



The Amazing Biker Lady, The Black Man, and Me

September 29, 2017

Yes, it is so true. We are all biased. We all have conscious, unconscious, implicit and explicit biases. It is also true that we have people who prove to us in the moment of crisis that our biases are so often wrong and unfounded. I learned this lesson once again on a recent flight to Atlanta.

Yep, this is my newest case study. Me! I am a 61-year-old black man who has for 35 years dedicated his life to sharing and teaching about the importance of diversity and inclusion. In fact, I was one of five managing partners who established, led, and then sold the largest diversity and inclusion consultancy in America to a publicly traded Fortune 500 company. I have trained tens of thousands of people in the US and abroad. I have co-authored books, workbooks, and articles; developed training programs, and worked with some of the largest corporations in the world. I am also conducting groundbreaking research and writing another book on the intersection of diversity, inclusion, biases, and neuroscience with my long-term business partner, Dr. Janet Butler Reid. The book is entitled: *Intrinsic Inclusion™: Rebooting Your Biased Brain*. We are determining how to build new neural pathways that reduce

the impact of human biases. Also, we want to develop effective approaches to helping diverse people become intrinsically inclusive and be in sync with others different from themselves.

One of our three hypotheses is that a person can have a significant emotional event to stimulate a change in their previous biases. One such event happened to me on a Delta Air Lines flight to Atlanta on September 24, 2017. On a personal note, I have three sons and a grandson named Kayson. I have been married to a biracial woman (African American and Italian who identifies herself 'blacker than Angela Davis') for 36 years.

Here is my story. Count my implicit biases.

I travel often. One of the benefits of traveling so much nowadays is that I used to go to Virginia often after a long week of work to watch my son Adam play football in Hampton, Virginia, on Saturdays and then return home to Cincinnati on Sunday. On this particular Sunday, the early return flight started off as most others. My wife Valencia and I left for the Newport News airport as usual at 4:00 am. When we arrive, our custom is such that I take the bags and she returns the car. For this flight, it was different because Valencia's return trip was on American Airlines and mine was on Delta. We went through security together as normal, and because we do so often, we were greeted and recognized by some of the diverse TSA agents. Traveling in my trademark Chuck Taylor Converse shoes and Cincinnati Reds baseball cap, I was off and running (so to speak).

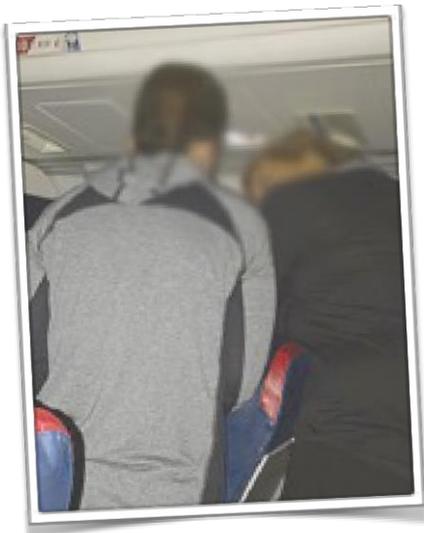


Traveling in my trademark Chuck Taylor Converse shoes and Cincinnati Reds baseball cap...

I remember looking at all the other diverse early-bird flyers (all sizes, races, colors, ages, sexual orientations, etc.) as we waited to board. The one thing we shared in common? Most everyone looked tired and sleepy. Nobody was really talking much except for two young white children who were being entertained by their stressed parents. Among the many travelers, I recall seeing a group of five white people traveling together, two men and three women. They stuck out in my mind because they were dressed in what I assumed to be "motorcycle biker gear." I distinctly remember thinking, "I wonder what these bikers are doing up so early." Also, for a fleeting moment I thought (since I was in the Commonwealth of Virginia), were they perhaps from Charlottesville at the recent protest?

Settling in.

The boarding process was uneventful (just as I like it). I said goodbye to Valencia as my flight was scheduled to depart 20 minutes earlier than hers. I boarded early and sat in my purchased comfort seat, with no one sitting next to me. "Great!" I thought, and smiled to myself, "I am traveling first class in row 14." The last two people that boarded the flight were African Americans. The first was a woman in her mid-70s, I suspect. The second was a black male who appeared to be in his early 50s. Both of them needed assistance to their seats in row 13, in front of me on the opposite side. The woman first needed assistance and she was kindly escorted by the white female flight attendant. I remember thinking when the black male was coming down about 10 minutes later, "Oh no, he is going to take away my comfortable first-class seating arrangement and sit next to me." I sighed with relief when he was seated in row 13, next to the woman. Again I noted, he too needed assistance. As they were settling in, the flight attendant told them kindly that they both had to put their canes up in the overhead bin. I thought, to myself, "Wow, so glad I don't 'cane', except when strolling with my Kappa fraternity brothers; yet, I do use my walking stick sometimes, when going on long walks."



