

The Rose That Grew from Concrete

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Abstract

Hsiao-Wen Lo presented “The Rose That Grew from Concrete” as a keynote address at the 2017 White Privilege Conference (WPC) in Kansas City, Missouri. She shares her journey in coming to understand White supremacy, and specific encounters and experiences at multiple WPCs that have sustained her through it all. Including her appreciation for music, such as artist Tupac, as indicated by the title of this presentation, she includes actions people can take to create peace, equity, and opportunity in the heartland—the theme of the 2017 WPC. This piece gives highlight to the experiences at White Privilege Conferences and the importance of attending such types of workshops and events.

Keywords: White privilege conference; Immigration; White supremacy; American history; Asian Americans; Ethnic minority students; Internalized oppression; Racial slurs; Marginalization; Dismantling privilege

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Hello! My name is Hsiao-Wen Lo. My gender pronouns are she/her/hers. As mentioned in the keynote description, this is my 10th White Privilege Conference (WPC). I'm humbled to be here and to share with you my journey in coming to understand White supremacy and how the WPC has sustained me in this work. I will also share with you some action steps that you can take to make changes.

For someone who has moved 12 times in the last 22 years, it has often been hard for me to call any place home. The WPC has been one thing that was constant for me in the past 11 years. So the WPC has felt like a home to me. About two WPCs ago, I met Shahnaz, who had moved many times as well, and she shared with me that, instead of thinking of physical space as home, she thought of "moments" as home. To me, defining home, not in terms of a physical space, but in terms of time, was so liberating. I just love it. A priceless gift that I will always cherish. I have had many memorable moments at WPCs that truly made me feel like I was home. So, right now, I'm happy to be home.

I titled my keynote speech "The Rose That Grew from Concrete," originally a poem by Tupac and later a soundtrack performed by him and Nikki Giovanni. I don't remember how I came across it, but it is a piece that deeply resonates with me. So much so that I saved it on the desktop of my computer at work. And whenever I needed a moment, I'd shut my office door and listen to it, so I could affirm my own existence and humanity. So I could regroup and gather myself. And only the social justice goddesses know that, some days, 2 minutes and 35 seconds is not long enough.

And here is the poem:

Did you hear about the rose that grew
from a crack in the concrete?
Proving nature's law is wrong it
learned to walk without having feet.
Funny it seems, but by keeping its
dreams,
it learned to breathe fresh air.
Long live the rose that grew from
concrete
when no one else even cared.
You see you wouldn't ask why the rose
that grew from the concrete
Had damaged petals. On the contrary, we
would all celebrate its
Tenacity. We would all love its will to
reach the sun
Well, we are the roses—this is the
concrete—and these are
My damaged petals. Don't ask me why,
thank God, ask me how! (Shakur, 2000)

Scratches and Marks: WPC, Me, and My Journey

I came to the United States in 1995 when I was 22 years old. As a first-generation immigrant who came to this country as an adult with no family and no friends, I had no concept of racism, White supremacy, and oppression. I heard about racism in the United States, but my knowledge about it was so limited that I thought racism equals racial discrimination and racial discrimination equals slavery. And since slavery ended, racism ended. Yes, I knew about slavery and knew about Abraham Lincoln. That was history. And yes, I knew Columbus "discovered a continent called America." That was history, too. And I knew about the "Indians" and I even knew about Thanksgiving, a lovely

American holiday, filled with appreciation and abundance. But I didn't know what really happened to the Native Americans after Columbus arrived. I just knew that "there aren't a lot of them anymore." Somehow, they are also in the history. Genocide was in the past. Slavery was in the past. All the bad stuff was in the past. No need to talk about it. We have overcome it, moved on from it. That was the message I got.

The United States I knew was red, white, and blue. It was optimism. It was fairness, it was freedom. It was human rights, it was kindness. It was the Easter Bunny and Santa Clause. It was barbecue on the Fourth of July and roasted turkey on Thanksgiving. It was Coca-Cola. It was Apple Pie. It was pursuit of happiness and liberty.

You can see I was ill prepared when the reality of racism hit, from Illinois, to Massachusetts, to Oklahoma, to Michigan, and to New York. I was ill prepared when I was told I had no docile bone in my body. I was ill prepared when I was told I got in because of affirmative action when I did not even know what affirmative action was. I was ill prepared when I was told the position was filled when the posting just went online less than 24 hours ago. I was ill prepared when service people would serve the White person behind me even though I was the first person in line.

