

# DC MOVES: Beginning a Courageous Conversation about Equity

## International Human Rights Day 10 December 2020

### Notes from LeeAnn McKenna's Presentation

#### Introduction:

- I work in warzones doing training in nonviolence for an organisation called Partera, Spanish for midwife, casting the facilitator in the role of companion, not expert. We use methods that are anti-colonial, feminist as well as play-based, experiential, elicitive; lots of laughter and movement: hard to replicate through Zoom! Some things may be lost in translation!

#### Discomfort Zones:

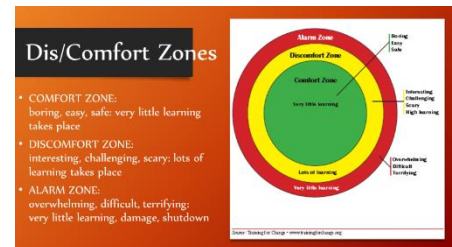
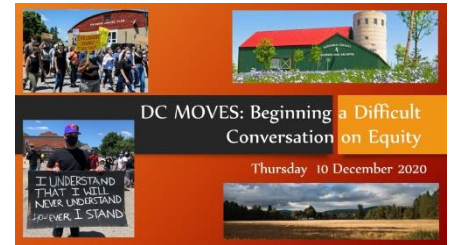
- if, in the course of difficult conversations on high-stakes subjects, you are **not** feeling some discomfort, then you are perhaps not yet fully arrived.
- When you notice feelings of discomfort, welcome them, sit with them, learn with them. They are your teachers.

#### Who am I?

- Choose one of the four images. The person in the image is asking: Who do you think that I am? Answer the questions. Then we will introduce everyone to the person assigned to you. What happened? How do you feel? Why refuse/reluctant/willing?
- So what is the point of this? *We all make assumptions.*
- The bad word for this is 'stereotyping'. But regardless of what it is called it is a neurological necessity. The brain imports information from a past, similar situation or encounter into the present. If that that were not so our brain is incapable of building complexity of thought. Each moment would begin with a blank slate.
- Our primitive brain helpfully files information in categories and when we find ourselves in a similar situation, the brain throws a file folder at us. Here ya go! Our work is to ask ourselves: what aspects of the information my brain is providing me are negative, detrimental to the wellbeing of the situation or person in front of me? And then make use of the information about previous experiences, while holding in abeyance damaging judgements. Allow that situation or person to be without putting it or them in a box, all figured out.

#### Disrupting Unconscious Bias

- What is it?...
- There are at least two schools of thought about 'unconscious bias':
- It's accurate; it is not—it's an excuse. It accurately describes the conditioning that has shaped us since our earliest moments—which is manifest/issues in **emotions and attitudes, beliefs and thoughts; words and deeds**—and to interrogate it is like asking a fish to describe water. **OR** it's an excuse to let yourself off the hook. I think it's a bit of both. I think that it depends on what we do with the news that we mostly operate in a cloud of unconscious bias.



- #### Who Am I?
- How old am I?
  - What is my socio-economic status?
  - What is my race?
  - What is my gender?
  - Is there anything about me that makes you think I am a member of a sexual minority?
  - What is my religion?
  - What is my nationality?
  - What is the level of my education?
  - What is my health status?
  - What do I do for a living?
  - What is my name?

#### Disrupting Unconscious Bias

- What is it?
- How is it defined?
- Why does it matter?
- What is its impact on me?
- What is its impact on others?
- How do we get rid of it?

## Jane's Question: (Video) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4yrg7vV4a5o>

- [look up Jane Elliott and the Blue Eyes/Brown Eyes exercise that she designed for her Grade three class in Riceville, Iowa the day after MLK was killed.]
- So, in terms of consciousness, what has just happened? *They know it but don't want to admit it; they don't like to see that in their mirror; perhaps their (first) moment of disruption.*
- So where did that conditioning come from? What are the sources...?

