

on  
being  
a  
whitey

## in the midst of a **RACIAL CRISIS**

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● Never before has it been so urgent for the White community to stir itself from lethargy and listen to what Black people are saying. I became especially convinced of this during my experience in the spring of 1998—immediately following the death of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. I was the only White person in one of the discussion groups for high school students sponsored by the Motivation Program of the Philadelphia Board of Education.

In the shift of middle- and high- income populations from the cities to the suburbs and of vast numbers of poor people from rural areas to the inner parts of our cities, the cities' problems of providing the kind of education their young people need in our changing world have become tremendously complex. Philadelphia Motivation Program represents an effort to enrich young people's school experience by giving them the kind of personal attention generally missing, in the large city high schools of today. I was brought into the program in 1961 to be a discussion leader for groups of high school students. Since I have special training and experience in working with groups, I was asked to be part of a small team of psychologists and social workers who would meet with the students and their parents to consider the normal problems of growing up in today's world.

The Motivation Program seeks to reach its goals of (curriculum enrichment, parent involvement, and community participation in school affairs through tutoring. Cultural enrichment, and group discussions. One of its major goals is to stimulate high school students to go on to college. To give students and their parents at least superficial familiarity with the "feel" of life, group discussions are held on the

campuses of local universities. Implicit in this approach is the expectation that the students will come to feel going to college is worthwhile and that their parents will want them to have such an experience. The high schools select students for the program on the basis of their potential for success in college, given sufficient parental support and personal preparation.

The students selected are assigned to a series of seven weekly discussion sessions held on Saturday mornings. Participation is voluntary. The students in each series form a large discussion group, which is divided into four smaller coeducational groups of about 15 students each. White and black students are often deliberately mixed in one small group. For the first and last session parents are invited to join the students in the large group for discussion. Each large group has two discussion leaders, a man and woman, who may also work together in various patterns of collaboration in the small groups.

The program's discussions are focused on the normal experiences and strains that confront high school students in growing up, on the theory that academic achievement is often impeded by dysfunctioning relationships outside of school life as well as within it. The discussions deal with attitudes, feelings, and opinions; they challenge students and parents to look at various sides of current problems. Discussion leaders ask the group to consider the consequences of various modes of action. Group members learn how to express their own opinions cogently as well as to respect the opinions of others. Each group, as it is ready, discusses a progression of subjects—understanding oneself, getting along in the family, premarital sex, use of drugs, attitudes toward school and teachers, concern about

Vietnam, feelings about one's future in present-day society.

While the leaders help students realize that knowledge of an issue and capacity to look at various sides of a problem contribute to a more adequate approach toward settling differences, they grant that adults do not necessarily possess better answers than young people. They point out that parents who sometimes feel vexed, troubled, and inadequate can become less authoritarian in their responses if both parents and children talk out their differences calmly and try to *understand* each other's point of view. The leaders place themselves in the middle, between students and parents, siding with neither.

The students' enthusiastic response to the group discussions has exceeded expectations. Some students have asked to return for more discussions after their first series has ended; others have stayed through two sessions on the same morning. Many have brought along friends not registered for the program. At times, a student's parent has caught his (sic) enthusiasm and has asked if his (sic) brother or sister could join the group. Because the program is intended to affect student attitudes, it has acceded to such requests whenever possible.

The program has also had a salutary effect on the morale of many parents. They have raised the same issues discussed in the group sessions with the students and worked on these issues further in the monthly meeting for parents, also sponsored by the Motivation Program.

All told I worked with six discussion groups last year. In the first four groups white students predominated, although each had a few black students. In these groups, while the students were honest in expressing their opinions and often concerned with the problems they had with adults, I found the situation comfortable and never really felt I was under personal attack. One of my techniques in approaching high school students was to look accessible: I wore *skirts* and sweaters and textured stockings. While I had no illusions that I looked like a teenager, neither did I look like a professor. I deliberately avoided professional jargon, keeping my vocabulary simple and using the students' idioms. In the last two groups, I found myself on *the spot* as a

member of a minority race.

## Getting with it

In the sixth group, in which the experiences described in this article occurred, all but one of the students were black. For this group I was assigned to work as coleader with Thomas W. Pierce, a psychologist at the Philadelphia Child Guidance Clinic. A black man of great compassion, commitment, and skill, he was greatly admired by the students. Using the students' own language, he employed a simple but psychologically sound approach to group dynamics. His reputation for excitement and honesty had spread throughout the schools. Students clamored to be in his groups. Because he put his stamp of approval on me, thought white, was tolerated by the students and the discussion flowed freely.

