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No Such Place as Safe

By Tim Wise

I think I've figured out what it is I hate about those "racial dialogue" groups that seem to be springing up across the country nowadays.

No, it's not the standard radical critique that they tend to amount to all talk and little action: after all, our ability to act forcefully to eradicate racial inequity requires that we understand the issues at hand, and dialogue--even divorced from direct action at first--can be a helpful starting point for that kind of thing.

And no, it's not the fact that oftentimes such dialogues become watered down "diversity-fests," where participants are encouraged to more or less hold hands, sing kumbaya and feel each other's existential pain. After all, as problematic as that kind of dialogue can be, there is always the possibility that dedicated activists can push the discussion in a more thought-provoking and uncomfortable (but necessary) direction, if and when we participate in these dialogue groups; so even that isn't too big a deal.

Rather, I think the problem, for me at least--and it's one shared by a lot of people of color with whom I've discussed the subject--is something that is typically said at the outset of these dialogue sessions, even before people are introduced, and which sets a tone for the rest of the process; a tone that is antithetical to tackling the important subject matter at hand.

It's something that many readers will be instantly familiar with, provided they have participated in one of these things before: namely, it's the part where the dialogue facilitator says something to the effect of: "We want this to be a safe space, where everyone feels free to express their views without fear of being shouted down or ridiculed for their beliefs."

Although it isn't usually made explicit, this admonition about the importance of safety is almost always really about making white people feel safe. After all, people of color rarely feel safe discussing race amongst members of the dominant group, and it's pretty unlikely that a simple sentence calling for civility would change that.

Black and brown folks know that race is a touchy subject, and yet they engage in race dialogue (whether formal or informal) as a matter of survival: they have to do it, safe or not, because the alternative is to continue neglecting an issue that is far too important to their everyday lives.

The whites in these dialogue groups, on the other hand, are often tentative to a point that is almost farcical. Nervous, afraid of saying the wrong thing, and convinced that people of color will yell at them for a slip of the tongue, whites often remain in a shell when racial dialogues begin.

This is one of the reasons that facilitators often go out of their way to create "safety." They are hoping that whites will participate more honestly if only they can be guaranteed that black people won't attack them for their ignorance.

Such a concern is, of course, preposterous, coming as it does from members of the most powerful group on the planet. I mean really now, do we, as whites believe there is any group on Earth that is safer than we are? Do we honestly think that people of color are in a position to jump our asses in a controlled workshop setting? What do we think they're going to do? Knife us for God's sakes?

If you want to see this kind of white paranoia in action, sit in a room full of white folks watching the anti-bias documentary, The Color of Fear, and you'll see what I mean.
As they watch one scene in particular, where one of the black participants in a dialogue group goes off on one of the white participants (after putting up with copious amounts of conservative, "anyone can make it if they try" silliness on the part of the latter), whites recoil from the clearly agitated black man, Victor Lewis, as if they honestly expect him to jump out of the screen and strangle them where they sit.

The funny thing being that throughout the scene, the only person really at risk was Victor Lewis himself, who knew that his indignation would mark him as the "angry Negro" in the minds of most viewers.

And that's the point: even in these racial dialogue settings, whites are always the safest persons in the room. It is black and brown folks who run the risk of being seen as "too sensitive," "too emotional," or some such thing, while whites can almost always content ourselves with the belief that we are calm, level-headed and rational, no matter how absurd the things we say may be.

In other words, the white obsession with safety is the ultimate irony given the way that our racial position and privilege tends to shelter us from the harsh judgments regularly meted out against people of color. Yet we cling to it in ways that are both silly and more than a little unbecoming; indeed our search for safety, before we are even willing to discuss racism, let alone challenge it, is the ultimate expression of white privilege in many ways.

A few months ago, while attending the fifth annual White Privilege Conference, in Pella, Iowa (the perfect place for such a conference, and a wonderful event each year), this lesson was driven home with disturbing clarity.

On the final day of the conference, attendees were to be treated, depending upon one's perspective, to a luncheon keynote by Morris Dees, co-founder of (and still lead counsel for) the Southern Poverty Law Center, in Montgomery, Alabama.

The SPLC, as those at the conference knew, and as most readers will be aware, is the organization that has, for several years, engaged in pitched legal battles with assorted neo-Nazis and Klansmen, often succeeding in shutting down their operations altogether or otherwise financially crippling them. So far, so good.

And yet, for many at the conference, Dees's appearance seemed problematic.

On the one hand, there is the issue of whether or not such a person should speak at a conference on white privilege, since addressing that issue has almost nothing to do with his work or the work of his group. After all, fighting overt racists, while worthwhile, is not the same as confronting the institutional racism and structural forms of white supremacy that make a mockery of equity and justice every day, with or without burning crosses or skinheads in the picture.

Then of course there is the issue of the SPLC's own occasional duplicity: like how they send out fundraising letters to their mailing list, implying that their operations will suffer without continued financial support, even while they sit atop an endowment of over $100 million: more than enough to finance their operations forever, without another dime being raised from often cash-strapped families.