About 20 minutes into the quiet, mostly dark cabin, with a few other workaholics like me with their lights on, I started working and dozing off simultaneously. Then I hear an ominous announcement over the intercom, requesting anyone with medical experience to click on their call button.

Now, totally relaxed and happy, I had a whole row to myself to spread out my work and to get ready for my short connecting flight to Cincinnati. I try to always do my expense reconciliation on my flight so that Pam, my long-time executive assistant, will not kill me. About 20 minutes into the quiet, mostly dark cabin, with a few other workaholics like me with their lights on, I started working and dozing off simultaneously. Then I hear an ominous announcement over the intercom, requesting anyone with medical experience to click on their call button. There was a medical emergency in-flight! I then turned around to look behind me to see what was going on. But nothing was happening behind me. To my surprise, it was right in front of me and virtually next to me in row 13. It was one of the two black people in row 13. My initial thought was, what happened to the elderly black woman?

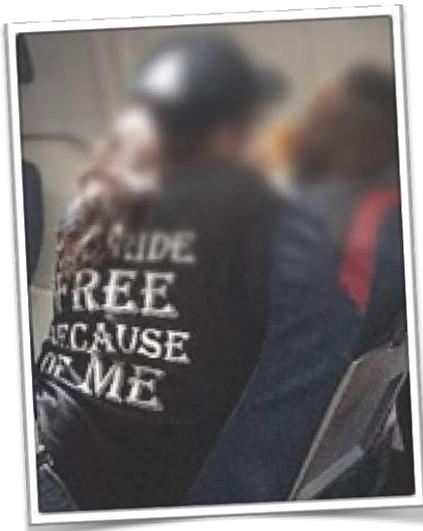
There was now a commotion right in front of me. Unfortunately, I now had a front row seat to a life-and-death situation. I was feeling anxious, even though I was not directly participating. Apparently, the younger black man had passed out, not the woman. The white

female flight attendant (the same one who had escorted both passengers earlier) was doing a great job. She was coordinating help and assisting the African American woman into another seat. This flight attendant's focus was to make room so that the man could get much-needed medical attention. He was now totally non-responsive to all her attempts to wake him up. I saw his body then go completely limp and motionless. He did not look like he was breathing to me. I immediately thought to myself, "Oh my God this 'brother' is surely dead!"

Then all of the sudden, it looked like an episode from the old TV sitcom M.A.S.H., when the choppers landed--without any of the humor, of course. Suddenly, this black man was surrounded by five white women, all strangers to him, and all working feverishly to bring him back to life. I thought to myself: first, he is so lucky to get this help and attention. Then I thought, why were they working so hard on someone they did not know and who was very different from themselves? White woman? Black man? My mind immediately went to a highly publicized negative airline event, where on another flight they requested someone with medical experience and a black female doctor was questioned and overlooked when she was prepared to help a fellow traveler who needed emergency medical attention. Why was this different? Who was the biased one now?

As I sat helplessly in my seat next to all this action, I thought, "I should have taken those CPR classes." But the truth is, this situation still would have been way out of my league. The only thing I felt I could do was pray for the man and the helpers. At that time, everything seemed to slow down when an overwhelming sadness came over me. Had I been an eyewitness to a black man just dying on the plane virtually sitting next to me? Who was he? What was he feeling? How would his family feel when they got this unexpected, terrible news? How terrible it is to die with total strangers? Now I was beginning to identify with the black man.

What if that were me? Then a slight bit of guilt also hit me. Just a few short minutes earlier, I was hoping that this 'brother' did not sit next to me so I could do some work! I prayed even more.



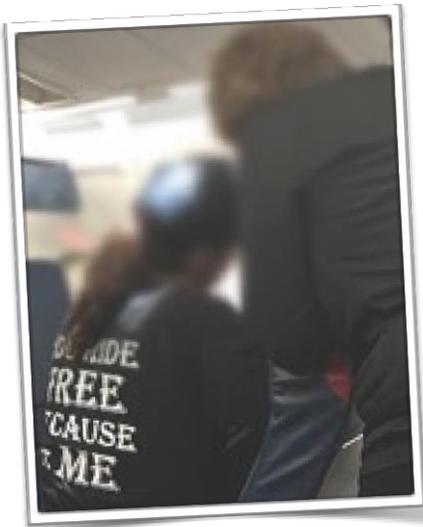
While all of this was going on, I also noticed that there was one woman among the five, who was now sitting next to the man. She had become the leader of the life-saving brigade.

