**VITAL SIGNS**

Perspectives of the president of APHA

### Allegory highlights dual reality of privilege

_When I was a medical student, I had an experience that shaped my understanding of how the world works. I had been studying all day with a group of classmates. Now that evening had fallen, we were keenly aware of our hunger, but there was no food to be found in the apartment. So we set out into town in search of food._

_We found a restaurant, went in, sat down, ordered our food, the food was served and we were eating. Not so remarkable a story, you might say. But as we sat there eating, I glanced up and noticed a sign on the door, and that sign was a profound revelation to me about racism._

_So what did the sign say? It said “open.”_ There I was, sitting at the table of opportunity, eating, with a sign proclaiming “open” to me. And I could have sat there a long time, comfortable and unperturbed. But I knew something about the two-sided nature of those signs. I realized that the restaurant was closed, due to the hour, and that hungry people just a few feet away from me would not be able to walk in, sit down, order their food or eat.

_And then I understood that racism structures two-sided signs in our society. Racism creates a dual reality. Those on the inside eating may not even be aware that there is a two-sided sign going on. Indeed, it is difficult for any of us to recognize a system of inequity that privileges us._

_It is difficult for men to recognize male privilege and sexism. It is difficult for white people in the United States to recognize white privilege and racism. It is difficult for all Americans to recognize our U.S. privilege in the global context, except that we got a little taste of it with the recent Ebola epidemic._

_But those on the outside are very well aware of the two-sided nature of the sign. It proclaims “closed” to them, but they can look through the window and see people inside eating._

_So for those on the inside who are asking, “Is there really a two-sided sign?” or “Does racism really exist?” I acknowledge that it is hard to know when you only see “open.” Indeed, it is part of your privilege not to know._

_But once you do know, you can choose to act. Acknowledging racism is not a scary thing; it is empowering. And if you care anything about those on the outside, then you can talk to the restaurant owners who are inside, near you — and encourage them to re-open the restaurant. After all, they will make more money. And, oh, the conversations you can have. Or you can pass food through the door, or break through the glass, or tear down the sign._

_But whatever you do, you won’t be sitting there saying, “Hmph, I wonder why those people don’t just come on in and sit down and eat.” You will understand something about the two-sided sign. And I hope that your understanding will move you to action. Email me._

_Camara Jones, MD, PhD, MPH president@apha.org_