



TEARS & FEARS: WHITE WOMEN & SOCIAL JUSTICE

By Dr. Maura Cullen

As a white woman, I have come to understand the power of my tears. When put in the context of social justice, there have been few consequences for my tears and many benefits.

Dr. Mamta Motwani Accapadi frames the concept of privilege in her article, [When White Women Cry: How White Women's Tears Oppress Women of Color](#). “Consider a fish that must swim upstream versus a fish that swims with the current, arguably both fish could survive, but under what circumstances? Would one fish benefit from the flow of the current?”

As white women engage in conversations about race, our tears contribute to the flow of that current. While we have the privilege of being carried by the current, women of color are continually swimming against the current. I am not suggesting that white women should never cry. However, I am suggesting that we remain diligent in understanding the possible implications of our emotions.

1. Crying shifts the focus to me.

Whatever was being discussed previously to my crying is negated along with the person that was speaking. Many of us have experienced the dynamic of someone hijacking the conversation when we are speaking. Perhaps they interrupted us or changed the direction of the conversation. As a result, we often feel frustrated and angry. Crying hijacks most any conversation, thus rendering the speaker invisible.

2. Women of color are typically blamed and painted as villains for creating my upset.

There is no shortage of people that come to my rescue when I cry.

While participating in a race intensive training, I started crying. A woman of color was providing me with feedback on my racist behavior. In that moment, I felt humiliated, ashamed, angry and helpless. Knowing the possible impact my tears might have on the conversation at hand, I tried hard to fend them off to no avail.

As my tears fell, an African-American man came to my rescue. He is a dear friend and trusted colleague. However, my tears left him in a tough spot, forcing him to make a decision as to whom he should support, me or the woman of color? It was a no win situation for him.

He chose me and had to deal with the fallout. But what consequences did I experience? None. Where was my fallout? The people of color were left to sort it out as I watched uncomfortably on the sidelines not sure of what to do. And so the circle of oppression is replicated once again. As long as the people of color were working through the situation, I was taken off the hook for my racism yet again, regardless of my intent.

If I had the chance for a do-over, how would I respond differently? If my tears were noticeable, I would redirect the attention back to the business at hand, as quickly and calmly as possible. If

necessary, I would name the dynamic of my crying and claim responsibility—then move on. No rescuing, no shift in focus.

3. My intention will always trump the women of color impact.

As people with privileged identities, white people will always default to their intentions when people of color challenge their racist behaviors or conversations. Whites believe that as long as they are well intended, then what they say or do should not matter. The message to of people of color, is to lighten up and don't be so sensitive. This is commonly seen when a white person tells a joke or makes a comment with racial overtones.

As people with target identities, people of color typically find the intention of the white person is less important than the impact it has on them. Just because you don't intend to hurt or offend doesn't make it so.

As long as I am considered well intended, my tears and privilege provide relief to me while adding to the burden for people of color.

So here it is in a nutshell...

Sometimes my tears release my fears.

Sometimes I fear my tears.

Sometimes crying takes courage.

Sometimes it takes courage not to cry.

Articles are provided for educational purposes and may be reprinted unaltered without prior permission, provided credit is given to the author as the source and the following paragraph is included. Notice of their use and publication, however, would be appreciated and can be sent to info@TheDiversitySpeaker.com.

Dr. Maura Cullen is the author of "35 Dumb Things Well-Intended People Say: Surprising Things We Say That Widen the Diversity Gap". She is widely considered one of the nation's foremost authorities of diversity issues on college campuses today. Maura has over 25 years of experience as a keynote speaker and trainer. She earned her doctorate in Social Justice & Diversity Education from the University of Massachusetts, is a Founding Faculty member of the Social Justice Training Institute and Founder of the Diversity Student Summit. To learn more visit www.TheDiversitySpeaker.com.