

## "Mommy, There's a Nigger at the Door"

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"Mommy, there's a nigger at the door who says he's collecting money for the paper," the 5-year-old White boy screamed as he summoned his mother. When a middle-aged White lady dressed in corporate uniform came to the door with \$1.25 to pay me for the paper I'd delivered, she greeted me with a half-hearted smile and a few words of gratitude. As I turned around to continue my collections for the day, I, an 11-year-old Black boy, was crushed. I felt small. This was not the first time I had been confronted by White racism, but it *was* the first time I'd experienced it from a well-taught "baby" racist.

In retrospect, I remember resenting the mother, who I concluded must have been directly responsible for, or had at least condoned, the White supremacist rites-of-passage in which the boy had been immersed. I disliked that this child was tragically inducted without conscious choice to a "society" of humans who deemed themselves fit for superior status over other humans who didn't look like them. Later, I began to think about this woman. She seemed to me to be the kind of person who you'd want to confide in or you'd feel compelled to greet if you saw her at the grocery store. Then, I began to blame the influential persons who must have oriented that mother to supremacist ideology. And, I also wondered if I should blame myself; I wondered if I was at least partly responsible. I decided that I couldn't have been. After all, it wasn't my fault that my physiognomic qualities were contested and despised. Nonetheless, I felt that I was marked, that I'd been designated a space in which to live. I hadn't considered that it was my choice whether or not to live in that space. At that age, it's hard to tell what things are fixed and what things are contestable.

As children, we humans attempt to configure our surroundings, evaluating the safe and unsafe places, people, and things. We determine the rewards and costs of certain kinds of relationships, and we define our identities based on our interactions with others. The anecdotes I provide are painful episodes of racism from my adolescent years. Needless to say, my interpretations were intercepted by social dynamics that preceded me and that I felt were out of my control. Therefore, every cross-racial encounter became especially meaningful in shaping who I am today. Yet, there are those outstanding personal experiences, which are

overwhelmingly negative, that function as constant signposts reminding me of things I will not tolerate and principles I must maintain. By explaining my personal background, a few racial episodes and anecdotes, a coping strategy for racism, and implications of racism for the helping professions in general, this essay implicitly argues that self-exploration and monitoring is the key to human and spiritual evolvment, racial cohesion, and being an effective scholar-professional. I believe that the processes of self-exploration and self-definition begin in early childhood as we emulate our parents' behaviors, gestures, and attitudes.

### PERSONAL BACKGROUND

For the past three generations, my family has lived in the northernmost midwestern part of the United States, where we often joke that racism is hidden in the honey. People from the South come to our hometown to visit, and they swear that there's no racial tension anywhere. I think the notion of racial color blindness was born in the North. My parents were raised in both White and Black neighborhoods. But, they raised my brother and me in White rural and suburban areas. These were places where, if I wanted a Black girlfriend, I'd have to travel a distance that was not conducive to my 10-speed bike. One day, I saw this beautiful girl with pretty blue eyes and long, stringy hair. I decided to pursue her. So, I approached her, and we talked awhile. Finally, she gave me her phone number, and the first time I called she politely explained to me that there would be no way that we could date, because her father would not allow her to date a "Negro." I was floored. Depression set in quickly, and I vividly remember being emotionally paralyzed. I never wanted to feel that way again, so I vowed from then on to avoid all intimate involvements with White females.

However, at an early age, I did develop genuine friendships with White males. We played together, but for some reason we didn't do too many "sleep-overs" and "eat-overs." It never bothered me though, because I really didn't care about anything except having friends with whom to play. My mother always told us that acquaintances would always come and go, but family would always be there, so my brother and I were encouraged to develop a strong friend-

ship with one another. My mother had White friends, and so did my father. I noticed that their Black friends, however, tended to be more permanent. To this day, I can't think of any White friends my mother still has. My father has one. My parents' Black friends are abundant. Over the years, in passing, I've heard both of my parents comment about distrusting or feeling suspicious of certain Whites. I observed my parents intently trying to gather clues on what race meant to them. In a way, I guess I was searching for guidance. I didn't know how I should feel about these people, some of whom I'd called friends and others who'd called me "nigger."

