

The Water We're Swimming In

Over eons, humans evolved from the sea, trading out gills for lungs, sprouting arms and legs where fins once fit. Although nicely adapted to a dryer climate, we still rely on water for survival. Water comprises more than 50 percent of our body and dehydration can trigger death in as few as three days.

As a landlubber, I was surprised when a teacher invited us to “look at the water you’re swimming in” from a racial equity point of view. Introspection and psychological analysis are familiar to me, but it was novel to examine white-dominant American culture as if it were an ocean, one in which I have been immersed since birth. The water that has largely supported and sustained me has been toxic for hundreds of millions of others.

The “Turning Inside” class I took (<https://equitybydesignusa.com/about/>) was more like a submarine than a pleasure craft. Instead of a purely cognitive, skim-the-surface trip in which we try to memorize a bucket of “do and don’t” language, we immersed in mindfulness exercises and journaled, to develop physical awareness about where we store emotions. In a nutshell, we were taught to notice feelings manifesting in our bodies that stem from racism, slavery, and white privilege, to comprehend how they can manifest in behavior and beliefs, and then to use that knowledge to become active against racism. The objective was to enhance the opportunity to become an ally for those who have and continue to suffer oppression – including ourselves, if appropriate. While submerged, we poured light on our deep heritage as oppressors and oppressed, using feelings as sonar for hidden treasure.

My dive consisted of three levels of experience, each generating physical and emotional responses. The first level into the history of Ireland, and specifically a mid-19th Century period known as “The Great Hunger,” during which a million starved and two million fled in the course of just more than 10 years. I felt pain for my ancestors and their families, and I felt deep anger for the English politicians whose public policies stimulated the outcome. This connection alone has given me more room to feel likewise today – empathy for those whose lives are made

miserable because of oppression, and resentful at the structural barriers still in place to justify status quo.

The second level of awareness came after reading a book by Tom Hayden about how some newly arrived Irish Americans embraced widespread violence and corruption in cities like Boston, New York and Chicago. In the process of amassing wealth and power, Irish descendants brutalized and debased others, much like the English had done to them and their parents. I felt shame about this part of my “people’s” past and confused about how easily some choose to ignore the lessons of their own past. Here again I can find room to support those who are brutalized by agencies of the state, whether police, correctional institutions, immigration or other.

The third level rippled in while journaling about my behavior over the years, largely ignoring the needs that people of color have continued to express my whole life. Just as German citizens ignored the atrocities of the Third Reich, I’ve stayed silent too long about human rights abuses in this country. Because the abuses were being heaped on indigenous, Black and Brown people, as well as the poor and the imprisoned, I felt little personal connection to their plight. Instead, to the degree I was politically or socially active, it was directed at those things that affected me.

Practicing Nonviolent Communication (NVC) for most of this century, I have learned how to express my feelings and needs more accurately. I have also become a better listener, able to empathize for others’ situations. NVC uses many of the same submarine tactics as the Turning Inside class, and I’ve been rewarded greatly with discoveries found lodged in dark crevices. “Oh look,” I said to my wife some time ago, “I’ve just discovered how my family life helped to shape my attitude about how women, and marriage!” The work we’ve done together has improved our relationship and lowered the heat on the disagreements we still have.

But the study of NVC didn’t magically push me in the direction of fighting against oppression against people of color. Despite volunteering with incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people for more than 20 years, I am embarrassed to have only recently been confronted with my unresolved biases. Through the Turning

Inside lens, I realized that my NVC practice had given me the skills to deal with a rainbow of issues that manifest in our culture, but I had chosen to largely avoid dealing with ones that I believed were beyond arm's length.

Had I made it a personal goal to acknowledge and address the biases I've held throughout my life, NVC would have been useful. The fact that I have known about my beliefs and did not act was made easier because of my privileged place in a dominant white society. For this, I'm feeling more than a little guilt, because I truly believe in equality, fairness, inclusion and safety for all.

Oddly, this immersion into the water of US culture has created a bit of dizziness. As I've sought the depth of my connection to bias, discrimination and oppression, another feeling of cautious enthusiasm is evident as I experience what seems like another body of water – one that seems healthier and equally vast.

On the cautious side, I wake each day more aware of the needs of others and more aware of the poison in our cultural waters. On the enthusiastic side of things, my commitment to engage is active and edged with courage. What helps to build courage, I find, is knowing that those in need have charted a path ahead for all of us, really, and my volunteering to support that quest is a beginning. It's the proverbial toe in the water.

Poised, ankle deep in this new commitment, I'm imagining that my courage will be bolstered as we go deeper together to uncover the sunken treasures of equality, fairness, inclusion and safety as the water gradually clears.

Tim Buckley
Salem, OR
503.990.6781
2tbucktoo@gmail.com

www.nonviolentcommunication.com