



The Day Everything Changed

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At my last institution it was Facebook.com that “ruined” everything. If we trace the whole debacle backwards it was a hall director teaching a social justice class. One of his students was also a resident assistant. This student was doing what we do on Facebook, stalking, spying, commenting, poking, etc., and she found a post of a fellow student that was disturbing to say the least. The RA forwarded the post to the teacher/hall director who then forwarded it to me and the few other staff that “got” social justice. I did what our interdepartmental protocol deemed appropriate and forwarded it along to the supervisors in my department. I was also nurturing a relationship with the school newspaper editor and forwarded it to her as well. I then reached out to the student who posted the story, asked her to be my friend, and offered any assistance I may be able to extend. That is when everything changed – at least as far as the university was concerned.

The post was from an African American identified sophomore that had attended a “Black Party” on MLK Day. When she arrived, she found an off campus house full of white students in black face with 40’s taped to their hands, dressed as “pimps” and “hoes,” and even a few folks with large kitchen clocks dangling from ropes around their necks. These pictures accompanied her post. She was appalled that MLK Day would come to a close with such a stereotypical

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expression of really bad judgment. People responded to her post surprised that “these kinds of parties” still happen and other seemed to really only focus on the inappropriateness of the timing of the party. The university seemed to focus first on the fact that this was an off campus party and that it in fact didn’t have a Greek affiliation. Then, as certain administrators could breathe easy, it became clear that we still needed to “do” something even though over a month had passed from the event.

What do you do when you hear that your campus, organization, chapter, friend, is on Facebook, MySpace, CNN, or the front page of the paper doing something utterly despicable, but not specifically a conduct violation? Is a “Crossing the Border Party” too much, but a “White Trash Party” is ok? It is assumed that most of these theme parties originate within Greek Life, whether on or off campus. Isn’t Greek Life deeper than cliché theme parties? Regardless, what do you do immediately upon finding out that there is a problem on your campus? Better yet, what can you do to proactively instill a sense of social justice, community responsibility, and accountability in your organizations that would create the space where these atrocities just don’t happen anymore?

As a Social Justice educator, I get asked more often than you would think, if these parties are a sign of the times that we are “slipping back” since the progress of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960’s. I specify which Civil Right’s Movement is being referred to here as

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throughout history and even today there are a number of “movements” working towards power equity in the country and in the world. Most of the interviewers are white men from the United States and more specifically local grown residents of the college campus. Sometimes, these “journalists” for the school paper even go as far as to identify themselves to me as “a fellow do gooding white liberal” to get on my good side or something. Regardless, I have a number of thoughts here. First, the Civil Right’s Movement, led by Martin Luther King Jr., and several others being referred to, did not, in my opinion send society on a progressive trend towards equality. Instead, I feel that it was a period of time where those in power (white, affluent, dominant groups) learned what not to say or do in public. This was not a period that changed the way people thought. The oppressive culture that existed has yet to cease its existence. Instead of power hoses, nooses, dog attacks, fires, and murders, we now have passive and even oblivious judgment from a mindless privileged class that throws theme parties, recruits for a “certain type of person,” and collaborates with other special groups. This can not be explicitly listed in conduct expectations and gets glossed over in our community standards, missions and campus creeds.

I cannot count the number of people, administrators, students, alumni, faculty, and community members who tell me they are not racist. We are all directly impacted by our socialization, media, and dominant/subordinated group memberships. When meeting someone

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for the first time, we are taught to take the new person first on their group memberships and then after getting to know them to treat them as an individual. However, we do not live in a society where we take the time to treats everyone as an individual. I can't even remember the last time I treated my direct co-workers as individuals. Not only do we not get to know people on a one on one genuinely interested basis, we rarely even afford ourselves the time to get to know our true selves. How can we approach an authentic dialog with another when we aren't available fully for the conversation? We don't listen or ask questions. We navigate other people, places, and things, operationally with limited information on which we make a number of assumptions and judgments that directly affect our behavior, attitude, thoughts, and interactions. It is this series of assumptions and judgments and impairs our ability to feel a sense of collective responsibility. If you can blame someone else, then you don't have to hold yourself accountable for that action or event. Moreover, if you are an "innocent bystander" or a "victim of group think" then a sense of individual responsibility also evaporates.

My challenge to those that I get to work with is to get to know your own identities, privileges, and group memberships. Track your own learned messages, judgment and assumption patterns, and dig up the roots of your individual trigger points. When you can more authentically be yourself you are more genuinely available to learn, teach, and grow. If you can work on this, then you are more likely to ask questions, hold yourself accountable and extend

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that sense of responsibility to your full chapter, organization, membership, etc. It is from this space that you can embrace, that a certain wrong doing may not be your fault, but it is your responsibility to ensure that it doesn't happen again. One of the most powerful elements about an oppressive force is that a representative from the oppressive group need not even be present for the oppressed to feel pain. It is through a lens of institutionalize oppression, where the oppressor doesn't even need to acknowledge their privilege to navigate their surroundings. It is this comfort that we need to challenge in ourselves and those we work with.

If I am practicing what I am “preaching” so to speak, then reading this article should make you uncomfortable. If it doesn't read it again – as that is the point. If we keep doing the same thing we will keep getting the same results. This has been proven time and time again. Change is uncomfortable. Do something different with your friends, family, significant other, etc. Then once these skills are honed a little, take them to work with you and apply them to your staff, students, co-workers, lunch buddies, committee colleagues, etc. There is no way to know everything that is happening on and off campus these days, but it is becoming more possible to read about what is happening well after it has happened or hear about something on your nightly commute home. Do those who you work with understand their role? Is there a sense of community responsibility? Are the standards, codes, policies, and creeds developed by the community that they represent? Are you answering these questions on behalf of your students or

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for yourself? Are you role modeling living an authentic life? Do you know what you can do right now to feel uncomfortable; to make change; to make today the day that everything changes?

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