I was ill prepared when I was questioned why I was where I was when I was a work-study student at the library. This White lady was not satisfied even though I answered each one of her questions. Yes, Ma'am. I work at the reservation desk. Yes, Ma'am. My supervisor told me I could use this space. Yes, Ma'am. His name is Tony. Yes, Ma'am. He gave me the code to come

in here. Yes, Ma'am. I am following the rules. No, Ma'am. I am not doing anything I'm not supposed to here.

I was ill prepared when I was told, "If you don't like it here, why don't you go back?"

Yes, the reality of racism hit me like a ton of bricks. And I was ill prepared.

I didn't have the context. I didn't have the vocabulary. I didn't have family to socialize me. I didn't have siblings, cousins, or friends to talk to, to prepare me to deal with racism. I didn't know what was happening to me. I didn't know where to begin to learn about it since I didn't know what "it" was. All I knew was that I felt my heart pounding. I felt a lump in my throat. A knot in my stomach. Something didn't feel right. I felt anxious. Sad. Confused. Even though things weren't making sense, I knew they must make sense in some ways. I just needed to find out. Or else, I would not be able to make it.

Would it be a surprise to you if I had a dream where I was in a big building, of how many stories I don't know? I was given a mission to complete, but no map, or blueprint of the building. I didn't know what the mission was and how to accomplish it, but I was supposed to complete the mission. And I was not supposed to be seen by anybody, or else I would be shot dead. I was in this building moving from one place to another, needing to move forward, but couldn't be seen. When I woke up from the dream, I was amazed by how my dream reflected my reality.

So, how am I supposed to make it? I'm in the crack in the concrete.

I had gone through the intensive

five-day program at the Social Justice Training Institute (SJTI) in 2006 and I was eager to learn more. Then came WPC. When I first attended in 2007, I was working as a staff psychologist at a counseling center on a predominantly White university campus in a small town of 2,500 residents with a student population of 2,200. I had been in the United States for 12 years by then, had lived in Illinois, Massachusetts, Oklahoma, and Michigan. I came to the WPC with Professor John Palmer and a group of students. I had never attended a conference like it. I gotta be honest with you. I was quite dissatisfied at first. "Disorganized" and "chaotic" were the only two words I had to describe it. Later I realized it was "disorganized" because it wasn't organized the way I had been accustomed to. It was "chaotic" because it had a lot of energy and there were many activities and conversations going on. And people were enthusiastic and friendly, ready to clap, applaud, or snap fingers. And there was this friendly tall Black man with a sharp suit on, who throughout the conference would reassure us that yes, we are running behind schedule, but we will be alright; that yes, he will get us to the next workshop; that yes, we can breathe, relax, and calm down. He was charismatic. And he was also so loving in reminding us about the presence of the youth in the room, in reminding us to recycle and pick up after ourselves so we don't create extra work for the sisters and brothers that work at the hotel, in reminding us of hope and community and optimism and possibilities. Somehow amongst all the things that were happening, he kept us together and he kept us moving along. Once I got the hang of it and began to appreciate it, it was time to go home.

I came back the next year. I came back because I loved my first experience with the WPC. I loved how "community-ly" it was. Particularly, I loved the People of

Color caucus, where I experienced love and support being given to and received by people of Color so readily, so genuinely, so wholeheartedly. It was the first space I had ever been in where a person of Color would share that they will be getting their PhD that year and an automatic round of applause would take place. They don't need to personally know you to celebrate your achievement. I had to pause and wonder: What is missing in my environment that gets me to find such a basic human decency to be so radical and mind blowing that I'm in tears? They are not applauding me and it's not even my PhD. And, that's what I meant, it was a community, it was a big family. We are each other's third, fourth, fifth cousins. And we celebrate each other's success. We don't ask each other why they had damaged petals. We know how they were damaged. And we come together to celebrate our tenacity. We love our will to reach the sun and help each other to reach the sun.

That was the first public space I was in where I felt like I could breathe, I could feel, I could be. Where my fear mattered, my anger mattered, my experience mattered, my life mattered. I had to come back. This is the only 4 days out of the 365 days where all this can happen. Where I know I'm not seeing things that are not there. Where I can be in a room with people who, with one eye contact, one smile, one nod, one head-shake, and one "mmmm-hmm" that lets me know that they have been there and done that and that I'm gonna be alright.

