



Yom Kippur 2006

On Tolerance

Reflections by Cynthia Chalker

Good morning. I am honored to be asked to speak to you as part of the Yom Kippur service.

To begin my talk I'll tell you a few things about myself. I am a black woman. I am college educated. I am a lesbian and my partner is Sandy. I am a step-parent to her son Ben. I work as a diversity educator at an independent school.

When I think of the word tolerance, I think of the lived meaning put forth by people in the majority. Whatever the majority may be. While those who occupy the majority get to think of themselves as open minded, tolerant and may even contemplate going the next step to acceptance, those being tolerated know they may or may not be tolerated for many reasons, including race, ethnicity, religion, political affiliation; you know the things which help make interesting people with stories to tell.

I began this talk telling you a little about myself. Some things you could know by looking at me or observing me from a far. I can also tell you some things about myself you might not know by just looking at me. For instance, I grew up in a mostly black, middle-class environment. I was in college before I came face to face with people who thought less of me because I am black. Up until that point, I certainly had the experience of people not liking me, but for what I thought were legitimate reasons: such as coming home after the first day of kindergarten, upset for being reprimanded when I pointed out to my teacher, rather arrogantly (her words, not mine) that she had skipped over portions of the story during circle time. I knew this because I could read and pointed this out to the teacher when she argued with me. You know it's going to be a long hard life when you are apologizing to the teacher the second day of your school career.

By the time I was eight, I was a wit and a deadpan delivery. This led to many humbling lessons in which I was required to apologize for hurting the feelings of my friends (of which I obviously had few). In instances such as these, I was being judged, I assumed, by the content of my character, clearly a work in progress, rather than the color of my skin. This is not an unusual assumption for a child.

While attending college in Virginia, I came to experience the world a bit differently. Where I thought my presence was accepted and enjoyed because of my fabulous personality and inquiring mind - my notes say pause for laughter - I found there were people, few of whom who had made my acquaintance, that assumed when they saw me or my black classmates the only reason we were accepted into the university was because of the color of our skin. Yes, people said this to me. More ridiculous and startling to me was discovering people also assumed I was somehow not as smart as they. That my grades, my extra curricular activities, my sat scores, were not as good as theirs and thus I was somehow inferior. I would spend four years of undergraduate and two more in a graduate program at that university being alternately dismayed, amused, and just a little angry.

Up to that point in my life, my family had spoken of this world where I would be judged by the color of my skin. And I had rolled my eyes and dismissed them. This was not my experience learning and playing in integrated educational settings. That is not to say I didn't know our family history. I was told the stories many times of a world, the world of my black southern born grandparents, where people were judged by color of their skin. And I, an eager student of history, also knew the stories of their migration north to raise their children in a world where they would have opportunities still, in the 1940's, not afforded to blacks living in the southern portion of the United States.

I believed their stories. But I also believed in the lived optimism of this family. My grandparents attended college, as had my mother and her siblings. All attended colleges designated by law for blacks only. My mom, though divorced and the sole breadwinner for most of my childhood, worked very hard to make sure we had the best education available. I grew up in a church, a home, and an extended family, that praised me for my intelligence and talents. I had done well in school. I did not have psychically or literally, the experience of being thought of as an inferior student. Certainly not a math genius, but a good student, nonetheless. I had no personal reference point for the assumptions I faced in college. In fact, I had argued with my mother throughout high school when she would, from time to time, admonish me for not having many black friends and warn me that I could not trust white people to be genuine friends. The world had changed; I'd argue my part of the script. She was living in some black and white America, not the Technicolor world she must, on some level believe in, as we had moved to the suburbs and attended schools with white kids. I was equal to my white friends. And wasn't that what all the marches and protest had been about?

But it was not just on campus where I had to come to terms with being tolerated. Off campus was the real world. Once, during my first year, my friends and I walked into the tiny downtown to shop. As we went from shop to shop, a car full of local white kids drove very close to us and yelled racial epithets at us as they slowed their car to better register our bewildered reactions. As we rushed away from the curb and closer to the doorway of a shop, one of the boys spit at us and then the car sped away. In that moment, a light went off. Those people did not know me and here they were yelling at me on the street. Why were they so angry? Because of my skin color?!? This wasn't even about whether I was smart enough to be at this school. This was not about my taking away opportunities from more deserving whites. To the kids in the car, it was just totally and completely about the color of my skin. Indeed this was the real world.

