

RACE

My Story & Humanity's Bottom Line

More than a Book.....It's an Experience

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From the “My Story” Section of the Book:

I was extremely fortunate that the racism that I withstood at Cornell Law School was often abated by that very experience. Cornell, located in the Finger Lakes Region of Upstate New York, is in the middle of a kind of natural beauty that is no less than magnificent - the Spring season filled with young, light green leaves, and azaleas of utterly saturated pink, red, yellow, fuchsia, purple and white; radiant Fall colors of amber, orange, red and brown; winters of brilliantly white first snows; summers of deep blue skies filled with mesmerizing white, puffy, cirrus clouds, rolling green hills speckled with farms, red barns and old rusty wagons from at least the 1930's, and of course, stunning views of Lake Cayuga, over which the campus sits. But most of all, **Ithaca has waterfalls!** The then popular bumper sticker, "Ithaca is Gorges", is **literally** true. Ithaca's gorges were my life savers throughout law school. Within a few minutes ride from campus were three **stunning** falls, Taughannock, Buttermilk, and my unqualified favorite, Treman. **All three** were for me, a safe harbor. Being able to get into my car, no matter how cold it was, (indeed, the snow white winter landscape had its own unique beauty), play one of my Gregorian Chant cassette tapes,¹ and take a peaceful ride out to either the country or to one of the waterfalls, was my personal retreat. It was my way of regaining my center and then returning home in peace and serenity, no matter **what** degree of frustration I was feeling after the latest racial incident at school. Being in Ithaca softened, significantly, the emotional blow of my experiences at Cornell. I took more “nature rides” than usual upon my return to school after we buried my father.

Two years later, in 1984, just before graduation, I wrote an article that was published in the May 20th edition of the Dicta, the law school's student newspaper, describing my experiences and those of some of the other black law students at Cornell. In it, I described what it felt like to be racially objectified by the majority of our peers **throughout** our entire law school experience. I was thirty when I wrote it in May of 1984. The article follows below in its entirety:

I wish that for a day, for just one day, I could make half of America's white population experience American society as black Americans experience it. Twenty-four short hours would suffice. What would they experience during those twenty-four hours? They would experience the American culture from a perspective which for most, would be shattering, shattering myths, stereotypes, pre-conceived ideas, lies. Within those brief twenty-four hours they would gain an awareness of the subtleties of racism of which they otherwise may have remained totally ignorant. They would experience being the fourth person in a supermarket checkout line, seeing all three people ahead of them receive a friendly, "hello", from the cashier and they not a word; they would experience white people's assumption that they are interested in only "black things", which manifests itself, for example, in white peoples' questions to them

¹ Ambient music, my absolute favorite musical genre, didn't yet exist, making Gregorian chant, at the time, my soft, relaxing music default.

regarding what they think about Jesse Jackson's campaign or Martin King's birthday becoming a national holiday, or some other such "black concern". They would experience what it feels like to have white people tell them all about the black people whom they have known in the past. They would experience what it feels to be in a society in which the vast majority of its members harbor an entire set of often unconscious but nonetheless firmly entrenched beliefs and attitudes about them, all of which are based almost exclusively upon the color of their skin, i.e., that they are less intelligent than white people, that they lack the full range of human emotion, sensitivity and sensibilities which white people, by their very birthright, naturally possess - the ability to appreciate nature's beauty, to be touched by a poem, to look up at the stars with awe. In essence, they would experience what it is like to be thought of and responded to as inferior, to lose their individuality, to be responded to as "a black person", to lose their personhood, to be dehumanized. They would no doubt see quite clearly that many white people are totally and utterly unconscious of their preconceived notions about black people. They would see the specific ways in which many white people relate to black people differently from the way in which they relate to white people, and they would understand, no doubt with far more depth than "real" black Americans, that the ways in which white people relate to them is the result solely of their social conditioning. They would see clearly that most white people are not deliberately or maliciously racist, but they would truly and experientially understand that that lack of deliberateness and malice does not alleviate the pain of losing their individuality, their personhood, a big piece of their humanity. They would see clearly that it does not alleviate the pain of being objectified, the pain of dehumanization.

