

## Shoulda Known Better

Word of the incident raced through our junior high school like a fast moving brush fire. A white kid relocated from his Native Georgia to our Long Island middle school. You sense where this is going? In the hallway, the new arrival greeted the first black kid (Charles) he saw, with "Hey you, N-word. What you doin' here at this school? You don't belong here." Apparently, he didn't know better.

Born in the Bayous of Louisiana, Charles, a neighborhood kid, had heard the N-Word countless times, perhaps more than he could imagine. But since his family migrated north, he'd grown accustomed to life without racial epithets shouted at him, particularly the N-Word. Charles thought the new guy knew better.

Without so much as a word exchanged, Charles planted a hard right cross to his jaw, followed by a barrage of blows to his upper body. Within seconds, the kid crumbled to the terrazzo floor, blood streaming down his cheek and a pair of broken



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## Predispositions

My car snakes over a gentle rise on a winding county road. In the background, the majestic slopes of the western Virginia Mountain range appears in the distance. Magnificent eruptions of fall color dot the rugged landscape causing me to shake my head in awe of nature's beauty. Then, a thought shakes me out of this picturesque scene.

I replay my predecessor, Tom's, last words. "Over there, they're not so fond of city boys, outsiders, and especially blacks." And that description fits me to a tee, right down to my pinstriped suit and wingtip shoes. My color alone prohibits any hiding out. The replay of this verbal caution in my mind sends a wave of angst surging beneath my chest and churning in my belly. I've felt like this before. To be told that hatin' lives in these hills raises my fear index. I contemplate my options; what am I to do? It's too late now. I've already signed on!

Now retired, Tom had held this job for five years. He understood the territory, knows the players, and was long considered an insider. I'm none of those. From his perspective, the less time I spent there the better. Still,

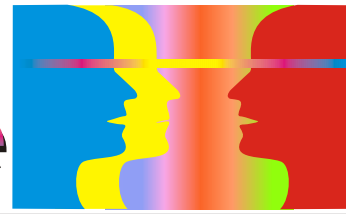
I've got a job to do and I can't back out now.

It's one thing for someone black to bring this to my attention. In other work environments, black colleagues would extend their support by giving me the "411" on the local politics. But when a white guy tells me to watch my back, well, rarely do I get that kind of privileged communication. Then my distrusting side kicks in and gets me thinking, is he just being a nice guy or is there some other ulterior motive? I can't tell for sure. I just started this job, but already my nerves feel fried.

At an early age, I learned to distrust most environments, albeit urban or rural. Nothing about an urban environment invites unconditional trust. And here in the country, age-old messages delivered to me in my youth now screamed up from my subconscious to distrust and protect myself. In opening up, you put yourself at risk. There was nothing in Tom's words that suggested this was a place to be open or trusting.

Still, with less than a month invested in the company pension plan, duty now called on me to earn my combat pay with clients in this rural abyss of the commonwealth.

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eyeglasses dangling from one ear lobe.

Even after toppling over, the kid persisted. At the top of his lungs, he shouted from the shiny floor, "You N-Word!" "I'll get you N-Word!" "This isn't the last you've seen from me N-Word!" "I'm telling my papa on you N-Word!" "You're going to pay for this N-Word!" The last word behind each declaration ended with the N-Word. He swore sweet revenge. You'd think he'd know better.

Not one of us, at least any of the black kids, had any sympathy for him. We reasoned his fateful day of reckoning had just finally arrived. For years he had operated without having to account for his use of the N-Word, but on this day, his license to hate was revoked. If not permanently, at least temporarily.

The next day, I watched him mope the halls. Now donning a puffy face, a primo shiner, and a new pair of glasses, he appeared out of sorts. In a school filled with Jews, a number of WASPs, and a handful of blacks, he got no affirmations for his hateful, N-Word epithets. He got no payback on Charles, and he got no support from his classmates.

Still, making his way through a mass of teenagers, I kept an eye on him. He might exact his revenge through a convenient surrogate, me! I couldn't be sure. I thought, if he lets loose with the N-Word again, I'll serve up a second helping of yesterday's beat down. But for a guy who only fights after being provoked, I was unlikely to raise my hands, especially after Charles' suspension from school. I should've known better.

Seems that every time someone uses the N-Word, a primal layer of inhumanity gets peeled back. It's like watching an autopsy; once you've seen one, like once somebody says the N-Word to you, you'll never forget it. You're left with the residue.

