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DIVERSITY & INCLUSION

For True Racial Reckoning, Start by Going Back to Your Roots

By Adria B. Martinelli, Attorney, Young Conaway Stargatt & Taylor, LLP | Mar 9, 2021
| Diversity & Inclusion (<https://hrdailyadvisor.blr.com/category/diversity-insight/>)

It doesn't have to be Black History Month to engage in introspection and self-review. As employers, most of you are conscious of your legal liability when it comes to equal employment opportunity. But many of you also have taken a step further by hiring diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) directors to appeal to a broader range of customers and employees. As the following essay shows, it's never too late to take a deep and thoughtful look at our personal biases and consider as employers how we can work harder to foster inclusion.



(<https://news.blr.com/app/uploads/sites/3/2021/03/introspection.jpg>)

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'Behind the Wall'

As for so many other people, music forms the soundtrack of my life. While my memory fails me more and more lately, I still have a crystal-clear recollection of the music I consumed at different times in my life and my feelings when I listened to it.

Recently, I found myself thinking about Tracy Chapman, a favorite artist of my college years. I spent the summer of 1988 in Boston, working in Faneuil Hall and living in an MIT frat house with friends. One of my roommates for the summer showed up with a cassette of Chapman's self-titled debut album, and I was instantly hooked.

Listening to Chapman's music again brought my mind right back to that summer. I began thinking about the themes of racial inequality that predominate her songs—even though they hadn't quite resonated with me in the same way when I listened to her music in the '80s.

Chapman's poetry is beautiful and direct in message. How could her words, which I listened to over and over again, not have provoked any deeper thoughts on my part? As I look back, I'm both confounded and disturbed.

'Smoke and Ashes'

I grew up in Tulsa, Oklahoma, the site of what has been called "the single worst incident of racial violence in American history." Coincidentally, we are approaching the 100th anniversary of the massacre, which took place on May 31 and June 1, 1921. Mobs of white residents, many of them deputized and given weapons by city officials, attacked black residents and businesses in the city's Greenwood District.

Tulsa worked hard to bury this ugly part of its history. Newspapers didn't report on it, and schools didn't teach it until many years after I graduated from high school.

My experience growing up in Tulsa was largely devoid of black people at all, with the exception of a tiny handful of black students who attended my private high school. The first time I recall ever hearing the phrase "race riot" was in the eighth grade, when I thought it had something to do with a foot race.

That was how little "race" played a part in my world view. It was simply absent. I recognize now how incredibly privileged I was.

'At This Point in My Life'

When I first entered college and stepped foot on the William & Mary campus in Williamsburg, Virginia, I was struck by the fact that nearly every service position was held by a black person, including the people who served food in the cafeteria, tended to the grounds, and cleaned the buildings.

The only college protest I recall ever attending was related to the loss of student parking on campus. I'm sure there were a few others with more worthy causes, but I'm fairly certain they were rare. Our campus was conservative and not very politically active, but no one I knew in the '80s could have been described as "politically active."

By the time I graduated from William & Mary, my white sorority had accepted two black students, one of whom was then-Secretary of State Colin Powell's daughter. The campus social life was still largely segregated between black and white, and I have no idea if it's better today.

'Dreaming on a World'

As I try to make peace with the past, one history course at William & Mary stands out in my mind. It was a class I took during my junior year about the Civil War, taught by a much-esteemed professor named Ludwell Johnson.

Professor Johnson's course was one of those few classes everyone on campus considered to be a "must take"—even if you weren't a history major. I was a history major and eagerly anticipated taking the course from the first time I heard about it as a freshman wandering the halls of the history building.

Professor Johnson was a longtime Virginian with a genteel southern accent. He spoke of the South as "we" and referred to the war as the "Battle of Northern Aggression," usually with a wink and a twinkle in his eye. At the time, I thought the course was a uniquely William & Mary experience, and everyone I knew who took it found him to be both an endearing and intellectually challenging instructor.

When I look back on his course now, I have so many questions. In particular, did any black students take his course? (I can't remember). If so, I'm guessing they didn't find his treatment of the war endearing. Either way, I wonder what kinds of discussions circulated about his course in their circles. I imagine they were different than mine.

'New Beginning'

I wish I could have a do-over of my 1980s self:

- I wouldn't just sing along with Tracy Chapman—I would throw my youthful energy behind her causes.
- I would make more of an effort to include the few black students in my high school.
- I would dig deep into the abominable history of race relations in my own hometown; and
- I would look around my Civil War class and consider how Professor Johnson's words and winks may feel to any black students there.

Unfortunately, I won't get a do-over. I can only say my 2021 self is sorry.

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