From Waking to Woke: A Reflection On the Work Ahead

By Dominique Samari, Co-Founder and Partner P3 Development Group

A racial equity and inclusion consultant shares her personal journey of self-reflection and asks others — especially white progressive allies — to do the same. Dominique participated in a session entitled “Let’s Talk: Equity, Access To Justice, And Why It Matters” at MIE’s 2019 National Fundraising Conference.

During a recent conversation, I was asked what I envisioned as the “end goal” for the racial equity and inclusion (REI) work in which I am engaged both professionally and personally. For me, REI work is a journey. A journey of waking that requires self-awareness, curiosity and commitment to uncomfortable growth and action. And like all great journeys — it has unexpected twists, wrong turns and bumps in the road. It is also impossible to know where this journey will take us. During the past year, I engaged in my own journey of self-awareness and curiosity. My journey has also been full of unexpected twists and turns but has led to insights on how individuals can join the REI journey and what the work ahead of us requires.

My journey of self-awareness and self-curiosity meant getting to know myself as if I were a stranger. Really taking a look at what makes me tick. This commitment has required that I take a close — but non-judgmental — look at what really comes up for me as I traverse life and all its encounters and experiences. This level of self-honesty has been refreshing, jarring, and even disorienting. It’s also a total departure from how I’ve walked through the world for the past 30 years.

My previous approach was to digest tons of information about how to live a better life without actually doing any of the work that better living required. I was a self-help junky. I loved all of it — the workshops, blogs, and books. But no matter how much I read, the change I sought was elusive. So, when I made my commitment this year, I closed the books and stopped the workshops. Instead, I committed to doing the work — the real work, the self-work. In so doing, I learned that the real work is much, much harder, but the reward also much, much greater.

One lesson I learned among many is that I deploy avoidance in personal relationships when things get uncomfortable. This avoidance masqueraded as “cooperation.” Once I learned to sit with the discomfort, instead of avoiding it, it became clear that I hadn’t actually resolved the issue through cooperation, but only buried it deep down. In that space, it sprouted little leaves of resentment. And this resentment often boiled over into verbal and physical manifestations of anger. This has been a huge “aha!” for me. I now use the feeling of wanting to “cooperate” as a signal that I may be moving into a dishonest space with myself. It’s still not easy, but this new awareness has changed many of my relationships — especially my marriage — for the better.

Once I got into this period of self-reflection, I actually liked being in the solitude of this space. It tickled me everytime I discovered another hidden aspect of my personality. “Hmmm,” I would say. “Look at you. Who knew you were hiding this?” However, I realized at some point that this was also not enough. In the midst of this self-work, I had to learn to be intentional about.

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Continued from page 3

going back in the world to practice this new, more self-aware version of myself — with people. (Ahhhh!) Identifying my patterns and triggers worked so well sitting in lotus position alone in my robe in the middle of my living room. In a professional meeting, with Harry and Larry, it became substantially more difficult. To bring true transformation, I needed both parts — the commitment to go deep within and the commitment to test and strengthen my new muscles in the world with people.

I believe I’m not alone in moving towards a period of deep reflection. As a nation, we have been called into a serious reckoning. Between the rise of social media campaigns like Black Lives Matter and #MeToo on the one hand, and the rise of explicit acts of racism and hate crimes on the other, Americans have been thrust on a journey of self-awareness. Many are struggling to examine who we are, how we got here, and where we will allow ourselves to go next.

In effect, it seems the implicit permission our President and the Far Right movement have given white folks to express their racism has also loosened a White Awakening for others. While Trump’s election has been disorienting to many, what seems to be far more jarring, especially to my white liberal colleagues, is the realization of just how deep white supremacy runs and how close to the surface it has lived all along. For me, this moment feels ripe with opportunity. This new awareness provides a fresh crop of recently-aware people. Collectively, it opens the possibility of moving the needle in all areas of racial equity.

But while this moment in our living history has compelled some into action, for many others, it has provided a false sense of comfort that at least they are not that. White progressives, in particular, are quick to distance themselves from their “less woke” friends and family members. They become righteous and almost competitive in demonstrating their wokeness and family members. They become righteous and almost competitive in demonstrating their wokeness and self-sabotage. This, too, applies to our difficulties addressing race. Americans often seek the quick fixes. We turn to workshops, tools, and talk about equity and inclusion. But, until we are ready to fully unpack the complex legacy of our nation’s four hundred years of slavery, segregation, and discrimination — until we are willing to take a deep uncomfortable dive into ourselves to understand how each of us carries notions of white supremacy and racial bias — we will carry this extra weight.

