

“Red and Yellow, Black and White, They are Precious in His Sight...”



KEY
ISSUES

Part 1: Confessions of a (Well-meaning and Unintentional) Racist by Dr. Lois Mitchell

In 1999 I attended a **Consultation on Racism** in Mississauga, Ontario, hosted by the Public Affairs Committee (PAC) of Canadian Baptist Ministries (CBM). During the course of this two day event, presenters representing a variety of communities provided information and insights about various aspects of racism, but what I remember most is the stories – the personal accounts of how racism has touched the lives of people from various ethnic and linguistic groups, right here in Canada.

Maybe I should back up a bit. I grew up in Fredericton, New Brunswick – a small city which is both a university town and the seat of the provincial legislature. Honestly, growing up in Fredericton through the 1960s and 70s, I don't remember even seeing people of different ethnic backgrounds. Well, except French speaking people. Official bilingualism did alter the culture of Fredericton but I didn't actually know any Francophones. While I was in Junior High School, I had one Jewish friend. I always enjoyed going to her house as it was somehow “different”, though today I can't tell you specific details. Otherwise, the people I knew and the people I saw, were pretty much like me.

When I was doing my Masters degree, I lived in Waterloo, Ontario for two years. The German influence and the presence of Amish people gave Waterloo and the surrounding area a different feel, but I was still pretty much unaware of the presence or effects of racism. I returned to Fredericton to do my PhD in Sociology and then moved to Deer Island where I have lived ever since. Deer Island is about as homogenous a community as you could find. It's a fishing community with essentially no ethnic or linguistic diversity. There isn't even a Catholic church on Deer

Island. Or Presbyterian, United, Anglican, Wesleyan. In fact, despite having five churches for a population of 850, all of the churches are evangelical Protestant (two CABC churches, two Churches of Christ and one slightly more charismatic congregation).

So, it was from this experiential base that I participated in the consultation on racism. It was an eye-opening and very moving few days. As I returned to Atlantic Canada, I was determined that as God would give me opportunity, I would work towards understanding racism (historically, culturally and biblically) and I would work with others whose goal is to bring racism in our churches and society to an end.

Just after I returned from Mississauga, I was at a Convention of Atlantic Baptist Churches council meeting and I roomed with Mildred Law (retired CBM missionary to India). I chattered away at length, telling Mildred all the things I'd heard at the consultation and how it was influencing my thinking. Mildred was patient, enduring literally hours of this monologue! And then – I still remember it – in mid-sentence, it occurred to me that Mildred, living as a single white woman in India, must surely have experienced racism. So, I said something like, “But Mildred, you must know what this feels like. As a white woman in India you must know what it feels like to be on the other side of racism...” To which Mildred softly replied, “White people never feel inferior.”

For me, this simple statement inspired an “AHA!” moment of insight which I am still working through. Such moments of insight are hard to explain, but this is such an important point that I'll do my best to unpack it here and in the next few articles. Understanding that white

people don't feel inferior is actually a key to understanding and even seeing racism. Racism is not just being a minority. It's not even so much about how you're treated. It's not just about stereotypes or even discrimination.

Back in 1959 a journalist, John Howard Griffin, wrote a book entitled *Black Like Me* in which he recounted his experiences “posing” as a black man in New Orleans, Louisiana. He literally dyed his skin black so as to appear to actually be a black man. He wanted to understand how black people in the southern United States feel as the “victims” of a racist society. The book, published in 1961 was controversial and provocative. Griffin was later celebrated as a human rights activist, but in his home town he was hung in effigy and threatened with death.

I had read this book at some point in my sociological studies, but when Mildred said “white people never feel inferior”, it hit me that Griffin's efforts to experience life as a black person were doomed to incompleteness. That is, he would be treated poorly, as was the experience of black people, but he would not really know how it feels to be treated thus, since his own consciousness and heritage was “white”. His skin was temporarily black, but his inner being was the product of the privilege of being white. He could be *treated* as though he was inferior, but he would not *feel* inferior.

I tell you this as a caution. Prior to 1999 I had never thought of myself as being racist. In fact, I think most people would tell you that I was sensitive to the feelings of others and kind to those who for one reason or another were “disadvantaged”. I certainly didn't want to think of myself as a racist and had actually had little opportunity to express racism overtly in the places where I'd

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