The love and support are so thick that I can feel it. Here it is, a conference that talks about White privilege, White supremacy, and oppression. That should feel so "yuck," right? And yet, I feel love, support, and community. It doesn't seem to make sense, does it? For the most part, my experience up to that point was: Let's not

talk about it. It is unkind. It'd make people uncomfortable. I didn't understand why we couldn't and why it'd be unkind. But not talking about it was making me restless, distorting my reality, and worse—killing my spirit.

I remember when I first heard the word "White supremacy" uttered, from this stage, it felt like someone running their nails down a chalkboard. I no longer have that visceral reaction. I can see it for what it is because the WPC has become the place where I talked and learned about it. A place where I could take a closer look at how much I have been socialized to believe the White narrative. A place where I could try out unlearning such socialization, without fearing my job or my legal status would be in jeopardy.

I later realized that it is exactly the fact that we are talking about White privilege, White supremacy, and oppression that makes this space so loving, supportive, and community-like. Because we are talking about the elephant in the room. We are not pretending something so abusive and so hurtful doesn't exist. We acknowledge it. We learn about it and we figure out a way to change it. That's what love is.

With the support, the love, the vocabulary, the knowledge, I began to gain some traction. I was able to give words to my emotions, to my experiences. Things started making sense and I know what it is that I am dealing with.

Keeping my dreams, I learned to breathe fresh air.

I was still ill prepared when White colleagues were given the credit for the work I did and would shift blame to me when they were at fault. I was still ill

prepared when I was asked why I had to be an Asian psychologist and can't just be a "generic psychologist." I was still ill prepared when my work did not have a system in place that led to the failure of renewing my visa in time, which led to me being undocumented for 3 months and 24 days. No income. No health insurance. But I knew, I was gonna be alright. I had a WPC I could go to at the end of the year and I'm going to get the love and support I need to last me another 361 days. Since I can't take these people with me when I go back, when I'm at the WPC, I take what I can: knowledge, stories, books, films, conversations, flyers, a t-shirt to get me through the rest of the year. I learned that those are essentials for me to survive. I can get through another year.

As much as I needed to be in a space with all people of Color, the truth was that I needed to be in a space with White people, too. Not all of the White people here, but some of them. I need to see White people who see the problem of racism and White supremacy and want to make changes. I need to see them so that I don't overgeneralize White people. So I don't come to hate them. It would have been so easy to turn my anger and frustration with White supremacy into hating White people. It would have been so easy to turn my powerlessness and helplessness into hating White people. But I resisted. I don't want to hate. And when I am at the WPC, seeing how some of the White people are serious about the work, it made it more possible for me to not hate. It gave me hope. It gave me strength. And I needed it. The WPC attracts those people, so I come to meet them. I need them.

From not knowing to knowing

So I have shared with you how I

came to the United States with very little knowledge about racism and White supremacy. In the past 22 years, I have gone from not knowing to knowing. So if you don't think minds can be changed—they can. I remember my very first innocent comment, "How come there are no Black people in our class?" and the deer-in-the-headlights look on my White classmates' faces. I remember not knowing the significance of the Native American students who were trying to remove the Chief mascot when I was a student at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. I remember not understanding my Asian American friend who was one day so mad that somebody had asked her where she was really from. And I remember learning the terms "Hispanic," "Chicano/Chicana," "Latinx" and the controversy of it, learning about the Trail of Tears, learning about "yamaka" and "hijab," and learning about "matzoh" and "shish kebobs." I also learned about fighting for the crumbs, drinking the Kool-Aid, and the crabs in a bucket. I learned about White dominance, White defensiveness, White shame, and White guilt. I then learned about the Chinese Exclusion Act and the Japanese American internment camps. I learned about boarding schools and massive incarceration. I then learned about Emmett Till in 1955; Trayvon Martin in 2012. And then Eric Garner, Freddie Grey, and Sandra Bland. And Aura Rosser, in my town Ann Arbor, in 2014. I remember thinking: This is one life too many, one mother too many, one family too many.

