

Say Something.

We were shopping for an oven. It had been a process, we had exhausted all the big box stores. So we tried a local place with a big inventory and a good reputation. As we entered the store we were greeted by a gregarious salesman, white guy, probably in his early 60's. We told him what we were looking for, and he showed us a couple models that seemed fine, but a bit pricey. My wife replied that she had seen better prices on the internet. The guy looked at me, winked, and replied, "Well, if you don't mind your oven coming from Mexico, and delivered by a gang of spicks, sure, buy off the internet."

We were both taken aback, stunned. We said we weren't interested and left the store. Then afterward, we sat in the car, looked at each other with guilt in our eyes, and said at the same time, "we should have said something."

Yes, we should have. We are both inclined to do so, both of us having well earned reputations for speaking out. The question of why we stayed quiet this time has been on our minds ever since.

So I did a little research. Seems like more people than ever aren't talking.

According to a Pew Research Center survey conducted in mid-September, 59% of US adults say conversations on race are "stressful and frustrating." Over 50% of Americans, (63% of Whites, 47% of Hispanics, 36% of Blacks and 34% of Asians) report that they "rarely or never" respond in public to a racial epithet. Over 69% of black Americans only discuss race with other blacks.

As that guy who loves to talk politics, history and yes, even race, with anyone, this increasing silence is troubling to me. I think that "stressful and frustrating" conversations are interesting and informative, and how we grow. Particularly when those conversations are with well informed people that are not of the same race and have a different perspective than mine. I have been taught by my parents, and then taught my children, to never stay silent when confronted with racism. I also feel passionately that it is the responsibility of adults to include children in these types of conversations. How else to get the kids informed and involved? It can be stressful, so what?

As the polls show however, many people disagree with me. I hear statements from educated people all the time such as, "I'm afraid to say anything, everyone is packing a gun these days" or "My kids don't need this kind of stress in their lives."

I argue the point. I explain that it certainly mattered to black Americans, that people spoke out, back in the 1960s when century overdue civil-rights legislation changed lives. I point out that women speaking up and speaking out certainly improved lives for mothers, sisters and daughters. I share quotes from people like Martin Luther King, Jr., *"We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the hateful words and actions of the bad people but for the*

appalling silence of the good people”, Albert Einstein, “If I were to remain silent I’d be guilty of complicity”, Elie Wiesel, “There may be times when we are powerless to prevent injustice but there must never be a time when we fail to protest”, and Desmond Tutu, “If you are neutral in situations of injustice you have chosen the side of the oppressor.”

Few listen. Eyes glaze over as folks walk away from these types of conversations. I sense they’re not comfortable, perhaps I’m causing stress. Can’t have that.

For too many these days, it’s just too stressful to speak about race, much less confront a bigot in public. It’s even become problematic for parents to talk about race with their children. It seems that today’s prevailing attitude comes from the song *Say Something* by Justin Timberlake and Chris Stapleton. The lyric *“sometimes the best way to say something is to say nothing at all.”* Well, with all due respect to Mr. Timberlake and Mr. Stapleton, I think that sentiment is wrong. The best way to say something is to say something.

But saying nothing does send a message. With our “appalling silence” at the appliance store, my wife and I were “guilty of complicity,” we “failed to protest” and we “shared the side of the oppressor.” You can rest assured we won’t be quiet the next time blatant racism happens on our watch.

It’s past time we all started saying something.

That’s all I’m sayin’

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