



WE THE PEOPLE

DIVERSITY, EQUITY AND DIFFERENCE AT THE UW
REMARKS BY UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON **INTERIM PRESIDENT ANA MARI CAUCE**

APRIL 16, 2015 | 2 P.M., *wələbʔaltx*^w – INTELLECTUAL HOUSE

The past year has been a very difficult one for those of us who view diversity and equity as core values; who believe in not only respecting, but also celebrating differences; who believe in justice and fairness; and who hold dear the idea that all men (and women) were created equal and should have equal opportunities to achieve their chosen goals and contribute to society.

It's been an especially rough one for African-American young men and women who saw their peers gunned down on the street, or stopped by police on college campuses for, well, walking while black ... on a primarily white campus, and who also saw, on video, in living color, their white peers singing on a bus, not only using the "n" word, but alluding to lynching as appropriate.

And it was also a difficult year for those from other groups that have historically experienced oppression: for women, who still are subjected to men in power discussing their bodies and their rights with little or no recognition that they are autonomous beings; for Muslims who watched their peers at UNC killed; for Jewish students who read about a peer at UCLA having her fitness for serving on student government challenged because of her faith. Many of you are probably aware that today is Holocaust Remembrance Day. We must remember and learn. Prejudice, discrimination, stereotypes — and the dehumanization they breed — can lead to what may seem unimaginable.

Some incidents have been much closer to home, like the racial epithets hurled at our own students who were marching to make sure we all understood that Black Lives Matter. We are not immune. Here in the Pacific Northwest, at the UW, we like to think of ourselves as progressive on these issues. But we often fall way short of our ideals.

This is not someone else's problem. And, while I'm not any more sure of the solutions than anyone else, I do know the best way to get out of a hole is to stop digging. We may not be able to solve racial inequity, and all those other forms of "isms" everywhere in this country or in the world, but we've got to begin by not being part of the problem. We can only do that by recognizing it and acknowledging that it resides in us.

That's why, difficult and risky as it may be, we need to have this discussion — and then take action.

I'm going to share some personal reflections and experiences here this afternoon — including my own encounters with prejudice. I share these knowing that I have benefited from significant privilege — from being raised in a family that was highly educated, to my light skin. I'm also going to share some observations about this generation of students — your generation — including some that I've experienced as a teacher who has been with you in the classroom and on this campus for 28 years. And as important, I'm going to challenge all of us, students, faculty and staff, and my leadership team, to own both our personal responsibility for the culture of our campus and the institutional challenges we need to address to combat the racism, both individual and institutional, that persists here and throughout our society. We'll begin that work in small group discussions at your tables after my remarks, but that's not where it will end.

Many of you have already begun the work. You've organized and participated in teach-ins with our faculty, you've held rallies and marches, you're serving on working groups and task forces addressing issues from wage disparity to barriers to access and so many other factors that lead to racial and societal inequity.

Just the fact that you are here tells me you have some level of concern and commitment to justice. So before we start, let's remember that societal progress isn't a destination, a problem that can be solved in a one-and-done matter. It's a struggle: You keep at it, you keep working, sometimes you falter, but you push ahead.

We are the University of Washington. We stand on Duwamish land in a part of the world known for its biodiversity — rainforests and deserts, glaciers and gorges, eagles and goldfinches. A place where you can dig for oysters and geoducks, grow apples and tulips — and we know that it's this diversity that makes our region so special, so beautiful, so inspiring.

Some of you probably chose to pursue your degrees here at the UW because you believed you would find support, feel safe and be accepted for who you are. Where you would be buoyed by a set of policies and procedures that would allow that to happen. And by a set of peers who would welcome you.

The National Study of College Freshmen, conducted by UCLA, a study that's been tracking the attitudes of college students nationwide, found that your generation of students views itself as committed to and comfortable with diversity.

More than 80 percent of this year's college freshmen said that their ability to work with peers of different cultures and races was either "somewhat strong" or a "major strength." Your generation clearly knows, and seems to embrace, that diversity is important to learning and preparation for success in the global marketplace.

So why has so much of the violence and ugliness we are experiencing today happened on college campuses?

Maybe part of the answer lies in another study question. Only about 45 percent of all freshmen believed their knowledge of other cultures or races was even somewhat strong.

I think these two seemingly incompatible beliefs — embracing diversity but not really claiming knowledge of other cultures — emerged, side by side, because yours is the generation raised on the notion that we can be “color blind” or culture blind or gender blind — raised to believe these things no longer matter, or worse yet — that the way to fix whatever bias or prejudice that might still exist is to become willfully blind to it. You don’t need to know about differences to work across them, because differences just don’t matter.