As much as I learned about the exclusion and crumb fighting, I also learned about interracial alliance, a history that doesn't get talked about. One time, in passing, I came across a picture of an Asian woman cradling Malcolm X's head as he laid on the floor after he was shot. Who is this woman? What's her name? I googled

and googled and googled and couldn't find her information. When she died at 93 on June 2, 2014, I learned she was Yuri Kochiyama.

I have come a long way and I know I still have a long way to go. As I reflect on my last 22 years and particularly my last 12 years, I have 3 stories from my damaged petals that I would like to share with you.

Stories

"If you still don't like it, we will go back to your room and order pizza."

Many things happened during my first three years of attending the WPC that I'd like to mention. As I mentioned earlier, my first WPC was in 2007. Two days before the conference, April 16, Seung-Hui Cho, a 23-year-old male, who immigrated with his family from South Korea when he was 8, killed 32 people and wounded 17 others, before committing suicide. This was known as the Virginia Tech shooting. What I did not know at the time was that two years later, before my third WPC in 2009, on April 3, Jiverly Wong, a 41-year-old naturalized American male citizen from Vietnam, killed 13 people and wounded 4 others at the Immigration Center in Binghamton, New York, before committing suicide. I remember thinking: I hope this is not going to be a trend for the upcoming WPCs. I can't take it.

I remember debating with myself whether I was going to cancel the trip and stay on campus for the Asian/Asian American students. I decided not to cancel. I remember looking at the WPC program, sitting in workshops, not seeing one Asian/Asian American keynote speaker. And there were only a couple of workshops offered by presenters with Asian last names.

Then they just announced that one of them was canceled. It was somewhat demoralizing because it was the White Privilege Conference and even though I didn't know what to expect, the absence of Asian/Asian Americans at the conference from keynotes to workshop presenters to attendees was glaring to me. It had an impact on me in a way that I was not able to fully acknowledge or articulate.

On one hand, I was thinking: An Asian man just killed 32 people. As I looked around the conference, there were so few people of Asian descent. They are not here. They are out there. Killing. Are they hurting inside, like me? Is that why they kill? How do I begin to understand this picture? What can I know, what do I need to know, to make sense of this? On the other hand, I was too grateful for the things I was hearing and seeing and experiencing to want to get in touch with my disappointment from the absences. After all, I was used to not seeing Asians/Asian Americans in the space I am in. Nothing new. Just keep walking. Without having feet.

Early in the afternoon of the last day of the conference, I overheard an adult talking to a group of Asian/Asian American youth. She said, "Let's go to this one. And if you still don't like it, we will go back to your hotel room and order pizza." This group of young people walked into the same workshop I was heading to: a workshop on Asians & Asian Americans in the American Media by Dr. John Palmer, who is Asian American. The room was already full, so the youth were sitting on the floor on the sides of the room toward the front. As John started talking and continued to talk, I couldn't keep my eyes off him and my ears were hungry for every word that came out of his mouth. I could feel the power that he, as an Asian American male speaker, had on me. I

glanced over, and the youth looked like they felt the same way. Their eyes were practically glued to John. They were like dried-up plants with dried-up roots and were just soaking up John's presence. Needless to say, John gave a fantastic workshop. I don't remember what he said, but I remember his voice, his presence, his confidence, and his brilliance. I realized I had not experienced all of that from an Asian American man until that point.

In case you haven't noticed, here at the WPC, they have the presenters present the same workshop twice. His workshop happened to be scheduled back to back. And those young people stayed for the second one. It was seeing how they couldn't take their eyes off John and how hungry they were for John that filled me with emotion. For those of you who have teenagers or work with teenagers, you know what a challenge it can be to keep their focus. John kept their focus not for 45 minutes, not for an hour and a half, but for 3 hours, with the same materials, twice. I needed to let that sink in. I needed to ask myself, what is it that these young people were not getting that got them to do this?

I learned that representation matters. John mattered to us. John mattered to me. It was hearing his voice that helped me become acutely aware that I have lost mine. I had given it up to learn the new language and the new culture, like the mermaid. I did not know that the culture and the new language I was eager to acquire was a language and a culture of White supremacy. One that would not give me the vocabulary and context to help me learn and understand all my experience in the United States.

I learned that all these experiences are personal, very personal. But I don't need to take them personally. They are personal to

me, but they are not *about* me. They are about a system that is designed to devalue people who look, and sound like me. I need to learn to walk without having feet. This is the concrete.

