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Attempting to Reason in the Holiday Season

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Attempting to Reason in the Holiday Season

Abstract

Every year on the fourth Thursday of November, I sit down with my extended family to heaping dishes of mashed potatoes, sleekly polished bowls of green bean casserole, overflowing gravy boats, and, of course, a crackling turkey fresh from the oven. Without a doubt, my relatives and I have a lot for which to be thankful. *[excerpt]*

Keywords

Surge, Surge Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Center for Public Service, Thanksgiving, "casual rascism", politically incorrect comments, insensitivity, equality

Disciplines

Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies | Gender and Sexuality | Inequality and Stratification | Race and Ethnicity | Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies | Sociology of Culture

Comments

Surge is a student blog at [Gettysburg College](#) where systemic issues of justice matter. Posts are originally published at surgegettysburg.wordpress.com Through stories and reflection, these blog entries relate personal experiences to larger issues of equity, demonstrating that –isms are structural problems, not actions defined by individual prejudice. We intend to popularize justice, helping each other to recognize our biases and unlearn the untruths.

SURGE

[VERB] : to move suddenly or powerfully forward or upward

ATTEMPTING TO REASON IN THE HOLIDAY SEASON

November 23, 2015

Every year on the fourth Thursday of November, I sit down with my extended family to heaping dishes of mashed potatoes, sleekly polished bowls of green bean casserole, overflowing gravy boats, and, of course, a crackling turkey fresh from the oven. Without a doubt, my relatives and I have a lot for which to be thankful.

Typically, we make a sizeable dent in the piles of food and everyone is feeling reasonably merry before the inevitable occurs: the discussion turns to politics or current events, and the first of several slickly slipped-in, thoughtless comments are made. Until recently, I would politely sit by along with the rest of my cousins and my brother as phrases such as “anchor babies”,



“black thugs”, and many others of equal charm and comedic wit were subtly added to the dinner dialogue. My cousins and I would look at each other, roll our eyes and make faces, but no one actually ever said anything to challenge our elder relatives. But looking back on those many years and gatherings, and being no longer too nervous to vocalize my disbelief that people I love would utter those phrases in the modern day, I wish I had decided to address this issue sooner.

The primary reason no one ever said anything until very recently is most likely because of the social norm that we have to respect our elders no matter what. But at some point, a person shouldn't have to accept disrespect and “casual racism”, as my brother has dubbed it; instead, when we hear thoughtless remarks that are derogatory to other, less socially privileged groups, it is our responsibility to point out why they are no longer allowable. This is the 21st century. The argument that an older person is “from a different time” is entirely irrelevant to the fact that they must respect other individuals.

So this holiday season, I am committed to standing up to my relatives if racist, sexist, homophobic, transphobic, or other insensitive or politically incorrect comments are made. Even though it'll be intimidating, I know I have a good chance of being heard, and in the event that my family doesn't appreciate what I have to say it is still an important step to take in promoting equity and respect.

It's never been easy to disagree with people that I identify as mature, intelligent adults, and who are, perhaps, even my role models. I never guessed that my brilliant grandfather, a retired surgeon, would be capable of such unbelievable comments as he made about Ferguson last Christmas. I never truly considered the gravity of my uncle making jokes about people like Caitlyn Jenner. And never had I imagined that my mother, an otherwise relatively open-minded and respectful person, would chastise me for remarking for the first time "how ignorant" these comments made them sound.

It was a tense moment with my mother, but I know that I did the right thing. I realized that if I'm not speaking up, I'm passively promoting a continued acceptance of racism and discrimination, even within the boundaries of my own family. Because when we allow others around us to make offensive comments about marginalized groups, we uphold the systems of oppression in society and perpetuate stereotypes. We become a part of the problem. This year I won't hesitate to speak up.

Many people seem to think that they're safe in spreading ignorant or hateful ideas while they're around others who love them unconditionally, but questioning them in a typically secure environment is perhaps more impactful than anything else. Ruining an otherwise lighthearted moment in a family holiday celebration is infinitely less important than reminding my family to be more aware of how lucky they are, and to check their privilege by abstaining from offensive remarks at the expense of marginalized groups.

Whether you choose to blatantly call out a relative on their offensive comments in front of the whole family, speak to them in a more private setting to explain why such language is better left off the table and out of this century, or take a more silent approach by glaring and refusing to laugh at tasteless jokes (as my 17-year-old cousin has recently started doing), any action to combat this all-too-familiar "casual racism" and disregard is important in the long run.

When we can start to remove thoughtless speech from the scene, we can look forward to having a little more to celebrate with our loved ones during the holiday season.

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This post is written anonymously to forego attention via social media. To contact me, email surgegettysburg@gmail.com.