Whether it was Tom Pierce's skill as a group leader or simply the students' need to express dissatisfaction with their hectic, restless style of living, I am not sure, but these discussions were more lively, exciting, and stimulating than any other I had known. At times I could not follow the fast interchanges between students. The special words, meanings, and innuendoes that young Black people use when speaking with each other were incomprehensible to me. But most of the time I got the message.

I tried hard to "get with it." In the early sessions I as deliberately confronted with the fact of being different and asked to give my opinion as a White woman on whatever was under discussion. My stance was to be honest and open, and not attempt to try to justify what cannot be justified.

For example, in the second session, Jane, a militant black girl, who was vice president of her almost all-black high school with a great deal of experience in confronting white school administrators, angrily turned on me. Calling me a White liberal, she said she was sick of people like me with good intentions who had really not helped the Blacks one bit. I didn't understand, she said, because I had never lived in her neighborhood. She said that if I spent a day in her home I would learn something about the noise

and crowded conditions that made studying impossible. When she finished talking, the group looked expectantly at me. For a second, I was set back by the strength of her argument. Then I answered sharply, "You are doing to me just what you say you don't want Whites to do to you. You don't know me and yet you say you know just what my experiences have been. You lump me in with all the Whites in your stereotype. I am one person and you haven't talked with me enough yet to know what I feel or what I have experienced!" My indignation had a great impact on Jane and on the group. They settled into letting me take part in their discussions. Afterward, Mr. Pierce told me he was glad that I spoke with such force.

Although Mr. Pierce and I each had our own style, professional orientation, and separate stereotyped meaning to the students, we developed rapport as leaders and grew to appreciate each other of our views of life. The searching questions of the students forced us to hold private discussions with each other of our views of life. I was pleased when, at the end of the fifth session, Mr. Pierce invited me to his home to meet his family. In many ways we became closer to each other than either of us did to the students. Our intense and authentic emotional bond provided a new experience for the students, illustrating what we were talking about when we referred to mutual respect and concern for one another.

Two days following the murder of Martin Luther King, Jr., we had an especially dramatic session, our final one of the series. The whole Nation was still in turmoil, with all of us—adults and young people—stunned by the terror and irrationality of the event. This discussion, a microcosm of the whole world's consternation, affords a view of the attitudes and feelings of young black people at that time. Its value lies in the fact that in the group these attitudes and feelings were *openly and responsibly* expressed.

The following notes on this session were originally made to advise the program's director of my feelings of as a group leader about the urgency of providing more young people with such opportunities to express and sort out their feelings if the present chaotic relationships

between the races are not to grow.

## A Confrontation

This was the week of our final session when we would meet with students in the morning and then with students and parents in the afternoon for a final summing up of the experience. The one white boy did not show up. Judging by my own apprehensions of what might follow the assassination, I was able to understand why he would stay away. Some students in the Philadelphia Motivation Program in a discussion with leader Thomas W. Pierce.

I had telephoned Tom Pierce the day after the assassination to sort out my feelings about it and let him know how I felt. Mr. Pierce, although stunned by the news, had spent the day trying to help elementary school students in their shock. He said I just had to attend our discussion group the next day. I replied that I had never questioned this because I knew that I could not do anything *but* come. What I could possibly say that would have any meaning was another problem. Our conversation generally reassured us that we were together in feeling, just as we had been throughout our earlier discussions.

I mulled over the situation on my way to the university on Saturday morning. I knew that by now I had established a fairly good rapport with the students. They had expressed many doubts and much anger toward white people because of their less-than-equal opportunities in school and work. I knew they considered me honest and regarded me as a person who would accept without retaliation, explanation, or justification their resentments against the world as they found it and against white people in particular. I must admit I was scared, but I counted on the students' general liking for me, even though I was white, and my previous fairness in considering problems.

When Mr. Pierce and I entered the room, we found in it a girl waiting for us. Her first comment was that one of us better write her a note to take home, because her mother would not believe that our group would really be meeting this day and would wonder where she had been. Mr. Pierce said he would do better than that; he

would telephone her mother and try to get her to come to the afternoon session. While he was gone, several other students arrived, tense and expectant. I wanted to delay starting the discussion until Mr. Pierce returned so I could have his support. But this was not to be.

Jimmy began it by directing a burning question to me as soon as he entered the room. He went right to the point. He talked about being a track star, knowing many white people all his life, liking some of them, and being taught that he should try to like them. But now how could he? He said he was utterly confused. All he could feel was anger and rage against *all* white people for what had happened. He didn't know how he could ever get over such feelings. Finally he wanted to know what I had to tell him about THIS!

