

## The Power of a Word

Recently I visited a friend and his family. During the visit we took his 3 year old daughter to a nearby mall which has a play area for young kids. Being a cold winter day, this was perfect for her. The goal was for her to play until exhausted so that later, after her lunch, she would have a good afternoon nap, giving the adults time for a peaceful lunch and conversation.

Once at the play area and out of her winter gear, his daughter launched into playing with the other children – running around, following and copying each other, sharing the slides, squealing, and just all-around having unfettered fun.

We sat on the edge of the play area, my friend and I, talking politics, embellishing shared adventures, and keeping track of his daughter. It was a pleasure to witness the children exploring the play area and experiencing one another. I felt joy as we watched his daughter go down a slide, belly first, and come to a gentle stop which put her face-to-face with another little girl, perhaps a year younger than her. They froze for a few seconds, touching foreheads, eyes locked, both smiling. When the moment ended, they both got up and wholeheartedly launched into the next direction-less activity.

My friend and I went silent – taking in what we had witnessed – the bliss his daughter shared with another child, a stranger she may never see again.

And then he quietly gave words to what we both were thinking,

“I want my daughter to experience this for as long as possible – before the first time she gets called, ‘Ni\*\*er’ and this moment is forever lost. And then I have to have the conversation. I have to explain it to her.”

And there it was. The “N” word.

The word, cutting like a cleaver, so soon to separate his daughter’s present from her future, which is his present.

For my friend and his daughter, the cleaving feels explicit, inevitable. It is a lesson learned at a young age in the United States. And if a child has a parent like my friend, the learning is followed with important lessons about procedures for self-preservation – physical and mental. And so he will provide these lessons to his daughter. These he knows he needs to share.

And of his daughter’s future learning, the sharp slice of the word, he speaks about as such a given. He speaks of it as if he were running fingers over an old scar for the thousandth time, recounting how and when he got it.

And it cut me as well at a young age. Yet being white, I did not know the pain until an adult. For most of us white folks, unless something happens in our lives to feel it, the

damage from the cut may never be recognized. We will, however, most certainly see and feel the separation from our darker skinned brothers and sisters.

Some of us may even exacerbate, perpetuate, and expand this separation – widen the wound – so to sickly bond with other whites. And many of us whites may unconsciously go through our lives with our unearned privileges and power; and being separated, never knowing of the damage the “N” word has caused others or ourselves. Never knowing something has been lost.

And like me, it will cleave the present from the future of the other little girl, the little white-stranger-playmate. Her future will be what used to be my present. And she may never ever know and recognize her loss.

And so cleaved by the “N” word, we all remain cut-off from each other, unless something happens which enables us to form a healing scar.

I believe, as my friend believes, healing the wound comes only from being in community with each other. Through coming together for the truthful telling of our lives, our lived stories of the cut, the cleaving, and the subsequent loss, pain, maintenance, and the surviving, and the ignoring, and the participation and collusion in systemic racism. By expressing and owning all of this with each other, only then can we truly heal and move to a place of understanding and being just with each other.

Only then can the “N” word lose its power.

Ron Wright and Will Clifton, December 2008