

Pastor's Column

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Not Every Bad Encounter with a White Person Constitutes Racism (But as They Add Up, Run-ins Become Harder to See Past)

My Pastor's Column today is an article written by our Parishioner, May Akabogu-Collins, which appeared in The Christian Science Monitor, on September 3, 2009.

I was about to kick my white neighbor out of my house. Then the memory of my dad's voice intercepted me.

In 1980, when I was coming to America from Nigeria to attend grad school, my father told me, "Not every unpleasant encounter with a Caucasian constitutes racism. It might just be ignorance—stupidity, in fact."

When I arrived at the University of Southern California, the dynamics of black-white politics were still alien. That first semester, I received the highest score on a test. As he handed back my paper, the professor publicly announced, "You surprised me; I kept slowing down for you, thinking you were lost." A compliment, I thought.

"An insult," said a classmate later. "The professor had presumed you were dumb because you're black." I wasn't convinced. But events moved on. Sometimes preposterously.

A year later, I was walking back to my hotel room in Baltimore when another hotel guest stuck her head out her room and addressed me: "I need extra soap and a towel." I smiled and replied, "Me, too." At that point, she flushed and disappeared. I chalked it up to rational discrimination.

Soon after grad school, I arrived at a college for an interview and introduced myself as "Dr. Collins." The secretary replied, "And I'm the president." She later apologized profusely, adding, "You look too young to be a PhD." "It's the melanin," I deadpanned, adding with a wink, "Black don't crack." She cracked up.

Never having been a target of old-fashioned, explicit racism, I still couldn't distinguish between imaginary and real racism. That changed when my sister and I entered a video store in Korea Town in Los Angeles. We were excited to find the Eddie Murphy comedy, "Coming to America." The clerk, without batting an eye, announced unequivocally, "Only Koreans." That was the turning point in my assimilation to my new environment.

For the first time, I felt the frustration of being black in America. "It's an Asian thing," a friend explained later. "They tend to be clannish." For a while I shunned Asians—and consorted with Caucasians.

In Africa we attended the same schools as the Caucasians. There was no built-up animosity and, I suppose, the Caucasians in West Africa never had a reason to draw racial lines or feel superior.

Hence, I had no self-consciousness among Caucasians. The O.J. Simpson verdict in 1995, however, changed all that.

I was the only black professor at a small college in Pennsylvania. When I heard my all-white colleagues denouncing the verdict at the department lounge, I stepped outside my office to join them. The lounge immediately went silent. Everyone froze, like a still frame in a movie, and the tableau resonated with the unspoken, "You're black, therefore..." I spun on my heel and fled campus.

I'd spent 15 years in America resisting racializing my feelings, but that incident at the faculty lounge gave me a new pair of glasses.

In San Diego 10 years later, as I was walking my dogs (Akitas) one Monday morning, I encountered an elderly white woman. "They are absolutely gorgeous!" she declared. Before I could thank her, she added, "Are they yours?"

Here's the thing: After 25 years in America, as such encounters accumulate, subconsciously, resentments also accumulate. "Fat chance," I replied, "I'm dog-sitting for a rich white family." And I strode away wondering if I was becoming racially paranoid.

I was still wondering that when my white neighbor knocked on my door that same day. She was having an off day, so she took the day off and came over to vent. "It's like," she began, tears welling. "How can I put it? I feel like I've little black people inside my stomach."

Huh? I'd had three little black people inside my belly and those were the happiest months of my life. So what could I say?

"What do you mean?"

A litany of woes ensued: hubby's worsening Alzheimer's, facing foreclosure, teenage turmoil—my mind strayed.

Black market, black sheep, Black October, Black Sunday, black Monday, black weekend, the blackest day in history (9/11). Granted, those held no racial connotations—they were just terms for bad things.

People having a bad day often say they're having a black day. But little black people in her stomach? Why, that's racist! I should just kick her out, I thought. Then I heard my father's voice: "It might just be ignorance...."

"Hel-lo-o?" my neighbor reeled in my attention. "Yeah, I'm listening," I said.

She continued, but my mind kept wandering: Had I just been

(Continued on page 2)

(Continued from page 1)

insulted? Should I demand an apology at least? Or was I becoming one of those “overly sensitive blacks”—you know, the ones who criticized David Howard, a former Washington, D.C., mayoral aide, for saying “niggardly” (which means “miserly”) at a budget discussion in 1999?

I still can't, be certain, of course. And I'm still not convinced that kicking my neighbor out would've been wrong. Yet, I'm bothered that my feelings are now colored by race.

I now empathize with blacks born here who, due to the country's history, are sensitive to these issues. But at the same time, I sympathize with the uninformed whites who must watch their language lest they inadvertently offend our sensibilities.

That's where America is. And until whites make the extra effort to understand the source of “black rage,” that's where America will remain.

Why didn't I approach my neighbor later to tell her that I felt insulted by her metaphor?

I was afraid she would consider me “overly sensitive,” and that it might cause a strain between us. Race discussion is uncomfortable. And that's exactly the problem in America—the lack of trust between blacks and whites and hence the inability to

engage in an open and frank discussion about the causes and effects of racism that can clarify our different reactions to the same racial landscape.

As President Obama has said, for America to progress, both blacks and whites must listen to one another with an open mind. Only then can we understand where the other is coming from. Yet it has to come from our hearts. And that requires mutual trust.

Blacks must be able to talk to whites about their fears and resentments without presuming that whites would consider them racially paranoid.

Whites must trust that blacks won't label them racists for expressing their frustrations. This is the way toward a more racially tolerant America. And in order to get there, we must be open with ourselves and compassionate with others.

Until then, these incidents will proceed with black—oops—bleak predictability: Ignorant white says something racially insensitive. Sensitive Negroes overreact. And we're all tired of that broken record.

(If any other Parishioners have published material that they would like to share with the Parish, please pass it on to me for my consideration so that it may become a “Pastor's Column.”)

F. Mike