Life-saving brigade.

The man was now surrounded by five white women. While all of this was going on, I also noticed that there was one woman among the five, who was now sitting next to the man. She had become the leader of the life-saving brigade. She was white, of slender build, with a long pony tail and wearing a hat. To my surprise, it was one of the ‘motorcycle biker women’ I saw earlier! She was cool, calm, collected, and focused. She had become the unofficial leader of the process, orchestrating a symphony of medical professionals working to save one black man's life. I immediately thought, "Black lives do matter." She talked to him gently, stroked his head and face with care, while she delivered and directed all the other medical interventions. She had not given up. While I was writing his obituary in my head, she and her team were working to bring him back. I was now rooting for this team of white women to succeed. This drama continued for 45 minutes in-flight.

I had already started to take some random pictures. That's when it hit me what I could do. I could document and witness this story to others. Watch this drama first hand, pay close attention to what was happening around me, and capture how I was feeling inside myself. Continue taking pictures, I said to myself. Capture your feelings along the way. I was now doing field work research on me, about me, and about my biases. I was now the case study for the work Janet and I were researching. I must admit, I felt a bit guilty about taking pictures, but rationalized to myself that this is what reporters must do.

I thought about what had been the most recent inputs into my head: Colin Kaepernick, Donald Trump, North Korea, Black Lives Matter, Charlottesville, Obamacare and a host of many thoughts and feelings had been bombarding my conscious and unconscious thinking, feelings, and emotions. I thought about all my own personal history of slavery, black men, white women, segregation, police actions, and much, much more. I remember all of my trips “back home” to Waco, Kentucky, during the years I was growing up. The fact is, I can trace my mother’s family from Waco, Kentucky, to Richmond, Kentucky, to the Broadus Plantation in Richmond, Virginia. Ironically, this is the same plantation where Harriet Tubman formerly served as a slave. I cannot help but wonder how these memories shape my thoughts and implicit biases today. I was also preparing for a major leadership training engagement, so I was reading new information on biases. Yes, I had now become an integral part of this life-changing and life- saving event--both as spectator and emotional participant. Who better to witness and document this situation?



What impressed me most, was that for just a few minutes the factors of race, gender, age, sexual orientation, regionalism, or being a biker was not the priority issue. This had now become the amazing mission of five courageous people--one of whom I automatically categorized as a ‘biker lady’.

Do our differences divide, or unite?

What impressed me most was, that for just a few minutes, the factors of race, gender, age, sexual orientation, regionalism, or being a biker were not the priority issue. It was not about the hurricanes, floods, or earthquakes. Nothing else seemed to matter but that a man's life was being saved by people on a plane. This had now become the amazing mission of five courageous people--one of whom I automatically categorized as a 'biker lady'. I would have never anticipated that life and death would be in her hands.



As the paramedics now entered the plane, they immediately went to work taking care of the man and talking to the Amazing Biker Lady.

To my total amazement, under this care—all led by 'biker lady', he slowly but surely was showing some hopeful signs of life. The lifeless, listless body was now showing small but significant movements. He started responding to questions through his oxygen mask. Life was creeping back into him. Hope had returned to me as breath had returned to him. I was starting to smile. My adrenaline and anxiety were starting to subside. He is going to make it, I hoped.

Once the plane landed, the captain ordered everyone to remain in their seats as the EMS crew came on board to take over. Now that the man was more stable, three of the five women had already returned to their seats and the flight attendant had returned to her other duties. They had ALL done their jobs well. Except for one 'biker lady': she continued to stay by the side of the man. The Amazing Biker Lady. By now, the man was conscious and somewhat alert. She continued to comfort him and talk to him and he started to smile. OMG! Had I just witnessed a miracle?

As the paramedics now entered the plane, they immediately went to work taking care of the man and talking to the Amazing Biker Lady. Now, it's worth mentioning that all four of the EMS caregivers were younger black men. She was like a doctor transferring her patient from one professional to another. She provided the name, vital signs, blood pressure, medicines, his recent surgery history, allergies, and other critical information to the EMS team. She was definitely discharging him from her care now. At that moment I said to myself, "wow, she must be a doctor." Why had I not seen that earlier? Why had that possibility never entered my mind? What stereotypes did I just exhibit (me, the so-called professional diversity consultant and expert).

