

Struggling with Racism – Inside and Out

I grew up in a good family. Our parents instilled in us, non-negotiably, the notion that everyone on this planet was equal, regardless of race or color, and that we were never to look down on anyone or consider ourselves superior to anyone. The very idea of racism or racial privilege was repugnant to me. Every moral fiber in me was anti-racist.

But I also grew up in a white family in a totally white community in a totally white rural area. The only non-whites I ever saw were one Chinese couple who ran a local cafe, and they kept to themselves. The only Afro-Americans I ever saw were athletes on television, playing football, baseball, and basketball. Our entire community was white. I can honestly say that I never talked to a non-white person before I went graduate school in my early twenties. I had no experience of relating to other races, even as every bone in my body told me I was not a racist.

After my ordination to the priesthood, at the age of 25, my religious community, *the Oblates of Mary Immaculate*, sent me to San Francisco to do a graduate degree in theology. By then, thanks to my later seminary studies in Edmonton, I'd already had some minimal contact with Afro-Americans and Black Africans, all of which had been positive and friendly, reinforcing my naive sense that I was above racial prejudice.

I was due for an unpleasant awakening. To help pay for my studies while studying at the University of San Francisco, I served as a chaplain at a hostel for young women, one block off the infamous Haight-Ashbury corner. I was a naïve farm boy and this experience stretched me immensely. There were number of young Afro-American women there and I got to be good friends with some of them. One night, sitting with two of them in my office, one of them said to me: "You know, Father, you're a racist. Now you're a nice racist, but you're still a racist. You don't have the same ease with us as you have with the others here." She didn't need to elaborate. Her words, though spoken without judgment, stung; I knew it was true. I was a racist (even if I was a nice one).

Well, as T.S. Eliot says, home is where you start from. Recognizing the truth of what had just been told me was a wake-up call, a beginning, a place to start from. I asked these two women to help me, to help me move beyond feeling safe and trusting only in what was familiar and home to me, and they helped me with my "nice" racism even as I helped them with some of their issues which had more to do with broken relationships and broken hearts than with race. One of them even took me to a gathering one evening where I met a couple of militant Black Panthers. They were very nice to me and I was somewhat awed by that, as if their respect somehow helped erase my whiteness. I was twenty-six years old when that happened, my ministry just starting, and grateful for the awakening.

I have been extraordinarily blessed since, serving within our Oblate missionary community. My ministry has had me living in different communities in different parts of the world and ever since those embryonic years in graduate school when I made my first friends across racial lines,

I have almost always lived in multi-racial communities, worked closely with women and men of various races, and have made very close friends across racial lines. But this doesn't erase the way I grew up; nor is it supposed to. I still treasure the home I grew up in, even as I now treasure deeply the multi-racial homes that I have lived in for most of my nearly fifty years since.

But, am I still a racist? I would like to think not; but I keep having other awakenings. I am now pretty comfortable one on one with most everyone and feel anti-racist inside every moral cell inside me; but, but ... just as I breathe in the air of whatever city I live in, I breathe in too in our culture a collective unconscious racism, a white privilege, which mostly, like air I breathe, I don't see. What's implied here?

Bryan Massingale, a theologian at Fordham, in a recent article in the *National Catholic Reporter*, reflects on a now-famous incident that took place recently in Central Park in New York City. A black man had told a white woman to obey the posted signs that required her to leash her dog in a public park, she told him she was going to call the police "and I'm going to tell them that there's an African American man threatening my life."

Why did she act this way? What prompts this kind of behavior from someone who might well be a nice person?

In Massingale's assessment there was more underlying her action than can be simply blamed on her. She has, no doubt, for her whole life been breathing in a certain air of which perhaps she is not really conscious. The cultural air she breathes and moves within gives her an inchoate set of assumptions – assumptions that cannot be explained by anything other than racial superiority, however unconscious. Here is Massingale's assessment:

She assumed that her lies would be more credible than his truth.

She assumed that she would have the presumption of innocence.

She assumed that he, the black man, would have a presumption of guilt.

She assumed that the police would back her up.

She assumed that her race would be an advantage, that she would be believed because she is white.

She assumed that his race would be a burden, even an insurmountable one.

She assumed that the world should work for her and against him.

She assumed that she had the upper hand in this situation.

She assumed that she could exploit deeply ingrained white fears of black men.

She assumed that she could use these deeply ingrained white fears to keep a black man in his place.

She assumed that if he protested his innocence against her, he would be seen as "playing the race card."

She assumed that no one would accuse her of "playing the race card," because no one accuses white people of playing the race card when using race to their advantage.

She assumed that he knew that any confrontation with the police would not go well for him.

She assumed that the frame of "black rapist" versus "white damsel in distress" would be clearly understood by everyone: the police, the press and the public.

She assumed that the racial formation of white people would work in her favor.

She assumed that her knowledge of how white people view the world, and especially black men, would help her.

She assumed that a black man had no right to tell her what to do.

She assumed that the police officers would agree.

She assumed that even if the police made no arrest, that a lot of white people would take her side and believe her anyway.

She assumed that man who asked her to leash her dog could and would understand all of the above.

And she was right.

This is the very definition of white privilege, privilege I grew up in and have for most of my life failed to recognize.

Massingale's words took me back forty-five years to that little office in San Francisco where I heard a gentle, non-accusatory voice say to me: "Father, you're racist. Now you are a nice racist, but you're still a racist." I know again its truth and now further understand its meaning. I can protest that I'm not a racist, but protesting my own innocence and separateness doesn't change the brute fact that I'm living in and in multiple ways supporting a cultural (and, sadly, sometimes religious) ethos which privileges me as a white man while it dis-privileges others. Massingale simply articulates it more clearly than we, nice people, would like to hear.

We can be good-hearted and still be racist, albeit as my friend said all those years ago, a nice racist. Our good-heartedness and our racism can comfortably co-exist inside us because we can be blind to what we are not at home within and to a racist cultural ethos we live within and support, openly or tacitly. The killing of George Floyd and the massive international protests that followed upon it are helping many of us understand that while we may be nice racists, we're still racists, and while our society and culture may also be nice, it too is still racist. And, partly, it's our niceness that needs to be confronted by *Black Lives Matter* and other such movements. Moreover, as this movement confronts us we need to accept too that like all massive movements (political, social, or religious), like any "great march", it will not come to us pure. It will contain some very mixed and malevolent agendas. But, despite that, we must still let it challenge us to recognize and confront something unhealthy in ourselves and in our culture, beneath our niceness.

Recently too some critics have also suggested that the slogan *Black Lives Matter* should be replaced by the slogan *All Lives Matter*. All lives do matter; but it's just that, up to now, black lives and the lives of others who have been subject to racial prejudice have not mattered as much as the lives of the rest of us. Black lives haven't mattered as much as my own life and I need to recognize that – even if I am a nice person.

Racism is like alcoholism and every other addiction. Once you've got it you can never speak of yourself as definitively cured; but you can, and should, move yourself "into recovery".

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