Watching John reminded me of a quote from Adrienne Rich (1986): “When someone with the authority of, say, a teacher, describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked in the mirror and saw nothing.” When I first read it, I paused. I paused to imagine myself looking into the mirror in the morning and how it would be to not see my reflection. It would be freaky. Wouldn't you be freaked out? But somehow, we let this happen to our children. We allow the environment they are in to be set up in a way that they can't see themselves. I thought to myself: We gotta do better. I gotta do better. That's how I started presenting at the WPC year after year. That was my first step to making changes and the WPC allows me to do that. I did my part to show up and let myself being seen and heard. That's my commitment to the Asian/Asian American/Pacific Islander youth, for them to see an Asian adult doing this work. For them to see their reflection in this environment, for them to know, they matter. And we, at the WPC, care.

So I come back. I come back for myself and I come back for the young people. And I come back to give back to this place I call home.

“A different drum”

One of the things I love about the White Privilege Conference is that it offers all kinds of workshops. Some are logical and intellectual, filled with research, theories, facts, stats, and concepts; others are emotional and experiential, filled with

music, films, conversations, and personal stories.

Every year, I pick a theme for myself to focus on. And at this WPC, I thought I'd stay away from theories, stats, and concepts to challenge my academic/nerdy/logical self and step into a less familiar territory.

So, I picked out this workshop called “A Different Drum,” where we were guided to use our senses to work through our internalized oppression. Senses. No words. How perfect! Exactly what I was looking for. So I walked into the workshop, not knowing what to expect. We were asked to pick one group to join. There was a sound group, a movement group, a drawing group, and I think the last group was a playdough group. I wanted to push myself out of my comfort zone, but not over the edge. My strategic mind is thinking: I didn't want to have to make something. That's too risky, too vulnerable. So let's go to the sound group, to listen to sounds. Now, here is what I love about the WPC. It humbles me and checks me when I make assumptions. Never fails. So, here I am, in my sound group, ready to hear some sounds—only to be told to reflect on a time when we faced oppression and produce sounds that would represent our experience. Of course.

After I got over the shock of having to produce sounds, I calmed myself down, refocused, and began to let memories flash through my mind. I came to a time when I was having what I thought was a friendly debate with a White friend about something and how the debate had come to an abrupt end when he said “ching-ching-chung-chung.” I didn't know why he made those sounds, so I asked, “What are you doing?” Shocked by his own behaviors, he apologized profusely, explaining that he felt like he was losing the debate and he quickly

left. I later told my partner what had happened and asked why Scott had made those sounds. I remembered how embarrassed she was when she told me that's how Asians sound to some Americans and that's how some Americans mock Asians. I felt the sadness, shame, hurt, anger, all over again as I was sitting in the group. That lump in the throat again. And I sighed. And I breathed. And I breathed more. Then a song I had long forgotten from childhood came to me. It was a song about love. The logic voice said, "Why this song?" and a voice said "Hush. Just go with it." So I started humming the song softly and it started to soothe me. And I started liking it. So I kept humming the song, softly. And then, "Time is up," one facilitator said. As much as I enjoyed the song, I can't say I didn't feel a sense of relief: Thank goodness this is over. So I thought.

We were then asked to go to either the people of Color group or the White group to share our experiences. At that time, anytime I could be in a group with people of Color, it was a relief. I was excited to be in my people of Color group. When it was my turn, I shared with the group how I decided to join the sound group, how I assumed I was going to listen to sounds, and how I eventually arrived at the song from childhood about love. See, there I was, talking about my experience, using words and my logical mind. I quickly moved myself back to my comfort zone.

I don't know why I didn't think of this, because after all, others had shown their drawing, their sculpture, and their movement. So, of course, I was asked to sing the song. I thought my eyes were going to pop out, when the facilitator, so gently and so invitingly asked, "Why don't you sing for us, Hsiao-Wen?" "Yeah. Why don't I?" When I said, "I'm not a good singer,"

I'm not trying to be humble. I really am not. Not to say, I have in many ways lost my voice, because of the daily indignation of "isms." But then, there was this voice that says, "Go for it. Find your voice." So I started singing, in Mandarin. My voice was cracking. It was hollow, pitchy, and not to mention completely off-key. The logic mind is saying, "Holy shit. I can't believe you are doing this." But somehow, I just kept going even though I knew I sounded awful. Then I saw the facilitator, who was sitting across from me, get up and walked towards me. She stood by me and put her left arm on my shoulder, and right arm behind my back. And somehow, I sat up straighter, and my voice had more strength and substance to it. I began to feel joy and happiness. And I felt confident. I also felt the support from this group of people. I felt safe. I felt whole. I felt alive. I was all of who I am.

