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One senior manager noted that as he fully took in the impact of the “isms” and saw how little he didn’t know, he realized that he had been brought up not only in a world of privilege, but also to expect safety and comfort as the normal way life is. Once he realized how little he knew about other worldviews and cultures and their strengths, he became humble, uncomfortable AND challenged to be in a learning mode. Today he is a key champion of diversity in a major organization and reports a much richer and more fulfilling life, though one that is less comfortable and predictable.

An African American male manager of a large multi-national shared the following example of learning from what he did not know. Though he was sensitive to challenges facing blacks and women in his company, when he was made a plant manager in a Spanish speaking country, this learning did not automatically translate. Without thinking about the significance of his decision, he supported an English only language policy that worked to benefit him and the small number of US company leaders, but did not allow the majority of employees to use their preferred/first language all day at work. During diversity leadership training, he realized that he had colluded with the US companies’ practice of making life comfortable for its corporate managers, even when the policy was not indicated given the small numbers. Much of the day, it would not have mattered if people spoke to each other in their home language, as there were no English only speakers around. This manager became very excited about the notion of diversity/inclusion learning as an on-going journey—one from which we do not “graduate.”

For me, such on-going awakenings are inspiring, engaging and essential. They keep work and life meaningful and purposeful—which is actually what most senior level managers really seek, especially as their careers progress. At its core, diversity/inclusion involves, for most in positions of power, a shift in ways of living and being that is self reinforcing.

It is especially important to my continued energy for this work to hear the voices of young adults as they emerge to take the reins of the fight for equity. I am just back from a trip to South Africa, where youth voices are strong, struggling, and powerful. The energy I get from combining what I learn from working with our adult clients with the challenges, action, and wisdom of youth, makes the option of “resting until freedom comes” or “waiting for the world to change” unfathomable.