

Separatism

by Paul Kivel from *Uprooting Racism*

Many white people become upset when people of color get together without us. In our workshops my colleagues and I sometimes separate people into racial groups. There are always white people who protest by saying, “I want to know what they have to say.” “How can we deal with racism without people of color?” “How come they get their own group?” “I think their group will be more fun.” “This is reverse racism.”

Racism is divisive. Each of these responses reflects some of the pain and confusion of that divisiveness. Although being white – with all the benefits, costs and opportunities that entails – has heavily influenced our lives, it can be difficult to look around and identify with other white people and to recognize that we are in this together. We need to learn how to challenge and support each other.

It is particularly hypocritical for white people to complain about people of color being separatist. For the last 500 years, it is white people who have excluded people of color from our homes, “our” schools, “our” workplaces, “our” neighborhoods and from “our” country. There have been literally thousands of sundown towns throughout the country - cities, towns, and neighborhoods in which people of color were prohibited from staying even one night.¹ These ordinances and covenants were usually enforced with violence. Even today people of color are routinely excluded, harassed or told to leave and “go home” by white people.

Most of us don't want to be excluded, but it is only in the last 45 years that people of color have been able to meet in and control their own space without the threat of intrusion by white people of authority. There are strategic reasons why people of color might want to meet together without white people. They may want to be in a safe environment, to enjoy each other's company, to talk about racism, to congregate with people who share certain things and to not have to focus attention on white people and white culture. Some of these are the reasons that any group of people with shared interests or concerns get together. Others are particular to the needs of a minority group in a larger social setting.

Physical and emotional safety is a crucial concern. Women know they aren't necessarily safe with men just because the men say "I'm liberated" or "I'm a feminist." For the same reasons, people of color know that they aren't necessarily safe when white people make similar declarations. At least in terms of racial abuse, it is generally safer for people of color when white people are not around. It is also safer for them to talk about difficult issues, to be vulnerable and to acknowledge conflicts and disagreements within their community without the danger that white people will use these things against them.

Congregating in a group without white people is also less distracting for people of color. Rarely do we whites sit back and listen to people of color without interrupting, without being defensive, without trying to regain attention for ourselves, without criticizing or judging. People of color simply cannot interact with each other with the same amount of attention and respect when white people are present.

Most people of color spend a tremendous amount of time and energy taking care of white people. This has been true historically as people of various ethnic groups cared for our children, took care of our homes, cooked our food and made our clothes. It has also been true emotionally. People of color have often counseled us, nurtured us in our old age, been our nannies or teachers, assuaged our guilt about racism, covered over their pain and anger to protect us, assured us that we were okay even though we were white and, out of economic necessity, put aside the needs of their families and communities to take care of ours. One of the assumptions of whiteness, particularly for people of middle-class economic status or higher, is that people of color will put our needs before theirs.

There are many reasons people congregate. Safety, shared interests and mutual support are primary ones. These are the same reasons white people congregate. If you look around a school cafeteria you might see white students, Latino/a students and Asian American students sitting in separate groups. If you looked closer and knew more about the groups, you might discover that most of the social groupings of white students shared concerns with other groups. Yet many of us who are white might say that the people of color are cliquish or separatist, and we might feel offended. We probably would not question the white students' sitting together. Nor would we necessarily notice the many ways the white students might be discouraging the presence of people of color at their tables.

Since so many public spaces in our society are white in tone, structure and atmosphere, people of different ethnic groups need space to enjoy their own cultural uniqueness, strengths and styles. They are not necessarily rejecting individual white people, plotting revenge or revolution. White society has controlled communities of color while all the time fearing that their members would rebel. Any time we see even a few of "them" together, we become afraid. This fear reflects our own understanding and guilt about the inequalities of the past, as well as the fears we have been taught about people who are different.

Our fear of separation can also lead us to ignore our responsibility for most of the separation. People of color are still routinely and persistently denied access to much public and most private space in the US. There is tremendous and undeniable segregation in housing, schools, jobs and recreational facilities. People of color do not choose to live in barrios, ghettos and reservations any more than white people do. Those who do often do so out of lack of choice. White-controlled institutions and individual discrimination have created this lack of choice. We segregate communities of color and rarely notice or challenge it. But when a group voluntarily congregates, we oppose its right to do so.

It is to our advantage when people of color congregate voluntarily without whites. None of us wants to be racist or to see racism perpetuated. But most of us are not very adept at noticing racism when it occurs or responding vigorously to it. When people of color come together for discussion and support, they become more able to point out and challenge racism.

All too often we let people of color take responsibility for challenging racism. We may describe it as their issue. We may fail to see how seriously and continuously it affects us. In an all-white group we have a chance to explore our questions, concerns, and fears about racism. We have an opportunity gently to challenge other white people about it. We have an opportunity to develop plans for confronting racism and becoming better allies for people of color. Let's take advantage of it!

Seldom do we consciously get together with other whites and talk about racism, about being white and about working for racial justice. We need this time together. Intervening with other white people is an important way that we become allies for people of color.

How could you bring together white people you know to think about some of these issues?

Who are some white people who can help you do this?

Notes:

1. For hundreds of examples, see James W. Loewen. *Sundown Towns: A Hidden Dimension of American Racism*. Touchstone, 2005.