

Technician > Viewpoint

Wake up to your power

By Rupert Nacoste, guest columnist
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I started working on diversity issues in the U.S. Navy in 1974. Back then diversity was all about black-white relations. But diversity in black and white is dead. Neo-diversity is what we live with today; a time and circumstance when for all of us, contact with people who do not look like us happens every day, and is unavoidable. Many people are having trouble adjusting to our neo-diversity America. Not so much because of prejudice and bigotry, but because of uncertainty and anxiety about how to interact.

Today my work is about neo-diversity with mixed groups on and off our campus. From college students, middle school students, people over 50, I have learned that one of the biggest neo-diversity problems in America is that moment when someone in a group utters words of intolerance. In all of the groups I teach and work with, that moment is described with this reaction: "I am very uncomfortable when people do this, but I don't know what to do. So I don't say or do anything."

Silence it turns out is a bad idea. Silence lets stereotypes live on. Silence gives power to racial slurs, slurs against our gay, lesbian and transgendered brothers and sisters, and slurs against our Muslim brothers and sisters. Silence gives power to division. When we are silent in those moments, we show too much tolerance for intolerance. That's why we end up with racial graffiti.

Will we ever stop that intolerance completely? No. Can we, you and I, influence how often it happens? Yes. But the change we want will not come through text messaging, Facebook or tweets. The change we want will come from what we do in our face-to-face social interactions and relationships.

Each of you has the power to influence your social interactions. When the person you are interacting with uses negative racial, gender or ethnic language, do not tolerate it. But, don't call that person names, like racist, sexist, homophobic. Instead of name-calling, speak for yourself. Don't try to tell that person they are wrong. Don't try to tell that person it's just not a good idea to talk that way.

Let that person know your standards for continuing to interact with you. Just quietly, but firmly, express your personal standard for the interaction. Speak into that moment, and speak for yourself. Simply say, "I am very uncomfortable with that kind of language. I find it offensive. It hurts me." If the person persists, walk away from the interaction. It's time for all of us to wake up and take personal responsibility for what goes on in our interactions with other people.

I tell you this as a social psychologist, a scholar of intergroup relations and a researcher. And the research shows that kind of statement makes a difference. It reduces the other person's tendency to ever talk using stereotypes or to use slurs against groups. It also makes the person feel bad about their intolerant words.

If we really want change, silence is no longer an option. When we are silent we give power to the idea that speaking in stereotypes and slurs is ok. That is why history repeats itself. But now is our opportunity to begin to change that. You see, it is in the small interaction moments where the next big change will occur. Now is your opportunity to create change in the small moments.

Dr. Rupert Nacoste is a professor of social psychology and is an Alumni Distinguished Undergraduate Professor. One of the courses Dr. Nacoste's teaches is "Interpersonal Relationships and Race." He is faculty advisor to "Wake Up! It's Serious: A Campaign for Change."