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What If You Were Accused of Being A Racist?

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Recently, I again watched the movie, *Driving Miss Daisy*. Repeatedly, Miss Daisy claimed not to be prejudiced when everything in her life reflected that she was. As she grew emotionally, through a relationship with her chauffeur, she grew to genuinely love him, but in her heart she was always prejudiced.

This set me to thinking, “How would I answer, if I were ever accused of being a racist.” It is obvious that simply claiming not to be prejudiced often only reflects the blindness of one’s own perception. When addressing the question of whether are not one is prejudiced, it is more important to ask, “What does your life reflect?” Here are some of my thoughts about how I would answer the question as I examine my own life and heart.

I grew up in the South, in a racially segregated and prejudiced society. My first experience with racism and my first conscious recognition of its existence was when I was twelve years old. I lived in the country and our nearest neighbors, who lived across the road – not a street or avenue but a dirt road – were African American. The family had a son near my age named, Junior. We played together, although we did not go to school together. When I was 12, the family moved to town. One day, I asked my father if he would take me to Junior’s house to visit and play. It was then that I came face to face with the ugliness of racism.

I remember how offended I was about the distinction and from that day I opposed racial segregation and bigotry. May years later, after I had graduated from Medical School and had started practice in Beaumont, I was riding with my father down this same, unpaved, country road. At one point my father stopped and called to a man in the field we were passing. The man walked over to my father’s truck. My father said, “I thought you were coming by the house on Friday?” John said, “One of the kids got sick but I’ll be there this Friday.”

We drove on and I asked my father what that was all about. By the way, John African American. My father said that John could not pay his light bill and he loaned him the money. John had young children and my father loved children, all children, and he

would not let them be without electricity. After a moment, I said to my father, “You, my father, gave money to a _____ (and I used a word which is not part of my vocabulary but I used it for emphasis)?” My father began to smile and I added, “You see, Daddy, you talk one way but you live your life exactly as I do. And, don’t ever forget that the social liberalism of my adult life was learned from you as I saw how you treated people even if your words were sometimes different.”

In 1961, when I was 17, I started college at Texas A&M. In October, I became a Christian; if I had any vestiges of racism, they were erased due to my understanding of the biblical admonition that “if a man says he loves God and hates his brother, he is a liar and the truth is not in him.” In that year, I visited African American churches and conducted Bible Schools for African American children.

In 1962, when I was 18, I returned to Louisiana to continue my education, thinking at that time that I would become a minister. I began a ministry at the City Jail. Civil Rights violence was rampant in the South. When men left jail, I tried to help them find work and places to live and some local people objected. One group threatened me and no one but my father protected me.

In 1963, when I was 19, the president of the Baptist Student Union at our college, where I and my future wife were active, told the Director that I had said that if he didn’t love African Americans (he used a racist term) that he was going to hell. I never said that but I did repeat the verse about claiming to love God and hating your brother. My college was racially segregated and I was identified as the civil rights advocate on campus.

In 1964, when I was 20, I went to Africa as a summer missionary where I spent three months in Kenya. When I returned to the United States, I was deeply committed to the dignity and value of all human beings. In October, 1964, I spoke to the State BSU Convention in Monroe, Louisiana. There were 2,000 students there and I spoke on Civil Rights and the Love of God. When I stepped off the stage, no one spoke to me and no one shook my hand. I was never asked to speak in Louisiana again until 1994 – thirty years later – I spoke to 500 community leaders; I spoke on Civil Rights.

In 1965, when I was 21, I married Carolyn Bellue. As this is written, we have been married for 52 years in August. We taught school the first year of our marriage. One of my students was a mixed-race Cajun who was brilliant. She was very poor. Carolyn and I took her and bought her a red dress and other clothes so that she could come to school. In 2008, forty-three years after the event, I contacted Vivian by letter. It was a year before she wrote back. She indicated that she had had a difficult life but that things were better. She said, which brought tears to my eyes, “When I was in the 7th grade a teacher and his wife bought me a red dress. It was the only dress I ever had. I wore it until it fell apart. Was that you?”

In 1966, when I was 22, my wife and I moved to Waco, Texas, where I started graduate school at Baylor. My wife was a team-teacher with the first African American to teach in a predominantly Caucasian school in the Waco School District. Her name was Minnie

Cooper, and we became very good friends. It seemed ordinary to us when we had a gathering at our home to invite Minnie. We were told that that just was not done. We ignored the mores and enjoyed our friend being a guest in our home. No one raised any issue.

In 1969, at 25 years of age, I started Medical School at UT Health San Antonio Long School of Medicine. Three months later, I started a health-careers program for indigent and Hispanic children. In 1971, our daughter was born. When my father and mother visited us after Carrie's birth, I noticed that my father was distant. He loved children and he particularly loved little girls having only had boys of his own. The second day of their visit, I asked my father why he had not held Carrie. His answer was heart wrenching. He said that he did not want to get too close to her because he was afraid that when she grew up I would let her marry an African American. How do you answer such a question about a child who isn't two months old? I told him, "Let me try to give you an honest answer." I then named an African American medical student who had a four-year-old son, named John. I named the son and said, "If when Carrie is sixteen and she and John want to go to a movie with friends, I can't image saying no. If they begin to see each other and develop a close relationship and come to me and say that they are in love, I hope I would be willing to bless their choice. I can not image saying no because John is African American." That afternoon, my father held my daughter and adored her until his death thirty-four years later.

In 1975, Carolyn and I moved to Beaumont. My wife and were invited to join the Country Club. I asked, "Can African Americans and Jews join?" The leaders said they had never been asked the question. I said, "I'm asking." They came back and said yes they could. I asked to see the provision in their by-laws. They said that it didn't exist. I said, "When it does let me know." Several months later, the by-laws had been amended and we joined the Country Club.

In 1979, we started a 'street ministry' in the inner city of Beaumont. We ministered to poor and largely African American children. We began taking them to our church which was segregated, not by choice but by practice.

In 1995, I and my partner founded Southeast Texas Medical Associates, LLP, a multi-specialty medical practice. In addition to building an award-winning practice, which is accredited by four national accreditation agencies, SETMA worked toward and achieved the elimination of ethnic disparities in the treatment of diabetes and hypertension. This was driven by our personal and corporate commitment to equality for all.

SETMA has supported a local organization named "100 BLACKMEN of Greater Beaumont, Inc. – "What they see is what they'll be." The Platinum Sponsor plagues which hang in our Executive Office suite states, "Presented to S.E.T.M.A. In recognition and Appreciation for All You Do As Medical Physicians and Attention You Give to your Patients Daily. You Are Making it Possible for Us to Continue Giving Scholarships to First Time College Students and Expand Our Scholarship Program By Supporting Them All The Way Through College. The 100 BMGB Scholarship Program."

In 2015, Mrs. Holly and I helped underwrite the Frank Bryant Memorial Lecture Series at UT Health San Antonio. Dr. Bryant was a distinguished physician in San Antonio. He was African American. We did not know until after we had helped underwrite this lecture series that one of SETMA's partners and another physician in Beaumont are married to daughters of Dr. Bryant. In 2017, The Bryant Lecture was entitled, "Achieving Health Equity: Tools for a National Campaign Against Racism," presented by Camara Jones, M.D., M.P.H, Ph.D.

The pattern for our lives was set in our youth and we have been unswerving in our commitment to social justice and civil rights. But mostly, we have been committed to treating everyone with dignity, respect and compassion. If you ask me, "Are you a racist?," or if you say, "I think you are a racist." I would answer, as best as I know my heart and life, I am not. Ultimately, that judgment rests in the hands of our community and in the hands of God.