Then, for the first time I heard her say her name was Michelle, as she was speaking to the lead EMS responders.

Miracles all around us.

As the man was now wheeled off the plane, he smiled at Michelle and said, "Thanks so much for saving me." She smiled back, "No problem!" She then went back to her own seat to retrieve her luggage from her other biker friends. On her shirt were the words, "You Live Free, Because of Me." Perhaps it should have read, "We All Live Because of We." After, the EMS team got the man off the plane, they hooked him up to more sophisticated equipment. It looked like he had definitely gone from good hands to good hands. At the same time, Michelle and the other fantastic four were completing an incident report with the airlines. She then went over to the man for one final time and said a gentle 'goodbye' while touching his shoulder, while he said goodbye and thanks so much. I felt really good at that moment.

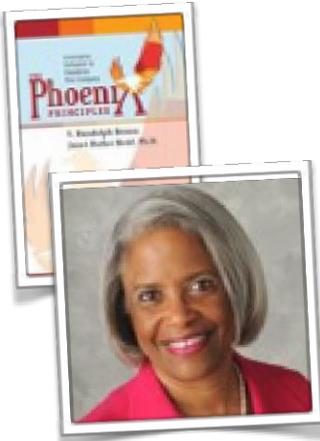


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I was now waiting for my next flight, which did not require a change of planes. This same plane was headed for Cincinnati, my final destination. How ironic, I thought; as usually my connecting flights are in some remote terminal or far away from where I had just landed. However, I could not leave the area for a cup of coffee without waiting to talk to Michelle after the incident. I had to share with her and her friends what I had observed; and to share with her and with the other bikers how fantastic she was. How she was amazing and had actually saved a life. In fact, I felt compelled to say thank you to her. I told her thanks for saving him even though I had no relationship with him. I also asked her if I could give her a hug and she said yes. We hugged, and with tears in my eyes that no one could see but me because I am a man, I no longer saw the biker gear or the Amazing Biker Lady; I just saw and held the Amazing Michelle. I found out that the Amazing Michelle was a surgical nurse from Wisconsin, returning home from a conference. It was a biker conference, and she was member of the ABATE of Wisconsin, and organization that gives the motorcyclists of Wisconsin a strong, united voice with regards to their future, their way of life, their safety, and their legal rights as motorcyclists and citizens.

The Amazing Michelle.

Vincent Brown and long-term business partner, Dr. Janet Butler Reid, are conducting groundbreaking research and writing another book on the intersection of diversity, inclusion, biases, and neuroscience.



**Dr. Janet Butler Reid,
Founder & CEO**

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**Vincent R. Brown, CEO
V.Randolph Brown Consulting**

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Michelle saved two black guys this day. And while I don't know the name of the black man she saved physically (and I pray he is doing well), she also saved me by again reinforcing the importance of my work, and reconfirming for me that good people come in all shapes, sizes, colors, and clothing. She restored my faith in the goodness of so many people. Further, that the words 'physician, heal thyself' and 'put on your mask first', are two important ideas to live by. These words of advice especially ring true for consultants like me. Finally, never judge the content of a book by its cover: old school advice passed down and shared by many. I, the diversity and inclusion expert, must keep working on ME so I can work better with, and for, others. The best teacher is also a continuous learner.

Now, don't get me wrong; race and gender are still two of the biggest unresolved issues of diversity that are a part of our experience and world we live in. We are truly divided in many ways. All of us can and should recognize our own biases while we are pointing out the biases in others. Importantly, we all need to be aware of our own implicit biases, acknowledge them, and learn from them. In every situation, we go through four phases: **observations, interpretation, mindset, and behaviors.**

Importantly, based on our emerging research, the Amazing Michelle's experience and images are now in my brain--a white woman saving a black man's life--and have been permanently embedded into my long-term memory as a significant emotional experience. It has created a new positive neuro-pathway for me on whites, women, nurses, and bikers. While I will always judge in a moment-- because it is human to do so--I will also reflect on the great example of the Amazing Michelle's courage and compassion in action.

I will likely never see the Amazing Michelle or that man again. But what I know about neuroscience is that her memory, that man, and my experience will be forever embedded in my brain. As important as this memory, I know the next time I see a white biker woman, my first thought will likely be positive.

As I left Michelle, I could hear her say to her friend Dave jokingly, "This better not show up on Facebook." Oops! Maybe I did not hear that. Thanks, Michelle.

Oh, by the way, doing my connecting flight to Cincinnati, the airplane blew the left engine on takeoff. Good thing we did not stay in the air any longer or this story would have never been shared. Another significant emotional event for me!