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Recommended Citation

St. Clair, Becky, "On Waking Up" (2019). *Lake Union Herald*. 840.

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On Waking Up

One Woman's Experience Becoming Woke

By Becky St. Clair



Provided by Becky St. Clair

▲ Becky St. Clair

DURING MY GRADUATE STUDY AT ANDREWS UNIVERSITY, I took a class called Issues in Intercultural Communication. Out of 17 students, I ended up being one of two white people, yet this was an intensely intercultural group. Including the teacher, the cultures represented by the class were Brazilian, Norwegian, Guyanan, Jamaican, American (various regions), St. Eustatian, Bahamian, Serbian, Haitian, Salvadorian, Ghanan and Venezuelan.

One night we were handed strips of paper and instructed to line up outside, shoulder-to-shoulder. We then read aloud what was on the paper: “If your parents are still married to each other, take one step forward.” Some of us stepped forward. Most stayed put.

Next: “If you are right-handed: one step forward.” With each statement we stepped or stood, depending on our experience.

“If you feel unsafe walking alone at night: one step backward.”

“If you can find Band-Aids in a mainstream store designed to match your skin tone: one step forward.”

“If you studied the culture of your ancestors in school: one step forward.”

“If English is not your first language: one step back.”

Finally, we were told, “Without leaving your spot, take a look around.”

Silence, as we all turned in place. I swallowed hard. Everyone, save for one who was merely one step ahead of me, was behind me. Some were nearly back at the line where we’d begun.

“The closer you are to this sidewalk,” she gestured to the pavement mere inches from my toes, “the more privilege you have experienced in your life.”

I felt confused. Looking at my childhood, I wasn’t privileged at all. I wore hand-me-downs. We had old cars and lived in an old neighborhood and the carpet in our house had holes. We even accepted a food box from the church once. Surely this wasn’t “privilege.”

Then, considering the statements read aloud mere moments ago, I began to realize that despite the discomforts of my childhood, compared to other realities I certainly was . . . privileged.

The weight of this realization nearly crushed me, and I immediately felt ashamed of ever thinking I’d had a “hard” life. I lagged behind my classmates and, in the building’s vestibule, I felt the tears welling in my eyes.

“Hey,” said a gentle voice. “Are you okay?”

In my watery vision, I saw a classmate — a tall, friendly pastor from L.A. — looking at me with concern. In a shaky voice, I told him how bad I felt. How stupid. How blind.

He asked quiet questions and listened, his hand resting gently on my shoulder. I answered him the best I could, still processing. It’s only in retrospect that I realize how ironic and absurd it was that a black man comforted a white woman for finally becoming woke.

This was, as I see it, the true beginning of my education. It drastically changed the path I walk, and I’m determined to keep going.

At least, until the next awakening. ■

Before moving to California, Becky St. Clair was the Media Communications manager for Andrews University.

Bloom Where You’re Planted

By Cheri Lewis



Courtesy Arlette Baptist

▲ Sheldon and Arlette Baptist

HER MOVE TO A SMALL COMMUNITY MEANT BIG CHANGES FOR ARLETTE BAPTIST. At least, that’s what it

felt like at first. Nearly four years ago, the now 27-year-old married her high school sweetheart, moved out of her parent’s home (in the Chicago Metro area), and took off on a new adventure to Oneida, Illinois, population 700. Her husband had landed a good agricultural job there and they made a point to visit the closest SDA church (Park View in Galesburg) as soon as they could.

Baptist admits the church experience was originally “jolting.” She and her husband, Sheldon, had grown up in Adventism and longed to stay as active as both sets of their parents. They were used to youth groups, activities galore, and well, worshiping with a large number of their peers. But, at Park View, they would be one of the only couples in their mid-20s. That said, Baptist describes how God had clearly led them there. Now, they just had to trust.

“We found ourselves organically committing to the church,” says Baptist. “It just kind of happened. We’ve really felt blessed attending Park View.”

But it’s been more than a feeling. She and Sheldon have actively engaged. She’s one of the music coordinators at the church (not only organizing, but playing piano, singing and, occasionally, strumming the ukulele). She’s the Women’s Ministry leader (undertaking an elegant prayer brunch, a secret sisters’ project, and a ladies’ get-away weekend, just to name a few). She’s been heavily involved in a teen girls outreach, and she and Sheldon host a small group study in their Oneida home. Baptist is quick to point out, though, her overall goal in ministry is “to God be the glory!” She admits to approaching any role/project the same way, “with a lot of prayer, time, effort and prep.”

Looking back, Baptist doesn’t think she’d change a thing. “I predict that if we had spent a lot more time with people primarily our age, we may have had a narrow point of view. It’s possible we would’ve even been part of the schism I see happening a lot between old and young [in our churches].” She’s a strong believer in building connections (and congregations) by focusing on “relationships with all generations.”

Like her faith, Baptist believes her time in Northwest Illinois has been a joy — not thanks to one large event but, rather, a series of little catalysts, “one small moment, leading into another small moment, leading into another.” And that can obviously happen, she says, whether you’re in a big city or small town. ■

Cheri Lewis is a freelance writer based in the Quad Cities in Illinois.

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 Indexed in the Seventh-day Adventist Periodical Index