



THE AWAKENING

Katrina Croswell
Higher Education, 8 years

***“HAVE YOUR INTELLECT BE
IN SERVICE TO YOUR HEART
WHEN YOU FIND YOURSELF IN A
STRUGGLE WITH THE EMOTIONAL
ASPECT OF SITUATIONS OF
RACISM, CLASSISM, SEXISM,
AND OTHER ‘ISM’S.”***

**- Shakti Butler, Ph.D., Executive Director,
World Trust Educational Services, Inc., and
Narrator of the documentary, *Cracking the
Codes of Internalized Racial Oppression &
Internalized Racial Supremacy.***

Question: How do we, as African Americans (Black people), reconcile with a society founded on our oppression? Even when we think we know what we should do or say when confronted by racism, we often find ourselves unable to act in the moment.

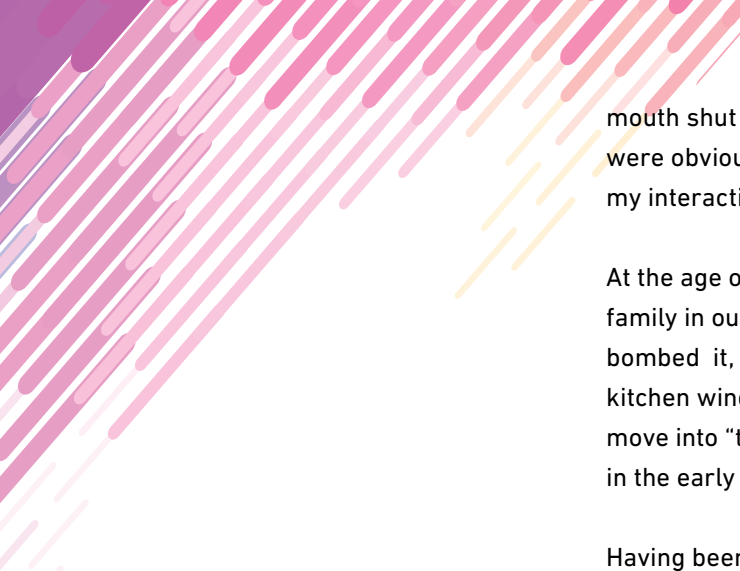
I had been at my job in the office of Student Services at a “progressive” Theological School for several months when a potential student—an African American man—walked into my office needing to ask me some questions about the school, specifically around the “temperature” as it related to students of color.

Just when our conversation was heading into a deeper level towards that subject, an older (maybe mid-60s) European American (white) woman came into my office, completely disregarding not only the fact

that I was in conversation with the brother, but also disregarding his very existence; she commenced in asking me questions about registration procedures. I remember being so taken aback by her audaciousness, privilege and entitlement. I could not/did not speak up fast enough to inform her of her lack of respect and what was clearly a boundary issue. Nor did I react with my urgent need to reclaim my brother’s presence in the room. The energy that was exchanged in that same instant between the brother and myself was at once silent and knowing; his eyes locked onto my own and I was devastated, recognizing that he knew that, had it not been for the fact that I had the answers to some of the questions that the white woman plunged into, I, too, like him would likely have been discounted—made “invisible.”

***HOW DO WE, AS AFRICAN
AMERICANS (BLACK PEOPLE),
RECONCILE WITH A SOCIETY
FOUNDED ON OUR OPPRESSION?***

While I was immediately aware that this situation was a clear example of entitlement on the part of the white woman, the anger, shame, guilt, and feelings of being assaulted and insulted in the midst of it is something that I struggled inwardly with. These feelings simmered within until I took some time to process the exchange in a way that would free me from the chains that had me bound to it.



mouth shut while stewing in anger when faced with what were obvious entitlement and privilege issues throughout my interactions with some white folks. Things like...

At the age of 13 or 14 years, being almost killed with my family in our home when some white kids (our neighbors) bombed it, for fun, by throwing an M-80 device in our kitchen window because ours was the first Black family to move into “their” neighborhood on the south side of Chicago in the early ‘70s.

Having been the ones who paved the way for other Black families to move into this all white neighborhood, in looking back, I realize that we “took one for the team.” Almost immediately after the M-80 incident, our white neighbors began migrating out to the suburbs.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO NOT ONLY CONFRONT WHITE PRIVILEGE AND ENTITLEMENT FOR WHAT IT MEANS TODAY, BUT TO ALSO ALLOW ONESELF TO GO DEEPER, TO EXAMINE THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND SUBSEQUENT “TRICKLE DOWN” EFFECTS?

Later as a young adult in my 20’s, I recall walking into a high-end department store on “The Magnificent Mile” in downtown Chicago, knowing straight away the moment those white sales folk saw my brown skin, someone would “shadow” me my entire visit. The most ridiculous part of

this and other instances like this is white folk having the audacity to think that we Black folk are not aware that this is occurring.

Like many of my brothers and sisters who have had some of the same struggles, I, too, had been so subtly and subliminally conditioned by this ever-present, invisible and pervasive layer of racism that insists “white is right;” we had not realized that in our silence we help to perpetuate that belief.

I AM NOW (FULLY) AWAKE!

Today, instead of kicking myself in the ass for not responding by going into a raging verbal assault in the first incident that I mentioned, I actively engage instances of racial assault/insult by opening my mouth and using the opportunity to allow my words to treat the ignorance as a teachable moment.

AS A RESULT, I AWAKENED TO MY OWN VERSION OF INTERNALIZED OPPRESSION.

I share glimpses into these memories and my subsequent awakening with a fresh belief that a significant shift or evolution in how human beings/communities perceive one another beyond our racial and ethnic stigmas cannot happen effectively or sustainably unless or until one’s own embodiment of self is deeply, and—as was in my case—painfully assessed from the root, thereby becoming a day to day work in progress for the individual desiring (re)-evolution.

What does it mean to not only confront white privilege and entitlement for what it means today, but to also allow oneself to go deeper, to examine the historical context and subsequent “trickle down” effects?

I realized that the only way I would succeed in breaking down the inward obstacles preventing me from recognizing this and other encounters like it as learning moments for me and teaching moments for the privileged, was to choose to allow myself to go WAY deep within myself, to determine what it meant about *ME* not feeling equipped—or yes, I’ll say it, “permitted”—to respond to that entitlement *in the moment that it happened*. As a result, I awakened to my own version of internalized oppression.

Looking back on my teen years, I recall the many instances in which I kept my



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR / KATRINA CROSWELL

A novelist who recently earned a Master of Fine Art in Creative Writing, Katrina is an artist and published author. For the past eight years she has served as a higher education administrator. Katrina is a firm believer in walking the talk. If you profess to live by the values of countering oppression and creating just and sustainable communities, do it...Be it.

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