The Belonging Project: Navigating The Nation’s Most Segregated City

Often in my life when I feel stuck or daunted, I turn to an intentional practice of curiosity and reflection. To help guide my reflections, each year I select a curiosity project. At the start of 2019, I chose to explore the idea of belonging. I made a commitment to interview 52 people from diverse backgrounds — one for every week of the year — on how people in Milwaukee create a sense of belonging for themselves and others. The project was born out of my own experience living
in one of the nation’s most segregated cities and my
curiosity about how this impacts our ability to create
a sense of belonging in our individual and collective
lives. Professionally, I have seen our city spin its wheels
on inclusion initiatives. Personally, as a transplant
to Milwaukee, I found myself challenged to build a
community where I felt I truly belonged.

While there are academics who explore these
concepts in greater depth, I approached this process
with a more practical goal: to translate and share my
lessons in my daily conversations with diverse individu-
als across my city. Now, having exceeded my goal at
64 interviews, one of the things I am discovering is that
there are a lot of newly woke and waking white folks
who have questions and fears. It is emotionally difficult
for them to come to terms with America’s racist history,
how this impacts their community today, and what
their part is in all of it. There is resistance from white
people who struggle to acknowledge privilege. The
internal reckoning required to come to terms with our
living history causes great discomfort. And as is true
for me and so many of us, when people choose to bury
discomfort, it seeds resentment and resistance.

The people I interviewed were concerned about
“saying or doing the wrong thing.” They feared causing
offense or even worse, being judged as someone who
is racist or prejudiced. One young lady I interview-
ed explained that the worst thing she could be called was
a racist, but admitted that she sometimes has racist
thoughts. She questioned why she was even sharing
this with me but admitted she had essentially made
the choice not to explore these problematic thoughts.

Instead, she convinced herself she was not really racist,
especially since she was dating a Black man. I have
been blessed my whole life with the gift of empathy.
I get that for white folks, it can be scary. In this age
of “call out” culture, how do you engage in this space
without ending up in a Facebook post because you
admitted that you have racist thoughts against Black
men, asked a question that offended, or touched some-
one’s hair? (But seriously, don’t do that last one.)

So what to do? What does it look like to do the
hard work and take a step forward on the journey from
waking to woke? Many will look for a clear and concise
method, but the recommendations I offer require a
much slower path of self-reflection and practice. I am
only mid-way through the Belonging Project and still
contemplating the insights gained. But I offer a few
recommendations that I hope will begin to help shape a
path forward.

It’s Time to Take a Long Look in the Mirror

What I see with white colleagues, clients, and
partners, especially those focused on social justice, is
that they love the intellectual work around race and
equity. Most, however, have not taken the time to do the
deep, uncomfortable self-focused work that this space
requires. They read books, attend workshops, and love
(love!) to talk about the less “woke” white people in our
country. But as I learned on my own self-awareness
journey, this is not where the work lies; it is not even
where most of the work lies. The first step in the work is
in taking a really long, deep look at you — at your biases,
thoughts and behaviors. It is time to start with you.
Ask yourself: where do you find yourself getting defensive? Feeling guilty? Wanting to hide? Where do you feel yourself judging others? Judging yourself? If you are human, you have biases. If you are human, you have opinions, perceptions, beliefs that you feel shame around. If you are American, some of those opinions, perceptions and beliefs deal with race. It is in this space where the work must start.

There are tools that can help you explore where you have bias and how that bias may have been formed. Harvard University’s Project Implicit tool is one of my favorites and is free. Meditation and journaling are good ways to use this awareness as a tool for exploration. Try not to judge the ugly parts that come up for you as you explore. Instead, I recommend using them as a launch pad for real change and transformation.

**Relationships Matter**

I’ve reached the conclusion that the single best tool for cracking the code on race relations in this country is to develop authentic cross-racial relationships.

The best REI tools are personal relationship building tools because we are not transformed by strategies, we are transformed by personal experiences. In several interviews for the Belonging Project, individuals shared that they became interested in issues of race, equity and inclusion after they experienced a deeply personal issue fueled by race. Two white men, for example, recently championed diversity efforts in their workplaces after having an “aha!” moment in their personal lives. My theory is that your “real life” has to change for the change to be and feel real.

This isn’t to say that we don’t need workshops, programs, strategies and initiatives. Formal efforts are important because they demonstrate a visible commitment, and they signal to others the importance of engaging in the work. Formal efforts also often create metrics that make sure we prioritize and hold ourselves accountable to the goals. However, for the work to move from transactional to transformational, we need to build formal REI programs and strengthen the diversity of our personal relationships. It is critically important that we have both. We need to address both the logical and emotional parts of ourselves to facilitate a meaningful shift.

