

## ***My biggest fear***

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All my adult life I have thought of myself as an ally – someone who was open, friendly and supportive of groups that often feel marginalized, misunderstood and left out. Yeah. I thought about their issues from time-to-time, occasionally weighed-in with supportive comments here and there, and wasn't doing any harm. Yeah, I honestly thought I was an ally

20 years ago, my wife and I adopted our son, from Guatemala. He was 7 months old. He was our only child and of course like all parents we love him more than we ever imagined possible.

He has had all the luxuries that parents like ourselves are so lucky to be able to provide - we lived abroad in France for three years, he attended the best private schools here in Atlanta, and he has pretty much any material thing he needed and wanted.

A handsome, sweet, smart, and friendly man, he, of course, doesn't look anything like my wife or me. During his teen years, starting around age 13, I began to see how race, and the color of his skin changed how the world processed him. While he had all the luxuries that parents like us could provide, he certainly did not have the privileges we enjoy. I began to see things I had never seen or imagined would come into play– and that it was simply because of the color of his skin.

I never imagined that I would be that person and needing to sit him down to have “the talk” that I now realize all parents of young men of color are forced to have. I fumbled on my words, trying to explain that as a young Latino man that if he was stopped by the police he would need to know how to succinctly communicate his immigration status.

And how no matter how unfairly he may feel he was being treated, no matter what he did or did not do, that his very best option was to comply. That he should not, could not, ... must not ... ever disagree or push back. I never imagined talking about deadly consequences of him pushing back, even when he had done nothing wrong. That in that moment, he had a choice to make: to comply and be home in 10 minutes, or to push back and risk the chance to being home in 10 hours. It was a conversation I had never imagined - because I had never had a reason to imagine it.

I had also never imagined having to explain the dozens of times when the three of us were together, and servers, cashiers, greeters, asked us "table for two?" – and other even more painful daily experiences, where the world told my son "You are an outsider". "You are not enough" or "You do not belong."

I was protective of him and more aware of what other young men face, and so of course, I assumed I was a really good ally. Because I was such a fierce ally for him, I also fancied myself a dedicated ally to others marginalized groups in the world. Yeah. I was supportive of different groups, knew how to talk about diverse issues in an intelligent way, occasionally weighed-in with what some would say are liberal views about hot topics... and didn't do any harm to anyone. Yeah, I honestly thought I was the very definition of an ally.

That all began changing, however, when I read Debby Irving's book, "Waking up White" and began contemplating how racial inequality may be fueled by the inaction of supposed "allies" like me. that it is not the white supremacists, or bigots or racist, or anti-Semites that are the real problem - but the allies who don't act. The allies who approach their support from a "do no harm" place – they are the biggest problem.

It was in that moment that I was not the great ally I thought I was and that the reason I was not that ally was FEAR, serious FEAR. That FEAR of putting myself out there, expressing my opinions instead of standing by when I hear what some people say, really acting and leading well beyond my “do no harm” approach. In the end that REAL FEAR is the fear of saying something unintentional that puts a divide between me and the person or group I wanted to support. In short making a small slip-up that could be perceived as insensitive – actually, saying some stupid - but not because I was stupid, but because of the privileges I enjoyed as a suburban-raised , well educated, heterosexual, Christian, white male - - unconnected and yes oblivious to the real experiences of the communities for whom I thought I was an ally.

I have realized how fearful I was I was of even the POSSIBILITY of offending someone I really want to connect with and inadvertently destroying the relationship, trust, and ability to connect ,and work comfortably together.

It’s there. It’s a fear that keeps me from doing things I really want to do. The thing that makes me play it safe and not talk too much about issues I know my voice could matter.

Here’s a good example - speaking to a group of students about some challenges our LGBTQIA students face. While referring to a student whose preferred pronouns were ‘they, their, them,’ several times – despite my best efforts not to - I used incorrect pronouns. Afterward, I was disappointed – well actually horrified at myself for not being attentive - utterly embarrassed at how clueless I must have seemed to those students – and inept at navigating through, or even effectively discussing important social justice issues.

And so it continues. I continue to strive ... to learn more... to feel more,... to do more... Each day, I do the best I know how... I try to find situations where I can engage in meaningful conversations about equality, inequality, justice, and injustice race, racism, gender, sexism, sexual identity, homophobia, mental health, and mental health challenges, and a variety of other topics that will help me understand others better. I am always looking for safe places where people will be forgiving if I slip up, mess up, or do not use the right language or understand a phenomenon I have not experienced. I'm still scared ... I am hopeful , however, that I will learn more effective ways to lean into the discomfort of all of these situations, and use the platform I have to make the difference that is brewing inside of me,

In the meantime, each day, I will reach for the courage to stop playing it safe, to initiate conversations aimed at lowering barriers and bridging divides, to forgive myself when I am clueless, to one day earn designation as an authentic and earnest "ally."