

# CHALLENGING HOMOPHOBIA, RACISM AND OTHER OPPRESSIVE MOMENTS

By Nicole LeFavour 5/10/02

It's happened many times... the little comment about how "gay" this or how so and so should just leave their partner at home and not flaunt "their lifestyle" at office parties. Maybe it is the "spic" joke, the "cunt" joke, the "trailer trash" joke, the cruel comments about the hygiene of "those people" or the cutting critique of a woman's figure or a man's "less-than-masculine" attire.

Really, when you sit down and think about it, it is all biased humor. Because it perpetuates misconceptions and stereotypes, reinforces racist attitudes, ableism, homophobia, sexism, classism or the idea that people should live in tidy little confined gender boxes -- it isn't funny at all.

So, you want to know what to do about it. Here are some simple suggestions, a formula shall we say for both challenging AND for accepting a challenge when this kind of talk and action goes down. Western States Center in Portland, Oregon created this model for their training on ending oppression. We in YFFN's Speak Out Idaho Project have found it amazingly useful.

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## ACCEPTING A CHALLENGE....

### WHAT SHOULD I DO?

(...Because NONE of us can know everything, understand every oppression, or be free of all prejudice-- we know it is likely that someday someone will call us on something we say. And it is good to be prepared.)

### Say someone tells you that you have just made a racist comment....

#### SHOULD YOU...

- 1) Do what is most common for us white folk to do: argue or explain to the speaker that (in spite of the comment you just made) you are not racist and they just must have misunderstood you.
- 2) Assume the deer in headlights stance, bow your head and vow never to show your face in public again.
- 3) Take a DEEP BREATH, (Ask a question ONLY to clarify NOT to argue.) LISTEN CAREFULLY (try to understand what it was that you said or did that they are trying to call your attention to) THANK THEM (if you can do this genuinely -- remember it probably wasn't easy or comfortable for them to tell you that something you said or did was racist.) Finally, and this may take some reflection first, do what you can to TAKE ACTION: like apologize, help change a policy, better educate yourself or GO AWAY AND THINK further about what was said.

Naturally the answer to this quick quiz is number 3. Think about it this way: in this day and age most of us don't want to be racist, sexist, homophobic, or oppressive in any way. Anyone brave enough to tell us when we have crossed the line, said something ignorant or done something outright offensive, is doing us a favor. It may not be easy to hear at first but it is so important, especially if the comment is coming from a person who is targeted for the -ism we just committed (.ie. a person of color when we are told we've made a racist comment), it is SO important that we listen (not argue) and respect how they feel, what they know and what they have to say.

Again:

**a) BREATHE**

**b) LISTEN**

**c) (THANK THEM)**

**d) TAKE ACTION**

**e) GO AND THINK ABOUT IT**

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## **CHALLENGING.....**

### **HOW DO I DO IT?**

(...These are the steps you can use when you hear, experience or witness something homophobic, racist, ableist or otherwise oppressive.)

### **Say you need to interrupt someone who is making a homophobic or transphobic comment...**

#### **SHOULD YOU...**

- 1) Stand up and yell, "You are an ignorant idiot," and then proceed to send out a press release announcing you're severing your friendship with them and canceling their membership to the club of the politically correct.
- 2) Do what is most common for those of us who were taught to be polite above all else: delicately make a vague reference to them thinking more carefully about what they are saying (even though we know exactly what they said or did, why it was offensive or homophobic and what they could do to begin to remedy the situation.)
- 3) Take a deep **BREATH**. It takes some courage and presence to be ready to challenge oppression because you know you will create discomfort, even if the person you are interrupting or others in the room may appreciate or benefit from it in the long run. **NAME IT**. Meaning tell them exactly what they just did and name the oppression they contributed to ("What you just said was transphobic.") **GIVE INFORMATION**. Meaning, if you can, tell them why it was offensive/oppressive/transphobic. ("When you don't respect a person's request for a female pronoun, you are playing into the idea that people must fit into only two

opposite genders with nothing in the middle and no room for self definition. You are not respecting that she identifies as a woman regardless of the way you see the body she was born into.") **GIVE A DIRECTION.** Tell the person what they should do about it. ("I have a great article about a boy whose school kept insisting she was a girl. I can lend it to you or we could talk about it over coffee tomorrow.")

Once again the answer is 3. We can all think of a million reasons why we might not want to be this direct, make someone uncomfortable or even say anything at all when we hear something oppressive. Think carefully about your reasons.

Again:

**a) BREATHE**

**b) NAME IT** (name the oppression the comment or action perpetuates)

**c) GIVE INFORMATION** (this may include how the comment is oppressive or how makes you feel)

**d) GIVE DIRECTION** (what can the person do instead or what should they remedy or never do again)

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## **STAYING SAFE**

If you are a person of color hearing racist comments or a queer person addressing homophobia or transphobia, there are times when it is truly not safe to interrupt someone who is being oppressive. Examples are a workplace where you know you will lose your job if your boss or co-workers knew you were queer, in a relationship where you are already a victim of violence, or in a bar or isolated place where you may already feel physically unsafe.

If over and over we are forced to hear these sorts of comments or experience this sort of oppression without being able to respond or protect ourselves, it is important that we think about getting outside support. Sometimes an oppressive environment can be overwhelming and we need help insuring that we are not "internalizing" or actually believing the negative things that devalue us as humans or make us feel shame when in fact we are good people who deserve to live in peace and with pride. Seek supportive friends, family members, group support, or ask others for names of counselors experienced in dealing with racism, homophobia, domestic violence or the issues you face.

If you are NOT a member of the group targeted by the oppressive comment you are hearing, then many of us believe that, hard as it may seem, you have an obligation to speak up and say something -- especially when the action or words is going to be heard by or will affect someone in the targeted group directly.

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## **WHOSE JOB IS IT?**

At times, many of us who are by-standers or not members of the group being targeted by an oppression have trouble embracing the idea that it may actually be our job to speak up. We are hesitant to create a conflict or make others uncomfortable. However, we need to remember:

- 1) **how hostile, oppressive or frightening it might feel to be a member of the targeted group hearing these words or being affected by this action**
- 2) **that there is virtually no way to avoid making someone uncomfortable if you really are going to identify and address an incident of racism, sexism, homophobia or oppression**
- 3) **that sometimes the only way we learn or change is by being pushed out of our comfort zones so that we stop to evaluate why we are uncomfortable or why someone we know or don't know considers our action so significant that they would take the effort to challenge it**

We suggest that you find a friend and PRACTICE this a bit on each other. Invent a scenario like two friends talking and one telling a bad joke. Go through the steps and see how it feels both to interrupt and be interrupted. Talk about it with your partner and with others. You can even ask for training for yourself or for your workplace, school, church or club. (See below for some resources.)

If we are to end an oppression we feel ourselves, we will often have to do more than just survive the inequities and prejudice we face everyday. When we are able, we will have to organize and educate ourselves and our allies to make change.

Ending the oppression of others IS our job, especially when we have the privilege and resources to do so. To be a good ally, one has to both listen and take action. Think how the world would change... or even just how your own town would change if we all started challenging oppression and teaching our family, friends, neighbors and co-workers to do the same.

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*To arrange training, find out about other training opportunities in Boise and around the Northwest (like Western States Centers' summer "CSTI" training in Portland August 2-4 <http://www.westernstatescenter.org> AND the Creating Change (Queer) Conference in Portland, November 6-10 <http://www.ngltf.org>), or if you have a question about oppression and what to do about it, call YFFN's Speak Out Idaho at 344-4295 <http://www.yffn.org>. If we don't know the answer we know others who do!*