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ANTH 101 - Cultural Diversity

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Paper 1

My Experience with Race

I have been taught to avoid racism and to encourage equality all my life. Through my first experience with race, and the anger and surprise associated with it, I learned of its power. This first lesson taught me what race really was and how it felt. This is an experience I will always keep with me. Although this first lesson has been challenged many times throughout my life there was one great influence that constantly reaffirmed my first experience. Although I learned racist traits from those around me, this is mostly due to the lack of understanding about race and racism from those teaching me. I strongly believe that racial education is important and that a proper understanding of racism is the only hope to eliminate it.

My parents taught me about race throughout my life. Although this was mainly taught in the form where we are white and there are "Others" who are not. My family taught me how we are all formed in the image of God and are His children. They taught me how we are all equal in the sight of God. My parents told me about the unfair treatment of people who are not white and some of the hardships that they have gone through, especially the African Americans. Unfortunately my memory is fuzzy when it comes to many of my early childhood years so my first memory of race is when I am a bit older.

The first memory I have that involved learning about race occurred when I was eight years old. My family was vacationing at a bible camp for the week out in the woods. The experience happened on a trip back to the cabin after a long day of playing in a lake that was a good distance from our camp ground. There was a bus that came periodically to transport people from the lake to the campsite. When my family entered the bus I happened to be the first one on. As I looked around the bus I couldn't help but realize, for the first time, that there were a lot of black people on the bus. This struck me as strange because every single person on the bus was black; there was not a single white person in sight. Being a capricious child I proceeded to voice my observations for all those to hear. "Boy, there sure are a lot of Black people on this bus," I exclaimed. This quickly got the attention of everyone on the bus, especially my parents. My parents quickly apologized for my inappropriate actions to all those on the bus. We got a lot of funny looks as we sat down in our seats and several passengers got visibly angry. It seemed to take an inordinate amount of time to reach our cabin, after which I received a long lecture from my parents regarding race.

This experience was very significant to me because it was the first time I recognized race. This is actually pretty funny because I grew up with a black boy. My mother was a baby sitter as I grew up and took care of an African American boy, my brothers, and me. Despite my many experiences with a person of color, I simply never recognized him as black, and never did until my mother pointed it out to me as a teenager. To me he was just another boy; a friend. I realize now that I did not recognize race because I was surrounded by those who were white and only

intermittently saw those of other races. The main reasons I did not recognize race was because I did not feel as though I was raced. I felt part of a culture, a community, and a family, but I did not feel part of a race. I can see now why in "Failing to See," Dalton asks the question: "Why do most White people not see themselves as having a race?" The reason for me was because many times in my life I was surrounded solely by white people, but at no time was I surrounded solely by people of color. It wasn't until there was a complete absence of white people that I was suddenly struck with the realization: hey, *I* am different. It was only after I was stripped of my racial majority status that I finally realized that I had a race. It's almost as if being different causes you to think of yourself as a race. It wasn't until this moment that I understood what it was like to be different, to be the minority, and to be raced.

I believed that I gained a valuable lesson out of this experience. After my parents' public apology for my remark, a number of black people approached them. I saw that they were talking to my parents and although they seemed agitated, their voices and demeanor was that of control. My parents later told me that the passengers on the bus were expressing their anger and surprise over my comment. Although I was very young I can still remember seeing those black passengers talk with elegance. I learned that day that although African American people may look different than me, they can be just as fluent and versed in the English language.

Let me take a moment to explain why I noticed the language the passengers spoke. My family was not well versed in the natural sciences and because of this they focused almost all of their time teaching us language and its importance in our lives. Because of my parents influence I grew up with the strong impression that you can know almost everything about a person by the type of language he/she uses. To hear a black person speak with such elegant composure cemented in my mind that black people had just as much potential as any white person.