As naïve as I may have been, I did not tell my mother this story until many years later, after I had obtained my degree and lived in another city. You see, my mother, having grown up in a segregated Washington, DC in the 50's and 60's, the haven my grandparents had sought for their family, still experienced a childhood which allowed her to understand much better than I, the evils of racism and the violence that could befall a young black girl in the United States. As a freshman in college, I could not call my mother in tears and tell her about this incident. I knew what my mother would do, like so many of us who are now parents, if we thought our child to be in danger. She would have driven the 160 miles, faster than lightning to my dorm room, single handedly packed all of my belongings, which, back in the day, all fit into our Chevy impala, drive me home and enroll me in Howard University, a historically black college located 20 minutes from our home in suburban dc. I didn't call her because I, this child of the seventy's and eighty's, was out to prove to my mother, and myself, the struggle was not in vain. That black people really could live free and unencumbered by race in this country.

The fall from innocence is often swift and the landing hard. I began to understand the conversations around me differently. The coded language used to communicate the ideas that the rise in the number of black students at the university corresponding with a perceived notion in the university community that

the quality of students in the admitted freshman class was lower than in years past. I began to understand what it meant almost every semester when white teachers were shocked--I say shocked and surprised--when handing back the first written assignments of the year, the one A, the one paper which did not disappoint, belonged to the black girl in the back of the room. Just once, I thought, try not to look so surprised.

Since college, I often amuse myself when people make assumptions about my place in the world, whether the assumptions are about my race, my level of education, or my religious affiliation. And because I often use humor and a smile to disarm, I get to be accepted and tolerated in places I know others who share my race, religion or educational experiences may not be welcomed. Yet it was not until I came out as a lesbian in my late 20's did I understand in a more concrete way, this notion of being tolerated and/or accepted.

I returned to graduate school to work on an MSW at the age of 30. It was the first time I made choices consistent with my determination to live as an out lesbian. For the first time in my life where I would be comfortable as a lesbian would trump where I would be comfortable as a black woman. In retrospect, it's kind of crazy that I thought my race and sexuality could be separate entities. And yet, it was within this new community, I found myself doing a curious thing.

Often in the company of people I'd just met, I would make references to 'my ex-husband.' I didn't make a conscious decision to do this. What took longer for me to realize was that if I did not say much more in the conversation, people would assume I was heterosexual. Even more troubling, when I finally realized I was doing this, I did not always divest those who assumed I was heterosexual of this notion. When I came to terms with my behavior, I tried to understand my motivation. Was it the idea that it was no one's business but my own that I am gay? Except then, why mention the ex-husband at all? By then there was also an ex-girlfriend. Why not mention her instead?

It dawned on me I talked about my ex-husband, as opposed to talking about my ex-girlfriend, because I did not want whatever tolerance and acceptance I had gained, compromised by outing myself to people I had just met. Just like a Jewish person may feel when in the midst of a group of Christians telling a Jewish joke, or more sinisterly, using coded language to imply some stereotype about Jewish people, I was fully aware of the ways in which gay and lesbians were spoken about, even among 'open minded' colleagues in my program. By the time I went to social work school, I had been out for over 3 years and devoiced for almost as long. Yet, I was still reluctant to give up my privilege as a heterosexual--and a member of the majority--to assume my place among those who--again--were barely being tolerated.

And so here is the thing about this business of being tolerated or accepted. Once you get the tolerance or acceptance, suddenly you begin protecting your membership. You do not want to be the one to rock the boat by calling an act by the majority group racist, sexist, homophobic or anti-Semitic. One's desire to be tolerated and accepted then takes on an interesting quality. We the tolerated become more silent. It becomes harder to see the good in using our positions of privilege in these groups as a way to turn the world upside down. And yet, I realized during my time in social work school that is exactly what I must do.

During my first year of social work school, my internship or placement as they are called in social work was with an organization in Philadelphia called The Attic, a program that provides space, activities, clinical and educational services to gay and lesbian teens. The organization began in the early 1990's as an

off-shoot of a program that worked with homeless teenagers in the Philadelphia shelter system. A growing number of the teens in the shelter system were gay and lesbian teenagers who had been thrown out of their homes by their families when they learned the child was gay. Other teens were a part of the foster care system that struggled to place gay and lesbian teens in safe foster homes. When the foster care placements failed for gay and lesbian teens, the teens turned to shelters, rather than returning to the foster care system.

When I was placed with the Attic, this vibrant program had just moved into their own building and was expanding their services. I met and worked with many young people coming to terms not only with coming out, dating and all the developmentally appropriate phases of a teenager, but also the often grim realities of what it meant to lose the support of their community of origin and family in the process, often, before they were 18. Within the large group of teens who utilize the resources of the Attic, there is a sizable black and Hispanic population. Kids of color come to this center because often it is the only place where they can be themselves, completely, without judgment, ridicule or danger.

