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Whiteness is like herpes

BY MARTIN YOUNG ON 28 OCTOBER 2015

You know now that you have it but prefer not to talk about it. Every now and then it surfaces like a rash, provoking discomfort, not in you, but in others. You have lived with it for so long that for most of your life you didn't even notice it. In fact, you were surprised when someone, unable themselves by virtue of colour to have it, discovered that you did, and pointed it out. The diagnosis hurt. It was uncomfortable knowing that others saw in you something that was damaging to them, but not directly to you.

And now there are calls to have those with whiteness pay for the damage it has done to others. This makes you uncomfortable, knowing that, like herpes, you cannot eradicate whiteness from your own being. It is just there. Subliminal, under the surface, unseen by you and others like you.

To others whiteness is as glaringly obvious as a flashing neon sign, like the trappings of privilege in good residential addresses, private schooling, the latest smartphones and flashy cars. More worryingly, whiteness manifests in an absence of empathy and understanding of the distorted benefit that those with it enjoy. This is one reason why those without it fear contamination or infection by the same values. This is why whiteness is a barrier to good relationships, just like undisclosed herpes.

There may be a solution however. This can be learnt from those who have herpes, or hepatitis or HIV and have managed to successfully and happily live without causing harm to others. The infection does not go away but its consequences are significantly reduced to the point that it becomes simply a part of one's identity, and not a disease.

This solution could be as easy as simply saying something like this:

"I have whiteness. I didn't know what it was and didn't know what damage it did. But I do know now. I understand and acknowledge all the harm that I and others like me did, even without realising it. I am sorry for the way that things were and are. I accept whiteness exists in me, and am willing to talk about it, and listen as to how it affects others, so that those effects may be reduced and one day eradicated. I know this will not happen


immediately, that it will take time, and that others with the same will probably resist this initiative. From time to time my whiteness may get in the way again, and I may not see it. I ask that those that do point it out to me. We need to talk about whiteness and its harm at all levels, as we do with disease, by education starting in the schools, being sure that those with it bear no stigma. We must have open and frank dialogue, overcoming our discomfort, until one day whiteness, as a clear distinction from skin colour, no longer exists.”

I believe this is possible. I know it is unavoidable if we are to heal this land.

[For more on “whiteness”.](#)

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