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Even in a Crowd, Protest is a Personal Journey

By Germaine Graham

UCF Forum columnist

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In the wake of some recent protests taking place all across the country, I am reminded of the very personal and public consequences that result from various reactions. By definition, protest means “a statement or action expressing disapproval of or objection to something.”

The personal choice to express this action or resistance to action is innate, instinctual and lonely when protesting a sharply divisive issue. Even in a crowd of people, protest is personal journey. This lonely place in protest allows one to define his or her core being, sharpen purpose, and overcome fear. One will also take the risk knowing that the outcome may cause harm individually or resolve an issue larger than individual gain or loss.

Years ago I stood alone in protest as a second-year graduate student in a Ph.D. program at a large university in the south. It was a private protest but I felt the weight of a larger issue on my shoulder. Here I was the only African American student in a class listening to a tenured professor degrade several groups of people in ways that made me and most of the class very uncomfortable.

I sat from week to week in the classroom as this tenured professor shared great knowledge about the field of study and information that trained me to be great clinician. Along with this great knowledge, he also shared personal stories, jokes and anecdotes. As the semesters went on, his jokes became inappropriate, crude, sexist and racist. Most of my classmates would often laugh nervously and then glance at me to check out my reactions.

A few members of the class were clearly impacted by his actions and words but did not want to risk speaking up in fear of a failing grade, rejection or retaliation from the professor.

The first time that it happened, I sat quietly in shock, fear, anger, disgust and anxiety. (By the way, these are the initial emotional responses to trauma—shock, denial and disbelief.)

My heart sank as the class laughed because I knew that I was alone. My survival instincts kicked in because I had heard these words before and experienced this many times. I remembered in that moment that I had to take this professor at least two more times, so I had to think rationally about how I would show my disapproval and objection to his statements, jokes and comments.

During the summer semester I faced this professor once again. In the middle of his lecture, he looked directly at me and stated “I have this really funny joke that I want to tell but it’s at your expense. Do you mind if I tell it?”

Shocked and amazed at his boldness, I muttered a very frustrated “Yes!”

He then said, “Well, I am going to tell it anyway.”

I had already rehearsed many times what I would do. Without thinking, I slowly stood up and stated that I would not stay to listen to his insults. I packed my things and left the classroom. I went straight to the library and I prepared for the upcoming exam.

I went back to class the next week to no apology or acknowledgement of what had taken place. I studied so hard that semester and did not let him stop me from getting what I needed and I was prepared to walk out again if I needed to.

After that summer, I did not hear anymore jokes, racist or sexist comments in my presence. I was prepared to walk out if it did happen again. I did finish and pass all of the classes he taught. I am sure that I probably did not change this man and his views but what I did that summer was so personal and profound to me because I resisted, showed disapproval and exercised my disagreement.

Protest is a personal journey that others may not join you on and may sometimes criticize you for, but by its very nature, it is an act of your own will and innate struggle.

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