There were at that time, few visibly, out gay black people within the Philadelphia gay community. The kids I worked with were often told by their family of origin that being gay was a white thing. And the kids, often residents of communities with few whites, were often subjected to harsh, even dangerous treatment if they attempted to go against their community's idea that everyone is heterosexual. For these teens of color, it is hard to argue against this notion that only white people are gay, when the only out gay people living non-damaging lives are white.

My work at the attic illustrated to me the importance of living a life that celebrated all of who I am. I waited until I was almost 30 before I came out, in part, because I could not face the hurt and rejection that could come with people knowing I am gay. I waited until I was financially independent and many miles from my community of origin, before I was brave enough to take the hits. I waited until I was comfortable enough to not care if I would be tolerated or accepted. And in waiting so long, I caused others a great deal of hurt and drama along the way.

The teens involved in places like the attic are the kids doing the hard work. The very least I can do for them is to live as a black out lesbian. Despite whatever memberships or privileges I am denied because of my race, sexual orientation or gender, I have enough education and economic flexibility to always have a roof over my head and food to eat. Understanding my privilege has helped me become more passionate about the importance of standing up, especially because others in the same group may not be able to about why it is important to stand up where others in the same group, may not be able to.

With a better understanding of what it means to live with one's life on the front lines of intolerance, racism or homophobia, I no longer have the energy to prove to others I am ok. I find it less amusing than I once did to wait while people sort out who is what in our gay, inter-racial, interfaith, blended family household. As I said to the piano tuner the other evening as he tried to figure out who was Sandy-the person who had placed the original call, who was Cynthia-the person who had confirmed the appointment - and greeted him at the door, and who was the child frantically searching for his baseball equipment in the hall closet, I introduced as our son?

As I rummaged through my purse looking for my checkbook, the piano tuner took a moment to clarify something. "So, you and Sandy are together?" he asked. Yes I said, finding the checkbook and pen. So Sandy is white? Yep I said, squinting at my checks trying to decide if I needed my glasses or not to fill out the check. Finally, I looked up, and saw his puzzled face.

Earlier I had quizzed this young guy about how he came to choose his profession. In the process, he told me he had once been an aspiring ballet dancer and had moved to NYC to peruse a dream, now gone because of injury. I supposed, it was his turn to ask the questions. So Ben is her son? Mmmhmm. I was now openly amused. Wait for it, I thought - 3,2,1, - Ding! "Oh, I get it now!" he exclaimed, a smile coming to his face.

Ok, sometimes I do still have fun with this. What's less fun is when I meet my neighbor in the elevator on the way to the laundry room and in her conversation it becomes clear that in the four years I have lived next door, she was under the impression that I worked in 14C not live there as a resident.

Or the morning, a few weeks ago as I prepared for work, I stood in the middle of the kitchen horrified as listeners chastised NPR for airing a series on being Muslim in America, the week of the fifth anniversary of 9/11. Each letter they read spoke of the upset that listeners around the country felt about the series. Lines such as "this is not the time to discuss tolerance of Muslims in America. It's disrespectful." Another said if the Muslim man, an American, felt the twoness of being Muslim and living in the United States, he should go back to his country where they settle their differences with suicide bombings.

That morning I stood in the middle of the kitchen screaming at the radio. "Remember the Oklahoma bombings?" I ranted. Timothy McVeigh and his buddies were white. No one would ever blame all white Americans for the tragedy in Oklahoma. It was just two nutty people. But brown people have to leave their house every day and worry whether or not we will be tolerated? Everyday I have to hope that people see past my skin color to realize there is more to me than what they see? What country do I really live in?

By the time I walked to work, I had calmed down and stopped muttering to myself. I realized at 8 in the morning, with the faces of eager children awaiting me as I unlocked my office, I can't afford to get lost in my anger. I can't. Otherwise I won't make it through the day. Let alone this life.

I have to continue on, and find joy and even peace, regardless of whether I am tolerated or accepted. I have to. I think we have a responsibility to understand each other, much more than tolerating and accepting. Understanding why a particular view of Judaism is important to you. Understanding why working for social justice is important to another. Understanding why I see my work in education as a catalyst for change.

Often when I do diversity training, I begin by asking people to tell me a story. Sometimes I ask the participants to tell their birth story. Or the story of how they came to have their name. Or one aspect they remember from their childhood bedroom. And I ask these questions at the beginning of a workshop on diversity because everyone has a story. And when you hear my story and I listen to yours, we have begun a journey that's much richer than merely tolerating each other. We begin to understand how we see ourselves and others in this world that we share.