Greetings from Joe | June 1, 2020
Joe Fenbert, Program Director – Association of Washington Student Leaders

Equality
Equity
Justice

The assumption is that everyone benefits from the same supports. This is equal treatment.
Everyone gets the supports they need (this is the concept of “affirmative action”), thus producing equity.
All 3 can see the game without supports or accommodations because the cause(s) of the inequity was addressed. The systemic barrier has been removed.

What Can I do?

Though I had known the concept of “white-male privilege” cognitively for a number of years, the first time I remember feeling it in my gut where it lodged in shame was after my family and I returned from teaching overseas in Latin America after three years. Even though we took our kids overseas as elementary students for the basic reason of having them experience life as a minority for a lesson in empathy building, and even though we intended this experience to contrast the wealth of the United States with an area of the world where on average 80% of the people live in extreme poverty, I still had never really owned my privilege as a white, middle-class, heterosexual male.

When I described living overseas to people, I explained, "We probably in hindsight took the kids to places we shouldn’t have gone." Venezuela experienced a social revolution under the presidency of Hugo Chavez while we were there and the city of San Pedro Sula where we lived in Honduras grew into the second most deadly city in the world. I would then go on to say, “It felt like we had this invisible bubble around us the whole time that kept us safe.” What kept us safe was probably luck. What I was feeling was what I had always felt as a white male: it was my privilege. Walking through life I have always felt safe; I have always been listened to, I have always been valued, I have always walked into any space of my choosing without questioning if I would be welcomed, I have always had people that look like me in every pocket of society I experienced, I have always voiced my opinion without thinking twice about it, I have always been given the benefit of the doubt, I have always felt protected and always with authorities, I have experienced that if I just told the truth, everything would be OK, even if I had done something not OK.

I understand my privilege now and work at understanding it even more. I realize that not everyone dances through life
with an invisible hold-harmless shield. As recent events illustrate, many people go through life with a target on their back that can turn deadly in seconds.

As educators, each day with our students we pledge for "liberty and justice for all." As we all grope with what we can do to make this more of a reality, I will share what I do.

- First, I make mistakes in my imperfect attempts to help others and out of my own ignorance. The metaphor I use is parenting. As a parent, I make mistakes, big ones, and even though they come from a place of love and care, my mistakes still haunt me. I make mistakes in equity work too and these mistakes haunt me as well as they are wrapped in harm to others or adding to someone’s pain. But like parenting, you can’t just stop, you keep going, making doubly sure you don’t make the same mistake twice and making amends for the mistakes you have made.

- I read to inform myself about the words being used to talk about race and racism. Intersectionality is one of those words I learned a few years ago, so it led me recently to click on the article Intersectionality Wars to understand it at a deeper level. Some concepts, like Critical Race Theory, counter narrative and understanding oppression are still seeds taking root within me.

- I’ve learned (and still learn) to accept being called out on my own racist attitudes or acts similarly to accepting feedback from my wife to be a better husband, from my kids to be a better dad, from my friends to be a better friend, from my co-workers to be a better coworker. I want to be a better human, so I try to make the word “racist” less charged and focus on being thankful for someone having the courage to help me become better.

- I attempt through experiences to grow beyond my world view and not get trapped in my own bubble of existence. I’ve been to church services at Mt. Zion Baptist Church in Seattle’s central area; I’ve attended a Nez Perce burial ceremony on the Colville Reservation; I’ve lived in Latin America for three years not as a tourist, but as a guest worker; I’ve been in work and social settings where I’ve been the only white guy in the room; I attended the White Privilege Symposium last year. I didn’t get to protest at Standing Rock, but I sent some water from the Lower Elwha River with two people I know who did make it there.

- I have friends who happen to be black and Latinx and Native-American and from other cultural groups. I didn’t intentionally go find a black friend or a Latinx buddy or go to a pow wow to feel indigenous. I’m grateful that people of color have let me into their lives, and I value their friendship. I do ask them questions from time to time, yet I know it is not their job to explain the world to me at every twist and turn. I also don’t think they speak for their entire demographic group when they do offer an opinion, just like I don’t speak for all white people with my opinions.

- I defend others and speak up when I’m witness to racist attitudes and acts. It is hard to do because it is the most uncomfortable thing to do. I don’t do it every time and in every situation. I wish I had the courage to speak up every time, and I work at it. I also accept the fact that I will lose some friendships when I do speak up. Part of the reason racism continues is we have not developed the language to talk about it and by even using the words, it plunges people into an emotional defensive hole. I plunge anyways.

- Lastly, I vote. I volunteer for political campaigns. I send money to candidates. I find out which person wants to pull the country in a direction I’d like it to go and then find a way to support them. I also write to my representatives when I see them pulling the country in a direction, I don’t want it to go. I attempt to name things and use the words and concepts about racism that I’ve learned.
We all grow up in a cultural system that molds us in powerful, often invisible ways; we are not responsible for the mold that created us, but we are responsible for figuring out how we have been molded and decide if we want to change. We are also responsible for working to change the systems, so the next generation comes out different, less biased, more tolerant, more just.

It is a collective struggle, our struggle, to live up to the promise of the Declaration of Independence that all are “created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.” Societal change is arduous, and it happens only as fast as there are people who first acknowledge there is work to be done. We first need to accept the premise that America, on a daily basis, still functions within cumulative attitudes steeped in racism built over centuries and continues to perpetuate inequality within systems built on institutional racism. Then, we must be willing to join in the work.