



GSR in the Classroom: RACE RELATIONS

WHITE PEOPLE CHALLENGED TO BE PART OF SOLUTION

BEFORE YOU READ:

Everybody brings unique perspectives to the situations they experience or observe. We respond to things we encounter in school hallways or through the screens of our digital devices based on a number of factors, including race, wealth and power. Too often, we're not aware of these tendencies and biases until we've already reacted.

In this article, a sister who is a millennial white woman reflects on how the comfort and privilege she grew up with affects her outlook on race relations. She calls herself and her readers to be more aware of our own prejudices and to be open to understanding how others might judge shared experiences.

Keep in mind while you read:

1. How do my race, religion and financial situation affect the way I look at events in my life and news from around the world?
2. Regardless of my background or how it compares with the author's, how open am I to stretching my perspective regarding racial issues?
3. Take as much time as you can to explore some of the links in this article.



AN IMAGE OF A NATIVE AMERICAN IS SEEN NOV. 20, 2018, ON A BUS NEAR THE U.S. CAPITOL IN WASHINGTON. (CNS/REUTERS/JONATHAN ERNST)

DEAR WHITE PEOPLE: NICE DOESN'T CUT IT

BY TRACY KEMME

Jan. 25, 2019

I was 14 years old when Officer Stephen Roach shot and killed Timothy Thomas in my city. A few days later, our Spanish teacher tried to lead a discussion about the incident. I don't remember all the details, but I do know that I was boldly ignorant.

Our co-ed, urban, Catholic high school was more racially and economically diverse than prep schools like Covington Catholic but still majority white. On that April day of my freshman year, there were

two young women of color in class. While I commuted a long distance, having chosen the school because of a large academic scholarship, they grew up not far from Timothy Thomas on the streets where I'd been conditioned to lock the car doors.

I can still picture them trying to educate us on the reality of life in their neighborhoods, brave voices in a sea of ill-informed opposition and **apathy**. I can still feel my own facial expression, a self-righteous smirk, as I **regurgitated** white suburbia's assessment of the killing.

"I'm sorry," I said condescendingly, "but he ran from the police! If he had just complied, all this could have been avoided."

As if evading arrest for a list of minor, non-violent infractions merited death. As if I knew anything about police relations in the inner city. As if I had a clue what it felt like to walk around with black or brown skin. As if my vantage point afforded me any kind of authority to offer an opinion.

Looking back, I shrink in shame. What gave me the **audacity**?

My arrogance is a symptom of the culture of whiteness, the same culture that reared its head in last week's encounter on the Washington Mall and the aftermath. I don't know the students involved, but I could see my teenage self in their behavior. I was blissfully privileged, brought up in the cocoon of a wealthy family and safe community. My parents and teachers encouraged me to dream big; possibility was at my fingertips if I put forth the effort.

I saw myself as a good person. A nice person. I sang at church, worked hard in school, related with classmates from many different social groups, and volunteered. In fact, I went to D.C. for the March for Life, a school trip so popular that it required applications and selection, unaware of the church's broad pro-life teaching but sure that marching is what good, nice, Catholic people did.

I judged the world from where I stood, a well-intentioned but gravely limited perspective. I think I knew I was fortunate to a certain extent, but I couldn't connect the dots. If I could succeed, why couldn't others? If I could avoid run-ins with the law, why couldn't Timothy Thomas? Deep down, somewhere in my human darkness, I probably thought I was just better. Before I even entered high school, I subconsciously internalized a narrative of **entitlement**, superiority and invincibility.

I'd venture a guess that many of the Covington Catholic boys are products of the same mindset. No matter how one assesses the D.C. confrontation, deeply rooted issues come to light. As Bishop John Stowe and John Gehrig point out, wearing Trump paraphernalia at a supposedly pro-life event is inherently problematic and inflammatory. As Dr. Marlene Lang and Marcia Mount Shoop identify, calling this all a misunderstanding disregards the sinful history of our country and the ongoing, systematic oppression of people of color. As these young men worry about their tainted reputations, young men of color are

VOCABULARY

Apathy: a lack of feeling or concern

Regurgitate: to repeat information without analyzing or comprehending it

Audacity: bold or arrogant disregard of normal limits

Entitlement: a person's belief that they deserve certain privileges

Trail of Tears: The forced removal in the 1830s of Native Americans from their ancestral homelands in the southeastern United States

Status quo: the way things are, especially regarding societal or political situations

Common good: what's shared by and good for everyone; also, what's achieved by working together

regularly defamed, incarcerated, and killed unjustly.

The fact that the boys come from a Catholic school adds to the complexity. In the pastoral letter “Open Wide Our Hearts,” the U.S. bishops admit that the church is complicit in the evil of racism, from long ago until today. Popes of the 15th and 16th centuries condoned and perpetuated colonization and slavery through the “Doctrine of Discovery”; European theologians deemed Africans and indigenous Americans to be of a lesser nature. Violent conquest in the name of evangelization gave way to institutionalized racism that has evolved but never disappeared, and the church still has a long way to go.

These are realities that teenage me, and likely the high school students in question, never had to reckon with. The culture of whiteness clouds us, breeding attitudes that often last far beyond youth.

