

## Reflection

### IF YOUR RACISM IS UNCONSCIOUS, YOU ARE A PROBLEM: REFLECTIONS OF A RECOVERING RACIST

By Nancy Schreck, OSF

For much of my life I did not think of myself as a racist because I didn't do or think things that people I defined as racist did and thought.

Then one day an African-American woman spoke with me about not knowing who I was because I grew up a radical: I did not have to include race in my self definition. She noted that not all bigots join the Klu Klux Klan or hate groups. Then looking directly into my soul, she said, "If your racism is unconscious, then you are a problem, too."

Her words have haunted me for years. Since that time, I have been committed to the task of understanding my identity as a white person with its accompanying privilege. I have continued to discontinue my former lifestyle of living in isolated homogeneous situations where I rarely have cause to think about race, white privilege or my racism.

I have become more sensitized to the ways I unwittingly participate in racism, even though I do not condone it. I am not finished with the process and write this reflection primarily to my white sisters about the work that is ours to do in dismantling racism.

#### **The problem of White Privilege**

Racism is a white problem and white people need to work with each other to confront it. The effort must begin with an understanding of the privilege that comes with being white. White privilege is the unearned set of advantages white people have been taught to believe is their birthright because of the color of their skin—that white is normative, average, ideal, and therefore preferred.

White privilege reflects the attitudes and fears absorbed by white people growing up in a racially prejudiced society. We may be taught to think that all people are equal, but we are socialized to feel that white people are better, cleaner, harder working, more trustworthy. The list goes on.

We absorb these attitudes, images, and messages emotionally even while we eschew them mentally. Our families, schools, churches, books, and television have given us the message that white people belong to the superior group, thus creating the illusion that it is a white people's world.

Clearing out these distorted images and stereotypes is extremely difficult. Replacing misinformation with accurate information requires time and deliberate attention. It does not just happen, nor does it happen quickly, for white privilege is a pervasive social cancer. Failure to treat the illness, even the collective lack of reflection upon this reality, leads to serious individual and societal problems.

Recovery from racism and white privilege is not unlike other recovery processes. It begins with knowing ourselves well and being honest enough to admit our problem.

We must talk to each other about the reality of our privilege, be aware of the power and access afforded us by our white skin, help each other understand the sick behaviors our racism causes, and assist each other in the faltering steps of recovery.

This is work we as white people need to do ourselves instead of depending on those in parallel cultures to raise the issues for us. We do not do our work of recovery from racism in isolation from the perspective of people of color, but we hold ourselves accountable for what it is ours to do.

Dismantling or unlearning racism must be a deliberate lifelong journey which begins in personal work and always leads to confronting institutional racism. It requires long term plans, sustained vigilance, and daily practice. Even after many years of deliberate effort, I find that subtle thoughts and feelings indicate that the illness is still eating away at my soul.

Prejudices have seeped in even as I think I am breaking down my walls of separation. I hope my continuing awareness will lessen my potential for harming others.

#### **The Truth Will Set You Free**

We have a moral imperative to expunge the tumor of racism with its toxic tentacles and social death threat. This is critical spiritual work for our time because racism is so

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dangerously destructive of both the person who has the disease and those who experience its effects. It is a great threat to the Body of Christ.

Jesus understood the need for people to take care of their inner work in the process of responding to the difficulties of the larger world. Jesus says: Go inside yourself first. Take the log out of your own eye.

Jesus also says the truth will set you free. My truth is knowing I have absorbed racist attitudes and that despite my best efforts and deepest desire to be otherwise, I am racist. It is my hope that confessing this truth will weaken its power over me and help me recover from its symptoms.

To be spiritually awake means to undertake this journey that cannot remain personal but becomes social and political. Embracing a vision of equality and freedom leads us to take public action. We must learn how to fight as well as to pray.

## Dismantling White Privilege

The following suggestions are intended to dismantle the illusions created by white privilege:

Choose to be aware.

Spend one year (or a month, week, or day) refusing to read material not written by people of color. Reflect on your experience. How has your vision of the world been impacted? How much access to information do you have? Get white men out of your head. Choose to experience life from the perspective of African American, Asian, Latina, Native women writers.

Question whether the pictures and other visual representations in your home/office are multiracial. Are your musical choices, prayers, etc. reflective of the multicultural make up of our world?

Break the silence by refusing to tolerate racial slurs, jokes, and racist attitudes. Speak to your white friends about their experience of whiteness, white privilege, and other issues of race.

John Perkins, in his book *The Quiet Revolution*, claims that relocation is a necessary step in recovery from racism. He notes that it is impossible to be converted from this sin

as long as sit carefully isolated in our “ivory” towers. Make a lifestyle change which immerses you either permanently or at least for significant amounts of time in a parallel culture so that your awareness of issues and white privilege is clarified.

*Nancy Schreck, OSF, is a member of the leadership team of the Sisters of St. Francis, Dubuque, IA. She was president of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious in 1995-1996.*

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## Discussion Questions

1. How would you define a racist?
2. Sr. Nancy Schreck says she formerly lived in “isolated homogeneous situations” where she rarely thought about race. In what situations can people place themselves where they do have to think about race? Are these situations different for whites and for people of color?
3. Many people will ask people of color who are not clearly black, Asian, Hispanic, etc, “What are you?” Why does that question matter to so many in our society? How does it put an emphasis on difference and race as a central part of the person of color’s identity? Do white people feel the need to explain their racial identity when meeting new people? How do we respect the dignity of the human person when we encounter new people from any racial background?
4. Reread the second paragraph under the subtitle, “The problem of White Privilege.” Discuss the author’s comments that white people are taught to *think* one way about people of color, but are taught to *feel* another way about people of color. Why the dichotomy?
5. How can white people work together to challenge themselves regarding racist stereotypes and sentiments?
6. What suggestions does the author make to actively combat racism? Discuss these suggestions and brainstorm for others.

