“Standing up to racism” – by Warren Ferguson

This week, we had the good fortune to have Dr. Camara Jones teach us about anti-racism in health care. Her allegory of the open/closed restaurant reminded me of a Worcester experience 20 years ago. It was my son’s 4th birthday party and we had decided to host a pool party at the Central YMCA in Worcester. We had a group of about 10 boys the same age swimming in the shallow, heated pool at the Y. It was perfect. I have a picture of about 6 of them trying to dunk me. It makes me smile to remember that moment.

My experiences before and after that time in the pool are more sobering and uncomfortable. As we entered the family locker room, I encountered a young mother and her three children, all patients of mine. I knew they were living in a homeless shelter. I was very fond of this courageous woman who worked hard to leave an abusive relationship to protect her children and herself. I asked if she was here with the kids to use the gym or pool. She smiled and said no, they were there to take long, hot showers. She explained that the family shelter was a very busy place and that one was always rushed in the bathroom. On Saturdays, she brought her family here to take their time and enjoy their showers. She was clearly proud of her resourcefulness. I remember feeling startled by their reality. But it was what happened after playing in the pool that I will never forget.

There is a small resource room off the foyer where the rest of the party took place and that room has a window into the foyer. As we cut cake and gave out small gift bags, I looked over at the window and the three children for whom I provided care looked awestruck and longingly through the window. Three brown faces staring on one side of the glass and all white faces on the other. I immediately invited them for cake and some fun. The youngest, a boy about my son’s age, looked at the pile of birthday presents on a table in shock. He had never had a birthday with more than one present. To this day, I wish I had coaxed my son to offer him one of his presents. At least, I was able to give them small gift bags.

A few of the parents standing in the periphery were visibly uncomfortable. A guy who I did not like from my Shrewsbury neighborhood appeared to be seething. He did not say a word, but his anger was palpable. I pretended not to notice. Maybe I should have said something?
I have thought about that experience often over the ensuing years and wonder what happened to that mom and her now grown children. They moved out of state about six months after that day.

This week, those who taught our faculty development sessions on racism, had a vigorous discussion with Dr. Jones about “protecting our faculty learners from humiliation” (my words) as we teach about racism. We talked about white privilege, given the white luxury of being able to “not think about racism”. Dr. Jones was curious about the concept of humiliation and postulated that it likely stemmed from a self-portrait of being further along in one’s anti-racism development than perhaps was the case. “I think that we all need to envision ourselves as the Emperor without clothes on this journey”, she said and went on to say that she has vowed to herself to call out racist behavior when she sees it, in as constructive a way as possible. I say AMEN to that as I think about those three faces on the “closed” side of the window, their innocence shaken by that moment of truth, “have” on one side of the window and “have not” on the other.