Throughout my life that lesson, I learned that day on the bus, has stuck with me. This lesson has been challenged on many occasions though. I could not help but notice most of the black people around me talked as though they were thugs or criminals. They used derogatory and profane language, talked positively about violence and anger, or slandered and degraded women and other races. The fact that some African American's exhibited this behavior is not surprising, because there are many white people who also do. But what is surprising is that the *majority* of African American's I have come in contact with have exhibited this linguistic behavior. This course has taught me that this verbal trait is not due to innate "racial abilities" but is simply a product of a different culture. This was first demonstrated to me as a preteen when I heard my church leader give lessons every Sunday. As a youth I met with other children my own age in a classroom where we were taught by an African American, Brother Roth (in our church we call each other "brother" and "sister" because we are brothers and sisters in Christ). Brother Roth was an excellent youth speaker and a sound moral man. I can still remember wanting to be like him when I grew up.

Although my parents taught me about the horrors of racism they also gave me the false impression of "racial abilities;" that some people, depending on their race, were naturally better at some activities than others. For example, they taught me that African Americans were naturally better athletes. I now see this classification of "racial abilities" as obviously racist, and is a product of culture not race. But I think that many people to this day do not see which beliefs are racist and which beliefs are not.

In our book "White Privilege," there are many false labels of racism. For example in the article "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack," Peggy McIntosh classifies privileges of white Americans, naming clearly racist behavior along with natural or dominate

race behavior, without making any distinction between them. For example one privilege listed was that of being able to find food and media/entertainment representative of your culture just about everywhere you go. This is not racist in any way, but is merely a product of being of the dominate race. For example I could not go to Japan and find American food just about everywhere I went; I would have to search for it. This is not bad or racist in any way, I am simply not of the dominate culture. Peggy McIntosh also lists white privileges that are due to clearly racist behavior. For example, when buying a house many minorities have to find out if the neighborhood is hostile toward their race. This is clearly racist behavior. Treating a person nicely should have nothing to do with their skin color and is a bad practice. Another white privilege Peggy McIntosh lists, mixes racist and non-racist behavior in a single sentence as follows; "I can go shopping alone most of the time pretty well assured that I will not be followed or harassed." Harassing a person due their skin color is racist and wrong, no matter what culture you are in. However being followed (I refer here to following a person with your eyes, not physically following them) is perfectly natural behavior and is not wrong at all. For example when a person watches a school of fish swimming by, all the fish being of the same color except a few, that person will tend to look at the few fish that are different in appearance. This is not racist behavior but human nature. If I went to Africa and lived amongst a tribe of predominantly black people, I can be guaranteed to be watched more often, or followed, simply because I look different. This is a product of human nature and is not racist. However, if this increased notice caused me to be treated negatively then that would be racist behavior. I have taken more notice of my thoughts and have found that I have been thinking of people of color in a more negative attitude solely due to their skin color, almost entirely unconsciously. Now that I am aware of this attitude I am consciously forcing myself to reevaluate people who are not of my race in a more positive light. This lack of understanding of racist behaviors is keeping many from seeing how they can be less racist.

My parents did a good job in teaching me to be less racist by focusing on equality all of my life. I first came to terms with race only when *I* was the one being raced, the one who was different. This first lesson taught me the importance of race and that people of color are just as capable when it came to the English language as any other white person. Although I have found many African Americans who contradict this lesson, there was one great influence, Brother Roth, who constantly reaffirmed this lesson. Much racist behavior still permeates our country. This is due to the lack of understanding of what racism really is, not a desire of superiority. Being of the dominate race gives people of that race advantages, which it naturally should, but using those advantages to treat the less dominate race(s) badly or to judge them negatively is wrong. It is through mixing up dominate race advantages, something that is right, and poor treatment or negative views of less dominate races, something that is wrong, that many people of this country are warded off by beneficial discussions of race. Through proper education, US Americans can know the difference between an advantage through racial dominance and an advantage through racism and should be more open to racial discussions, which would benefit the USA enormously.

Bibliography

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