WHITE PRIVILEGE

The two stories beginning on this page by staff writers Black Moore and Pauline Go tell of their experience with the University's Race Circle.—Ed.

What do I know about race and racism? I'm white. I'm also male and relatively educated. By almost anyone's definition, I am firmly situated in America's dominant class. To take a phrase of the Race Circle's mission statement but out of context, I hold "unearned race privilege." Ten years ago, that term would have made me say 'bloh.' It probably would make a lot of white Americans angry, the way people feel when they're called on something that is true but hard to admit.

And it is true. By virtue of the random deal of my genetic and demographic cards, I have the privilege of being able to go virtually any place I want in this country—let alone this state—and without anyone judging me or judging my character because of the skin tone and facial features I inherited. There have been exceptions, but they are nothing more than that. In general, I can dwell admixed in a department store, loiter on a street corner, cruise Franklin Avenue with a bad snuffler, or ramble casually into an upscale restaurant just to use the phone and rarely will anyone ever care, much less confront me. Moreover, I have the privilege—and I didn't do a thing to deserve this privilege—not of having to think about my race and how it affects my identity on a daily basis.

I can do and acknowledge my own racism. Like it or not—and I don't—it's a subtle but very real part of me. I grew up with flesh-colored crayons (when flesh meant pink); history books that marginalized minority cultures; and strangers, friends, and loved ones who insinuated racism in me. I have at various times perpetuated racist behavior, laughed, or looked away. Imprinted, racist thoughts dart in and out of my mind—uninvited, intrusive, inexplicable.

That's what I know about racism; rather, that's about the extent to which it affects my life. And that's why I wasn't much offended when it was suggested that I might not be the best candidate to report on the Race Circle.

Fortunately, the ensuing discussion led to the notion that two perspectives—a white male and a Malayan female—might be better than one, and I received an invitation after all.

I was a bit apprehensive and, as the group of as arranged our chairs in a circle in the basement of Peik Hall, my apprehension turned to fear. I'm not much for speaking in public, much less pouring out my heart to relative strangers. And it was not just early on that my colleagues and I were encouraged to fully participate. I had even brought my own personal object to place on the mud cloth in the center of the circle—the idea that to me signifies racial unity—but felt too much an outsider to actually offer it.

RAISIN AND THE POWER OF THE CIRCLE:

BRINGING HUMANITY INTO THE WORKPLACE AND THE WORLD

A candle lights the center of the Race Circle.

"Racism and privilege are significant societal problems, and universitities, including this one, are not immune," says Julie Switzer, director of the Office of Equal Opportunity and Affirmative Action (EOAA). "The University's mission statement says that we will prepare graduates for active roles in a multicultural and multicultural world! and the regents' diversity policy says that we will establish and maintain an environment that actively acknowledges diversity and is free from racism, sexism, and other forms of prejudice, intolerance, or harassment. Each year race concerns are one of the top two issues brought to our offices, and they tend to be the most difficult."

More than a year ago, the University began an effort to combat individual and institutional racism, using an ancient process—the circle. "The circle is about creating a space that doesn't exist—creating a space for someone to speak, and for someone to have a voice, for truth to be revealed," says Jerry Hughes, founder of the University's Race Circle and equal opportunity consultant with the EOAA.

"It's about creating a space to tell the stories that empower us and empower us to do better and to build relationships in a good way.

Walking on Eggshells

I grew up in Malaysia, a land as ethnically and culturally diverse as the United States where battles and alliances between ethnic groups are common. Race discrimination and prejudice were subjects of discussion and debate among certain people around me, but they never affected me personally. I had a multicultural group of friends and my family lived in an upper-middle-class suburb made up predominantly of people from our own ethnic background. I had what the Race Circle calls "unearned race privilege." Five years ago, when I was 24, I left my tropical homeland for new challenges in the United States.

In America I came face-to-face with people who, through body language and words, did not welcome non-white "foreigners" like me. I was no longer a part of the privileged society, but relegated by the actions of total strangers to a marginalized group. By now, I have become more attuned to the behaviors of those around me and more deeply aware, too, of my own actions. I do not lead a life of constantly fearing racial discrimination nor do I always feel as if I am being stared at because of my nationality. Asian features, but there are moments when I find myself walking on eggshells—being ever so careful about what I say and how I behave—because I fear my actions and speech will lead others to stereotype those who look like me. If I am cut with someone, does that make Malaysian rude people? If I make grammatical mistakes while speaking English, will all Asians be seen as poor speakers of the English language?

I readily volunteered for this Race Circle assignment because I believed myself the perfect candidate—with my heightened sense of awareness and my personal experiences with racism—to shed light on this hopeful initiative and the way it operates. Moreover, I was intrigued by this seemingly novel concept of healing racial tensions within society by gathering in a circle and speaking from one's heart.

The circle I chose to attend began to take shape when Jessica Hughes, the keeper of the circle, laid an intricately designed African mud cloth on the floor of the room. We then placed 11 chairs around the cloth, I grew increasingly curious as I made glances in Hughes' direction.

She was patiently setting a vase of colorful summer blooms, books and magazines, a spool of dried sage, and photographs on the cloth that was to become the sacred center of our circle. As we settled into our chairs, people around me began pulling objects from their pockets and their purses. Each object was treated with a mixture of love and respect by its owner, who was either clutching it tightly or touching it gently before carefully placing it next to an item that was already on the mud cloth. I felt like an intrusive as I sat witnessing what was obviously a ritual for the people who have, for over 12 months, shed all pretenses of comfort to talk about the state of racism in their private lives and at their workplaces.

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