**Education Is Critical**

I know I knocked books and workshops earlier, but there is immense value to educating ourselves. It is critically important that as a nation today we develop a shared understanding about the role of race in shaping all American economic and social institutions. Most people truly have never examined in any depth how our country’s very foundation was built (quite literally) on white supremacy nor the full impact of how this plays out today.

During one of my recent Belonging interviews, I spoke to a middle-aged white man who, quite earnestly, asked if I knew that the federal government intentionally prevented people of color from buying homes in certain neighborhoods. It was called redlining, he very concernedly finished. I smiled and nodded. Yes, I am familiar with this part of our history, but he, and I assume many others, are new to these truths.

There are amazing books and resources that can help educate you on the impact of racist systems, policies and practices that continue to impact people of color today. Once you build your level of education and awareness, don’t stop there! There’s more work to do. Ask, “How do I translate my knowledge of history into action to address racial inequity?” Circle back to your deep self-reflection to see how your new level of education changes your understanding of yourself, your role, and your next steps forward.

**It’s Easy to Judge Others, Hold Back.**

As humans, we are wired to assume the best intent for our own actions and the worst for others. In a workshop I co-facilitate with a colleague on Adaptive Leadership, we share a tool called the Ladder of Inference developed by Chris Argyris that helps participants understand how we quickly and easily jump to conclusions about others based on only the slightest of observations. The Ladder helps us better understand how we land on conclusions about others, and what we can do to check our own thinking.

When you have done your own work, your next step is not to judge others. It is to meet them where they are and help your fellow white friends and family on their journey. It may be constructive to educate people around you about the historical and current injustices you have been learning about. What may be even more valuable is to help others understand what to expect as they embark on this journey. Share with them what was difficult, surprising, or unexpected during your own self-reflection process.

In my interview with the man who had recently learned about redlining, I asked how he felt when he learned this new information. His first response was
disbelief; he refused to believe it. Once he moved past disbelief, he ran right into anger and shame. He felt complicit in not knowing until now that this happened in our country, one that he loved so much. These emotions were hard to process.

It is important for people to know as they begin working in this space that these emotional responses are common and should be expected. It is also relevant for people to hear how you worked through them and made your way down this hard-won path. Share where fear came up for you. Same for the doubt, the shame, the lack of motivation to go deeper. Share the mistakes you made and how you recovered. Speak to how you worked through it, and consider how you can help them in the least judgmental and most supportive way. Ask yourself how you can help them show up with courage — again and again — in what you now know is very difficult and personal work.

Don’t Get Stuck, Move from Self to Others

Remember the self-work is important but, at some point, you have to re-engage and share and practice with others. This is your work, white people. In time, you will need to bring your evolving self back into the world to visibly and vocally support efforts to make this country and world more inclusive and equitable.

As new insights and understanding open up for you, you will begin to feel empowered to share your experiences with those around you. As you think about taking this work into conversations in your home and workplace, I recommend bringing in tools and experts that can help you navigate this difficult space. At this point, these resources can be quite useful. Find individuals, organizations and approaches that resonate with you, as well as those that will push you gently into spaces of discomfort. It is from this space that you will continue to grow.

This work is difficult. It is difficult for all of us. But I believe it is the work of our lifetime. Real change will require all of us to wrestle with our individual and collective demons, then come back together again and again to authentically and collaboratively push this work forward.

Best of luck on your journey. I will be rooting for you. I will be rooting for all of us.

1 Dominique Samari is passionate about service to others and believes that partnering with and empowering leaders, organizations and communities leads to meaningful, lasting and positive change. She co-founded P3 Development Group in 2011 where she leads the design and implementation of programs, strategies and initiatives for clients seeking to drive equitable and inclusive change in their organizations and communities. Prior to co-founding P3, She served in key management positions for the Department of State’s Rule of Law Program in Afghanistan. Dominique received her J.D. from Marquette University Law School and prior to working in Afghanistan, served as criminal court commissioner for the City of Milwaukee. She began her career as a criminal trial lawyer for the State of Wisconsin and established her own law firm before moving into diversity, equity and inclusion and international and community development. Dominique may reached at Dominique@p3developmentgroup.com.
2 Harvard University’s Project Implicit tool: https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html
3 Key Word: Authentic While I believe relationships are one of the best tools, I insist — demand, really — that you not use relationships with people of color as a means of working out your issues. This is your work. And we are, quite honestly, exhausted.