This experience was powerful to me because I had been silencing myself for years. As I stood there listening to people telling my French friend, my Italian friend, my British friend how much they love their accents and that they could just listen to them all day long, I couldn't help but notice that nobody ever told me that they love my accent. I learned my accent is not desirable, not one to be loved, not one people could just listen to. All. Day. Long. One that would activate ching-ching-chong-chong if I did not follow the White narrative. There was that lump in my throat.

What I experienced was the power of community. No instruction, no tutelage, but with a simple touch and a circle of support. My voice transformed. Don't get me wrong, it wasn't like I was belting out like Beyoncé or Adele, but I experienced a shift inside of me that I will never forget. I found my voice, literally and metaphorically speaking. That experience gave me hope, hope for change, hope for growth, and hope for

possibility. Every time I feel insecure and ashamed of my voice, I feel that touch on my shoulder and on my back. And I keep on keeping on.

“Madison City Hall”

A few years back, the WPC was in Madison, Wisconsin. Being directionally challenged, I got lost on my way to the convention center that first day. I then needed to get back to the hotel to retrieve something and I needed to find the shortest route from the convention center to the hotel. As I was leaving the convention center, I saw two White men sitting there visiting. I approached them and asked for directions. One of them told me to head out the door and walk towards the city hall, pointing at the giant building. He told me to walk up the staircase and walk straight through the city hall and when I come out on the other side, I would see the hotel down below. “Just walk through it,” he reminded. I thanked them and hurried out the door. As I came to the foot of the city hall, I looked up at the stairs and saw the building on top. I paused for a few seconds, with no particularly conscious thoughts, instead of walking up those stairs, I decided to walk around the wide bottom base of the stairs, taking a longer route, to get to the hotel. On my way back, I did the same thing. I didn't think much of it until at the end of that day when I joined a group of people who happened to be heading back to the hotel from the convention center. We walked and chatted. We came to the bottom of the stairs, we walked up and through the building. As we were exiting, I came to realize what I had just done and what I had *not* done earlier. I realized that I had been socialized to believe that certain spaces are not my spaces; I don't belong there. City hall is one of them. It doesn't belong to people like me. I had internalized that message so deeply that it

was no longer in my consciousness. In that split second when I was at the bottom of the stairs, I made a decision to turn left, to go around. Nobody told me I couldn't enter the city hall. To the contrary, I was told to, by two White men that it was alright to do so. But I stopped myself. Something in my mind said, “That's for them, not for you.” I took a different, longer route. I inconvenienced myself.

Again, there is the power of community. I was delighted to learn how being with a group of people makes it more possible to check out my assumptions and to work through my internalized oppression. But what truly humbled me in this experience was the power of White supremacy. Even though I was not born and raised here, day in and day out, the message still gets through to my head, whether I know it or not, whether I like it or not, whether I want it or not. It's programmed in. So, I must pause and ask myself: In what ways do I follow the White narrative? And how does that affect how I see myself, how I see White people and other people of Color? In what ways do I treat other people of Color the way the White narrative expects me to? And what can I do differently? I have lots of work to do to de-program and re-program myself.

Even though I stayed in the United States because of my partner, I could not get the green card through marriage because we are a same-sex couple. I learned more about the U.S. immigration laws than I cared to. Our only option at the time was to secure it through employment. So during the last year of my PhD program, I was busy finishing my full-time predoctoral internship and my dissertation, while looking for a job. I needed an offer before my student visa expired, and we were prepared to go anywhere the job took us, so I could stay. It

didn't matter if an Asian-sounding name would receive 50% fewer calls when applying for jobs. Gotta keep walking, even without feet. Eventually, I did get a job, but it was a job where my fellow colleagues of Color came and went faster than we could graduate a class of students; where I knew well that I could pick up the pieces and put them back together but the minute my students leave my office, they would be broken again; where Tupac's "Rose That Grew from Concrete" on my desktop was my saving grace. Fast forward, five years later I got a call from the lawyer, "Your green card has been approved." Tears came down my cheeks when I drove home that day. My legitimacy no longer needs to be tied to an employer. I could be free. And I quit. I moved to Ann Arbor and started a private practice. Breathing fresh air.

