics that make us alike or different from other groups, but as *the* group, the "gold standard," to which others should be compared and valued. We have tended to see the characteristics of those other "diverse" groups as "less than" and subsequently have learned little from them. The outcome, sadly, is that we know dramatically less about the lives of members of other groups than they know about us.

I had to **take responsibility for doing the work** of personal growth. As a white man I haven't had the need to "study" others in my life because "survival" was never an issue for me. We all need to do the work now. One important value: intention doesn't count — outcome does. Once I embarked on this journey it was not enough that my intentions in what I said or did were noble or earnest. What matters is the outcome that is produced by what I have said or done.

Next, said simply, I had to **learn the value of making contact**. I had to establish authentic relationships with people different from myself. This goes beyond locker room, water cooler and casual bowling alley conversations. We must engage in real relationships with individuals, taking place on their "turf", and, of course, on ours. There is much to be realized by academic research, but the real learning (and pleasure) comes from face-to-face time. An important point here: avoid treating new acquaintances as a "project" as it is not their mission to educate you. I realized that I had cognitive dissonance — or "doublethink" — between the stereotypes I held about certain groups and my actual experience with them. My only effective strategy was to overcome my stereotype by accumulating a wealth of real experiences. In time the real experiences overcame the stereotypes and made them too ridiculous to consider.

I had to **give up being afraid to ask "stupid" or potentially embarrassing questions**. There is nothing to be gained by trying to be enlightened or "cool." For the most part I really "didn't know what I didn't know" and any bluffs on my part were transparent. I simply accepted the humbling and embarrassing fact that I was woefully ignorant about the lives of individuals from other groups. At the same time I learned that my "innocent" query might be greeted with anger or exasperation or some other negative response. White men have had the luxury of ignorance for a long time, and even a well meaning question can strike some deep chords of anger or resentment in some people. Accept such a response as valid and find another way to re-establish the relationship.

I had to **accept that many mistakes would be made** and undoubtedly I would not like feeling "dumb." I had to accept my companions' feedback as a necessary part of my learning and move on. After all, my "teachers" in this process are not saints either (why should they

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be?). I had to learn to not measure the other people's experiences, thoughts and feelings against my own; and to simply connect with what's common to both of us. As white men we have a tendency to compete, to assess and evaluate, to see where we stand in relation to others. Withhold that tendency in these relationships. It will destroy your learning and the relationships.

Learn how to think in more complex behavioral models: in terms of both/and, more so/less so, sometimes is/sometimes isn't, rather than either/or, always/never, is/isn't. My experience of myself and other white men is that we want to reduce issues to simple polarities: yes or no. Beyond that we have created disciplines to give us what we like to believe are "true" pictures of reality. Science and mathematics, however, are inadequate tools to fully understand and sympathize with what we as human beings have done to and with each other throughout history.

I have learned that regardless of the circumstances, the act of oppressing is essentially the same: placing oneself over another individual's or group's self or full personhood. I now know better what I do that oppresses others directly, or how I collude with others in oppression.

Good intentions are not enough - only actions count, and I must be fully responsible for the total impact of my behavior on others. The pain and joy that has been shared, the life experiences that have been opened to me, the relationships I have formed, and the depth and authenticity I have been exposed to, have changed me profoundly. I know that I am a long reach away from the person I would have been had I not opened myself to learning and a myriad of experiences provided by people who had the courage to speak the truth.

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