In elementary school and high school, I had at least two close White friends. The friendships developed at schools in two states, but in both cases, these close-knit friends of mine ended up terminating our relationship not long after we graduated. It wasn't done in any formal manner; it could probably be described as abandonment. I rationalized that our friendships must have been based purely on convenience. I have never let a White person get that close to me again. As I write this, I find it interesting that I have connected these disrupted relationships with race. I remembered what my mother said about friendships coming and going. Yet, the race of my White friends was the only common ingredient of those lost friendships that at the time made sense, given that I'd also been informed about the link between "Whiteness" and some Black people's general distrust of Whites.

### RACIAL EPISODES AND ANECDOTES

As I recall, my first racial confrontation was at the age of 7, when I was called a "nigger" by a few school-age kids on my way home from school. Until then, I hadn't clarified for myself what it meant to be Black. This was around the same time that my classmates were curious about my physical characteristics. So, they asked if they could touch my hair, face, and skin. They were especially intrigued by the hair texture. "Wow, it's like cotton," they exclaimed. They put their White arms up next to mine and didn't say anything. I never knew what their silence meant. I touched one girl's hair just to offer a mutual gesture, but I remember not really being as intrigued as they were. This was one of the few emotionally neutral moments related to race that I had. I didn't feel happy or frustrated, intrigued or repulsed. I was left with no real intense expression or mood at all. Oddly enough, that is what made that one neutral encounter stand out for me. High school was a different story though.

The high school children screamed, "Sambo! Sambo! What's up dude?" They were talking to Sam, a Black boy who'd just been admitted to the school—increasing the Black student population by 25%. What makes this episode so unique is the composition of the student body at the school. I went to a secondary school that was for advanced students, so the average freshman was 10 to 12 years old. I am still amazed that these adolescent preteens knew about Sambo. We hadn't studied minstrel figures in history or English

class. So, they had received this information elsewhere. Admittedly, I was aloof. I had no idea at the time that they were insulting Sam. I thought it was just a play on words to call him Sambo. But, they were really alluding to a blackface minstrel figure with big lips, brown eyes, and exaggerated physiognomic features. The students masked their obvious curiosity about Sam's race by hurling negative comments at their peer. When I reported it to the school's administrative office, no one seemed at all surprised. They told me they would talk to the boys. I continued to confront this puerile ignorance throughout high school and college; even now it persists among my professional colleagues.

It would seem that older adults (ages 30 and higher) would be more mature and sensitive to race issues. But I guess those extra years of adulthood just concretize earlier racial assumptions, beliefs, and values. I taught at one university in which one White American faculty member, during dinner, began questioning an Asian faculty member about what his culture thought about the assortment of issues outlined by this White faculty member. I finally tired of the interrogation and remarked that the Asian faculty member should not be held responsible for delineating all Asian perspectives on these issues. Not only was it unfair and inconsiderate, but it was unrealistic to expect him to do this with complete accuracy. I am continually amazed by some of the things that come out of faculty members' mouths. I have even heard unjustified insinuations by White faculty that the Black students were the least intelligent student subpopulation on campus. So with racial prejudices like that, imagine what these faculty take into the classroom. For this reason, insults, Freudian slips, and inappropriate jokes are part of the everyday professional parlance in most institutions. Perforce, racism survives because personal lived experiences, whether positive or negative, dictate interactions with others.

