



Reconsidering Racism: The Midwives Alliance of North America 2007 Conference held jointly with the International Center for Traditional Childbearing (ICTC)

By Susan Hodges
Reprint from the 2008 CfM News

Panel on Racism

While there were many excellent workshops and presentations, probably the most unusual and important single event at the conference was a plenary session on racism with a panel that included both white and African American speakers. This is a topic that is rarely addressed head-on the way it was at the conference, but it is an important issue for midwives and midwifery advocates, because so far our organizations tend to be pretty separated racially. MANA is mostly white, ICTC is mostly black, and CfM is mostly white, and there are even fewer Latina, Asian or Native American women in our organizations. State groups tend to reflect this also. How can we understand the challenges and concerns of women of color, and women living in poverty, younger mothers, and other groups of women, if we are not talking with and listening to each other? ALL women deserve access to the Midwives Model of Care. The problems with maternity care are huge, and the organizations we are up against are powerful, so we need to be talking and listening and working all together to bring about change.

While the racism session was not a “comfortable” session, for me it was very enlightening and worthwhile. I am sure everyone came away with a different experience and different realizations and thoughts. Because I changed as a result, I wanted to share some of my experience and memories of this session. While there was a lot of excellent content in this session, I am going to share just a couple of comments that really stayed with me.

One of the speakers posed a question to the (mostly white) audience of conference attendees: How often do you think about being white? I kind of looked around and realized that for the most part, I don’t ever think about being white. I am not aware of being treated in any particular way, and I don’t think about it. That speaker, a CNM who is also African American, said that black women think about being black, all the time, every day, and that in her job, where she was the only professional employee of color, she was always second-guessed, checked up on, and aware of her race every single day, a source of continual stress. That really made an impression on me. I just had not thought about the privilege, the assumptions I can make about how I will be treated when I walk down the street, go to work, walk into a store, or whatever --- just because I am white skinned. And I had not thought about how I can go through my whole life basically without ever having to think about that, while people who are not white are having quite a different experience of living in our society. I realized that if I want to be part of ending racism, I have to start with myself. I can choose to be aware that in some ways I am blind, and I can reach out and ask for help to understand and to find out how I can be part of “the solution” instead of unconsciously being part of the problem.

At the end of the panel, there were questions and comments. One of the black attendees had the courage to speak honestly, and said that actually she was not feeling very welcomed at the conference. She said white attendees had not come up and greeted her or hugged her. My first thought was that, well, I hug my friends, but it is not my habit to go up to people I did not know and hug them, so what was her problem? But I could not stop thinking about this. I realized that the important part was that she did not feel welcomed. I haven’t ever thought about being a minority at a conference or anywhere else. But I recalled the very first MANA conference I ever attended. I was one of maybe 3 or 4 people who was not a midwife

or midwifery student, and I definitely felt “different”. At some point during the conference the then-president of MANA came up to me, introduced herself, and said “I’m glad you are here.” I don’t recall anything else she said, but I never forgot those words that made me feel OK, welcomed, included. I think that is what the honest woman at MANA was talking about. I realized that if I want to be part of breaking down the barriers of racism, I can go outside my comfort zone, I can turn to someone I don’t know, and at least introduce myself and say “I’m glad you are here”.

I think I always thought I was not “racist,” because I think I am not overtly or consciously racist, but these discussions made me realize that is not enough. Just by being white, I live as a privileged person in this society which, to a much greater extent than I would like to admit, is in many ways and on many levels inherently racist. Being unconscious of this just continues racism and injustice. I don’t think I ever really thought about that or understood that before. It is similar to when Marsden Wagner points out that “fish can’t see water,” referring to physicians not being able to see that there is anything other than the medical model that they practice.

I also had some additional discussions with some “women of color” at the conference. I shared how sometimes I might want to initiate a conversation with someone of another race, but feel like if I do so it will seem I am only doing so because they are of another race, and therefore is racist, so I end up doing nothing. Talking this through with them helped me understand that I only need to be honest with myself and with the other person, and I realized that I can reach out, even if it is outside my comfort zone. It will take many of us reaching out, taking a chance that another person will respond.

Since I came home from the conference in the fall, I have picked up the phone a number of times and called people that I would not have thought to do before the panel. That is just a small step, but it is a step. I want to keep this consciousness alive in myself, and spread it around! I hope that the panel will have positive ripple effects for a long time, through me and through all the other people who were there!