

# Unlearning Prejudice through the Healing Power of Our Stories

By

Lauren N. Nile

September 9, 2014

Recently, millions of Americans and indeed people around the world were mesmerized by the events that took place in Ferguson, Missouri in response to the killing of unarmed African American teenager Michael Brown by an on-duty member of the Ferguson police department. Among the many interventions that occurred in the immediate aftermath of the tragedy was that done by life coach Iyanla Vanzant. Ms. Vanzant went to Ferguson primarily to simply allow members of the community to tell their stories – the stories of their encounters with Ferguson police officers. Her intention was to give people the opportunity to discharge the pain of their experiences.

Witnessing that intervention on television reminded me of the tremendous power that the telling of our personal stories has to help us unlearn racism. Hearing each others' stories can help to lessen our judgments and in turn, lead to greater understanding of another's experiences. If that understanding is **deep** enough, it can result in wisdom, and if that wisdom is **profound** enough, compassion can arise.

Two stories, both of which were shared in diversity sessions that I facilitated in the 1990's, are particularly powerful for me. One was told by a young African American man; the other, by a young European American woman. (Although the two narratives are told in first person, and do accurately represent the message, they are not verbatim accounts.)

The young man worked in management for a large Florida-based supermarket chain. During the afternoon of the workshop, he described a personal experience that had occurred at a gas station convenience store earlier that morning:

On my way to the training this morning, I stopped at a gas station convenience store to get a cup of coffee. After pouring my coffee, I got in line to pay for it. The guy in front of me was also black. All of a sudden, for no reason that I could see, this guy started going off on the cashier, who was white. I mean he was screaming at her, calling her names, everything. I think maybe the guy was mentally ill. He left, then I was next in line. When I walked up to the counter, that lady looked like she saw a ghost. I know what she was probably thinking. She was probably thinking, "Oh God. Here comes another one!" I didn't even **know** that guy. I didn't know him from Adam. Now, if I had been a **white** guy in line behind another **white** guy that had just gone off on her, she probably would've looked at me and said something like, "What was **his** problem?!" But as a **black** man, I have no individuality. That hurts like hell.

In my brief interaction with that young man, I experienced him as polite and soft spoken. Absolutely **nothing** about him was threatening.

The following was the story of the young woman, an employee of a large Federal agency in Denton, Texas:

When I was growing up, people used the "N" word all the time. They talked about Black People really negatively and had all the stereotypes. Then, once when I was in elementary school, we moved, and for a little while right after the move, I had to

go to a school that was mostly black. I'll never forget the classrooms in the school. They had no world globes. They didn't have the clocks on the wall that teachers use to teach kids how to tell time. The alphabets that were hung above the blackboard were hand made by the teachers. There wasn't an abacus in my classroom. We had no record players, no science table, no maps. We had no reading corner. Other than the old textbooks that we were using, there weren't even any **books** in the classroom. I remember, even as a kid, thinking that there was no way these kids could compete against white kids because they had nothing. How **could** they compete?

But while I was at that school, I made friends with a little black girl. One day after school, I walked her home. When we got to her house, I went in. I noticed the floors. They were beautiful, shiny hardwood. There was a very nice piano in one corner of the living room. The furniture, the curtains, everything looked perfect. My little friend's mother came out, and she was dressed so nice and her hair looked so pretty. She introduced herself, made iced tea for us and then played the piano for us.

After that, whenever I would hear one of my relatives, their friends or one of my friends use the "N" word and say racist things about Black People, I didn't say anything, but I would always think to myself, "Wow. They're saying those things and they believe those things because they've never seen what I saw. They don't know what I know. They just don't understand."

I'm **so** glad that I had that experience. Going to that school for a few months and especially that **one** afternoon at my friend's house saved me. They saved me from a closed mind that would have really limited my thinking, my understanding, and my whole life. I'm so thankful just those few months allowed me to escape that.

It is those kinds of stories that can deeply touch our hearts and in so doing, help all of us to understand each other and our experiences on a much more profound level than we almost ever do. Such sharing from and listening with the heart allows us to bear witness to our shared universal humanity. If as a **community**, people of all races of Ferguson were to participate in a skillfully facilitated kind of Truth and Reconciliation Commission in which they both tell their own stories **and** deeply listen to those of their neighbors, they may discover that they possess the ability to come together and perhaps for the first time as true allies, work in coalitions against excessive policing and other challenges facing their communities. If as a **society**, we could learn to both share **our** own stories and with neither judgment nor defensiveness, and listen to those of others, we would significantly accelerate our maturation beyond racism, beyond anti-Semitism, beyond sexism, beyond homophobia and heterosexism, indeed, beyond **all** prejudices. If a critical mass of people **on the planet** did so, we would experience a kind of mental, emotional and spiritual healing which as a species, we sorely need. Telling and listening to our stories with empathy and an open heart, while not **sufficient**, is certainly a **necessary** ingredient in our prescription for unlearning prejudice, providing as it does, a kind of group therapy in our attempt to heal from the neurosis of racism and all other isms.

**Lauren Joichin Nile is Author of *RACE: My Story & Humanity's Bottom Line***