### A COPING STRATEGY

At some point, I actually became immune to these racially charged negative comments. I am not suggesting that the insults and remarks don't bother me, but that I no longer feel deflated as a result of hearing them. I've discovered that the few of my friends who dislike most Whites are reacting to their multiplicative encounters with Whites that have eventually turned sour. I don't know of any one Black individual who is hateful of Whites for no reason at all or merely because of their White skin color. In fact, I've heard many Blacks say that "racism is not our problem." They rationalize that Blacks did not create it, nor are they responsible for its immediate presence, therefore Blacks cannot dismantle it alone. Still, some coping strategies are counterproductive. Combative warfare in the form of Blacks' physical violence toward Whites or of Whites toward people of color is not the right answer. For some, it seems justifiable for the moment, but then they realize that it is impossible to physically punish all Whites every time racism is experienced.

I have learned to cope in different ways. The most prevalent way is through my research and teaching. I have engaged myself in a lifelong critique of identity, particularly that of Whites and Blacks. I am concerned about how and why racism began and has been sustained. Also, I am inspired by this personal quest to uncover what Whiteness really is and why many Whites don't claim a specific cultural heritage, but would rather be "just American." I treat almost everyone the same, but I am not naive about race. I cringe when I hear people say the following things:

- I don't see color; you're not Black, you're just human.
- My best friend is Black.
- There's only one race—the human race.
- Everyone is equal, so why do we need social equity programs like welfare?
- I understand the struggle of your people.
- As a woman, I know what you go through as a racial minority.
- Do you play basketball? (Because I am tall and Black)
- Your people are so talented.
- You are so articulate.

I find myself not only fatigued but plagued by the following:

- Reports that overemphasize Black crime while White crime is mildly mentioned.
- The popular perception that Blacks are either entertainers or athletes.
- Negative media bombardment of Black males.
- Corporate closeting of racism as opposed to using real preventive measures.

It is virtually impossible for a person of color to reach adulthood without ever experiencing racism. I would guess that most Blacks, for example, have probably been confronted by racism at least once before the age of 15.

### IMPLICATIONS

So, I have a problem with people who say that racism does not exist—that it is anathema to the current sociopolitical climate. It is *the* central bacteria in our society, which prevents the possibility of social cohesion. And, it begins in early childhood for some people. I once heard a college professor contend that there is a distinction between adult and "baby"

racists. I found his comments fascinating, because for that moment I'd felt that we'd traveled the same life path. He was giving voice to my personal history, characterizing and embodying the essence of my pain. For a brief moment, I actually wanted to know his story. I wondered what motivated him to teach about cultural issues. For me, the answer is clear: I was devastated by the indelible mark that racism left on my mind and spirit. It literally drenched me at almost every stage of my life. I came to believe that Whites owned race hatred, and I figured that every bigoted individual I came across was just "renting" or had inherited this brand of evil from Whites. Luckily, I am over that now, but some of my scars are still healing. Every time that I recall one of those episodes of racism, I feel those same scars sting.

As marginalized human beings in whatever discipline or profession, we are profoundly affected by race in America. It is something that forces us to "negotiate" our cultural identities on a daily basis. Many Whites, having been protected from this code-switching mandate, often do not realize that racism exists. Code switching refers to the alteration of behavior out of personal necessity due to some external influence. I think that because they do not experience or perpetuate it individually, it is difficult to fathom how it takes place. Whiteness never has to be defined, but blackness must be explicated and defended by Blacks to protect African American cultural space. As we professionals become aware of how our own biases contribute to a racially hostile social climate, then we are moving that much closer to eliminating these biases from the human equation. Certainly, there are people with encounters similar to mine, and they are constantly reminded about these situations due to the stigmas attached to race. Personally, I will always remember the day when that 5-year-old said, "Mommy, there's a nigger at the door." It reinforces my awareness that racism is not just resident in the minds of the adults, but the seeds are often planted in the virgin minds of children. Children must also be taught to discard race hatred.

Counselors, therapists, and other helping professionals must do self-evaluative inventories to prevent projection, transference, and counter-transference onto those we intend to help. By revealing to ourselves those narratives, critical incidents, and personal signposts related to race, I am convinced we are becoming better prepared to assist in ameliorating the human condition.