So, there, out in the open, was the theme that was to consume our energies for the next several hours. In response to Jimmy I told about my telephone call to Mr. Pierce the day before, my own shock and horror, my understanding of why he might feel such hatred, and why I had no pat answer on how he could feel otherwise. A terrible thing had happened. I said I didn't intend to try to talk him out of his anger. But I wanted him to notice that I was *here* this day to talk with the students, to look together with them at how we all felt, and most of all to keep communication open between us. This, I said, was what we had to do this day. I hoped that people everywhere would be able to do the same.

## Violent reactions

The precise exchanges in this meeting are impossible to report verbatim. We were so involved that it is hard to remember everything that was said. The students were full of feeling—hate, giving up on white people, hopelessness, the futility of Dr. King's nonviolent approach. To them what happened confirmed the argument that the nonviolence was "way off" as a solution to their problems. They expressed impatience, cynicism, and pessimism.

At one point, Michael turned to me and announced, "If I were you, I would be home hiding under my bed right now." According to

the Students, the black revolution would come whether or not they, or we adults, wished it.

I was glad when Mr. Pierce returned. As in previous sessions, he personalized the dilemma of black and white by using the relationship between himself and me as an example. He asked the students what he should do if he were walking down the street with me and some black people he did not know tried to "grease" me. Should he ditch me or go down with me! The students said he should ditch me, that he would be left stranded if he took any other course of action. I would never take him home to my house, they said. Although I protested that I do have black friends of mine come to my house, they did not seem to believe me because they did not know any black people who had ever been invited to a white person's home.

Mr. Pierce, with great emotion, tried to get each student to consider how he would react in this situation with a white friend. But most of the students had no white friends so they could not relate to the problem. One or two said they did have a white friend, but added, "No, I would not stand up for him." However, their tone and facial expressions indicated that they were undergoing great emotional confusion and that turning their backs on their white friends would not be easy.

Mr. Pierce carried most of the discussion while I responded here and there, serving mainly as a target for the students' bitterness. He tried to get across to them that rioting and self-destruction were not a wise course of action for black people. Adult arguments—his, mine, and later the parents—fell on deaf ears. I found myself utterly frustrated because the young people seemed so set in their attitudes. They kept telling us of how long black people had been persecuted, and of how little our ways and thinking had helped the world. They pointed out that we of the older generation just could not possibly understand how they felt. They said that they did not care whether horrible destruction and death for white and black alike occurred if eventually things would be better than they were now.

At one point, Mr. Pierce tried some role-playing. He asked each student in turn to "think

white" and me to "think black." This put the students under a terrific strain. At first they said they could not possibly do this, but he persisted. Finally one after another the students made some hesitating attempts to mouth the stereotyped attitudes of white people about black people. Then the idea caught on and the role-playing became easier for them. I did my best to express black anger. The students shifted for a few minutes into conversing among themselves, pretending they were white people and joking and hooting at what was said. Finally, Robin said softly, "I pity, the white people; they must feel awfully bad right now." Her sentiments were not shared by the others, but were met by bitter laughter. The group was still upset and angry when at noon we moved to a larger room for an afternoon session with parents and other students. I was spent from the intensity of the morning's experience, so I left to get sandwiches for Tom and myself. He stayed with the students.

While I was in the cafeteria, Jimmy came up to me help me carry the sandwiches. He said awkwardly, "I hope you can understand why I had to say what I did to you this morning. I do think you're a pretty nice person and I don't like to think of your being killed but I just have to feel this way and will have to be part of it if it happens." I was very touched. I told him that I understood and still thought he was a fine person. I told him that I had two teenage boys of my own and hoped to live long enough to see them grown, but if I had to die, then I was ready to do so.

### Change in tone

The afternoon session had a slightly different tone. We were joined by parents, discussion leaders, and students from two other groups. There were two black students—one very vocal girl and one boy—who spoke against violence as a solution. In spite of being jumped upon by most of the others, the girl stood her ground. After listening quietly for about half an hour, a 40-year-old father made an impassioned plea for restraint. He told the group he had dropped out of high school but had returned as an adult and had received his diploma only a year ago. He tried to impress upon the young people

that advancement was possible, despite all they said about the inferior quality of education in their schools, if they would stick with it and make the most of their opportunities. His opinions seemed to fall on deaf ears.

A mother told of visiting a junior high school where she observed what she described as wonderful training opportunities "better than Bok Vocational High School"—the students learning to make beds, do tailoring, and master other practical skills. She quoted the black principal as saying that the school had obtained the program because the parents had spoken up through their community group. Our students dismissed the training program she described by saying that the white schools got all the good things.

Near the end of the meeting, I said that I had been listening to their message—that they had been telling me all day what I should go and tell my white friends. Now I had a message for them, my black friends.