I’ve heard “nice” white people say, “I’m so sick of all this ‘racism’ stuff. I didn’t own slaves! I didn’t order the **Trail of Tears!**” In addressing racism, no one is accusing contemporary whites for creating the system. They are pointing out that we are the ones who have benefitted from the system and continue to benefit from it at others’ expense.

I’ve heard “nice” white people say, “I’m just really not into politics.” That phrase in itself indicates privilege. It says, “I’m doing fine, so I don’t have to get involved.” The truth is, if I live and breathe in this society, I am a political person. Choosing not to educate myself or participate is itself a political act that allows injustice to continue.

I’ve heard “nice” white people say, “I worked hard to get where I am.” That’s probably true. The problem is that people of color work just as hard, and usually harder, and never even get close to the prosperity

whites enjoy. They face systemic barriers in almost every facet of life.

I’ve heard “nice” white people criticize the way people of color protest racism. I remember that in the days following the Timothy Thomas shooting, we looked on disapprovingly from a distance as the “riots” unfolded. Curfews curbed our school activities and social plans. How dare this “unrest” interrupt our pleasant white world?

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. wrote from the Birmingham jail that whites cannot be “devoted more to order than justice” or prefer “a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice. ...”

Instead of accepting the **status quo**, we must: face our implicit bias; understand the power dynamics that come with being white; take the initiative to learn the parts of the story our upbringing allowed us to ignore; listen with humility when someone is willing to do the emotional labor it takes to illuminate new perspectives for us; back movements for racial justice led by people of color; vote for the **common good**; and work to change the culture on every level.

White people, being “nice” and “good” is not enough. We’ve got to intentionally be part of the solution.



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AFTER YOU READ:

1. Sr. Kemme acknowledges that while people have differing opinions on what took place Jan. 18, 2019, at the Lincoln Memorial, it brings to light many historical and social concerns. A lot of things that went wrong that day had roots in longstanding problems. Identify at least three issues that fueled tensions in that encounter.
2. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. contrasted negative and positive senses of peace. Simply put, he was saying that people can't simply avoid being upset with each other, but must do the harder work of uplifting one another's dignity. Name some basic steps we must take to live in positive peace with each other.

SCRIPTURE SPOTLIGHT: St. Paul spent a lot of time trying to resolve conflicts among early Christians. He encouraged them to, with God's grace, overcome discord and love each other:

"Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience, bearing with one another and forgiving one another, if one has a grievance against another; as the Lord has forgiven you, so must you also do. And over all these put on love, that is, the bond of perfection. And let the peace of Christ control your hearts, the peace into which you were also called in one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, as in all wisdom you teach and admonish one another, singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or in deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him."

Colossians 3:12-16

Sr. Kemme recalls the brave voices of classmates who tried to correct her regarding racial issues when she was a "boldly ignorant" high school student. As an adult, she encourages us to listen with humility when someone works to shine light on new ways of seeing things.

1. Think of a time when a parent, teacher or friend told you something that you might not have wanted to hear but needed to hear. How did they handle the conversation, and how did you respond?
2. It takes courage to speak the truth with love, and humility to accept hard truths. Name some virtues that Paul lifts up as essential to Christian relationships and identify one that's most important to you.

THE CHURCH'S CALL

In “Open Wide Our Hearts,” their pastoral letter against racism, the U.S. Catholic bishops remind us that we are made to live in relationship with others and with God. They quote Pope Benedict XVI, who wrote:

“As a spiritual being, the human creature is defined through interpersonal relations. The more authentically he or she lives these relations, the more his or her own personal identity matures. It is not by isolation that man establishes his worth, but by placing himself in relation with others and with God.”

From Caritas in Veritate (2009), No. 53

Think about your relationships, with your family and friends, as well as with acquaintances and strangers you might encounter.

1. How authentically do you live with people you're close to? Do you feel free to share your perspective on issues, even if that causes tension? Are you willing to speak up if someone shares an inappropriate joke or a comment that you disagree with?

2. How open are you to broadening your perspective by reaching out to people of different racial, religious or economic backgrounds? How might this help you grow as a person?

SYNERGY WITH SISTERS

Racism is a priority issue of Sr. Kemme's congregation, the Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati. Their website features this video in which Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie warns of the danger of basing our understanding of other cultures on a single story.

Take time to listen to her talk, then think about a group of people you'd like to know more about – perhaps the African American or Native American people mentioned in Sr. Kemme's article. Create a list of a few books to read about them and, with a realistic timeframe and the help of your local library, develop your understanding by reading these stories.



ACT

1. Sr. Kemme encourages people to vote for the common good. The bishops of the United States do the same every four years when they issue their call to “Faithful Citizenship.” The bishops do not endorse political candidates, but they do remind voters about Catholic teaching on a variety of issues and encourage them to vote with a well-formed conscience. Explore what the most recent Faithful Citizenship document says about current issues, then visit the websites of candidates to see how their positions align with Catholic teaching. If you are too young to vote, share Faithful Citizenship with your parent(s) or other adults.
2. Go the Project Implicit and take the Race test. Your results might reveal a racial attitude that you aren't aware of. While your preference doesn't indicate that you're prejudiced, it's helpful to be more aware of your attitude about people based on their race.

PRAY

Loving God, bless us with the gift of understanding to not only understand our own hearts, but to understand the hearts and lives of others. And bless us with the gift of courage as we challenge obstacles that dwell within us and all around us. Let your peace fill us and the world. Amen.