

# THE TREASURES & CHALLENGES OF DIVERSITY FOR WHITE MALES

by Michael G. Welp, Ph.D.

The room is still as people around the circle lean forward to listen. Quiet moans and twitches of discomfort float about as a woman recounts her story. Among her flowing tears and deep pain are the fragments of an experience from childhood when she was denied use of a public drinking fountain. The fountain was off limits, marked "For Whites Only."

Inside, my heart grew heavy. I felt paralyzed as I heard this story of oppression. I knew of our country's segregated history, but it never felt as real as it became that moment. Why had it not been real before? I don't remember the details of her story. What I carry is the depth of pain this colleague held. It is one of a few key experiences in my life that catalyzed my transformative journey toward advocating inclusion and equity.

In my colleague's story, the oppression was overt, the fountain clearly marked with a printed sign. Harder to grasp are the more subtle ways in which discrimination continues, fed by passivity, fear, and avoidance. As often as I have successfully confronted discrimination or participated in open dialogues around diversity issues, I can also recall feeling too hesitant to confront or too scared to talk openly about touchy issues. Diversity challenges me, like many things in life. It brings forth my strongest and weakest parts. Embracing diversity thus means dancing with my own shadow. I am glad, because this is one of the more significant dances in my ongoing process of growth. Some of the most important lessons I've learned have centered on the touchy topic of white males and diversity. The media has focused on the worry, anger and resentment of white males. However, while I have found my journey to be



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painful at times, I have also found the pathway toward diversity to contain priceless treasures. Writing about white males is tricky for several reasons. We often resist seeing ourselves as a group. We see women, people of color and others as groups, but we tend to see ourselves only as individuals. We need to transcend the "either/or" question. We are both individuals and members of the white male group. We must look at both realities to comprehend and respond to issues around diversity. Others see us as a group, so we must too, in order to understand their reality.

A second challenge is that acknowledging our membership in the white male group can seem to imply denying other differences such as class, religion, age, sexual orientation and ethnicity within the white male group. But again—transcending the either/or question—we are a white male group and there are differences that split white males. To understand issues of diversity, we must move from either/or to "both/and" logic. I am both white male and American born, heterosexual, in my mid-30s, raised Catholic, upper-middle class, able-bodied, mixed northern-European heritage, and introverted. My writing about white males is oriented toward my membership in these categories as well. White males with other backgrounds will have different experiences. Acknowledging the white male group, collectively and with individual differences, is

one part of the whole puzzle and is a critical piece often overlooked.

## DIVERSITY IS ONLY HALF THE PICTURE

As a high school senior, I spent a summer with a family in northern Germany. What struck me most was how similar we were to each other. The similarities put the differences into perspective. Difference and sameness are a

polarity with each being defined in part by the other. Barry Johnson illuminates polarity dynamics in *Polarity Management*. He explains the paradox that in order to gain the benefits of one pole, you must also pursue the benefits of the other. To stimulate reflection, I often ask people: If you were stranded on a desert island, would you rather be with twelve people exactly like you or twelve people who are totally different? Most people recognize they'd want people with totally different skills and resources. But in reality you would want both similarities and differences. Things like a common language would be helpful. In this hypothetical situation you would have something else in common, a goal to survive. To understand diversity, you have to involve something at the other end of the pole, like unity or community.



My explorations of diversity throughout the world have always been informed by the commonality of the human family. Seeing a smile or hearing a deep chuckle from a co-worker in South Africa served to bridge the gaps of language, race, generation, and many other differences. Wisdom comes from seeking insights into both similarities and differences and recognizing that both are always present in some way. To do this I must know myself, my culture, and my motives, since it is easy to erroneously project similarity onto those things I like and difference onto those things I don't like.