Other lessons

One of the important lessons I learned in my work to understand White supremacy is that it is multifaceted. The notion that Whites are superior to all other races doesn't stop there. It extends to anti-Semitism, classism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, xenophobia, and Islamophobia. To fix a problem that is multifaceted, the solutions and the actions need to be multifaceted as well. The rose needs not only fertile soil, but also the water and the sun. Having the soil, but not the water, having the water, but not the sun, wouldn't work. We need to bring all shades of color along and all their identities. We are the soil, the water, and the sun. And I need to work together with others to make changes.

Another important lesson I learned from understanding White supremacy is that it's about dominance. It is about exploitation and abuse. Amy Tan said, "But to pretend that all was right with the world, I first had

to know what was wrong." The irony is: Once I know what is wrong, I can no longer pretend all is right. To my surprise, learning how to dismantle White privilege and White supremacy has taught me about love. It has helped me uncover the layers of social conditioning and see the humanity of my true self that is pure and spirited. It also helps me see yours. This work is intrinsically rewarding to me because it helps me get a glimpse of the world I would like to live in: the one that is kind and loving to all beings, so I can build it.

To do that, I am learning to love myself and others, deeply. And to do that, I must look at myself and my environment differently. I came to see how capitalism has perpetuated human dominance over other forms of life for profits, but in the name of convenience and entertainment. Forests are destroyed. Land is cleared so palm trees can be planted, houses can be built, prisons can be built, and oil pipelines can run through. Orangutans are displaced so we have palm oils for food and for our skin. Families are torn apart, so we have cheap computers and printers. And we run the risk of polluting our water while dishonoring the culture and land of the Native Americans. I am part of the problem if I am not part of the solution. So now, I create more and consume less. I live my life in ways that are economically and environmentally sustainable. Sure, it is inconvenient at times, well, a lot of times. And it costs me more, sometimes. This is no easy work. But love makes it possible. Learning the kind of work conditions people are in to make 5 dollars an hour, 3 dollars an hour, 75 cents an hour; learning how poor Brown and Black neighborhoods are targeted to fill up prisons makes it possible for me to support small businesses, to frequent mom and pop shops and restaurants, and to not buy products from companies that use prison labor. And then I

learned about buffalo and how they have long sustained the Native people physically, socially, culturally, and spiritually. This then extended to learning that mama chickens teach baby chickens over 30 sounds before they are hatched and how they can tell each other whether the predator is on the ground or coming from the sky; learning that pigs love to have their bellies scratched and are smarter than dogs, cats, and three-year-olds makes it possible for me to consume less animal products. It makes it easier for me to see them as lives, rather than food. And learning that baby cows naturally wean themselves at around 10 months but are weaned at 6 months old on beef farms and 24 hours on dairy farms and how traumatic that is for the baby and the mother, I think for a second before I reach out for a carton of milk or a block of cheese.

No, this is not about lettuce or grapes. No, this is not about water fountains or bathrooms. No, this is not about illegal or undocumented. No, this is not about the Qur'an or Bible. As Frederick Douglass said: "There is no negro problem. The problem is whether the American people have loyalty enough, honor enough, patriotism enough, to live up to their own constitution." This is about people. This is about life. And I value love over convenience. I value lives over convenience. I will walk the walk.

Action Steps

The theme of this year is to create peace, equity, and opportunity in the heartland. We are called upon to organize, strategize, and take action. And let's start right here, at the WPC. Let's bring more voices into the space. After all, we can't be fooled into believing that racism is only black and white. Believing so will support and perpetuate the White narrative and for

all people of Color to continue to resent each other, look down on each other, and fight each other. The reality is that racism does not just affect African Americans, but also Native Americans, Latinx, Asian/Asian Americans, people from the Middle East and many more shades of people that are beyond these categories. We must work together. Let's bring them to the circle. Let's bring out their voices. Let's see them. Let's form a new way of being. A loving way and a kind way. Let's see each other. Let's hear each other. Let's show up. Send recommendations to Eddie regarding keynote speakers, comedians, and films. Send him suggestions for quotes for the t-shirts. Send him ideas and pictures, *about* all shades of people, *for* all shades of people, *from* all shades of people so he can make the website better, so he can make the program better, and make the WPC better. So we can create a space where we can celebrate each other's tenacity. So we can heal together and love together. If we must, we will grow our own speakers and facilitators, right here at the WPC. Let's keep dancing, keep singing, keep reading and telling stories, keep laughing, and keep creating. Let's make it happen.

