

The Mindful Life

By Michael Wiederman, Ph.D.

Issue 3 — November 8, 2005

MINDing theMIND

"I'm not racist, but . . ."

How many times do we hear (or say) this phrase as an introduction to an anecdote? What does it mean? Recently I heard a woman, white, tell of an incident in which she had to pick up a female friend at an inner-city bus station late at night. As an introduction to her description of how frightened she was, the young woman started with the infamous phrase: "I'm not racist, but . . . like, I was the only white person there." She implied that she wouldn't have been as uncomfortable had there been other Caucasians.

What is the point of this pervasive phrase? At some level the speaker must recognize that what is about to come out of his or her mouth is going to sound racist. So, the obvious interpretation is that the claim of not being racist is an attempt to diffuse a clearly racist statement. At a deeper level, however, I think the people who say "I'm not racist, but" really do not think of themselves as racist. If they did, they probably wouldn't be so concerned about not appearing to be.

But what is racism? How about this definition: Treating, viewing, or feeling differently toward someone based entirely on that person's ethnicity or race. In the case of the woman visiting the bus station, would she have mentioned the race or ethnicity of the other people present had they all been Asian? Canadian? If not, then the issue wasn't simply being the only Caucasian there. There must have been some assumptions about the specific ethnic groups represented at the bus station.

The next time you hear, or are tempted to say, "I'm not racist, but . . .," perhaps you'll take notice. Does a racist statement or story follow? How do you feel about that? Remember what they say: "The first step to change is awareness."

Continued . . .

MIND Morsels

When all is said and done, as a rule, more is said than done.

— Lou Holtz

We've all heard the old phrases, "Actions speak louder than words," and "Words are cheap." What often gets overlooked is that talking about something actually might be counterproductive. Why? Talking about what we plan to do, hope to do, or dream of doing may take just enough wind out of our motivational sails to keep us from actually doing it. Many times talk ends up being a substitute for behavior. True, talking about our plans may help us formulate the best course of action, and may elicit help from others. It's when we seem to talk excessively about what we'll do that there may be a problem. Do you find yourself talking repeatedly about the same plans, always describing the same hoped-for future? What might happen if you stopped?

Failure to prepare is preparing to fail.

— John Wooden

Preparation is rarely fun. When it is, we probably don't even think of it as preparation. It's the unpleasant tasks that are tempting to put off, or avoid altogether. Then, when we fail, it's equally as tempting to blame our failure on anything other than our lack of preparation. Otherwise we have to admit that we could have done better. It's only when we have done everything possible to prepare that we can legitimately blame failure on something outside ourselves. But then, if we did everything possible to prepare, how often would we experience failure at all?

*It's easy to practice something you're already good at,
and that's what most people do.*

*What's tough is to go out and to work hard on
the things that you don't do very well.*

— Pete Rose

Success feels better than failure. So it makes sense that we're attracted to the things we do best. Even in trying to improve those skills, though, we continue to focus on "practicing" the things that are probably least in need of practice. Practicing behaviors we aren't good at is frustrating and a blow to our sense of competence. But isn't that the point of practice? That's why it's called "practice" and not "ego-inflating fun." With practice we hope to eventually banish frustration and incompetence. It is unfortunate that to get there we have to put up with the negative aspects of practice. As you think about an activity that's important to you, what aspects of it could use improvement? Are you practicing the aspects necessary to get the results you want?