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We find ways to distance ourselves from others

By David Whitfield | The Olympian's Diversity Panel • Published January 11, 2008

The first time I saw a white cross burning was on Mr. Moore's plantation. I was about seven, naive, and fascinated by its size and how it lit up the entire earth, as the huge flames reached for the sky. As I stared at it, I thought about pictures I had seen in a Bible; all the characters were white, dressed in white and carrying crosses. So I asked my mother if those people were from heaven.

She said "No, those people will hurt you; now get in the house!"

Metaphorically, I think we all see burning crosses daily and choose to remain silent.

With recent hate crimes, noose incidents, genocide, I wonder to what degree are we living, or trying to live, the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.'s vision? I also muse about what he would say about what's going on in the world in general and in this country in particular.

And it's not just about skin color, gender, size, and sexual orientation; it's about class, economic freedom, and the general welfare of each of us. Despite how much we rave about the economy, globalization and progress, the inequality gap between the haves and the have-nots is widening — economically, educationally, politically, and emotionally — affecting our ability to connect, to engage. We seem to be disengaged as citizens, organizational members and members of communities. Of course, there are exceptions to this.

Our disengagement is disconcerting because it means that we are silent, tuned out, removed. We seem to find effective ways to distance ourselves from others who don't look like us, speak like us, smell like us, or share our same interests. Many of us remain silent about the income gaps, learning gaps, equity gaps, about what goes on in our schools, the number of women illegally trafficked into this country and across the world daily, the number of children who go to bed hungry, and the number who die of hunger daily, by the hour. Those are just a few examples.

By remaining silent, we give credence to these injustices imposed upon those who have little or no voice.

What would King say about these events? What would he say about our silence? And what keeps us from being engaged? What keeps us from speaking up? Is it apathy, complacency or both?

Are the white crosses burning in your front yard, metaphorically? When crosses burn in our life, we need people to care, to fight, and embrace his vision, to be engaged.

Being engaged has to do with knowing who we are, what we value, and what we stand for. Do we really stand for his dream?

For many of us, white crosses are burning, flames are soaring; we are hurting each other. "So, what now?" you might ask. I have offered an unflattering version of reality as I see it. It is not fun or easy to believe. My question is, if you see crosses burning, a person being threatened, a child being abused, do you have the fortitude to emotionally engage, to challenge injustices, to help us move toward MLK's vision?

