

## “The Color Wheel”

When we began this course, “Etching Away Bias in Healthcare,” I was appalled by the experiences that many of our patients described. The blatant cruelty that fatphobia inspired was disappointing to hear about. At first, I listened to these stories and fed my own ego, recognizing that I would *never* say such horrid, obviously-stigmatized statements to another person. And yet, one bout of self-reflection pushed me to recognize an ugly truth - while I may not engage in outright fatphobia, I know that I have internalized it to some degree and that internal stigma can still manifest itself. This thought process inspired me to create the piece you see before you. Upon first glance, “The Color Wheel” seems to be a warm and inviting piece. Its velum panels are bathed in soft pastels and the letters etched at the top of each sheet glow in their cheerful hue. As you glance inside the piece, you see bright strings in an exciting array, all attached to the lantern within. My first glance at this work fills me with a sense of comfort and joy.

However, take another look at “The Color Wheel.” The velum panels are meant to be somewhat transparent - as you look through them, are you able to see the lantern within? You may be able to make out its shape. Can you describe that shape in detail? How about the color? There is a candle within the lantern - would you trust yourself to light it if you were only looking *through* the vellum? Now, take a look at those bright letters at the top of each page. How do those statements make you feel? Does that feeling match the letters’ colors? Some of these phrases I have heard spoken to myself or to my friends; others, *I* have ignorantly spoken in the past. Finally, glance inside the piece. Do you notice the phrases at the bottom of each panel? These are the conclusions that could be drawn from the corresponding statements in the front. Does the nature of these conclusions match the brightness of their letters? There seems to be a great dichotomy between the visual cues of this piece and the messages that it conveys. Such is the nefarious nature of internalized stigma.

The outer comments on this piece were all well-intentioned. When spoken, they meant to build another person up and yet, in reality, they were rooted in fatphobia. Though the colors of this piece are so joyful, that does nothing to diminish the cruelty of the comments that they

display. More than that, these well-intentioned microaggressions occlude our vision of the person to whom they are directed (ie the lantern). Someone might suggest simply removing the wall of color from around the lantern - but it is not so easy. These comments knot themselves around the receiver; colorful though they are, they work to ensnare and entrap. Not only is our vision as an *outsider* blurred, but the vision of the person *within* is blurred as well. They must look through these walls of stigma to view the outside world; along with that, they have to deal with the conclusions at the bottom of each sheet. Is this fair or just?

As health professionals, our internalized stigmas play a significant role in the lives of our patients. How can we hope to nurture the flame within our patients if we have to look through the walls of our own well-intentioned microaggressions? The person behind our stigma already does enough work to battle these comments - should we not do our part to address what we have internalized? These are the thoughts I hope to leave you with as you look at this piece

Grace Thomas

