

Interview with Jane Elliott

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Contrast, 28-3-96, by Mercita Coronel

EYE-OPENER: JANE ELLIOTT TEACHES EXERCISE AGAINST RACISM

Her experiment in the Oprah Winfrey show in 1992 became world famous. Jane Elliott (62) carried out her brown eyes, blue eyes exercise, a behaviour training that lets white people experience what prejudice and oppression does to you. What happens if you don't have any power anymore and are subject to arbitrary discrimination, just cause you have blue eyes? During the international week against racism Jane Elliott came to Holland. Mercita Coronel spoke with her.

"Who told you to sit down?" "Do I have to spell everything out for you, sit!" One participant of Jane Elliott's workshop walked out after one hour, another never returned from a quick trip to the bathroom'. Their blue eyes did them in. In Elliott's world brown eyed people form the majority and they have the power. Blueys are dumb, inferior, lazy and they steal. To emphasize their inferiority they have to wear a collar. For blueys the rules are always changing, at the mercy of the brown eyes. A blue eyed participant who walked out before attempts to get back in. Elliott is unrelenting, he's out. In the real world people of colour can't just step out. They don't have a choice. They can't take off their colour.

Get Elliott's kids. Elliott developed this behavioural exercise in 1968 after Martin Luther King was killed. As a school teacher in Riceville, Iowa she tried to explain the meaning of King's death to her all white students. Riceville was and is today a white, christian town with a population of a 1000 souls. And no racism according to them. Elliott devised the exercise -this is not a experiment she emphasizes- in which one day the brown eyed children are on top and the next day the blue eyed. "I choose a physical characteristic over which they had no control and attributed negative elements to this characteristic." Elliott choose eye colour because during the second world war eye colour was one of the ways for the nazi's to determine if someone was send to the gas chamber or not. Brown eyes could be fatal even if you had a beautiful German name. "I had no idea how it would work out. If I had known the enormous impact it had on my students and the community, I would not have done it." says Elliott. As a direct result of the success' of the exercise her four children were taunted, spit on and molested by their teachers, their classmates and the parents of their classmates. "From get the Elliott kids it became get the nigger-lover's kids" says Elliott.

Outsider Not only her children got it. The day after her appearance on the very popular Johnny Carson Show, the people in Riceville also decided not to buy from her father anymore. They feared black people would think that they all thought like her' and blacks would think life was good in Riceville and move over there in droves. Father Elliott went bankrupt. Of course this didn't go down very well in Jane Elliott's family. "My mother thought I'd gone crazy and asked me: can't you just stop with this nonsense? She has never forgiven me. My brothers, self-made millionaires and conservative Republicans wondered what the hell my problem was?". Her father, however, has never stopped her. In fact, it was his contradictory attitude that made Jane the odd one out in her family. "My father always said: 'never put a stone on another man's path' or justice will never be disadvantageous to man' or a just cause is a good thing'. At the same time he wouldn't have his daughters marry a black man. I thought that wasn't right . I was crazy about my father. It's a shame he was so prejudiced".

Oppressed position. From 68 to 84 Elliott did Brown eyes, blue eyes' with schoolkids. She was surprised every time again, about how the mechanics worked. " I administered this exercise to a group of children with dyslexia. Brown eyed children, who couldn't really read or spell anything without stammering, suddenly could spell words they couldn't before. On the other hand, I had a very smart girl who could multiply very well. The moment she as a blue eyes came in a inferior position, she started to stammer and making mistakes doing her sums. And we had been doing the exercise for less than two hours!"

With this Elliott wants to indicate how 300 years of oppression must have influenced people of colour. From 84 on Jane has been doing an adult version of brown eyes blue eyes in companies and governmental institutions; for a fee of \$6.000,- a day. To the Magenta foundation, who asked her to come to Holland, she didn't charge a dime. During her visit Elliott has trained nine people to do give the exercise in Holland. The group includes people from several anti-discrimination Bureau's, School Without Racism and from the Magenta foundation. Blue-eyed Ronald Eissens from Magenta says:"Even though I knew what to expect, I became completely stressed out within 15 minutes. Nobody tells you the rules, but then they change all the time anyway. You become nervous, feel pressured, you can't think or perform anymore."

Effect At reunions of former students of Jane Elliott who went through Brown eyes blue eyes', it becomes evident how it has influenced their lives in a big way. And not only their lives, as they pass it on to their children who will pass it on to their children.

Racism is still alive and kicking in the States, says Elliott. It became very apparent during the O.J. Simpson case. Elliott about his acquittal: "It wasn't so much for O.J. that blacks were glad he got of as they were happy about the fact that for the first time a black celebrity used the system in the same way whites have always used it to their advantage.

They saw O.J. more as a white person anyway. He behaved white, had white friends, white sponsors. The whites however said: 'O.J.'s only mistake was that he thought he was white just because he was a member of a white country club!'. Jane rejects the idea to think of the US as a melting pot: "It has to be a salad bowl. Everybody is entitled to have their own identity and has to be treated with equity.

Systems of Power It struck Elliott that the American list of discriminatory remarks like blacks are suspect and loud' and I'm not a racist, I have black friends myself'. were recognized by the black participants at the workshop in Holland. During the training, a Surinamese participant came to the distressing conclusion that discrimination is no accident but deliberate: "It is systematic!".

Participant Commissioner Johan Dietz from the Regional police force Amsterdam found the workshop impressive: "I came there with a behavioural therapist, both of us found it incredibly educational. From the moment you step through the front door, all kind of things happen to you. I wanted to introduce myself to Mrs. Elliott. Guess Again! At that moment it becomes clear how little you can do in a power structure where you aren't the one in power. Within a few hours I felt like I was some kind of loser." Dietz is considering to invite Elliott back to Holland to do workshops at police academies. Finally Elliott: "We learn to be racist, therefore we can learn not to be racist. Racism is not genetical. It has everything to do with power."