

Beyond Diversity 101: Toward Living, True Community

By Niyonu D. Spann, October 2007

I first had the leading to develop the workshop Beyond Diversity 101 after some ten or so years as a diversity workshop facilitator. At that point, I wanted nothing more than to get noticed and to work with the best in the country. I was well on my way to both when I began seeing a disturbing pattern in myself and my colleagues. When we facilitators measured success during and after each workshop, the scale was frequently correlated to the following: how guilty the white folks (especially white men) felt and whether the people of color, women or the other designated oppressed group got in touch with their pain and expression of anger. Most of the activities in our workshops were focused on oppressed groups telling their stories of victimization, and the oppressor groups “learning” and hopefully coming to feel a sense of responsibility—or more usually guilt—about what they had done.

It is perfectly natural to have feelings of guilt in response to one’s personal wrong actions or those of a group in which one holds membership. It is likewise natural to respond with anger. We *are* talking about serious crimes here—rape, slaughter, and conscious attempts to dismantle whole cultures—both historically and now. I certainly think that we should tell the truth, feel the feelings and act accordingly. The problem I was perceiving, though, arose from the end result of these workshops or so called interventions: the guilt and the anger were disabling for all participants, the “oppressors” and the “oppressed.” We were not moving beyond the disability, we were often just more stuck.

I have come to understand that uncovering the fullest truth possible must include acknowledging the deeper interconnection which underlies the divisions of “oppressed” and “oppressors.” What ultimately allows us to recognize the reality of our interconnection comes through the heart. Yes,

we must of course acknowledge the gross injustices upon which our nation, communities and religious establishments were founded and are presently sustained. And courage of heart allows us to see and make these difficult acknowledgements, record the truth of them, and then take the necessary action, both within and without, to right them.

Therefore, each five-day Beyond Diversity 101 (BD101) begins with the declaration that the heart is essential to this work. A quote by Gary Zukav frames the opening session: *“This is Heartwork that we are doing—therefore we are calling on a wider order of logic than that which comes from the mind. This wider order of logic—this heartwork—requires close attention to feelings/emotions.”* Not everyone that attends a BD101 arrives at this courage of heart, but it is surely the goal!

As I followed the leading to advance my work (and my life) beyond guilt and blame, the elements required to make this happen in the context of a diversity workshop came to me, one by one, just like the phrases of a new song. Spirit guided me every step of the way! Firstly, this advanced work requires enough time to go deep—to the root level—and to stay deep long enough to re-member what true safety is. People often request safety in diversity work and get mad if it is not provided to their satisfaction. What they are generally hoping for is to be allowed to remain comfortable, safe from unpleasant feelings or less familiar realities—or from truths which threaten their entire self-image. Transformation is antithetical to this kind of comfortable safety, but there is a deeper safety: that “it is well with my soul” kind of safety that we can reach personally and corporately. This divine safety or wellness is what lies beyond guilt and blame. Reaching and experiencing it together requires more than a half-day or even a weekend.

Secondly, the work occurs on the mental, spiritual and physical levels. (Guess which one of these is left out in most Quaker circles?) Having a body worker who understands transformation and particularly how it happens in and around the body has been essential, so BD101 often incorporates massage, movement, and other physical components. It has been imperative that the four- or five-day workshop include all three of these areas. Goethe wrote, *“If you would create*

something, you must be something.” You cannot create wholeness and truth by ignoring or dishonoring parts of the whole—that’s what got us into this mess in the first place.

Lastly, *everything*—and I do mean everything that is included in this work—is grounded in the truth that there is that of God within each of us. This is a core concept in the BD101 curriculum, essential to its proper facilitation: we each can know love, truth, and therefore wholeness, *fully*. No one person has greater access to these than another.

Therefore as we facilitate this workshop, we must see ourselves as facilitating a process of remembering. In other words, we are holding a space where each person can see and acknowledge the injustice in and upon which we currently live while also remembering our divine birthright and deep interconnection. Since its creation in 1999 there have been over 300 participants to take the five-day intensive and about twenty interns who repeat the intensive to learn more about the process. Because no two intensives are the same, the intern experience can be very rich. In July of 2006 we held the first Training for Trainers (TfT) at Pendle Hill. This past June, Lisa Graustein, from Beacon Hill Friends, became the first full Assistant Facilitator out of that TfT group. Joe Moore, from Lancaster Monthly Meeting, filled that same role in Nova Scotia at the end of October.

I continue to learn from amazing teachers, some of whose conceptual articulation and activities are included in the BD101 workshop design. I give particular thanks to Dr. Darya Funches upon whose teachings much of this work has been built. And certainly there are no more powerful teachers than BD101 participants themselves, whose expressions on the first day are often of confusion, guilt, fear and anger. It is amazing to sit with these participants, my teachers, as their muscles relax, our eyes meet and our minds and spirits expand. In these eternal moments, we move beyond the surface to a deep wholeness—our divine birthright indeed!

About the Author



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