

I WANT TO UNDERSTAND

I'm a white female and that alone brings me advantage I did nothing to deserve. It is an unfair result of the color of my skin. Most of the time I'm not even aware of this reality. I just take for granted that this is the way life is. I'm wrong.

I was raised in an all-white neighborhood. We often struggled to make ends meet but we always had enough. It was a safe and comfortable life. I never had to worry about being accepted or being treated differently because of how I looked. I thought that was true for everybody. I never met anyone who didn't look like me until I was a freshman in high school when two girls became the first African American students to enroll at Seton.

Initially I was cautious and thought they were very different from me. As I got to know them, I discovered we had many things in common like love of family and striving for good grades. But there was so much in their lives we never talked about. I was shocked, surprised, and angered that a class boat ride to Coney Island excluded them because African American people weren't welcomed either on the boat or at the amusement park. They weren't surprised. That was part of their everyday lives that I knew nothing about. We might have been in the same religion class and students at the same school, but our day-to-day-worlds rarely intersected. And I didn't make an effort for that to happen.

When I was a senior at Mount St. Joseph College a theology professor invited us to take part in a local march for Jobs and Freedom. For me it was a small step for racial equality, but then I returned to the safety of my own comfortable world. I wanted to know but I had no real insight into what that march meant for the African Americans who were there. I didn't ask.

I tried to understand and stand up for justice and an end to racism. There were other marches I took part in though I really didn't get it. I continually found myself surprised by things that people who didn't look like me had to endure. I never considered that the lifestyle I experienced and what I thought was normal needed to be examined and changed.

More than 50 years later much remains the same. I still have unearned privilege I'm usually oblivious to unless something egregious happens. I raised two sons and never had to give them "The Talk" about interacting with police. I just assumed that they would be safe. That's not true for African Americans.

The amount of work that needs to be done is overwhelming. There are inequalities in justice, education, housing and employment, as well as limited access to health care and high infant mortality for African Americans. I don't know what I can do will make any difference. I see that racism affects anyone whose skin is a different color from mine. I hear first-hand accounts of racism affecting the Latino and African parishioners that are part of my St. Leo family. Racism is pervasive. It is evil. It eats away at our souls.

I want to be open to taking a hard look at myself and finding out uncomfortable things—and changing. I know there's so much I don't know, but I do want to learn.

I want to understand.

~~ Angela Anno



In an effort to get feedback about racism a sampling of parishioners was asked to respond to three questions:

1. What do you think about what is happening now?
2. Have you or any family members ever experienced racism?"
3. What do you think is needed to help us heal?

Answers were anonymous:

"I saw my father beaten with "billy" clubs by police when I was 7 years old. If I close my eyes I can still see his teeth on the front doorstep."

"I feel that it is wrong to be or to say that, we, they or us, are better than one another. The only one who is better is God."

"Vote out the bad, bring on love, peace and joy."

An African parishioner told of having "Go Back to Africa" written on the sidewalk with arrows pointing to their door. Another knew little English but remembered the swear words hurled at her by a neighbor.

"It's heartbreaking to see what is going on."

"My wife is of another race. She reminds me of what I'm not aware of."

"Racism is wrong because God has created each one of us unique and in his image and likeness from the beginning of creation. God destined us to be happy as human beings. We are people of relationships and we need each other. God has given us the responsibility to care for creation, but for this to take place it is important that man be reconciled to God, that he have a personal encounter with God first and only in this way, all human beings can live in peace and to be happy and not discriminate against anyone because of their color, or nationality. We are all one in Christ Jesus. May God bless this country and the whole world, so that we can live according to God, listening to his word and putting it into practice, so that we can have a world in peace and be happy with ourselves, with the family and with all the people around us."

"Racism has been going on for a long time. Our system is failing us. Police often are not accountable for their bad behavior. We need to have something else. I have been helped by some wonderful police but we can't give a pass card to those who are racist."

"One day I went to the Zoo with my family and a white child moved away and seemed scared of us. That is sad. God made all of us."

"We need to work together—all of us—to hold systems accountable. We need more black people in leadership roles and given more opportunities. It's going to take everybody. This is our home All of us are immigrants. This country was built by immigrants. We all need to keep doing our part."

"Felt like I was getting turned down for promotions based on my color more than my experience or potential experience. People were getting trained over me that had just come in the door. Bad part about that for me was sometime I ended up having to train them; helping them to get promoted over me. Another time was in a small clothing store where I felt I was being watched while others were shopping freely being the only person of color in the store. When I walked out the store, looking back through the glass window of the store I saw the customers and the cashier looking more relaxed. Did not feel comfortable going back in the store again. Sad part from me was they have some really nice clothes."