## Unconscious Bias/Implicit Association/Implicit Social Cognition

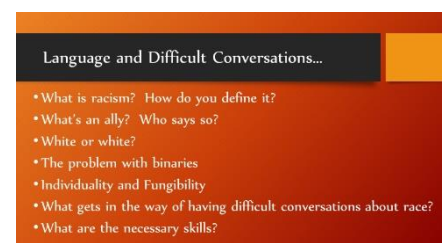
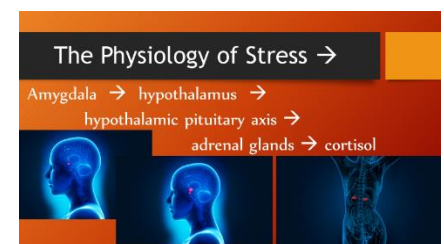
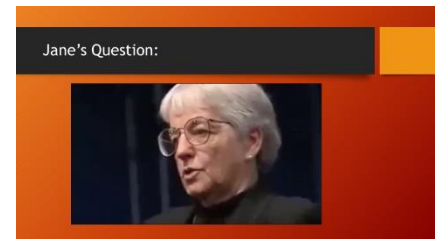
- Get out your Blind Spot grid. Demonstrate the affect of the retinal scotoma. What happened when the dot on the right disappeared? The brain filled in the blank spot with an unbroken grid. Hmmm... so if we can see it or know it, the brain fills the gap!
- This book focusses on another type of blindspot: one that contains and hides our biases – information that is unavailable to **our conscious mind**.
- What is being hidden? What's being hidden are bits of knowledge, messages about social groups—about how the world works, who's up, who's down—that we absorb every day. Once lodged in our minds, those biases can influence our **beliefs and actions** towards other groups while we remain oblivious to their influence, unaware of the extent to which our perceptions shape our likes/dislikes and our judgements about people—their character, abilities, potential... Just as we are unaware of the scotoma, we are unaware of our biases.
- For some, the results of an IAT [search: <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/canada/takeatest.html> and take a test] can be devastating. In a single training I did in the US, there was a woman, a lesbian activist in her fifties who discovered herself to be conditioned to heteronormativity and a young Black man who confronted his conditioned capitulation to the rules of White supremacy; a woman in her thirties who would have considered herself a feminist—her negative implicit association with sexism.
- The good news is this. Once confronted with our hiddenness, we are given the opportunity to **choose awareness**. To become our own watcher. To head off at the pass a thought or a deeply-ingrained attitude—that leaps up and bites—before it becomes a self-hurting or other-hurting racist, sizeist, ableist, sexist, transphobic, xenophobic word or deed.
- Recommendation to White People: Subscribe to MEDIUM and start reading. Monitor your responses to what you read: anger? tears? White fragility happening? or suck it up, go out and make change, knowing that you never really arrive at some destination of perfection. You will mess up. Repeatedly.
- The answer to the last question a few slides back – about how do we get rid of this conditioning stuff – the answer is: we don't because we can't.

## The Physiology of Stress

- Our brain creates and files images of the familiar. And when we are confronted with something unexpected: **amygdala** signals → the **hypothalamus** → the **hypothalamic pituitary axis** → **adrenal glands** release cortisol into the blood stream → triggering the stress response. And it happens in milliseconds. This is what has kept our species alive, this instinctive flight or fight response. You can't change it but it is open to suggestions... but that's another workshop.

## Language & Difficult Conversations

- **Race:** What is it? *A social construct* – the corollary of which is: there are no biological markers. When did that social construction take place? 1681.



The label, 'white' referring to a **group of humanity** appears nowhere in law until 1681. A slave uprising known as Bacon's Rebellion in Virginia a few years earlier scared the elites into making dramatic changes in law that created a new and much lower rung to the social hierarchy and assigned that rung to those of African descent. It worked beautifully to justify and institutionalise an economic arrangement that benefitted those at the top, now known as 'white'. And the concept, the designation spread throughout the British Empire in no time.

- **Allies:** Approach with modesty, White people; it is not yours to assign.
- **BIPOC:** superb comprehensive acronym—but suggests a binary: PofC—PwithoutC/colourless. Compare with the abandonment of a gender binary for a continuum of difference; same thing with race: a continuum that includes ALL of us: racialised to privilege – racialised to not-privilege with a spectrum of colour in between. The binary suggested by POC contributes to White people's sense that we don't have a colour, i.e., we are without race. We are ... the norm; everyone else the minus-norm. We capitalise Black and Indigenous while not capitalising White suggests the latter as the normative. That's a problem.

**Individuality vs Fungibility**

- Fungibility: the ability to replace or be replaced by another *identical* item [read: human]; mutual interchangeability: What it looks like, feels like is this: while I, a White person, am an individual, the 'other' is a monolith, thinking alike, looking alike, voting alike, acting alike...
- A brief workshop story: a diverse group of people, a staff team, were divided between White and Racialised [I recognise that I am breaking my own rule; this acknowledges common usage] and asked a question: How often do you talk about race? White: 'Uh, never.' 'What?! you never talk about race? What do you talk about?' 'Uh, the weather.' 'We talk about race all the time. We have to.' White people thinking, 'We don't have to...' (e.g., the US, Anglophones) Well, yeah we do.

**Reverse Racism: The Comic and the Scholar**

- Video: Aamer Rahman, Saudi-Australian comedian: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dw\\_mRaIHb-M](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dw_mRaIHb-M)
- Video: U.S. scholar, author of, *inter alia*, Post-traumatic Slave Syndrome. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GNh4FTYZQ2U>
- **Closing:** Becoming aware of privilege not as burden but as opportunity.
- Difficult/Dangerous/Courageous/Crucial Conversations are precious and risky, bringing people of diverse ethnic and racial identities for the express purpose of exploring the *borderlands* of race and power.
- A Poem. *Unknown Unknowns*, LA McKenna
- A Poster: Adrienne Maree Brown, African American author and poet: Pulling back the veil

