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Out Loud

One dance MFA student looks back at how no one talked about “white privilege” as she grew up among compassionate people who otherwise wanted to “do the right thing”

by Lauren Etter

“You white girls run this school.” I was a freshman in high school when this remark was directed at me, from a youngish white male history teacher in the hallway. It confused me. I followed the rules. I was hardly involved at school beyond my academics. I spent most of my time in the dance studio, so I never joined any clubs or teams, much less student government. At 13, I wondered what I did that meant I had power in my school. But I didn’t ask that question out loud.

When my parents decided to move from New York City to the suburbs, it was important to them to continue raising me in a diverse community. They wanted me, their white daughter, to have opportunities to know people with experiences different than my own during my formative years. They chose Stamford, a Connecticut city with a population of 100,000 residing in both multi-million-dollar single family homes and government-funded housing projects. I always attended public school where the student body was relatively balanced when it came to high and low income levels. But while the public schools represented a cross-section of students in Stamford, we didn’t all have the same educational experience.

As we got older and the time came to send some students to accelerated learning programs, things changed. My classes became whiter and whiter, something that also happened in my dance studio as we became more advanced. By the time I went to high school in 2002, the hallway was the only place I interacted with most students of color. Even the cafeterias segregated themselves, something that still exists sixteen years later, according to an article from the school newspaper, though a recent student-initiated effort to integrate the cafeterias and promote inclusivity has been moderately successful.

It would be many years before I really understood why someone would say that I “ran” my school. It was nothing I was aware of doing. It was what my *whiteness* did. As a kid, hearing that comment was the closest I ever came to having a conversation about white privilege. My parents, teachers, and mentors had taught me to be respectful of everyone, no matter who they were, but they had never said out loud that because of my skin color, I gained unearned benefits that others weren’t afforded. Evidence of this was all around me, but I never *understood* it. Being in a privileged group, I didn’t have to.

The first time I was asked to “check my privilege” or heard the phrase “unconscious bias” was at twenty-five, in a course on teaching trauma-informed yoga to young people with an organization that works with incarcerated kids. It was the first time I took part in thoughtful conversations about how my whiteness affected my relationships with students. I started talking with my parents. This was precisely why they chose to raise me where and how they did, but I wondered why we had never talked about race out loud before.

In the last five years I’ve had many conversations with my parents about race. My parents were both born in the 50s, became total hippies, work in the arts, and would proudly call themselves liberals. Yet my father still refuses to accept that as both a man and a white person, he should work to facilitate change wherever he can, even if it’s inconvenient to him. He’ll

proudly post on social media about the horrors of Trump and the GOP, and he'll always vote for Democrats, but he is resistant to take on any responsibility beyond that, and he becomes defensive when I suggest otherwise.

My mother runs a non-profit dance school with a racially diverse student body that makes quality dance training available to every student who walks in the door. She spends most of her time thinking about how she can do better by the many black and Latino families that the school serves. In one recent conversation, I told her about a recent Bill T. Jones interview I had seen. Jones said that he had thought we had already achieved equality during the 60s, and yet there he was talking to current dance students at NYU who felt they weren't being represented in the curriculum. I asked Mom what she thought of this generational difference, what she thinks about the Black Lives Matter movement as opposed to the Civil Rights movement. She said that she thinks her generation was more naïve, that they were so eager for peace that they wanted to believe that they had achieved it. I admire the fact that she's still working on it.

I wonder what kept my parents from having conversations about race with me when I was younger. Perhaps they just didn't have the language to talk about it with me back then. Perhaps they trusted that I would learn what my whiteness meant on my own, given that they tried to instill in me lessons of compassion and responsibility. Maybe they weren't willing to make the sacrifices that are necessary for people in power to make in order to allow others equal footing, I don't know. I do know that this journey to consciousness, my road to understanding what is broken in our society, and how I can most responsibly contribute to anti-racist efforts, is never-ending. While I would like to believe that we will see racism disappear entirely in my lifetime, I don't think it's possible.

I do know, though, that I will talk with my future child early and often about what their privilege means and how we can work to demand that the same benefits be afforded to people of color. After all, in order to fix something, we have to be able to name what's broken. Out loud.

Lauren Etter holds a BFA from NYU Tisch School of the Arts and has taught and choreographed for the Joffrey Ballet School in New York and the Ballet School of Stamford in Connecticut. Currently a second-year MFA student at UC Irvine, her thesis will focus on conversations about race in the dance world.