

7/1/2020

We're All In It Together

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The year was 1994 or 1995. I was in graduate school for horticulture at one of those big-name colleges. It was springtime and all of us hort students were on an educational field trip to a region with quite a few growing operations, all of varying sizes and technologies. As a newbie to the industry, it was quite enlightening, really, to see the breadth of grower capabilities and, since it was prime shipping season, the number of people employed by the industry. Educational, indeed.

There's one particular stop and experience from that field trip that I think I need to share at this point in time. Even though it happened 25 years ago, I feel its weight even now. The story is simple. My group and I were touring one operation that was absolutely humming with employees doing their jobs quickly and efficiently. I'm hanging in the back of the group as I do. One of the local extension agents was near me. And he said to me (as I was the only

one near him at the time), "You know, they say that by 2013 that white people won't be the majority of people in the U.S."

I turned to consider him and the situation. What brought about his comment? Well, we were in the shipping bay of an incredibly busy greenhouse. The workers had complexions of all different shades of dark brown to mocha to cream to pale white. I'm pretty sure he couldn't understand the language or languages being spoken (nor could I). The people surrounding us, visibly different from him and I and definitely the majority of the room, clearly prompted the comment.

Why the comment to me? Well, his family knew my farming family and I had met him on one or two previous occasions. I'm also what I call a "Whitey Whitereson"—as in, there's no mistaking my heritage whatsoever. I'm as WASPy as they get. In fact, the only country I've traveled to where they don't immediately speak English to me is Germany (it's my coarse German hair that makes me look like a native). He may have felt comfortable bringing up an issue of race and ethnicity around someone he knew to be of a similar heritage.

Why that comment? I remember his look, the way he held himself. A tall, thin, older white man, graying to white. One arm crossing his chest, the other bent at the elbow and that whole hand cradling his chin, as if by holding his head in this way he was holding his whole self upright. I remember his face and I'm still trying to decipher its message. His expression was somewhat reminiscent of Jack Lemmon in "Glengarry Glen Ross" with worry, concern and anxiousness all rolled up in one expression.

At that time, I took his comment as an expression of concern for the future of the status quo. Something akin to: "Well, what's gonna happen if it's true? Then what?" It was unfamiliar and uncharted, the future. He seemed adrift in the uncertainty of it.

While we still tip toward the white male end of the spectrum, our industry is blessed with a diversity I don't see in many other sectors. White, black, brown, yellow, red, Euro, Latinx, male, female, trans, Asian, gay, straight, conservative, liberal, introverts, extroverts, hippies, sticks-in-the-mud, cussers, teetotalers, old, young, rich, poor, in sickness and in health, all in this together ... you get the idea. Even though my extension friend may not have seen it at the time, it's always been that way. We all can just see it better now.

Oh, my response to the guy? Well, I don't recall exactly. Something along the lines of "Ya don't say..." or some sort of noncommittal statement. I guess I was a journalist in training, even then. **GP**