

On White Tears



I know of so many white people who are terrified to publicly express their feelings and struggles and issues of race and racism for fear of those feelings being labeled as 'white tears'.

"Who am I to cry about this with all of my privilege?" I've heard many versions of this sentiment.

One fellow, a white man living in Alberta commented on an earlier version of this post to say, "*To call these tears white, and ignore they also exist in black, Hispanic, Asian and all indigenous people is the root of racism. They are simply human tears.*" which goes to prove [this point](#), to show the difference in understanding of power dynamics there is amongst white folks but also it's important to note that I don't say anywhere that others don't have tears. But we all seem to hear what we want to hear.

I was speaking to two good, white women today who were struggling with 'white tears'. What came to me was that those tears are like plants. If they grow in the wrong place, they might be considered weeds but, as one of the women I spoke with pointed out, in the right place, they are medicine.

White tears are like medicinal plants that, when they appear in the wrong context can be considered weeds.

All too often a white person's emotional reactions and inner wrestling can dominate a conversation on race or an anti-racism event (I've seen it first hand). In that case, it can act as a weed crowding out the space for other plants to grow. But, in a safe container dedicated to just this purpose of grief and healing, it is a much-needed medicine.

The Mayan Tzutujil word for tumour translates as 'hardened grief.' This is what grief does when it's unexpressed. It hardens. As Martin Prechtel puts it, "For the lack of grief, we go to war."

If these tears are not shed, I've seen white people become hard and vicious and go to war with other white people. If these tears are not shed, their approach to anti-racism will become dogmatic, punitive and rigid, fueled by the unexpressed grief turned into self-hatred. If these tears are not shed, many actions as an ally will come from a deep guilt and shame, not love and beauty making.

Much of this has to do with the placement of these tears. When white people cry in public to show the world how much they care, it can be driven by the desire to ensure that the world knows we're good, we're 'not like them', we're not racist.

But this, actually, underlines the need for the tears to flow. It's the lack of spaces to wrestle with the complicated weavings of our ancestral history that lead to simplified notions of 'white people' which create 'white guilt' and the very self-hatred that drives the need for attention and validation.

The lack of tears shed amongst white people has consequences.

I've heard white people say things like, "*You know, I have zero patience for public tears. The world is a safe space for white people. So I really don't wanna hear about it.*" Those words land, to me, as the words of someone who has not been given the space to grieve and whose grief has ossified into something hard and sharp.

I saw another comment on a wall that said, "*We do have safe spaces though - our friend groups and families.*" Perhaps this is so for her family and a wonderful thing if it is. But it's not true for most of the people who I know whose families have precisely zero time for anti-racism. Most of these people are the outliers in their families. So where, precisely, is this safe space located?

I've heard others say, "*No person of colour is saying 'don't have feelings' it's just that white people are wailing over a flesh wound and PoC are missing limbs. They laid on the grenade and are taking a lion's share of the pain and yet we're limping around like we are dying, wanting our marginalized friends to listen to us.*" And, of course, I'm not in disagreement here. What I am saying is that the pain and confusion of white people is real and, if not tended to, creates even more dysfunctional behaviour and blinds white people to seeing the realities of the lives of people of colour. When we are so wrapped up in our own unresolved pain, we can't hear the pain of others. My contention is that, if we want white people to be good allies to people of colour, they need space to process their feelings and conflicting thoughts without burdening people of colour with them. But, where are those places?

Another comment I read said, "*Go, have a glass of wine. Talk to your white friends privately, talk to your significant other. Some processes need to happen off the field and out of the spotlight. You gotta do*

what you gotta be ready, I get that. But that's why we have bathtubs and bedrooms." Again. Is this the answer? Self-medicate and then talk to your white friends who may not share your views, or who, because of their own unexpressed grief might respond to you with *"get over yourself"*? Who are these people with whom we are supposed to have these healing conversations? Or just cry alone in the bathroom in the hall of mirrors that is our emotional life?

Another comment, *"As someone who has shed enough tears, I am ready to get to work and half my friends seem to want to embrace the abuse and the other half seem to want people of colour to pull them out of their bed in the morning."* This is part of the strange dynamic amongst white people that we will say to each other, *"I've grieved but you don't get to. It was okay for me to do but not for you."* There's this strange urge to want to shut it down rather than to insist that it happens. But, again, where? Who are the qualified people to guide such a conversation?

Another comment, *"We are in a crisis. If this were a flood, or earthquake, we'd need to pull our shit together to get shit done. The person sitting on the curb bawling when we're all trying to move sandbags or drinking water is not being helpful."* And, of course, that's true too. And this is my point: my emotional confusion and turmoil inside of most white people as they wake up to what's happening is what keeps them from being able to really see what's happening. The response that, *"White people shouldn't be so fragile."* Isn't so helpful when the reality of the fragility appears amongst us. A better question might be, *"What could the tempering process look like that might help work the fragility out of the metal of their emotional body?"*

I wish the situation were other than it were.

I wish white people could see the situation more clearly.

I wish the waking up process for white people wasn't so messy and overwhelming and that we weren't so fragile.

But it is how it is.

White people need healing as much as people of colour but for different reasons.

If the core argument is that, "White people shouldn't have pain." in the face of the reality that they do, what kind of argument is that?

If the core argument is, "White people should process that pain on their own." but they don't know how to and there are no safe spaces to which they can go, then what kind of an argument is that?

If these tears are not shed, if these hard questions are not asked, if the wrestling with the issues isn't

encouraged, if white people are not helped to see how the same colonization that has brutalized people of colour and indigenous people also brutalized their own ancestors then white people will continue to turn people of colour into validation giving machines and the only possible source of emotional approval for them, their only possible salvation from the deep, deep self-loathing created by a sorrow that wasn't allowed to be expressed.

This all puts an incredible burden on people of colour to do immense emotional labour on our behalf. It's not much fun to be around someone who either dumps their emotions on you or who is still using you to deal with the dysfunction that's arisen as a result of not having given those feelings a proper voice.

White people need healing as much as people of colour but for different reasons. So much of the struggle here is that white people don't have many spaces where they can go to safely share feelings, cry those tears and receive the needed medicine that comes from them.

But where?