On still another level, in addition to experiencing the feelings of being a member of a group which is consciously and unconsciously thought of and treated as inferior by the majority of society, they would also experience the reality of being a member of a group which is a **numerical** minority in this society - to walk into a movie theatre, restaurant, bookstore, classroom, one's work environment...and be one of only a handful of brown faces, and possible the only one.....

I am convinced that it can be fairly safely assumed that most white people, after only half of that day, would probably be driven to cry out, "I am white! I am white! This is going to wear off in only twelve hours! I am white!" Most could simply not take being classified, being responded to by automatic impulse on the basis of the color of their skin, walking through city streets and just being in society in general with the knowledge that when white people look at them, they, (white people), see a black person first, their sex second, and not much else. With their exclamations, they would in essence be proclaiming and reclaiming their full personhood, their humanity. They would be shouting to the world that they really are a "regular person".

After those twenty-four hours had elapsed and the "black/white" people had returned to their ordinary state, I would like to sit in on a discussion in which the "black/white" people try to explain to the inexperienced half of the white persons present, what it was like to be black for a day. I

would love to listen to them attempt to explain how differently they, the inexperienced half, responded to them, (when they responded to them at all), as black people, what it felt like to be denied the common courtesy of a "hello" from a supermarket cashier, to have white people talk to them about "black things", obviously with the assumption not only that they are interested in nothing else, but also that they probably do not know much about anything else. I'd like to listen to them try to explain what it felt like to walk into a movie theatre, bookstore, restaurant, classroom, one's work environment...and be one of a very few or the only black face present. I would like to hear them describe what it was like to experience the American media and advertising industries as a black person. I would **love** to listen to that conversation.

My thirty years of experience as a black American unequivocally inform me that the inexperienced white people would respond to their comments and perceptions with total skepticism and even disbelief. They would be utterly unable to hear, to really hear, to listen to the descriptions of the patronizing, rote manner in which the inexperienced white people related to the "black/whites". Without actually having lived as a black person for a period of time, albeit a very short one, there is simply no way for the inexperienced whites to understand the experience of being black in America. Finally, they would for the very first time truly understand that most white people simply do not see the racism in their interactions with black people.

My three years at Cornell Law School have, not surprisingly, proven that the law school reflects the racism in society-at-large, the kind of racism described above. I wish that for just one day, I could make the entire white Cornell Law School student body truly understand what it is like to walk through Myron Taylor Hall as a black law student - to sit in those classrooms knowing that the majority of your white colleagues view you as.....less intelligent and less articulate than they, solely because of your race, that you are incapable of thinking very well in the logical, coherent, comprehensive manner which is required of attorneys.They would learn much from experiencing what it feels like to have your intelligence, your ability to think critically and analytically, your articulateness, your ability to be an excellent attorney, discounted, ignored, indeed, not even seen.

Obviously, one cannot magically transform white people into black people. One cannot through mental telepathy make them suddenly aware of their unconscious racism. How then does one make them understand the invidiousness of unconscious racism? How can they be made aware of the all-pervasive extent and effects of that unconsciousness on those of whom they are unconscious? How can they be made aware that their unconscious racism also adversely affects their own lives? How does one expose myths for what they are? How does one open eyes? Minds? How does one force white people to grow, to identify, and subsequently eradicate their world view in which to be a white person is to be a person and to be a black person is to be a black person? How does one give them the simple ability to see and respond to people who are racially different from themselves as intelligent, sensitive human beings? How is that awesome feat

accomplished? Do I go around the law school proclaiming that my favorite composers are Sibelius and Rachmaninoff, that I write poetry, that I keep a journal, that I love orange sunsets and rocky beaches? Do I go around explaining that I don't spend every waking moment of my day wallowing in my oppression, that I enjoy skating, exercising, and writing letters to friends? Do I yell out that my mother loved poetry and opera, that my father, a postman of thirty-five years was a science enthusiast and part-time mystic and Egyptologist?

