

Rupert W Nacoste Ph.D. A Quiet Revolution (Psychology Today Blog) Posted March 28, 2017

## **Dear White People?: Here's what you need to understand about this racial affront.**

Within minutes of each other, on Thursday March 23rd, I received two emails

At 2:30pm, email one said:

“Dr. Nacoste, I'm in need of your help. Most of my friends are aware of the research and material I have studied under your theory and many have contacted me today concerning UAB and want my ‘opinion’. I'm sure you are aware of the film that will be shown, "Dear White People", as part of Diversity Education Week. Many of my ‘white friends’ are appalled. And I have tried to understand how such a loaded question filled with inter-group tension is supposed to promote diversity on campus? In the title, you can clearly see the ‘us vs them’ dynamic. I was hoping for your insight.”

I responded to that email saying,

“I really don't know anything about the film, except that it has made the rounds of college campuses. But I am troubled that this is making students angry. North Carolina State University (NCSU) students, our students, are defacing the posters, tearing them down. All of that is highly unacceptable, going way past just being put off by the title. Those reactions should tell you that no matter what people say they feel those are not innocent responses to a movie title. Everyone should check themselves to investigate why a title like this (with no racial slurs) is so emotionally provocative to them. What intergroup anxiety is it really tapping into?”

By the time I finished and sent that response, I saw the second email about “Dear White People.” I put off responding to email two because I had to finish my teaching preparation for my class at 4:30pm. Not only that, but I had to be sure I had ready the presentation I would be giving right after class (at 6pm) to the Kappa Phi Lamda (Asian-American interest) Sorority for their Diversity Education Week event.

Friday, I finally got around to email two, which said,

“I am a student in your 'Interpersonal Relationships and Race' (PSY 411) class this semester. I am emailing to express my concerns over the events at Talley today, 3/23 in hopes that you will be able to help. As I was walking past Stafford Commons, I read signs that said 'Dear White People, stop dancing' and other signs that made fun of common 'white people' stereotypes.

Also, the video that they were promoting by the signs was playing on the big screen, and from what I watched, the video had clips of non-white individuals speaking stereotypes and bigoted statements that have been heard across the country and clips of white individuals yelling.

To be honest, I was caught so off guard and felt so uncomfortable I walked as quickly away from the situation as I could. Using the knowledge you have given me this semester, I am very hurt at the fact that in such a public manner, white people were being isolated as the sole perpetrators of bigotry. You have said countless times, there are no innocent, yet I feel the need to apologize for the color of my skin and the apparent bigotry that is automatically associated with it. I would be grateful for any encouragement or advice for how to deal with these emotions...”

By the way, I am not just busy on the NCSU campus helping people learn how to manage themselves when these things happen. On the increase are calls to me to help other colleges and universities, to give their students a better understanding of how to interact well with a neo-diverse mix of people. In fact, earlier the same week of our “Dear White People” disturbance, I got two different requests for my help.

An administrator from Shippensburg University (Pennsylvania) wrote with a “*Request for possible assistance*,” to say, “I’m currently in the middle of reading your book, *Taking on Diversity*, and thought now is a good time to inquire about possible ways you might be able to help our university. Last fall a vile bigoted comment was posted on social media. If you would be willing to come and assist us...”

Then I received an email with the subject, “*Helping Us In Arizona*.” This administrator said, “Right after the election we had several incidents of hate speech, defamation of property and the like on our campus. I also teach Race and Ethnic Relations and I use your book, *Taking On Diversity*. The reason I am writing you is that I have been given the ‘green light’ to find our Keynote Speaker for this year and I was wondering if we could get you to come to help us with these neo-diversity issues on our campus.”

No one should think, then, that these are issues only at North Carolina State University (NCSU). Trust me there are no utopias out there in America. There are no innocent places to go.

To the 2nd NCSU student who emailed me about “Dear White People,” I said,

“Here’s what you need to understand about your reactions to this racial affront. Your response is not wrong or overly sensitive. Just like the response of African Americans to people ‘having fun’ with stereotypes of black people (B.E.T parties), is not wrong or overly sensitive. But part of what is in your reaction is because you are taking my class and you are now able to articulate exactly what you are reacting to with appropriate concepts and outrage. You can now call out bigotry as bigotry. You now see bigotry in all its forms for the bigotry that it all is.

But do not ‘give in’ to that bigotry. That bigotry, other people’s stereotypes of people with white-skin does not define you. Just like other’s people’s stereotypes of people with dark-skin color like mine does not define me. I will not let other people’s stereotypes become a part of how I think of myself.

Too, it is good to know that “...there are no innocent.” I do not know the intent UAB had for using the film or promoting it the way it was done. But I do know that on our campus, in towns and cities, in Hollywood, just the same as there are white people who want black people to just shut up, there are black people who want white people to feel guilty. I cannot stop that from happening and neither can you. What we can do is see the bigotry for what it is. Understanding that, we then should know not let that make us act in inappropriate ways. We then should educate those in our social circles about the nature of bigotry. And we then, when appropriate, should speak out against that bigotry, calmly and clearly.”

Now to America, I say this:

Use of group stereotypes should not be offensive to you only when aimed at a group with whom you identify. If when Muslims speak out against the irrational fear of Muslims that they feel every day, and you say, “...well, they-can’t-be-trusted,” you show your concern about stereotypes only matters when you feel implicated. If when African American students object to white students going around in black-face at parties, or having “...dress up like a black person” parties and once again, you say, man-why-are-they-so-sensitive, you reveal your true colors. If when gays and lesbians cry out when public stereotypes of homosexuals are used or offensive anti-homosexual language (‘that’s so gay’) is used, and you wonder why-are-they-so-sensitive you reveal that you only care about your group.

We now live in a neo-diverse America. No longer segregated from each other, in our neo-diverse nation we all have to encounter and interact with people from many different groups. Right now we are struggling to live up to our American values that start with, “We hold these truths to be self-evident that

all men are created equal...” To save that soul of America, we must learn to interact with each other with respect.

Stereotyping is one form of bigotry. But it’s not bigotry just when it is aimed at white people. All bigotry is all the same; anti-group feelings expressed in (verbal or non-verbal) behavior. Objecting to bigotry only when it is about “your group” and about your feelings means you are playing a passive-aggressive role in maintaining and spreading the intergroup tension tearing at the soul of America today.

Dr. Rupert W. Nacoste is Alumni Distinguished Undergraduate Professor of Psychology and the author of Taking on Diversity: How we can move from anxiety to respect (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2015) and To Live Woke: Thoughts to carry in our struggle to save the soul of America (Loyola University Baltimore: Apprentice House Press, 2020)

This essay is now Chapter 31 of “To Live Woke.”