

The witnessing archive — an offering

I have been told that I have very high expectations of people and for myself. Initially I sat with this comment about me as judgment and criticism. Recently I have come to appreciate how high expectations have contributed to my hopes and intentions for my daily living and my relationships in home and work space.

This mini-profile of me leads me to a story of racism where I moved through various positions of Witnessing. This story is incredibly moving to me and tears of passion for justice and equality and care come with its telling.

I was working at a non-government welfare organization as a social worker. I had missed the last staff meeting as I was in court supporting a family. I was sitting at the fund-raising meeting a week later, with my supervisor and 2 colleagues. Discussion started around organizing the video for public relations purposes. Plans were being made for selecting families, particular families, I asked why we could not ask the clients present next Wednesday for the children's group to participate in the video as they would be at the Centre anyway. There was a long silence and then I was told because they were Vietnamese and 'the decision had been made to have Anglo children'. The reason given for excluding Vietnamese clients from the video was that the donator group would not identify with these children and their families.

I sat with these words for several moments. Then asked my colleagues what they thought of this decision? Had everyone agreed to this decision? Were racist practices going to be carried out in this agency?

I also spoke about my experience of this decision. I would not support the exclusion of anyone on the basis of race. I am from India therefore am Asian and would that mean that I was to be excluded from the video?

One colleague spoke of embarrassment at her silence. One colleague spoke of her silence being confusion and now shame. My supervisor spoke that it was a public relations decision and it was not about clients. I was also told that my expectations of this agency were unreasonable and narrow, as they needed to consider funding issues.

Sometimes Dis-empowerment attends people's lives regardless of skills with articulating your argument, regardless of education, regardless of position in the agency. Dis-empowerment is contextual. I experienced Dis-empowerment because of my looks and my racial background. I experienced a sickness filled with sadness and alienation, and tears coated with anger and injustice and disbelief.

I made a statement of my disgust at the decision and left. I sat on my own in my office and thought. The tears stopped and my passion for standing against injustice flamed. I made a time to speak to my supervisor and the director of the agency. I discussed my position on racist practices and what meaning that had for me as a worker and for our agency's client group. 'Debriefing was suggested for workers who had experienced this decision as difficult. The management refused to change their decision regarding exclusion of Vietnamese people in the video. I refused to be silent about this position within the agency or in the community.

I spent time with my colleagues in work time and at a dinner. During these times we spoke with honesty beyond comfort. I spoke of my disappointment and sadness that friendship and collegial connection had been distressed by racist practices. One colleague spoke of Shame and how it was there with her silence in the staff meeting, and how it was still with her now. She wrote a letter to her supervisor and director about Racism in the workplace and what meaning that had for her practices of Care and Respect for all clients, colleagues and herself. We joined our hopes and intentions for anti-racist practices in the workplace.

Kaethe's idea of 'witnessing' and its forms (e.g. empowered and aware etc) and taking an action stance connected with this experience. Courage and Passion for standing against injustice allowed me to take an action stance.

I wonder whether I was speaking from a position of Dis-empowerment and awareness or empowerment and awareness?

I felt lacking in agency and professional power but aware of injustice. My hopes for my work and daily living regarding ethics of respect for all human beings, gave me power to speak and act.

Regardless of my awareness and action, things did not change. The agency adopted that racist practice. Sitting with this decision and feeling empowered was difficult.

Sharing this story seems to offer me the power of voice in a community of Care. People reading this story; witness an act of hurt and racism. My hopes are that this will strengthen others' voices to find words and actions that stand against injustices.

Wishes of Peace

Tracy Castelino
c/o The Witnessing Project
82 Homer Street
Newton, MA 02459