Then there's that business about "tolerance," which appears to be the Center's favorite word, as in their "teaching tolerance" materials for primary and secondary school teachers and classrooms. As many critics have noted, tolerance is a pretty weak formulation, seeing as how it means little more than putting up with someone else, allowing them to perhaps live another day, or refraining from burning down their house or church, but not much else.
But as real as these concerns were, and are, none of them were what nagged at many conference attendees this time out.

Instead, what concerned many of us was the rumor that had begun to circulate on the first day of the four day event, to the effect that Dees had required heavy security as a precondition of his appearance, including armed police officers. What's more, there would be searches of bags and backpacks coming into the venue.

Actually, I knew this was no mere rumor. Having spoken at fifty or more colleges where Dees has also made presentations, I have been told repeatedly that every time he speaks, bags are searched and he makes the same demand: No cops, no show, end of story. It is a requirement that appears as a rider of sorts in every lecture contract written for Dees, inserted either at his own insistence or that of the SPLC.

And while it is true that Dees (like many who fight racism) has had his life threatened, it is also true that people of color struggle against racism every day, having no expectation of security and feeling anything but entitled to bodyguards.

As such, many of us at the conference felt as though Dees should be confronted on his apparent sense of entitlement; his feeling that he somehow has a right to be safe as he does the work that others have to do as a matter of survival.

This challenge was not made necessary because Morris is uniquely flawed, or especially craven in his manifestations of white privilege. Indeed every white person who came to Pella for the conference had been able to take for granted that we would blend in, be accepted and welcomed, and ultimately safe, unlike people of color.

Rather, the challenge was necessary because it was, after all, a white privilege conference, and one of the principles of antiracism is to hold white allies accountable, especially when we inadvertently screw up, or fall back into old patterns that can reinforce racial hierarchy and power inequities.

Not to mention, there was something especially problematic about the fact that Dees would turn to the kinds of forces for security that often present the greatest threat to people of color: namely, cops with guns. Though most whites might feel comfortable with such folks around, it should be obvious that to people of color, the presence of police is a mixed bag, at best.

And so I asked the question.

Yet because he had been tipped off ahead of time to the question that was coming, Dees immediately became defensive upon my standing in front of the microphone, and refused to allow the proper setup for the query: the part where I was going to place his sense of entitlement within the orbit of what I and other white activists also take for granted.

Due to his pre-emption, and clear agitation, I was forced to cut to the chase. Unfortunately, this made the exchange seem more like a pissing contest between two white guys trying to "out-ally" each other, than a legitimate challenge to someone who is viewed by many as some kind of hero.

The point had been to challenge not Dees, but whites in the audience, to ask themselves what it meant that a white man doing this work would a) be able to demand protection and receive it; b) feel entitled to have that level of protection as a precondition for his doing the work, and c) think nothing of using forces which, to many people of color, are the problem, and not the solution to danger.

The point being, that this country is never safe for people of color. Its schools are not safe; its streets are not safe; its places of employment are not safe; its health care system is not safe. So
why in the hell should white people feel that we have a right to something--in this case, safety--that people of color have never had?

And what does it say about us that we feel so obsessed about security that we honestly seem incapable of doing the work unless we are assured of our safety? Whether it's Morris Dees, or white folks in a workshop seeking safety to bare our souls, or cry, or some such shit.

How Dees answered the challenge, though not the point was instructive. It was as if he had never been asked the question before at all; which is frightening not for what it says about him but what it suggests about his audiences and the people with whom he has surrounded himself.

After all, how can one not see the contradictions inherent in a white man doing antiracism work being more protected than any persons of color doing the same?

Although other high profile civil rights folks, like Jesse Jackson or Julian Bond, might have occasional security around them, it is never as tight as that for Dees. Never are there eights armed officers, a personal bodyguard, and bag searches at the door. Even Louis Farrakhan surrounds himself with his own members from the Fruit of Islam, not hired guns and off-duty cops.

What white liberals must come to understand is that fighting for justice is never fully safe. Nor can it be made so; nor should safety be particularly sought.

At the same time, as whites, we are more protected in this work than any other persons on the planet. We are far less at risk, from police, from employers, from teachers, and even from crazies like the kind Dees fears, than people of color are. We should neither cower in fear that fighting racism will automatically place our lives in danger (which is another horrible message Dees's security squad implicitly sends), nor attempt to be especially protected in doing the work that needs to be done.

Checking ourselves, avoiding the replication of privilege when possible, and remaining accountable to the persons who are the targets of racism are key tenets of white antiracist ally behavior; and those of us involved in this struggle too often overlook them. Morris Dees is merely one high-profile example of the problem, though he is hardly alone.

So long as we respond defensively when challenged on this point, as long as we refuse to admit our mistakes, or to acknowledge that our actions mean more than our words, we will not deserve to be thought of as allies, we will not deserve to be keynote speakers at conferences on racism, and we most assuredly won't deserve to continue having money showered upon us and our organizations.

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