## LEARNING OUR WHITE MALE CULTURE

Knowing our own culture, and thus knowing ourselves, can often be hardest for white males. The benefit of being the dominant culture is that others must either conform to it or know it well enough to work around it. In writing about white males, I speak especially about heterosexual white males, since ours is the most dominant culture. The cost of this privilege is that as straight white males, we often have the least awareness of our own culture. Leadership consultant and author Robert Terry summed up this dynamic when he said, "To be white is not to have to think about it." Terry also wrote a *Parable of Ups and Downs* about the dynamics of privilege and calls this dynamic "dumb-upness." Obviously the costs of this privilege are ignorance and

lack of awareness, which often translate into lack of choice and a reactive stance. Being a part of the dominant culture can thus become a prison of limited awareness. Exploring diversity is the key to this prison: It raises awareness and opens the door to choices previously unknown

and unreachable, for each culture holds many gifts of wisdom concerning how to live in this world.

Thus, I have found that I need to leave my culture in order to understand it. Just as a fish is the last to understand the concept of water, it is by exploring another reality that we come to more clearly see our own reality. The paradox is that in order to understand who we are, we must understand who we are not. As a guest on the Rosebud Indian Reservation in South Dakota a few years ago, I heard a week of storytelling and saw what it means for a culture to have a strong oral tradition. Through this, I realized my culture does not rely on oral stories as a mode of passing on the culture. I can't change unless I first realize I have choices. My journeys to other cultures have shown me the choices my culture has made and have expanded what I perceive as the choices before me.

Many white males don't believe we have a distinct culture. Culture is something others have. I didn't understand the dominant straight white male American culture in which I was raised, until I began to look at other cultures both within and outside the United States. I came to understand my culture as having a strong focus on action, as opposed to being, reflection and stability. In my culture, time has a linear aspect, focuses on the future, and controls many social interactions, including for example, how long my church service lasts. This is not true in many other cultures where the length of meetings, such as church services, depends on the energy felt in the moment. Edwin Nichols, a diversity consultant, notes how cultures traced back to European history learned a concept of time as linear due to short, crop growing seasons. Being task oriented and allowing time to control activities was a matter of survival. Cultures where plants grew all year long came to think of time as more cyclical. It is important to gain

an insider's view of the culture rather than interpret it from an outsider's perspective. Someone from a linear concept of time is likely to misinterpret the behavior of someone from a cyclical concept of time, if they haven't gained an inside view of the culture.

Similarly, I have heard white Americans talk about Jesse Jackson as being too emotional and almost out of control. As Thomas Kochman describes in his book *Black and White Styles in Conflict*, for black American culture, the presence of emotion signifies truth. But in the white male American culture, it can be the opposite. Truth is attached more to the concept of being rational and in control. It is easy to misjudge another culture from one's own cultural perspective. Here I am reminded, as Angeles Arrien mentions in her book *The Four-Fold Way*, that the Latin term for the word respect means the willingness to look again.

My white male culture values the importance of the individual over the importance of the collective. In the United States the saying is, "The squeaky wheel gets the grease," while in Japan it's, "The nail that sticks up gets hammered down." For the white male American culture, self-reliance and independence are valued over harmony and interdependence. We commonly borrow a quarter promising to return it, while in some other countries to settle out debts is to threaten to end the relationship.

One aspect of my culture that I treasure is the espoused value of equality, though we have a ways to go in achieving it. Some other cultures in the world do not value or espouse equality. Related to that is our looser and more flexible concept of hierarchy than some other cultures in the world.

The themes of the dominant white American culture have been well documented by Edward Hall, Geert

Hofstede, Nancy Adler, Gary Weaver, and many others in the field of intercultural research. It is very important to note that many of these studies focused on white males and thus describe the dominant white male American culture. Examining gender differences illuminated by writers such as Debra Tannen, Riane Eisler, and Carol Gilligan is very important. These authors discuss the different values placed on relationships, hierarchy, and other cultural variables. It is vital to remember that cultural patterns describe group tendencies, and individuals vary within each culture. Understanding cultural tendencies helps us to understand our predispositions. Through reading and experiencing other cultures, we begin to truly understand our culture and ourselves.

