

Complicity, Complacency and Dealing with White Fragility

At a recent Black Lives Matter march, a number of people carried white signs with large black type:

Silence = Complicity

The word “complicity” jumped out like a hungry cougar, wanting to take a piece of me. I reacted with a jerk, feeling defensive and guilty.

“Complicit? How am I complicit?” I muttered to myself, and later asked another protester.

“You’ve been complicit in the race war that has been waged against people of color (POC) because you’ve not been anti-racist,” she said. Apparently, saying “I’m not a racist” is like saying I’m part of the problem and not the solution. Like the Roman Emperor Nero, fiddling while the city burned, my white privilege has handed me the fiddle. On the sidelines, I’ve “tut-tutted” and “how dare they?” but have not been active in raising the bar of fairness and opportunity for others.

In my defense (coming from a place of victim thinking), I said, “I’ll admit, I’ve been complacent about a lot of things in my life, including racism, income disparity, Wall Street corruption, US military interventionism in the name of democracy, LGBTQ rights, the Death Penalty, tax fairness, and more.”

Then I realized that while “complicit” was a judgment leveled at me from others, “complacent” was self-judgment. Both offer an opportunity for self-reflection, from a place of honesty and objectivity, not from victimhood. And both invite empathy.

When I heard “complicit”, I felt guilty and immediately sought the comfort and safety I often find in my privileged life. After more thought, I also wanted more clarity, understanding and perhaps a shared reality with those who see me as culpable. So, if I can move to empathy for a person accusing me of complicity, I can surely see that they want to be seen and

heard for their pain. They may also want trust. Perhaps even support in their quest.

When considering the self-judgment of "complacent," I once again felt defensive. "So what? It's not like I've been idle," I said in my defense. "I can't be working equally hard in all the areas of my life where I'd like to be!" Here, it's ease and understanding I'm needing, perhaps acknowledgement, too.

Self-empathy for the complacency judgment might go like this, spoken internally to that defensive side of me: "So, are you wanting others to understand that you are active in a variety of ways? That you're meeting needs of contribution, equality, and fairness in those activities? Would you also like them to understand that you're disappointed you aren't more involved, more effective?"

Having done self-empathy, I now have more clarity and am more emotionally grounded. From here, I can see that my guilt feeling indicates a lack of understanding about racism and other forms of discrimination. Now I can form requests of myself and perhaps others. For instance, to meet my needs of growth and integrity, I have joined the local chapter of NAACP and will sign up for some committee work. I'm taking a couple of classes, one in anti-racism and one on power, privilege and white fragility. I'm reading a couple of books about racism in America and how to break with that tradition personally and collectively.

Saying "yes" to new group work and study, I notice I'm watchful for a feeling of overwhelm, because of old stories of mine that say, "You have to give up something else to make this work."

For now, the defensiveness has ebbed. When now asked about my complicity and complacency, I can answer from a confident place of understanding, honesty and growth. I can say no to a request and not feel the sting of judgment about "not doing enough". And I can say yes with a boundary, having a better sense of when to say "enough".

I'm looking forward to a next opportunity to visit with my Black Lives Matter acquaintance. Listening to her and reflecting her passion, she may say that her need for respect has been met, just as I can report that my needs for understanding and learning have been met. In parting, perhaps both of us will agree that what happened between us has also nurtured connection and hope.