

"What societies really, ideally, want is a citizenry which will simply obey the rules of society. If a society succeeds in this, that society is about to perish."

James Baldwin, "A Talk to Teachers"

Exploring the Depths of Racist Socialization

By Tim Wise

Every now and then a lesson comes easy. Other times we learn things by accident, if at all. And inevitably it seems, the lessons that matter most, often come from the least likely sources, and at the most inopportune moments. So much so, that if we aren't paying close attention, we'll miss them altogether. Such was the case last August when my paternal grandmother died, at the age of 78.

Although the passing of a relative may seem hardly appropriate as the jumping off point for a political commentary, it is precisely the oddity of it, which makes it all the more poignant and valuable. But first, a slight preface to what I'm trying to explain.

In the past few years I have had the good fortune to speak before nearly 60,000 people, in 40 states, on over 150 college campuses, and to dozens of community groups, labor unions, and government agencies about racism. Some audiences respond favorably, others not so much. But the message I deliver is always the same: those persons called "white" have a particular obligation to fight racism because it is our problem, created in its modern form by us for the purpose of commanding power over resources and opportunities at the expense of people of color.

Furthermore, all whites, irrespective of their liberal attitudes, "tolerance" for others, and decent voting records, have to address the internalized beliefs about white superiority from which we all suffer. No one is innocent. No one is unaffected by the daily socialization to which we are all subjected--specifically with regard to the way we are taught to think about persons of color in this society: their behaviors, lifestyles, intelligence, beauty, and so on.

Without question, convincing white folks--particularly those dear liberals who insist every other friend they have is black--that they too have internalized racist beliefs, even of a most vicious kind, proves the most difficult in the work I do. You can't prove the point with statistics, or poll numbers, or by pointing out the wide disparities in life chances that form the backdrop of American institutionalized racism. Convinced that they are free from the biases, stereotypes, and behaviors that characterize "real" racists, such persons inevitably seem the most resistant to the analysis offered here thus far.

It is with this in mind that I return to my grandmother. For her death—and more to the point, her life, right up until she died--offers more in the way of proof that racist socialization affects us all than anything I have experienced. You see my grandmother was one of those good liberals. In fact, in many ways she was beyond liberal, particularly given the time and place in which she spent most of her life. Born

in the Detroit area, she and her parents moved south in the 1920s. Her father was a member of the Ku Klux Klan. A member that is, until the day in 1938 when his only daughter informed him that she had fallen in love with a Jewish man, and that in addition to that, his hatred of blacks was unconscionable to her. She then handed him his robes, and with her mother's approval, asked whether he was going to burn them, or if she was going to have to do it herself. She challenged him despite what must have been the palpable fear of standing up to a man who was none too gentle, and most certainly capable of violence. As it turns out, he would never attend another Klan meeting, and by all accounts changed his attitudes, changed his behaviors, indeed, changed his life.

Throughout her life she would stand up to racist bigotry on a number of other occasions: threatening to commit vehicular homicide on a real estate agent who sought to enforce restrictive covenants in her family's chosen Nashville neighborhood; standing up to racist comments whenever she heard them, from friends, family members, or total strangers. The fear which often paralyzes whites and makes us unwilling to challenge racism--described by James Baldwin as the fear of being "turned away from the welcome table" of white society--was something that played no part in her life.

She was a woman of principle, and although not an activist, in her own way she nonetheless instilled in her children and grandchildren a sense of right and wrong which was unshakeable in this regard. She is in no small part responsible for who I am and what I do today. But enough of the praise. Heaping accolades on the dead is not my intention here. For there is another part of this story which is less heartwarming, and yet more instructive and important than anything said heretofore. It is the part about my grandmother's death.

A few years ago it became obvious that MawMaw, as we knew her, was developing Alzheimer's disease at a fairly rapid pace. Anyone who has watched a loved one suffer with this condition knows how difficult it is to witness the deterioration that takes place. The forgotten memories come first. Then the forgotten names. Then the unfamiliar faces. Then the terror and anger of feeling abandoned. And finally, a regression back to a virtual infant stage of development, complete with the sucking in of one's lips so typical of newborns. It is a fascinating disease, in that it renders otherwise healthy persons helpless, eventually causing not only a mental meltdown, but a physiological one as well. It renders its victims incapable of reason or comprehensible thought. It saps the conscious mind of its energy, and therein lays the point of my story.