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Putting ourselves in the position of being a minority can generate learning by thrusting ourselves out of the "dumb-up" role. In doing so, we can become preoccupied with issues of inclusion and noticing what gets us included or excluded. This is an experience that many people who are not straight white males struggle with everyday. I have experienced concern about inclusion when I was the only white person in cross-cultural travels and community gatherings; the only heterosexual attending a gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender church community; or the only man in all-women groups. I have also experienced being on the edge of groups through shyness. These experiences sensitize me to the dynamics of inclusion and the energy drain required to deal with situations that are not inclusive.

I have found many benefits in truly understanding myself and my cultural values. Only when I am aware of my culture can I truly appreciate it. Also only when I am aware of my culture can I begin to avoid imposing it on others. I stop seeing it as universal reality and begin to see it as one culture among many. I have learned from social psychologist Edgar Schein to view cultures

as shared solutions to universal problems of external adaptation and internal integration. These solutions gradually become accepted as assumptions that are taken for granted.

Sometimes my culture's solutions have dysfunctional side effects around which I would like to develop choices. For instance, my culture has a strong belief that we can control our circumstances and shape our destinies. As a result, when we fail, we have no way to explain the failure except to blame ourselves. I believe this is why three-quarters of all suicides in this country are committed by white males. Edwin Nichols, former researcher at the National Institute for Mental Health, has studied this dynamic. He noted that during the closing of steel mills in the 1970s, for every tenth of one percent rise in unemployment, five hundred white males committed suicide. This may have also been the result of a loss of identity for these men, since in our culture most of our identity typically comes from what we do. Most other cultures do not define identity so exclusively by occupation. Still others emphasize harmony with the world instead of control. By recognizing my culture as one solution to universal problems instead of viewing it as the solution, can I begin to transcend the dysfunctional aspects of my culture? I recognize other possible choices. Exploring diversity then becomes the key to unbinding cultural chains.

## CHALLENGES ON THE DIVERSITY PATH

My pathway toward advocating inclusion and equity has felt steep, and at times the load has been heavy. Heaviest is the pain I feel when I recognize my unconscious contributions to oppression. It is the pain of ignorance; of swallowing unchallenged cultural assumptions and realizing I am living on shaky untested ground. Being open to the possibility that I have caused additional unrecognized hurt and pain leaves me feeling exposed and raw, putting me in touch with my own incompetence and humility. This is a very emotional place to be for a white male whose culture typically values rational over emotional intelligence. As diversity consultant Tom Kochman explains, "Nobody wants to be caught with egg on our face." Kochman also notes that culturally, white males believe they "have to have it all right," which comes from the premise that it's wrong to be wrong. This makes the incompetence and humility I feel even more

intense. White males culturally do not tolerate uncertainty well, often responding with reactive postures.

But to travel the pathway to diversity is to go to a place of not knowing. Just when we think we've got the world figured out and know what the rules are, we find out there are many more sets of rules. Humility knocks at our door and says there is more to learn. Often fear answers the door and says, "I'm afraid about what I'm going to learn about myself." It can be hard at this point to remember that our gift in this process is a greater clarity of who we are and a reclaiming of choices around who we would like to become. On my path I have also felt both guilt and shame. Sometimes I have found they motivate my learning process. Other times they can slow my movement and wipe away my momentum. Chere Brown, founder of the National Coalition Building Institute, notes that "guilt is the glue that holds prejudice together." Guilt can serve to catalyze or immobilize the learning process. Author Shelby Steele notes that guilt can be dangerous, for it tends to draw us into self-preoccupation. Thus, guilt can be a motivator only if it is contained, so that one can focus beyond striving for innocence. I have sometimes found my motivation limited to proving that I'm a good guy, especially since, as a white male, I can get caught in the belief that I have to have it all right. Guilt helps us understand the weight of these issues, but it is important to travel onward to the field beyond ideas of rightdoing and wrong-doing. Inequality has its own momentum. If we are inactive and neutral, striving only for innocence, but not for change, we continue to allow that momentum to build.