But is this blindness really a good thing? And whose color, gender, faith or culture are we erasing when we go blind? What’s being “whitewashed,” so to speak?

I can remember being a brand-new assistant professor when I had just given a colloquium focusing on youth of color, when one of my colleagues commented positively about my talk and then said to me, “You know, I’ve never thought of you as a Latina. You don’t act like one.” And this was clearly supposed to be a compliment! A compliment to his enlightenment, and perhaps to the fact that I could “talk real good.”

I felt like screaming, “What’s the problem with acting like a Latina, whatever that means? That’s who I am! And why the heck should that be a problem?”

W.E.B. Dubois, the first black Harvard Ph.D., and founder of the Niagara Movement that laid the foundation for the NAACP, someone I consider my “academic grandfather” — he was my mentors’ mentor — put it best when he said in his book “The Souls of Black Folk”: “Being a problem is a strange experience — peculiar even for one who has never been anything else.”

Maybe it’s time to reset the equation and admit that, first, we are not color blind — nor should we be. And more importantly, that we cannot just escape our history and biases by pretending they don’t exist.

We must begin by facing up to them!

Racially based stereotypes, biased attitudes and racist beliefs aren’t things that reside solely in, or are perpetuated by, bad people. If they were, the solution would be easy. Get rid of those people, take the bad apples out of the barrel — and, done!

Sure, there are horrible bigots and people who spread hate, and the world would be a better place if we could stop them from doing so.

But racism and all those other “isms” are about something much more profound. They are inside all of us — passed down over generations, in our cultures and histories, imbibed by new immigrants as they arrive on our shores. But it’s often subtle, sometimes out of our own consciousness. That is why we have to actively struggle to get beyond it. We can’t just will it or ignore it away. We have to become culturally aware and self-aware.

Let’s not forget that the men — and they were men — who wrote that “all men were created equal,” such a liberating and powerful idea, really meant all men who were white — many owned slaves! Racism was baked into our country’s founding, and it remains in the fabric of our country — indeed in every country I know of — and it is there, underneath the surface of our daily lives.

Sometimes racist remarks or actions are clearly willful and meant to hurt, to put people in their place, so to speak. But even a truly thoughtless comment, borne out of ignorance, plain and simple, can still cause damage.

The march organized by the Black Student Union and others to say Black Lives Matter marked a day full of pride for those who marched across our campus. It was probably the largest march since the 1970s — it was student-led and it was peaceful and life-affirming.

Then somebody yelled out something about the demonstrators being apes, turning something joyous into something ugly. Words can damage. They may not break bones, but they can crush souls, which is worse.

Now, it’s pretty clear those young men who yelled out apes meant for their words to hurt. But words can hurt just the same even if that isn’t the intention.

When I was teaching about intelligence testing in our clinical graduate program, one of my mentees, an African-American young woman, very proudly told the class that the sequencing of the human genome showed that the genetic overlap between races was 99.9 percent. A young man in the class followed her comment by sharing that the overlap between humans and chimpanzees is 96 percent (this is true; indeed, the overlap with mice is 85 percent, but that was not the point).

I knew the young man; he was pretty clueless about what he’d just said — about how he’d indirectly made the comparison between African-Americans and apes, a comparison with a long and difficult and tortured history, a history that still stings and still has power. The young woman’s face had fallen.

He hadn’t meant it that way, of course, but the pain and insult was still real.

Cluelessness is no excuse.

Lack of knowledge about the histories and cultures of those different than ourselves, coupled with confidence that we can work with others from different races and cultures, are the perfect ingredients for a Molotov cocktail, ready to explode at any minute. So, we shouldn't be that surprised when it does.

These "micro-aggressions," as researchers call them, add up, because they are persistent, and daily. And no, you can't just shake it off! And you shouldn't have to!

Our neighborhoods and schools have become more segregated since the '70s. We don't know much about difference because we live in homogeneity — often based on class, but race and class in this country go hand in hand. College campuses like this are generally the most diverse settings our students have ever been in. It's the right place to change the equation. But, that requires putting in the time to learn about others and to look inside ourselves, at our own upbringing, at what we heard our parents and neighbors whisper, at what we've sometimes thought or felt before we caught ourselves.

Many of you know I was born in Cuba — and in Cuba, like most Caribbean countries, racism has its own distinct look and feel. Words that would sound racist in this country, like "mi negrita" (my black one), are terms of endearment. But, that doesn't mean that a color line doesn't exist, although it may be placed in a different part of the color spectrum.

I learned from my parents that I was lucky to be light-skinned — my religious aunt, who went to Mass every day and who taught me compassion and charity, also taught me that white skin was a gift from God, so we should be extra kind to those who were darker.

How incredibly condescending and "white" of her.

