

An Aussie Confronts Racism in America: The Most Challenging Issue

Course: Racism in America: The Most Challenging Issue February 2018

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One of the seventy-eight learners who signed up for **Racism in America: The Most Challenging Issue** in February 2018 when the course made its debut was Sahba Clara Delshad. Sahba had “just recently moved to the United States from Australia for a job with BahaiTeachings.org.” In Australia, she worked for the State Government in Multiculturalism. “It is extremely saddening and fascinating for me,” she said, “to learn about racism in the U.S. as it is very different from that in Australia” But she went on to say that she is “passionate about learning how we at the individual, community, and institutional levels can through action contribute to race unity.”—THE EDITORS

How did Sahba, having recently settled in Oakland, California, in the United States, react to the course as she confronted a type of racism very different from the type she encountered in Australia? When she posted her Learning Self-Assessment at the end of the course she was honest about how difficult the experience had been:

“I felt that, halfway through the course, my level of depth may have lessened due to the heaviness of the material. It was extremely draining emotionally and mentally, and it also triggered and brought up memories of some physical bullying I experienced as a result of race when I was younger. I think this caused me to withdraw a bit and interact at more of a superficial level.”

But, when Sahba reflected on what she had learned in the course and what insights she had gained, she had many positive things to say:

“This course helped me learn more about the details and history of racism in the U.S., supplementing information I had gained from books and documentaries I had seen. I found the material emotionally intense and draining, so I did not access all of it, and I did need to step away. Some of my insights are these:

- That slavery did not really end. It just changed.
- That those who are supposed to provide justice are, in fact, the ones that have created the injustice: the government.
- That there have been positive efforts of unity building by communities and individuals even at times when racism and slavery was at its most intense.
- That the communities that have been so unjustly treated have great resilience and courage.
- That the systematic nature of the racism has, unfortunately, created some cycles of belief and action that create false perceptions of a community.
- That women are doubly marginalized because of the intersection of race and gender.”

Even though the course contained “heavy” material that caused her to find some space for herself, Sahba was honest about the skill she learned, about her new feelings and attitudes, and about her changed values and beliefs:

“I have been humbled to listen more than to speak and share my opinion.

I was extremely angered and saddened by the injustices. I also felt more faith in humanity’s learning about the other tradition.

I am trying to focus on the positive of moving forward and contribute to unity building initiatives, conversations, projects, and movements.

I always believed we were all one and was committed to social justice for all. I do feel I need to reflect more on what values of “love” and “justice” look like in my behaviors, words and intentions.”

Perhaps the hardest part of any course is what you do with your new learnings after the course ends, when there are no more weekly readings, no more questions, no more Forum postings. It is just you. Sahba looked back at her goals for the course and committed to keeping on with the passion she expressed at the beginning of the course when she said she was “passionate about learning how we at the individual, community, and institutional levels can through action contribute to race unity.” Among Sahba’s goals are these:

- I would like to share what I have learned with others in tactful ways, as I do often get angry about this issue.
- I will make a presentation to at least one person on my team at BahaiTeachings.org.
- I will share what I have learned with my local Bahá’í community and its Racial Justice/ Outreach to African American Friends Working Group.
- I will start a book club at my work starting with book *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* by Michelle Alexander and Cornell West.
- I will attend, contribute to, and/or participate in race-related spaces in the Oakland area at least once a month.
- I will pray once a week for the healing of the hearts that have been hurt because of racism and for the hearts and minds of the community and my own to open.
- I will listen more than I speak to learn language that is respectful and conducive to unity.

Racism in America may be different from that in Australia, but the remedies are the same everywhere. Sahba left the course with these words and actions:

“Thank you for offering something like this. I am actually on my way to Chicago. I work for BahaiTeachings.org, and we recently established an Advisory Council on Race Unity to help us learn how through our content we can play a small role in achieving race unity in America, both within the Bahá’í community but also with seekers. We are having our first face-to-face meeting this weekend! Even in my Uber ride this morning I was discussing race unity with the driver. Living in Oakland, I am constantly surrounded by opportunities to learn more about race unity, I feel very grateful for this opportunity.”