

Exploring the Depths of White Racist Socialization

Tim Wise

EVERY NOW AND THEN A lesson comes easy. Other times we learn things by accident, if at all. Inevitably it seems, the lessons that matter most often come from the least likely sources and at the most inopportune moments. Such was the case last August when my paternal grandmother died at the age of 78.

The passing of a relative may seem hardly appropriate as the jumping point for a political commentary. So first, a slight preface to what I'm trying to explain.

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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 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.

It is with this in mind that I return to my grandmother. My grandmother was one of those good liberals. In many ways she was beyond liberal. 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

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that, his hatred of blacks was unconscionable to her. She handed him his robes, and with her mother's approval, asked whether he was going to burn them or whether 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. 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, she nonetheless instilled in her children and grandchildren a sense of right and wrong which was unshakable in this regard.

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. 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 renders its victims incapable of reason or comprehensible thought. It saps the conscious mind of its energy, and therein lies the point of my story.

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 that had led her to fight the pressures to accept racism—began to vanish. As this process unfolded, culminating in the dementia ward of a local nursing home, a 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 that,

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for her to utter it, would have made her, well, another person altogether. But there it was, bitterly and fluently expressed as it probably ever had been by her father.

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—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 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.

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. 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. 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.

Maybe all this is why I'm so tired of other white folks trying to sell bullshit like: “I don't have a racist bone in my body,” or “I never notice color.”

Fact is “nigger” is still the first word on most white people's minds 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 have a drink with me at any 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 takes 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/University or Massachusetts game a few years back to protest racist comments by Rutgers' president. Fans who seconds before had been wildly cheering black basketball players, could and did turn on a dime as soon as they were reminded of the racial battle lines which trump the NCAA-inspired brotherhood every time. 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.

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humanity. What those women at my grandmother's nursing home need and deserve—much more than a sniveling apology from embarrassed family members—is to end this vicious system of racial caste. For us

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punched by racist conditioning just like everyone else, let's learn to forgive ourselves. Our guilt is worthless, although 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

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. ■