They were good people, whom I admire and love to this day — but they held beliefs that I won't sugarcoat by calling them anything other than racist. And they weren't so great about gender equity either. They laughed at men who were "effeminate," and, by the way, they also thought Anglos had loose morals.

Because they had no real power, at least not in this country, the effects of their biases didn't extend far.

But knowing what I know about families and familial influence, not to mention all I know about the larger societal context and how it affects us, in my most honest moments I have to ask: How can these biases, these prejudices, this racism not be part of who I am? And because I am in a position of power, it can matter and I must be self-aware and accountable.

And so must you, since so many of you will leave here and go on to be leaders.

What you believe, how you act, will matter.

I did try to bring my parents into the 20th century, with some modicum of success, but, in many ways I just ignored their prejudice — until I couldn't. When I met the woman I thought would be my partner for life (and I was right: we've been together almost 26 years), I wanted my mother to be a part of our lives, which meant coming out to my mother. It was not something I looked forward to, but it had to be done.

I expected my mother to be unhappy, but I could not have anticipated what she'd say: "Now both my children are dead."

Nothing could have been more hurtful.

My brother, her son, had been murdered. He was a civil-rights activist and union organizer, and when you try to organize black and white workers in some parts of the South, you run into the Klan. He helped organize what was this country's first anti-Klan rally. The Klan showed up and five young people were murdered. (And it was caught on film — although by news cameramen, not cellphones.) He was 25, recently graduated, and newly married to a woman of Panamanian background who was black. One of the several reasons he had been targeted is because he was viewed as a race-mixer.

Because my mother didn't understand English well, it fell on me to tell her what had happened. I'll never forget the sound she made. It was not quite human.

It was unbearable for us both. So, to have her equate what I had just told her about me to that moment, it just could not have been worse.

Yet, I knew she loved me; there was never a doubt. I knew how much she had sacrificed to give me the life I have. She even offered to sell her condo, her only real possession of worth, to get me conversion treatment.

It was tough between us for several years, until finally something changed. I'm still not quite sure how, but she was ready to visit me in our house. She grew to love my partner, now spouse. Years later, trying to fight her way back from a massive stroke, my mother died in my arms, and I knew she was proud of me. I think she knew I was proud of her.

It was the last gift we gave each other.

She was a strong, wise, giving and compassionate person, a 4-foot-11 Mack truck of persistence, but her life was steeped in racism, sexism, classism and heterosexism.

It's not just about bad people doing bad things. It's about us. This is not someone else's problem. And it is not someone else's responsibility to change.

Perhaps grudgingly, and certainly an inch at a time, my mother did change. She opened her heart to her son's wife, who was black, and to her daughter's wife, who was ... a wife, although then a partner. And that not only made my life happier, it made her life and her death a whole lot better. She could have spent her last decade on earth bitter and alone, and died that way too.

Prejudice and bias divides us from people; it's the opposite of the boundlessness that we talk about here that has become our motto. Prejudice is all about binding and limiting; it makes us smaller.

Now, please, don't think I told this story because I expect any of the victims of oppression on our campus, or in our society, to be as tolerant or loving toward those who seek to hurt them as I was toward my mother. She was, after all, my mother, not a colleague or friend, much less a stranger. I also do not mean to imply that everyone changes, or tries to change.

And though I did help to educate my mother, it's not up to those in the oppressed groups to educate us and enlighten us. And, when we allow them to struggle for equity alone, rather than struggling alongside or serving as allies, we are only increasing their burden — or more precisely, we are giving them our burden to carry.

We do not live in a color-blind world — and the fact that we would even think that's desirable says something about how we really view difference. Believe me when I say that black people in this country cannot forget they are black, especially on a primarily white campus, even more so when they are the only one in a class, or club, or, or.... They know that if they do something wrong, they'll be judged differently — and I do mean that literally — just look at our jails.

Words don't break bones, but they crush souls. Stereotypes may be all in your head, but they can shape reality. And, they create the conditions that lead others to break bones, or burn crosses, or murder. And the combination of words and stereotypes and biases also create the conditions that lead to exclusionary or biased policies and institutional practices that lead to and maintain racial and other forms of inequity and deny real people opportunities. Such policies or practices are often much less obvious, but ultimately more corrosive.

So where does that lead us?

I've spent the better part of our time talking about the personal consequences of discrimination and bias. Equally — no, even more concerning to me — in my role as president, are the effects of what is called systemic or institutional racism, the biases and barriers that diminish our capacity as a society, or in this case, as a university, to truly fulfill our public promise of both access and excellence, indeed of access to excellence.

