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Listen

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Listen



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It can be difficult to be critical of the institutions that we are a part of, from inter-personal relationships to big corporations. Part of this is because our own institutions of education do not teach us how to be critical in the first place. I was born into a family that practices the Baha'i faith, which is a religion that teaches that education is the key to human progress, and that lack of education leads to oppression and chaos. The Baha'i faith originated in Iran, which is where my father was born and raised. Baha'is in Iran are denied access to high education and because of this, I have always been hyper aware of my privilege as a college student. My dad came to America to go to college, and when the Iranian revolution happened, the country became unsafe for Baha'is, so he was forced to apply for political asylum. One good thing that came out of this is that he met my intelligent, beautiful, wonderful, Black mother and they are currently living happily ever after.

Because of the importance placed on education, my parents have always bent over backwards to ensure that I got the best education they could provide. One

thing my education has led me to know is that I have the capacity to accomplish whatever I set my mind to. I like to believe that my accomplishments are the reason that I got into college, and that I'm here to become more equipped to accomplish even more, better things. The most frustrating thing is knowing that no matter how much knowledge I gain, and no matter what I achieve, I will still be terrified to walk alone at night to my (on campus) apartment, for fear of being murdered because of the cafe au lait complexion that I fight so hard to love myself for in the first place.

No matter how empowered I become, nothing I do alone will change the struggles I face based on the color of my skin. It doesn't matter how many Black Student Union meetings I go to, or how many movie screenings or social justice dialogues I host at my small PWI in Olympia, Washington. I cannot affect enough change alone to stop the violence that Black college students are facing all over the country. I can honestly say this breaks my heart.

I go to a school that has been ranked as the most lib-

eral college in America, where a lot of the students are quick to consider themselves activists. In the spring of last year, two unarmed young black men were shot outside of a grocery store down the street from my school. Other than a protest and some optional workshops hosted by my college, nothing has changed in our community. Students of color still face the same challenges we did before, and everyone else seems to be apathetic. It seems like to some people, social justice is only really appealing when you can yell protest chants with a big group of people and stop traffic for a few hours.

I am currently taking a class called Gateways for Incarcerated Youth. Gateways allows me to visit Green Hill School for Boys (a juvenile detention center in Chahelis, Washington) twice a week, and learn alongside incarcerated young men who are enrolled in the class. I'm not only learning about race theories on cultural wealth and cultural trauma, but I also have the opportunity to apply my knowledge and practice to what I'm learning outside of the traditional classroom. Something I learned quickly is that if I want to get the most out of my time in Gateways, I have to allow room for myself to make mistakes. It is necessary for me to get out of my own head long enough to ask the question that I think "sound dumb." At first, it was really easy to get caught up in my thoughts, worrying about saying the wrong thing. I had almost forgotten that our humanity is most deeply connected through our struggles.

This class has brought me to a new level of understanding of the importance of learning across differences, and I have learned more in this class than I have in any other course I have taken in my fourteen years of education.

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Image by Szlivka Róbert

Gateways has been a salve to my soul. It is easy to feel disheartened living in the world we live in, and seeing people's responses to tragedy. I believe that programs like the one I'm in are how we begin to find solutions to the problems facing humanity. For any change to come about, we have to listen to the people whose voices have been taken away from them. The only way for violence on college campuses to end is to hear out the victims of violence. Society has normalized racism, so it is not enough to simply denounce "racism," because racist nuances are built into the structure of almost every institution in our world. One thing I have learned in my twenty years is that I will be unlearning my oppressive miseducation for the rest of my life. I have begun and will continue that unlearning through education. My heart goes out to my fellow Black and Brown students who are in the struggle.