

RACISM IN SOCIETY AND IN OURSELVES: CONFRONTING RACISM IN MYSELF

I want to share a personal story; a confronting experience; a shameful realisation..... made possible through COVID.

I don't think of myself as Racist. I've examined my behaviours. I treat others the same – the same as I like to be treated. I think of others the same.

I'm inclusive.... I protest, I sign petitions, I donate money..... I object to racism! To the racist articles and cartoons..... I meet with others to explore these very issues.

So I have little racism in me.....and I do realise I am of 'white privilege'

But I've actually learned a lot more about what that really means thanks to COVID19.

I've been COVID compliant. I stay home. I keep my 1.5 metres distance. I haven't panic shopped. I wear a mask. I STAY home.

But I've heard that there are those who don't.

I've heard there are some who 'test positive' but continue to carry on as usual.

I've heard they go to work..... they don't social distance..... so they don't care or don't understand....

Of course they understand..... They are CHOOSING to resist...

...oblivious to the pain of a restricted life

... uncaring of all our pain and sacrifice in lockdown. .

..... making obviously selfish choice, and not thinking about "others".

Selfish they're to blame....

My anger had a target - quietly kept but real no less - my projections were focused. My distress at the re-emergence of COVID - of the 2nd wave - had a known cause – they who were CHOOSING to ignore the new rules caring only about themselves.....

And then one morning – walking my dog in my permitted 1 hour of exercise..... with face mask on (*see what a good citizen I am – evidence my consideration of others, of all of us in this together!*).....

On that morning came an abrupt call to examine the racism in me.

I came across Anthony, a neighbour I've met once or twice before as he walked his dog - socially distanced, masked too. On this morning Anthony had a story to tell.

He was learning about the state of this State through the working experience of his partner. You see she works for DHHS – seconded to the Contact Tracing unit now.

She finishes work tired and frustrated – *of course* – but saddened too.

Saddened by what she was learning..... like the how 'Adesh' – the taxi / uber driver – who tested positive - refused to tell her anything when she rang.

Who did he live with? NO ONE

Who had he had contact with? NO ONE.

What names could he give her? NONE!

And then again 'Kalyn' Who drives ubers and delivers our food, etc – when she phoned:

Who does he live with? Family and friends? NO ONE

Who had he had contact with? NO ONE

What names could he give her? NONE!

And why such obstructionist answers? FEAR! Real, grounded, totally genuine fear!

You see if Kalyn or Adesh told the truth – gave the names of the 3 or 4 they live with, told of their families or friends doing this same casual work then they too would have to quarantine. They too would lose their livelihoods...

They too would be unable to work, to earn, to pay rent, to feed themselves and their families.....

And with no history of a trustworthy, compassionate government they have no trust in our system – in DHHS – in the phone call..... in Anthony's partner trying to assist by doing her job contact tracing.

For each of them there was no choice.

They WERE protecting others – their others.

I was struck by the racism within me. I was exposed. ashamed

Ashamed of my absolute inability to imagine or to have considered such a life, such a situation, up until that very minute the closed nature of my racism..... exposed, raw and disturbing.

I had developed no way to 'know' or to 'see' that work and income, could be so tenuous, so insecure. That fear and desperation could be so real – right here in my own city.

I had possessed no compassion, no understanding, happy in my white privilege. So I was the one NOT understanding – I am the one not thinking deeply enough of others, not seeing the various, harsher realities of others who are NOT like me..... whose lives are NOT like mine..... whose privilege (and hence security) is so much lesser.....

My examination of my own racism had to be re-examined..... it was falsely based..... My identity groupings excluded too many..... made space for too few.....

I had been blinkered – comfortably so – not really questioning “are we all in this together?”

I now don't even think we are experiencing the same “this”!

I no longer imagine there are those who “go to work regardless” due to their ignorance or arrogance or uncaring manner.

They go to work regardless because we are a racist society that has not truly embraced all of those who are here. Our systems, processes, assumptions and tactics are based strongly in our white-washed views.

So I am left thinking that.....If I firstly assume that within us all is racism somewhere, then I must - we must - use this COVID opportunity surely to broaden and deepen our thinking, to examine ourselves and our society to improve the lives of all not just the white privileged majority, of which I am one.

Thank you.

Joanne Fitzgerald