

Scott Campbell

The Racism Within Us

Last week, a young woman, a 2015 graduate of St. Johnsbury Academy and Peace Corps volunteer recently evacuated from Senegal, West Africa, emailed me. She is white, but was deeply disturbed by the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officers. She wanted to rally the public around racial justice. She planned to use her skills as a graphic artist to create a sign people could post showing their support.

I was impressed with her sincerity and wanted to support her effort. I suggested a press event, she agreed, and I emailed about 40 local institutional leaders, with an emphasis on police, corrections and the local prosecutor. I didn't think to start with the community of color, in particular Sha'an Moulert, a local leader I knew of but did not know personally.

A number of people called me on that oversight the very next day. Late that afternoon, following House floor and committee Zoom meetings, I had a long phone call with Ms Moulert and the young woman who started it all.

Racism infects all of us, whether we're aware of it or not. I fancy myself pretty aware and conscious of countering it. I am myself one-quarter Korean, and though I was raised on the "white side of the tracks," I have realized since I was young that if I were one-quarter Kenyan, say, I would be "black": a difference of merely a few letters, whether of the alphabet or the genome.

Yet I, woke white(-ish) man, missed the obvious.

Would it be best to call on a man to lead a women's march? or a straight person to lead a LGBT demonstration? No. The young SJA alum decided to step back, and she and I canceled the press event.

It's true that racism dehumanizes

both parties, oppressor and oppressed. And that, I think, is where the young woman's activism sprang from: White people, reform yourselves. In itself, it's an honorable motivation. But if racism is a character flaw for white people, it's a life sentence for black people. The experiences are not comparable.

The ways in which racism is an ignoble founding principle of America, and has been woven into the fabric of our society ever since, would take hours — years — to recount. But briefly: citizenship originally stipulating "white men;" Jim Crow laws restoring slavery in all but name; lynchings; miscegenation statutes outlawing "mixed marriages;" redlining by realtors and bankers, keeping blacks out of "white areas," and further skewing the accumulation of wealth away from blacks. "Driving while black" sounds funny but it's not a joke: blacks are 12% of U.S. population but over 36% of inmates. And on and on (and admittedly missing even more profound markers).

It's got to stop. And we — all of us — have got to stop it.

Most important, by remaining stuck in oppression and resistance, our society misses celebrating all the ways African American culture immeasurably enriches America and the world. More's the pity.

I have no illusions that Mr. Floyd's murder, or the widespread reaction to it, will spell the end of racists and racism. But I hope that, like the naming of sexual predators in high places and the "me too" movement, we may advance another painful step toward recognizing structural wrongs, and our personal complicity in them.

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