You see resisting the weight of one's socialization requires conscious thought. It requires the existence of the ability to choose. And near the end of my grandmother's life, as her body and mind began to shut down at an ever-increasing pace, this consciousness--the soundness of mind which had led her to fight the pressures to accept racism--began to vanish. Her awareness of who she was and what she had stood for her entire life disappeared. And as this process unfolded, culminating in the dementia ward of a local nursing home, an amazing and disturbing thing happened. She began to refer to her mostly black nurses by the all-too common term, which forms the cornerstone of white America's racial thinking. The

one Malcolm X said was the first word newcomers learned when they came to this country. Nigger. A word she would never have uttered from conscious thought, but one that remained locked away in her subconscious despite her best intentions and lifelong commitment to standing strong against racism. A word that would have made her ill even to think it. A word that would make her violent if she heard it said. A word which, for her to utter it herself, would have made her, well, another person altogether. But there it was, as ugly, and bitter, and fluently expressed as it probably ever had been by her father.

Think carefully about what I'm saying. And why it matters. Here was a woman who no longer could recognize her own children; a woman who had no idea who her husband had been; no clue where she was, what her name was, what year it was--and yet, knew what she had been taught at a very early age to call black people. Once she was no longer capable of resisting this demon, tucked away like a ticking time bomb in the far corners of her mind, it reasserted itself and exploded with a vengeance. She could not remember how to feed herself, for God's sake. She could not go to the bathroom by herself. She could not recognize a glass of water for what it was. But she could recognize a nigger. America had seen to that--and no disease was going to strip her of that memory. Indeed, it would be one of the last words she would say, before she finally stopped talking at all.

Please understand my point: Given this woman's entire life, and the circumstances surrounding her slow demise, her utterance of a word even as vicious as nigger says absolutely nothing about her. But it speaks volumes about her country. About the seeds of pure evil planted deep in every one of us by our culture; seeds, which--so long as we are of sound mind and commitment--we can, choose not to water. But also seeds that left untended sprout of their own accord. It speaks volumes about the work white folks must do, individually and collectively to overcome that which is always beneath the surface; to overcome the tendency to cash in the chips which represent the perquisites of whiteness; to traffic in privileges--not the least of which is the privilege of feeling superior to others--not because of what or who they are, but rather because of what you're not: in this case, not a nigger.

In so many ways that's all whiteness ever meant, and all it needed to mean for those of European descent. To be white meant at least you were above them. If you had not a pot to piss in, at least you had that. To call another man or woman a nigger and to treat them the way one is instructed to treat such an untouchable is to assert nothing less than a property right. It is to add value to what DuBois called the "psychological wage" of whiteness. When my grandmother was strong and vibrant she had no need to take advantage of these wages, and indeed, often tried hard to resist them. But in weakness and confusion it became all that her increasingly diseased mind had left. And she called in the chips. Maybe all this is why I'm so tired of other white folks trying to sell me bullshit like: "I don't have a racist bone in my body," or "I never notice color." See, MawMaw would have said that too. And she would have meant well. And she would have been wrong. Fact is nigger is still the first word on most white people's mind when they see a black man being taken off to jail on the evening news.

The first thing we think when we see Mike Tyson, Louis Farrakhan, or O.J. Simpson (as in "that murdering nigger"). Think I'm exaggerating? Then come with me to America's airports and have a drink with me at the bar the next time an African American other than Oprah, Michael Jordan, or Colin Powell makes the news. Take a cab ride with me anywhere in this country, and if the driver is white (or really anything but black), and the trip more than 15 minutes, see how long it takes for the word or its modern-day coded equivalents to spew forth from their mouth, once they find out what I do. Ask me what white folks yelled at black students who occupied the basketball court during a Rutgers/U. Mass game a few years back to protest racist comments by Rutgers' President. Fans who mere seconds before had been wildly cheering black basketball players, and yet could and did turn on a dime as soon as they were reminded of the racial battle lines which trump NCAA-inspired brotherhood every time. And then after that, tell me the one again about being colorblind. Let's go to Roxbury tonight, or East LA, or to the Desire housing projects in New Orleans, or to any MLK Boulevard in any city in America and then let's see how hard it is to spot melanin. Colorblind my ass.

Then once we're all through feeling bad for having been sucker-punched by racist conditioning just like everyone else, then please, for the love of God, let's learn to forgive ourselves. Our guilt is worthless, although, it should be said, far from meaningless. It has plenty of meaning: it means we aren't likely to do a damned thing constructive to end the system which took us in, conned us, and stole part of our humanity. And what those women at my grandmother's nursing home need and deserve--much more than a sniveling apology from embarrassed family members--is for me to say what I'm saying right now, and to encourage everyone to be brave enough to say the same thing. To put an end to this vicious system of racial caste. To spend every day resisting the temptations of advantage, which ultimately weaken the communities on which we all depend. Those nurses knew and so do I why my grandmother could no longer fight. For the rest of us, there is no similar excuse available.

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