## MOVING TOWARD AND THROUGH FEAR

As I actively engage in this struggle, being in a place of not knowing connects me to my humility and humanness. When I share this openly, I find I am open to receiving the compassion and forgiveness of others. I only have a piece of the puzzle, a part of the whole truth, and I rely on others to build a greater whole with me. To do this involves taking risks and moving toward my fear. Through these struggles on the path to diversity, I have found a spiritual connection to the whole. It is a movement from thinking about different cultures as right or wrong to right or left. As the poet Rumi said, "Out beyond ideas of right-doing and wrong-doing there is a

field. I'll meet you there." It is important not to solely rely on people of color, women and others to educate us white males about diversity. White males also can help each other. When we help ourselves and each other, we will find others willing to help us too.

A few years ago I lived for a year in Lesotho and South Africa where I led week-long Outward Bound courses focused on interracial team building for mining companies and other South African corporations. Working there, people of different colors had been kept separate from each other and socialized to fear each other. I believe there is a very similar dynamic for many people in the United States. In South Africa, people had never formed the types of relationships across racial lines that would enable them to test and challenge assumptions they were taught to believe about each other. One white miner had been told by his wife that she would divorce him if he slept in the same room as the black miners. On a youth course, a white girl had been told by her parents that if she ate out of the same pot as black kids, she would get sick.

Through the structure of an Outward Bound course, which requires interdependent teamwork, people of both cultures found they shared many of the same strengths and fears. That helped them to balance the polarity of difference and commonality, which is a major source of creative tension in forming community. Weaving together a community means moving through fear to discover real differences and real commonality.

This was the same experience I had when I heard the story of my friend's experience at the water fountain. I asked myself why I had never truly felt the pain and impact of segregation before hearing her story. I had not yet built the depth of relationship across racial lines necessary to truly share and hear another's reality, learn about real differences, and discover commonality. One does not need to travel to South Africa to learn about diversity. Diversity is everywhere. Pay attention to differences you share that create for you conditions of inclusion or exclusion. Notice similar dynamics for

others. How do the places you work and live tolerate the presence of different cultural realities? Are there parts of yourself that you have to leave outside the door? Besides cultural differences, look at individual style, expression, and skills. Instruments like the Myers-Briggs

Type Indicator help us to see strengths others bring that complement ours. As we discovered in thinking about who we'd like to be stranded with on a desert island, we come to value each other's unique abilities and resources.

Traveling the diversity pathway promises to expand the learning skills of white males, because it demands that we cope with powerful emotions, tolerate ambiguity, and deepen our reflections. The realities of diversity make the world more complex. Thomas Kochman points out that the Golden Rule—do unto others as you would like them to do unto you—assumes that others want the same that you want. This is not true in a world of diversity; people want and value different things. Thus, skills in tolerating and managing this complexity are demanded. Responding to the presence of diversity strengthens the learning skills so needed in today's world.

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## TREASURES ON THE DIVERSITY PATH

There is a strong business case for diversity. Organizations that understand and value diversity gain better access to diverse markets, locally and overseas, and they benefit from better access to the diversity of human resources they have available. They enjoy better relations with local communities and government and avoid costly litigation. They achieve what diversity consultant Chuck Shelton calls a "sustainable collaborative advantage." Learning the skills involved in honoring and working with diversity helps us become the kind of flexible and responsive people needed in today's world.

In addition, I have found other, more personal treasures as well. First is a greater clarity and appreciation for who I am and a reclaiming of choice about who I would like to become. I am not the same person I was when I began my diversity path. I am more myself,

which includes more of some aspects of the white male culture and less of others. I have removed some of the blind spots of my privilege, which has given me humility, compassion, and freedom from “dumb-upness.” I have a greater connection with myself, my emotions, and my strengths and weaknesses. My need to conform is lessened as I recognize the diversity within me. I have also become more bicultural, able to function in different cultural norms according to the needs of those around me, as well as my own. I understand more how others perceive me and the groups of which I am a member. I am caught less frequently in the traps of either/or logic and am better able to think beyond right and wrong. My abilities

to tolerate ambiguity, to reflect, and to learn have increased.

This process has led me to a greater sense of connection with others both near me and around the world. I see myself as part of a larger whole. Here lies the heart of the journey: Exploring my white male identity allows me to become more of who I am and connects me to a world much greater than myself.

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