

One Step Closer To the Death of Bias

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June 2015 was an interesting, emotional month for many Americans. For me, it hit very close to home, both figuratively and literally. Having been born and raised in South Carolina, I was emotionally affected when I learned of the senseless killings of nine innocent people attending Wednesday prayer service in Charleston and it made me reflect on the culture I grew up in.

As a child, I remember faith being front and center in my family dynamic. It was a regular occurrence for me to visit my grandmother and see her perched in front of the television watching Billy Graham or the PTL Club with Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker. Church services were all day Sunday—we started with Sunday school, then off to Church Service, then go home and eat, and then return to Church for the evening service. Church revivals, choir practice, and Church conventions were the norm. When I moved away from the south, I used to tell people that I was from the “Buckle of the Bible Belt”, joking about flying into Charlotte and exiting the airport, driving on the Billy Graham Parkway heading to my home state of South Carolina.

Wednesday prayer services were sacred...a huge part of the culture for people of faith. As when I was growing up, and even today, anyone can join prayer service - you can walk right in off the street and be welcomed into the circle—much like the atmosphere at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in downtown Charleston. Dylann Roof walked into the Wednesday service and was openly welcomed to join the service. Even when he argued the scripture discussion, the people attending the service were patient and perceived this discussion as a teaching opportunity. Little did they know of his intentions and that his heart was filled with hate. When he pulled his gun, it was reported that he was asked why he was attacking church goers. The shooter responded, "I have to do it. You rape our women and you're taking over our country and you have to go." On June 17, 2015 nine people were murdered, including the Pastor and South Carolina State Senator Clementa Pinckney.

Wow. How could this be? Its 2015, right?

The week after the shooting, I visited my brother, Daren and his family in California. The previous week's events compelled us to discuss our upbringing and our experiences growing up in the south. The town we grew up in is a sleepy town in the Piedmont that I often refer to as the “red dirt south”. We both agreed that we had a great childhood in a close knit community and talked at length about our experiences and encounters growing up with racism. However, we never experienced ‘Hate’. Racism and hate are different. Very different.

As we continued our conversation, we remembered countless events that were simply part of our lives...again, the “norm” – for us. I am a bit older than my brother, so I remember certain things that he does not. I remember reading to my great uncle who was illiterate because he was unable to attend school as a young boy. I remember the stories of my grandfather going into stores with “white only” signs. My father and his brothers weren't allowed in, so they had to wait outside for him to return. I remember in junior high school being voted “Miss Black 7th Grade” and in my senior year of high school being voted “Miss Black Senior,” while my best friend was voted “Miss White Senior”. I remember buying gas every week at a full service gas station near my house that was owned by the Grand Dragon of the KKK. It was common knowledge of his affiliation and power, but he was a “normal” guy that always said “hi” to me and told me jokes as he pumped my gas. This was our reality.

Interestingly enough, my brother Daren and I both agreed, looking back, that we were definitely discriminated against. But with everything we experienced growing up in the south, even though it may seem wrong and unfair, we never felt that we were subjected to actual ‘hate’. We never felt like we were in danger and we were never threatened because of our race. Discrimination is one thing...again, HATE is something totally different.

The 'alleged' shooter, Dylann Roof, was arrested in Shelby, North Carolina - 18 miles from my parents' home, where my children are staying for the summer. It was horrifying for me to know that this hate filled fugitive was so close to my parents, my kids, and my family.

Since 1961 the Confederate flag has been flying over the South Carolina Capital and has been a point of contention for many South Carolina residents. Advocates for the flag's removal say it represents a racist legacy and a dark chapter in the nation's history, while defenders insist it symbolizes Southern heritage and honors fallen soldiers. For the record, Senate Majority Leader Harvey Peeler, from my home town, said he would not vote to remove the Confederate flag. Sigh.

Following the Charleston Massacre, investigators uncovered photos of Dylann Roof with the Confederate Flag (or Rebel Flag, as it's referred to by Southerners). I think this direct connection of the flag with a person who represents such deep-seeded hate pushed South Carolina Governor, Nikki Haley to make a bold move by stating **"By removing a symbol that divides us, we can move forward as a state in harmony and we can honor the nine blessed souls who are in heaven."** The legislative process to remove the flag began.

After flying on the Capital Grounds for more than a half century, the Confederate flag was lowered in a solemn ceremony and placed in a nearby museum on July 10, 2015.

One step closer....

Twenty years ago during a visit home, I went out to dinner with my first cousin, who I grew up with and is like a brother to me. To this day, he remains my best friend. During a rare lull in our conversation, he looked me in the eyes, took a deep breath and told me he needed to share something very important with me. He proceeded to tell me he was gay. Not knowing exactly what he was expecting from me, I simply smiled and said "I've always known, I was just waiting for you to tell me."

We both laughed and continued to laugh until the conversation turned serious when I begged him to move somewhere away from the place where we grew up so that he could live his truth. Be happy. Date and work... free of judgment. We all have the rights for life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, right? Three examples of the "inalienable rights" which the Declaration says has been given to all human beings by their Creator, and for which governments are created to protect. Ultimately, my cousin relocated to the West Coast and is living his truth - free of discrimination and judgment - exercising his right for Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness.

Then, after a long-sought victory for the gay rights movement, the Supreme Court ruled by a 5-to-4 vote on Friday, June 26, 2015 that the Constitution guarantees a right to same-sex marriage, making same sex marriage legal in all 50 United States. Marking another historical moment in our Nation's history.

"Progress on this journey often comes in small increments and then sometimes there are days like this, when that slow, steady effort is rewarded with justice that arrives like a thunderbolt," President Barack Obama said, moments after the Supreme Court delivered its historic decision legalizing same-sex marriage nationwide.

Another step closer...

These significant events happened so close together. I began to examine why I had such a visceral reaction to them. What did they mean to me? My personal connection to each event has continued to broaden my lens to all that is "different" and continues to fuel my personal drive to work in the diversity and inclusion space.

Martin Luther King stated,

"Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that."

When I think of the recent course of events, it renews my faith in people. In May, I had the pleasure of meeting Billie Jean King at NEHRA's Diversity and Inclusion Dinner. My memories of her are not only as a world class athlete, but also as a spokesperson for fair prize money for women. She also worked tirelessly for equality and empowerment for women to show that women were confident, strong and equal.

Fast forward to today... Serena Williams, an amazing woman, is again ranked number 1 in the world and is the reigning champion of the Australian Open, French Open, Wimbledon, US Open, WTA Tour Championships and Olympic women's singles. She is regarded by some commentators, sports writers, current and former players as the greatest female tennis player of all time. Her prize money is estimated at \$72,976,354. (1st all-time among women tennis athletes and 3rd all-time among tennis athletes). Serena's success is a direct effect of how Billie Jean King's work affected future generations—an amazing legacy to leave behind.

Today times are different. We are making small but significant strides towards living in a society where we are all valued equally - at home, at work, at school—wherever we choose to spend our time.

We still have a long way to go to get rid of racism, hate and bias. But, I'm hopeful that events like the removal of the Rebel Flag from the Capital grounds in South Carolina and legalizing same sex marriage have similar effects on future generations. Hmm...this definitely is a journey.

One of my favorite quotes by Mahatma Gandhi is ***"Be the change that you wish to see in the world"***.

My goal is to do everything I can to leave the world a little bit better than I found it. And although we have many more steps to get there, I am hopeful that we are truly one step closer to the death of bias.