If you are so inclined and would like to do more, here are some actions I am taking that I would like to share with you for your consideration.

I hope you will consider working on deprogramming and reprogramming yourself. One question has been helpful to me in examining myself: "In what ways do I perpetuate White supremacy?" If the answer is "I don't." Ask again. And again. Until I find an answer. Do I say, "boys and girls" in that order? Do I say, "White people and people of Color," in that order? With whom do I make eye contact after I ask a roomful of people to introduce themselves? Do I look to the person of Color on my right or

the White person on my left? Who do I ask to accommodate whom? Do I check myself to see how White supremacy shows up in my work, so I can eliminate it? In my work on GLBTQ issues, am I inclusive of all GLBTQ folks or am I only just focusing on White people? Consciously and subconsciously, we perpetuate White supremacy in several dozen ways, if not hundreds, small and big. We cannot change what we don't acknowledge. We can't really help others uninstall the program if we are not doing it ourselves. Be the change you want to see in the world, as Gandhi had said. And the world needs more people who will work on themselves than people who tell other people to work on themselves.

Let's remember: We are multidimensional. Each one of us has multiple social identities. Supremacists oppress the identities they deem less worthy. To dismantle supremacy, let's work on uplifting the identities that are deemed less by the supremacy and let this be the core of our work. I welcome and appreciate work around ableism, ageism, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia in this space. I do. And I ask my White allies who do work around these issues, to continue to center and uplift people of Color in your work. If your work is on ageism, be sure you center elderly of Color, who may also be transgender, who may also have disabilities, and not let them be an afterthought. If your work is on gender oppression or transphobia, be sure you center women of Color or transgender families of Color, who may live in poverty, who may be Muslim and undocumented, so they are not further marginalized. And I ask my cisgender men of Color allies to center our cisgender women of Color and transgender families of Color. I ask my straight family of Color to center the queer family of Color in our work to challenge White supremacy. Because

whether you know it or not, for centuries, they have been along your side, lifting you up. Please do the same. Let's lift each other up.

Some other questions I ask myself that I hope you will consider: Instead of money equals power, what if I lived in a culture where kindness equals power, compassion equals power, honesty equals power, and integrity equals power? What would that look like? In what ways do I perpetuate the notion that money equals power? What would, and could I do to transform our culture so it's kinder?

Finally, practice self-love. For those of you who have been doing this work, you know how hard it is. You know how pervasive the injustice is and how infuriating it is how pervasive it is and how hopeless it can seem. Sometimes I just want to lash out when I am angry and hurt. And I quickly remind myself: Supremacy is about domination. It is abusive and dehumanizing by nature. I can't expect others to love by being abusive to them. I can't expect them to humanize me or others by dehumanizing them. I can't solve this problem by being the problem. Tell them they are bigots and racists are just not the way to go. To be the solution, I must be a practitioner of love myself. Dr. King, Jr., (1986) reminded us: "In advocating violence it is imitating the worst, the most brutal and the most uncivilized value of American life" (p. 66). So please resist. Resist the temptation to lash out when you are hurt. Resist the temptation to lash out when you are angry. Find your way to love and start from there. Humanize yourself so you can humanize others. Listen to yourself so you can listen to others. Hold yourself accountable so you can hold others accountable. And forgive yourself so you can forgive others. Let's love our way out of supremacy.

Closing

I want to close my speech today by sharing with you another quote from Dr. King, Jr. (1967), who once said, "Those who love peace must learn to organize as effectively as those who love wars." To love peace is to dismantle White supremacy. Dismantling White supremacy is spiritual work and is necessary. It requires our constant and diligent effort. It's about creating a loving and kind world. Inside out. You can do it. Let's do it. Thank you.

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