I do not have the answers to those questions. Freeing minds and changing solidly established behavior patterns is extremely difficult work. That task requires generations. I am greatly encouraged, however, by the good, serious anti-racism work which so many black and white feminists have recently done and are presently doing. After six long years of working arduously in feminist organizations in Philadelphia and New York City with Indigenous American women, black women, Asian American women, WASP women and Jewish women on issues of racism, anti-Semitism, sexism, classism, homophobia, ageism and able-bodied people's discrimination against the physically challenged, the past three years at Cornell Law School have been excruciatingly painful for me. The following are but a few of the numerous racist incidents which have occurred during my three-year tenure at Cornell Law School: A Law Practice Dynamics lecturer very clearly implied that all black people are thieves and hustlers; a guest speaker judge addressing a group of students in the West lounge, referred to his Nigerian law clerk's countrymen and women as running around in the woods throwing spears, (for which he later apologized); a professor informed two black students whom he planned to call on the next day what their question was going to be; placement office personnel continually informed a black student about opportunities in a District Attorney's office despite her constant and adamant indications that she was not interested in prosecutorial work.....

.....Consciousness raising can indeed be done, but not without both a sincere desire and serious commitment on the part of white people to work on their racism. It requires reading, consciousness-raising groups, an awareness in the moment of one's reaction to a person of color, as well as the reasons which underlie them. It requires a vision, a vision of what their life could be like if they were emotionally free to respond to every single person as an individual and a desire to have that life to the extent that it is possible. It requires a vision of what the world should and can be.

I have a list of several very good sources of information (primarily books and pamphlets) on how to "unlearn" racism and will be more than happy to provide it to anyone who drops a note in my pendaflax.

Among the stories that I **didn't** share in the article, was a conversation that I had with one of my African American classmates at the beginning of our third year. During the conversation, she described her sheer shock and horror in response to an incident that she had experienced while working as a summer associate at a major New York City law firm. At one point during the summer, she attended a social function of some

kind at which several of the firm's partners, associates and law student summer associates were present, along with a few New York City judges. Two of the judges, one of whom was African American and the other, European American, had an apparently well-known history with each other as what may be described as at least professional competitors and perhaps even rivals. At some point during the evening, my friend saw the European American judge, after he'd had, "a few too many", walk over to the African American judge and overheard him say to his rival, "You know, if slavery ever came back, I'd love to own you." Upon hearing of my friend's experience, I shared her horror. **Then**, I felt immediate and absolute empathy for the African American judge. And **then**, I thought, "Nothing, not being an intelligent person, not being a good person, not a college degree, not an Ivy League legal education, **not even being a judge, nothing**, can insulate you from this insanity."

The day the article was published, I ran into my first year locker mate as she was entering and I was leaving the women's room at school. After neither speaking to nor even acknowledging me for three years, she looked at me and said with what sounded and appeared on her face to be utter shame and guilt, "I really like that article you wrote." I responded with a very cool, austere, "Thank you", then walked out. After sharing a locker with me **for an entire year**, after sitting in a number of classrooms with me **for three full years**, after **seeing** me five out of seven days a week over the **course** of those three years, I believe that as a result of reading my article, that young woman, (whose name I don't even remember because we never interacted), **finally** saw my humanity. Perhaps my stoicism in that moment gave her quite a lot to think about. I wish, however, that I had been **able**, in that moment, to have both felt more compassion **for**, and shown more compassion **to** her. I wish I had possessed the maturity in that brief exchange, to have actually smiled at her and said warmly, "Thank you. I appreciate your saying that." It is what my mother would have done.²

² I remain both professional and personally respectful, but I can become "cool" toward people whom I feel have treated me or others insensitively. We are all works of personal growth in progress. In addition to being professional and respectful, continuing to be **warm** to another when I have experienced them as being insensitive is an individual personal growth objective on which I continue to work.