

My Truth

Good morning, Due to the uncomfortable topic, my family advised me to have a warning advisory. Therefor listener discretion is advised.

In last years July newsletter, I gave my testimony of why I joined the Anti-Racism committee. I gave a fraction of the truth because I am still reconciling with my open wounds.

I am grateful that some people have never faced what I have experienced. I call this a privilege. Standing here being vulnerable is uneasy. I am thankful we are starting to have these uncomfortable conversations now, it should have been earlier. Especially, given the times that hate, racism, and discrimination continue to kill, hurt, and further divide people and communities.

Like me, you were probably raised in a generation that said a remark or used a gesture that was acceptable then, and are now unacceptable because they are offensive. We know better and claiming ignorance is inexcusable. I understand the confusion in not knowing what words, what pronouns to use as not to offend. This is not about being politically correct, which is a trigger word to some. It is about being mindful and being aware that our words matter. When you see or hear micro-aggressive words, gestures, and behaviors and do nothing, it impacts vulnerable minority groups and marginalizes them. Perpetuating the stereotyping, bias, and stigmas that have crept into our normal vernacular. This is not normal. It is wrong. Depending on who's listening, the micro-aggressive words and gestures can cycle through the next generation.

Imagine, right now a child is learning and inflicting their learned hate. While another child is facing and battling the racist slurs and remarks. Some are holding back the flooding tears, some are physical fighting, and some are tending their bruises. Somewhere, an adult like the child sits struggling with self hate, shame, anger, betrayal and contemplates whether to fight on or end it.

A quote attributed to Edmund Burke, "The only thing necessary for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing." By choosing to not unlearn what we are taught and to not use the words that are hurtful, we choose to be complicit. Being a silent observer is therefor not an option. I am one of the harassed, oppressed, and ill-treated by words, gestures, and actions. I didn't chose to be a victim. Here are my truths.

When I heard about pray away camps and children detention centers. I recall my earliest memory of when I am 4/5 years old. I see the pitiful sideway glances, adults and kids moving away from me, like I had a disease, hearing the audible whispers of, "anak sa labas", outside or bastard child. My mother having had me out of wedlock at young age in a very conservative Roman Catholic Philippines meant that her sin was my sin. To redeem my soul, the nuns at school had me pray by myself in a dark closet or pray at the back wall of the classroom as the class was in session. In addition to that prayer I would pray for for more strength and courage to fight back the other kids that slapped and punched me and adults that shoved and shunned me.

As a darker skin tone child, I had to wear light colored clothes, use an umbrella outside on sunny days. I was told to use papaya soap or lemon juice to lighten my skin tone as well as take chlorine baths as a young adult.

People have asked me if I was "fresh off the boat?." No, true. I arrived here on a smoking allowed, hot meal serving, and golden wings pin giver, Pan Am Flight. It took me years before I understood what that meant, and yes it is offensive.

I am dumbfound when people say, "Wow, you speak English very well" and ask "Why don't you have an accent?" This one is tough. I gave you my answer last year, but I should have said:

My first language was beaten out of me. My first step-father was an abuser of alcohol and people. There were physical retributions if I pronounced and spelled words incorrectly and consequences if he heard "chicken talk" in his house. He was the first to tell me and not the last to say, "This is America, we speak English here". The worst part of having my language taken away from me is when I am around other Filipinos. I am an out cast. I can't speak Tagalog, but I understand it. I am ridiculed for my American accent when I am pressured to say something in Tagalog.

At my first Sunday school, I felt like a zoo attraction when the kids surrounded me, petted my long black hair, and quickly touched or poked my skin. While the adults looked on and whispered how exotic I looked.

I am NOT an immigrant from an s* hole country or third world country. These words are not new to me. They make me mad because the lands, riches, and culture of my people were stolen by Americans and other nations who colonized us. I have heard, "why don't you go back to where you belong". Some of us can't because it is a choice between life and death. For me, coming here as a child and being Americanized and unable to speak Tagalog, I would be a target. Not to mention I am a law abiding, naturalized citizen, and served in this great nation's Navy. I am made to feel unworthy to be a US citizen even though I've proven it time over.

We, immigrants are NOT lazy and we don't want handouts. In the 1980's, businesses did not want to hire immigrants even if they had trade experience and spoke "broken English" like my mom. I saw my mom work a minimum of three jobs at once. She worked five jobs to afford that rental house in the nice neighborhood with the best school that made her accept reduce lunch for me. She didn't want their handout, she and I still made my lunch almost every day.

Riding and walking while colored in that nice neighborhood, I heard "You don't belong here!" and "Your kind is not allowed here! Get off our street!"

Shopping while colored or appearing poor in North Carolina was no different in California. My mom and I were watched and followed, and sometimes we had to show the contents of our bags to show we were not thieves. I remember one time my mom

got so fed up she displayed her credit cards and money on the counter after being told, "You can't afford our things, leave." When I got older, I too went through this experience.

1994, I'm a sophomore in high school, I went to school carrying my green card for the first time. I sat in my partially empty classroom in a partially empty school hearing the protestors chanting "NO to Prop 187!" outside our school. California Proportional Law 187 denied immigrants access to medical, school/ college, and other services, if residency was not proven. This law required schools and employers to report undocumented immigrants. If residency was not proven the supposed immigrant were to be arrested and immediately deported. It didn't pass that day. However, it set the precedents for deportation laws including how immigrants are taken and treated by ICE agents presently.

I feel a sense of guilt in my part in the "Don't Ask Don't Tell" policy, working as a Navy psychiatric technician. I treated mental health and suicidal patients. In the course of their treatment, I was also obligated to document and report admissions and confessions that went against the Uniform Code of Military Justice. Leading to their dishonorable discharge from active service. Policies like the "Don't Ask Don't Tell" that try to ignore or hide issues do not work.

The military saw my sex, as a female, a complication and in 1997, saw my pregnancy as a disability. They had me sign a document acknowledging that I did not want to be discharged because I was pregnant. Right now Congress is arguing about not allowing federal workers which includes the military, paid emergency or pregnancy leave. The ramifications of this new policy paves way in dismantling women's recent access to once prohibited jobs and duty stations.

Recently, our son, John told us that he experienced racism during high school. With the killing of Michael Brown, racial tensions worsened. I knew about the incident where an LGBTQ person tenaciously fought back their harasser, a known practicing white nationalist when it happened.

What I - what we - didn't know was that John was also taunted on a daily basis and was once physically punched in the chest by another known white nationalist. We have had the talks about driving while colored and complying when pulled over. We talk about racism and politics openly with our kids. We talk about taking the higher road. Using intelligence unless you get hit first. Our John didn't punch back but fought back with his quick wit that day.

Yes, there are white nationalist in our children's school practicing their hate. We have even found out the several businesses in Gurnee are hubs for white supremacists. I know of two business that openly practice to not serve minorities. Racism and discrimination continues to exist and is close to home.

I'm ending where I should have begun:

My name, is Maria Westphal, I choose not to hate even though I have been hated on.
I choose to unlearn what I have been taught.

I choose to advocate and standup against micro-aggressive actions and words when I see and hear them.

I choose to break the cycle and to not contribute to the problem, because I know better.
This is in accordance to the Serenity Prayer. "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference."

Amen and thank you.