

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Struggling with racism on the Fourth of July



Douglas Kindschi director, Kaufman Interfaith Institute

I am writing this week's column on the Fourth of July, not in a big crowd watching fireworks, but quietly reflecting on our country, its history — both the good and the bad.

Recent months have led many of us not to celebration, but to challenge. We are challenged by a pandemic keeping us isolated and apart. We have been opened to a new understanding of racism and systemic problems in the police culture. We have had to face our own complicity in allowing and even supporting systems of discrimination. For me, it has led to a time of confession and resolve to better understand my own unconscious racism embedded in a "white privilege" which had also been invisible to me.

During these days of celebrating our country's founding, I appreciate the privilege of living in a free country, realizing that my freedom is not experienced in every nation. And not experienced by everyone in our country — not at our founding and not even today. It is a kind of "freedom privilege" that we take for granted. We are rarely conscious of that privilege. In a similar way, many of us have benefited from white privilege of which we have not even been conscious. It was just the way the world was. I went to excellent schools, enjoyed meaningful jobs, didn't worry about getting into college. I was never threatened by a policeman. Growing up, I just assumed that was the case for anyone living in America and generally law abiding.

ILLUSTRATING WHITE PRIVILEGE

Reggie Rivers, former NFL running back with the Denver Broncos and now a broadcaster, author and motivational speaker, illustrates white privilege by telling about a white friend's experience with the police. His friend had left an event at the Four Seasons hotel and was driving home when he saw the police lights flashing in his mirror. On the busy street there was no convenient place to pull to the side so at the next corner he turned right and then stopped. The policeman informed him that he was driving without his headlights turned on. He explained that he had been at an event at Four Seasons and the valet parking attendant must have turned off his automatic lights, of which he was unaware since the city street was quite well lit. The officer went on to tell him that he had turned onto a one-way street, going the wrong way and further asked if he had anything to drink at the event. He responded that he had a couple of drinks. The police officer then suggested that he do a U-turn and park his car in the right direction and then take an Uber ride home.

Rivers' response was that this could never, in any way, have been his experience as a Black person. "Driving while Black" means always being subjected to being pulled over on some minor charge and then interrogated in a way that almost seems designed to infuriate. It was certainly not the experience of Rayshard Brooks in Atlanta, who was guilty of "sleeping while Black" in his car at a Wendy's drive through. Even though he cooperated for over 20 minutes, submitting to a breath test as well as a pat-down. He moved his car, volunteered to leave the car and walk to his sister's house. Only when the police became physical and tried to handcuff him and take him in did he resist, resulting in a conflict that led to his being shot in the back while running away.

White privilege includes a lot of benefits that most of us have not been aware of as we go through life. We uncon-

sciously assume that this is just way things are. As a child, I was not followed by police when I rode my bike outside my immediate neighborhood. When I began to drive, my parents didn't instruct me to always keep my hands on the top of the steering wheel if I got stopped by police lest they think I might be reaching for a weapon. I was taught that police were there to help me if I was in trouble and that I could trust them. Only when recently learning about white privilege did I begin to see its invisibility to me most of my life.

In another video, Reggie Rivers tells of a retreat he had with 34 other Black men. He describes them as very successful, educated and wealthy. As they began telling their stories, he was amazed at the similarity of their stories and their feelings about what was now happening in America. He was shocked as they described their experiences and that no matter how much success or education or wealth they had, when they get stopped while driving they are "just another Black guy in the car." He polled them to discover that among this group, ages in the 20s to 60s, most of them were college graduates and 28 were CEOs or senior executives.

He continued asking how many feared the police: 29 responded they do. All 34 had been threatened or baited by police and had in just the past 12 months been profiled in a store or by police. Furthermore, everyone was surprised that the murder of George Floyd has led to such a broad appreciation and understanding from people of all backgrounds. America is waking up to what has been happening, but what for many of us has gone unseen. You can watch these videos for yourself at: virtualgalateam.com/racism.

Racism is a phenomenon also similar to religious bigotry and hate, which our culture has experienced in the past and continues today. Catholics and Jews were persecuted and faced hatred, as did various immigrant groups. Anti-Semitism has been prevalent in our history and recently led to the murder of 11 congregants at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh. Islamophobia targets peaceful Muslims and even people who are mistakenly seen as Muslim because of skin color or dress such as the turban-wearing Sikhs. In each case it is the "othering" of people who do not look like, dress like or worship like my tribe. This attitude violates the teachings and principles of all of our religious scriptures, but is still prevalent in our society.

NEW BOOK CLUB

The Kaufman Interfaith Institute will begin a new book club on Zoom discussing the book, "White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk about Racism," written by Robin DiAngelo. She helps us understand why cross-cultural dialogue is so hard and why our defensiveness actually adds to racial inequity. For more information go to bit.ly/Kaufman-Book.

We are at a special time in America today. As we move forward from July Fourth, let us work toward a new freedom that includes all, regardless of race, religion, skin color, economic status and social standing. This is a special time when more of our society is becoming aware of previous failures. It is time to show commitment to finding justice and support for all peoples.

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A Janet Jackson lyric is written on a protest sign as about 300 people march during a Black Lives Matter youth protest against racial injustice and inequality June 12 in downtown Flint. *Jake May, Mlive.com*

If you go

What: Online book group discussing the book, "White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk about Racism," by Robin DiAngelo

When: 3-4:30 p.m. Tuesdays, beginning July 21

Where: Information and sign-up at: bit.ly/Kaufman-Book. Participants will be sent a Zoom link for the online discussion.