I said the young people who were at the sessions without their parents should go home and tell their parents what we had talked about today, trying to get their parents interested and active in the schools. I spoke of school improvement being achieved, not on a racial basis, but on the basis of pressure from parents who spoke up for what they wanted their children to have. When some students talked about their parents' not knowing how to speak up, I urged them to help their parents to do so. I also spoke of how such things as the Motivation Program helped to correct the balance a bit.

I left feeling wrung out. I was sick all over—headache, stomach ache, and mainly heartache. In my 25 years of working with groups, this had been the most intense, difficult session I had ever experienced. It called on everything I had as an adult white member of our society—and found me wanting. I thought about all that had been expressed this day, it did not seem to me that the students had changed much, unless being together and ventilating all that feeling had somehow helped to relieve the strain on them. Still, they had been frank; we had heard them and expressed our adult values. Perhaps in their confusion they might remember something

we had said about how much we valued them.

Not long ago, I had a telephone chat with Tom Pierce, who told me two things of interest. He had invited all students in the group to a meeting the week following our discussion and many had come. At this meeting the intensity of the anger had diminished somewhat. The students talked much about how they would carry on, what college life would be like, and how they might try to get along with others in new situations. Jimmy, who still dropped by to see him from time to time, had decided to go to college instead of becoming a tailor. On one visit, Jimmy had asked how I was.

## The Lesson

What is to be done next? Surely more and more such approaches at communication must take place to help young people gain a sense of their own selfworth and of their worth to the larger community. The separation that exists between black students and white students is the shocking reality of our day. There can be no change of attitude, let alone change of behavior, while the black students cannot even call to mind one white friend. The foregoing experience was limited in its usefulness in bringing the races together in that all but one of the participants were black. For some of the students, having a frank discussion with even one "whitey" was a new experience.

Many months have passed since I had this experience. Much has happened and much has not happened. I find myself still hearing the students tell me, "Tell this to your white friends..." And I find myself remembering other parts of that discussion:

"Were sick of hearing that prejudice is a disease and that we have to understand that. We don't care that the white man has this problem."

"When the next riots happen, they're not going to be in our neighborhood but in yours."

I can remember the students' lack of concern when I described my own experience with prejudice as Jew as I grew up. From their point of view, it was irrelevant that I had trouble getting a first job. One student noted that prejudice had not kept me from knowing since

childhood that I would get to college. It had not made dropping out or giving up part of my family's culture or of my friends' experience. All I had to do was make some practical choice and continue to pursue my essentially self-confident course. In one fell swoop, a longheld and slightly self pitying memory had been debunked.

I can also remember, with horror, how calmly the students discussed the knife fights in their schools; how vividly they talked about what they would do in a riot—they had all been part of little pieces of such conflict already: how unconcerned they were when I mentioned that my son had, without provocation, been hit in the stomach by a black friend the day after the assassination. I can hear the students tell me that we "whiteys" just do not understand that they see things differently than we do.

In retrospect, it seems to me that the soundest part of the experience was not what we had talked about but how the discussion had been led. A white woman and a black man talked back and forth with each other, as well as with the group, sharing a piece of their own lives and accepting each other's differences. The students might remember this more than our most cherished opinions and philosophies. Did this kind of leadership help them see a possibility of a fruitful exchange between blacks and whites?

I had this experience not simply because of my own skill in group discussions. I could have met with the black students for months and never been part of such intimacy. Partly, I rode along on the rapport developed by Thomas Pierce. I was in the group while the members "leveled" with someone they deeply trusted. He helped them to permit me to participate in their thinking. Partly, it happened because of their shock at losing a great hero.

I know now that this experience has probably altered my life far more than it did theirs. For I am one "whitey" who had the good fortune to see and hear "how it is." Can I possibly transmit this well enough to white people to increase their understanding in time to avoid the kind of holocaust the black students talked about so vividly and with such certainty? Can other white adults possibly learn to change their views of life, reassess their opinions of why and how

things are as they are, and learn to listen! Can I myself learn to hear properly?

I am still carrying the students' message—their warnings, their desperate urgency, their volatile reactions, and their faint hopes for orderly change—to my "white friends" on every occasion I find. And I have found many occasions: a program in the auditorium of a prestigious suburban private school; the annual meeting of the board of the local Boys' Club; and my own classes at the University of Pennsylvania.

I know that I am teaching differently now. For I have seen at close range that much that I had once believed about race relations is simply not useful today. I have been working with a racially integrated faculty to prepare for the opening of Temple University's new Graduate School of Social Administration in the fall of 1969. One of our major aims is to bring black graduate students and white graduate students together to work on problems of the urban ghetto.

I believe that the central educational objective of the schools now must be to teach students to live with change and be ready to solve new problems. And this kind of life approach must be taught by adults who are able to accept new patterns and ideas and who have poise and resilience. The first necessity is to learn to hear! □

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