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Black History Month: My Personal Story

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As we approach the end of Black History Month, I reflect upon my own pilgrimage knowing that no experience of a Caucasian will ever match that of an African American who has been subjected to a lifetime of prejudice. Therefore, this reminiscence is not meant to suggest an equivalence. It is however to provide a template for others to use in evaluating their own experience.

Growing up in the Southern United States, I have been aware of ethnic disparities all of my life. Not growing up in a metropolitan area, I was not personally confronted with the realities of racism until I was a teenager.

From age six to thirteen and beyond, I lived on a non-paved country road where our nearness neighbor was an African American family. My brother and I played with this family's son who was near our age. When they moved to town, at thirteen years of age, I asked my father to take me to their house so that I could see their son. I grew up in a home where racial epithets were not used and where every one was treated kindly and courteously so I was surprised when I was told that I could not visit my friend's home. I thought it was strange but to my discredit, I did not protest.

Five years later, just before my eighteen birthday in November, 1961, I started college at Texas A&M. In October, a series of events led me to an experience where I became a Christian. Words of songs I had sung all my life echoed through my mind as did Scripture verses such as "he that says he loves God and hates his brother is a liar." In the fall of 1962, I returned to my home in Louisiana to continue my college education, thinking that I might become a minister. My racial attitudes radically and rapidly changed and I began aggressively to seek reconciliation with those who were "different."

In 1964, I spent three months in East Africa as a Student Summer missionary. Often I would spent weeks at a time without seeing another Caucasian. I was treated kindly and supportively by my African friends. I was comfortable with them and I learned to genuinely love them. I was revolted by the artificial separation between "Europeans" -- Caucasians -- and Africans.

After returning from Africa, In October, 1964, I addressed a student convention in Monroe, Louisiana. Having matured into a commitment to respect the person and the rights of all people, having been part of a church which sang “red, and yellow, black and white,” and after my experience in Africa, I was deeply committed to social and ethnic equality. In my speech, I addressed civil rights and racial equality, after which everyone present avoided me. I was not asked to speak in the state for the next thirty years. The president of this student organization in which my future wife and I were active, told the leader, “Larry said that if I don’t love _____, I will go to hell.” What I actually said was that if he claimed to love God and hated his brother, he was a liar.

Some will read this story and correctly judge that I did very little, but this is an accurate retelling of the life I lived. I have often lamented that I did not do more but to be helpful to anyone, this story must be told as it happened.

In 1965, I married. My wife and I moved to Golden Meadow, Louisiana to teach. We befriended a teenager who was poor and was of mixed ethnic parentage but who was also brilliant and lovely. Earning very little ourselves, we took her shopping and bought her among other things a red dress. 35 years later this child, now a mother, wrote us that that was the first and only dress she ever received and she wore it until it fell apart. Again, so little, but it is our story.

In 1966, I started graduate school at Baylor and my wife taught school. Her teaching colleague was the first African American to teach in a pre-dominantly Caucasian school in Waco. We all became friends. When we invited our friend to our home, we were surprised that questions were raised but it did not dissuade us. Now, 52 years later, one of our most cherished relationships is one of my wife’s students who is African American.

In 1971, my daughter was born. My father, who was a good man but a child of his culture, was reluctant to receive her and when I asked why, he said that he was afraid that when she grew up I would let her marry an African American. Rather than giving a perfunctory and politically correct answer, I told my father about a medical school classmate who is African American and who had a two-year old son. I said that when my daughter and this young man were teenagers, if they wanted to go to a movie or a party together, I hoped I would be mature enough to allow it. And, if after a while, they believed they loved one another, I would counsel them about the complexities of such a marriage but hope that I would not say no just because others would say, “it is not done.” Within hours my father was cuddling my daughter and until his death cherished her. The issue never came up again.

In 1975, my family moved to Beaumont to start a medical practice. We were invited to join a club. I asked, “Can African Americans and Jews join this club?” I was told that no one had ever asked that questions to which I added, “I’m asking.” Two weeks later they called and said, “Yes, they can.” I asked to see the bylaws of the organization which supported that. I was told that no such bylaw existed and I said, “When it does give me a call.” Three months later, we received copies of the by laws which affirmed that African Americans and Jews could join.

In 1977, my father and I were driving down the same unpaved country road on which we had lived for thirty years. My father stopped his truck and called to a man who was plowing in the

field. He walked over to the truck and my father said, "I thought you were going to come by the house last Friday?" The African American man said, "One of the children got sick, but I'll be by this Friday."

As we drove away, I asked what that was about. My father told me that the man was unable to pay his light bill so rather than cutting his lights off, my father paid the bill. I had seen that kindness from and in my father all of my life as he would never let children suffer. I said to him, and I used an offensive word which I will not repeat here, "You are telling me that my father give money to a _____?" As I pressed the issue, my father smiled, and I said, "You see, Daddy, I learned my social liberalism from you by seeing how you treated everyone the same. As a child of your culture you did not fight as I have but I learned how to treat people from you."

In 2016, I was honored to delivery the commencement address at my undergraduate university. However, the greatest honor was that I was introduced by an African American student. I acknowledged the great honor that was as I commented that when I was a student between 1962-1965, to my disappointment and shame, he would not have been able to attend that school. We are not perfect yet, but we are better than we were.

I could go on, but this is a good place to conclude. You may comment, "What's the big deal, you didn't march in a demonstration or picket a business?" and you would be right. You may judge that I have done very little at little cost and you would also be right. But, this is my story, told as it happened. The good news is that my children's and my grandchildren's stories are much different and nobler, and I know that my great grandchildren's story will be even nobler.