One of our alums, Nick Hanauer, captured it beautifully in a Facebook rant, of all places. In it he wrote, “Innovation is a combinatorial and cooperative process ... diversity is at the core of that process ... diversity super-charges innovation.” Innovation happens when we bring new perspectives, ideas, experiences and solutions to the table. Diversity drives excellence and success. We cannot be a truly great university without it. To make progress on solving the world’s greatest challenges, we must also make progress on diversity.

So what can we do — what must we do — here at the University of Washington? Because it’s our community, and because this is what universities are all about — places of discovery, of civil discourse, of difficult conversations — where we learn new ways of looking at and acting in the world. If not here, where?

First — refuse to be part of it. Call out your friends who tell racist jokes, even those stupid dumb blonde jokes, or who make biased assumptions about people of color, or women, or the undocumented, or about those in wheelchairs, or, or.... They are not only untrue, but damaging.

Tell them it’s not funny, that what they are saying is offensive, that you won’t be a party to it. If you must, walk away.

This is especially important if you are in the “mainstream” or “majority” — we cannot just shift the burden to speak out onto the aggrieved party. It’s not their problem, and when they say something it is often viewed as defensive.

And if you are told by someone Chinese, Jewish, Muslim or gay that what you’ve said is hurtful or insensitive, “I didn’t mean it” isn’t the appropriate response. That just makes it all about you, and what you meant, when they’ve had the courage to tell you what they feel. Better is, “I’m sorry, that was insensitive. I won’t do it again.” And then don’t do it again.

Second, learn about others who are different than you, not just through human contact, but by reading and education.

If you’re not sure why your words were offensive or hurtful, put in the time and energy to analyze and problem-solve it on your own time. It’s not the job of the aggrieved party to educate you. (And it’s usually not that hard to figure out.)

And if you read and learn about others different than you, you’ll be less likely to make offensive comments in the first place.

Third, take the time for self-examination and reflection. Look into your hearts and into your heads and analyze what's there. Don't let it scare you. Whether you're black or white or brown, Native American or Asian, straight or gay, you do have racial, or gender, or other stereotypes and biases and prejudices — it is impossible to live in this society without them. Knowing this will help you catch yourself and not act on them, which is what's most important. You can best do that when you are aware of them.

With time and effort, habits and thought patterns can and do change. You can get past your biases and connect — and make your world bigger and truly boundless. And your change can lead to a world of good for our community — all our community.

But it's not just what we do individually, it's what we do collectively — and as an institution.

A recent article in The New York Times about a neuroscientist investigating the roots of prejudice notes that we have been shaped to wear seatbelts, recycle, pick up our dog doo and eat more vegetables, but “What has not come so easily is persuading us to identify with — or even tolerate — people we perceive as outsiders.... [T]he killing of a single unarmed black teenager might prompt thousands to protest in the streets. But social policies that address the problems behind individual fates — programs to combat poverty or racial bias in policing — remain as polarizing as ever.”

What we need to do is hard. So, my last point today is to share my commitment — and that of my colleagues throughout the University's leadership — to work in greater and more comprehensive ways to address the UW's own institutional issues, and to strive for equity and fairness for all in our community. This is the bigger, although more subtle, challenge. But we must take it on.

We're still figuring out, and working on, what this Race and Equity Initiative, as we're calling it right now, will look like and what the different steps will be. But, in many ways it has already started — we're following the lead of our students who said loud and clear that Black Lives Matter, and of our faculty who immediately organized a teach-in, and of the staff members in the Office of Minority Affairs & Diversity who have already been working on a new Diversity Blueprint, and have initiated a series of Community Conversations to learn how to better support the communities we serve.

It will include the review and implementation of recommendations from the Bias Response Task Force, who have been asked to examine how we can improve the UW's ability to receive and respond to incidents of bias and discrimination. And it will involve work we do on faculty search committees to make sure members know about implicit bias and how it can hinder a meritocratic hiring process.

This is not my initiative, this is your initiative. And together — we will!

We don't have all the solutions, and I'm not naïve enough to think we are going to solve all the problems of prejudice, hatred, bigotry or ethnic conflict here and now.

But, we can, right here and right now, pledge to stop being a part, or at least so much a part, of the problem! To find our better selves, to build bridges across our differences, instead of erecting walls.

My friend and colleague Eric Liu, founder of Citizen University, who has written several books including "A Chinaman's Chance," loves to point to a billboard he saw while sitting in the midst of a traffic jam on the highway. It said simply and powerfully, "You aren't IN traffic, you ARE traffic." We are the problem, and we are the only ones who can change it.

Let's begin to acknowledge our shortcomings and talk about them, not about them in other people, but in ourselves and in our workplaces, in our living places, and in the places we study and learn — let's talk about how we can hold ourselves accountable, and about how we can change and take action.

Right here, right now. Let's begin today.