Take for instance, Michael Richards, the quirky character who played Kramer on the hit TV sitcom Seinfeld, who laid bare all his N-Word warts in one regrettable performance at an L.A. comedy club last fall. Afterwards, surrounded by a publicist, an attorney and a civil rights champion, Richards offered a timid apology, unlike his blasphemous rant using the N-Word the night before. He ruined it for me. Now, every time I see him all the warm feelings I had for his outlandish comedy turns cold.

Whether it is a well-known celebrity or lesser-known new arrival, I take umbrage. People from the black

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# Predispositions

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It was the last thing I wanted to hear; it was the last place I wanted to go; they were the last people I wanted to face. Can't I just do my job without all the hatin'?

Within seconds, my mind had constructed every worse case scenario imaginable. What if my car broke down on this seldom traveled stretch of road? What if I couldn't get to a phone for help? And worst of all, what if I ran into some yahoos? What if, what if, what if. And what was I to do?

Not for one minute did I consider Tom was trying to scare me ... but I did. Not for one second did I contemplate ways to avoid this territory ... but I did. Not for one instant did I give thought to quitting the job ... but I did. I don't scare easy, but neither do I take myself for a fool.

When in the south, historical lessons have taught me to make a habit of sticking to major interstates by daylight and to be settled into my hotel by dusk. But today is different. Today I'm driving a single-digit county road, miles from the nearest interstate or town. Just hearing the whooshing sound of my lonely tire tread triggers an involuntary gulp response in my throat.

At the first client's office I was greeted with an unexpected, yet genuine and warm, hospitality. A bit stunned, I offered introductory pleasantries, outlined my role, and presented an outline of our work together. My first assignment came off well, and with little time between appointments, I proceeded to the next client's office. I considered, "Now, that wasn't so bad."

Nearly the identical experience repeated itself with the next client visit, the one following, and the countless others made over the next two-years! Not once did I experience any of the alleged "hatin'" that had so clouded my mind before each visit.

Could Tom's assumptions have lacked merit? Or perhaps, during my visits, my horoscope was in harmonious alignment with the universe. Either way, I sure felt silly; fueling my initial and subsequent angst, especially after the company president surprised me with a letter of commendation. It turns out several clients had corresponded with him about my exemplary service. No consultant had ever been so

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community, in particular, can make no stronger case for its use. Whatever love there is in the phrase, "You are my N-Word," gets buried in the translation.

From its historical context, its disparaging nature, and its razor edge, the word's use has never set well with me. I remember every time someone shouted it at me. To take license, you'd think, by now, people would know better.

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### 30-Day Observational Practices - Taking Account

1. Note every time the "N-Word" has been used in your presence.
2. In both public and private, note, in detail, your reactions. What did you say to yourself? What exact emotion(s) was present? What sensation(s) was in your body? How did you move?
3. Do you have a different reaction when a black person uses the word than when a white person does? Just recall the event(s) without judgment.
4. What are you learning when

others use the "N-Word" in your presence?

If you find the practice questions of interest, and would like to explore your questions on "Taking Account" further, I invite you to take a personality style inventory on my web site at <http://www.dwhconsulting.com/survey.html>.

E-mail the results to me at [darryl@dwhconsulting.com](mailto:darryl@dwhconsulting.com) and indicate your wishes to schedule a complimentary 15-minute consultation on the results of this test and/or your own perceptions, defined through the questions and practices, and I will contact you.

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recognized.

Tom's caution taught me a valuable lesson. Being predisposed to somebody's alleged predispositions, may cause you to look for the very thing you're trying to avoid. Predisposition interferes with your ability to connect; predisposition keeps you on edge and leaves you gripping angst. Until you've experienced them, leave those sleeping predispositions to the pre-disposers.

### 30-Day Observational Practices - Predispositions

1. Notice the predisposition you might hold about people, circumstances and/or events.
2. Throughout each day, notice the predispositions you hold. What may have triggered them? What's the predisposition based on? Keep a journal.

3. How do you feel about these predispositions?
4. What are you learning about yourself and predispositions?

If you find the practice questions of interest, and would like to explore your questions on "Predispositions" further, I invite you to take a personality style inventory on my web site at [www.dwhconsulting.com/survey.html](http://www.dwhconsulting.com/survey.html).

E-mail the results to me at [darryl@dwhconsulting.com](mailto:darryl@dwhconsulting.com) and indicate your wishes to schedule a complimentary 15-minute consultation on the results of this test and/or your own perceptions, defined through the questions and practices, and I will contact you.

- Strategic Planning • Business Coaching
- Meeting Facilitation • Team Building
- Change Management
- Board & Leadership Development



# Face-2-Face Digest

For Information on the topics in this newsletter, or to arrange for training or speakers in the areas it discusses, please contact at us:

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