

Systemic Racism Exists; Acknowledge It

By Vernon M. McFarland



Many have the mindset that they are personally above racism or over racism. They say things like, “I don’t see color,” “I don’t have a racist bone in my body,” or my personal favorite, “I have a black friend.” Even so, failing to acknowledge that systemic racism exists doesn’t mean it’s not an everyday reality for millions of Black Americans. We can no longer hide our heads in the sand and say it isn’t our fault. We must all be proactive in resolving the patent unfairness and bias in our society that are caused by systematic racism.

I was born in Natchez, Mississippi, in a hospital named after the former president of the confederate states—Jefferson Davis Memorial Hospital. I grew up in a suburb of Jackson, Mississippi, a city named after the nation’s seventh president, who was pro-slavery. In Mississippi, we celebrate Robert E. Lee Day, a confederate general and slave owner, on Martin Luther King, Jr., Day. My grandparents lived through Jim Crow. My parents grew up in segregated Mississippi. Despite these experiences, their faith in God never wavered. They instilled in me to keep God first, be good to others, and to work hard for what I want.

I attended a public school in Mississippi that was overwhelmingly white at the time. I was usually one of two black students in the gifted and accelerated classes. During my teenage years, I was somewhat willfully ignorant to racism, similar to many white people I now know. I knew what racism was. I knew that some white people didn’t like me simply because I’m Black, but I always looked for the best in people.

Starting in middle school, the feeling that I was being tolerated, but not accepted, began to grow in my spirit. I saw Confederate flags flown with pride by my “friends,” who were adamant that they weren’t racist and that the flag was simply their heritage. I learned that many of the “great” men after whom buildings were named and statues erected believed that I would be considered merely prop-

erty and subhuman. I listened to classmates say things like, “you’re not like the other Blacks.” I realized that classmates and neighbors were children or grandchildren of KKK members. I overheard racist jokes and slurs. I saw fights between Blacks and whites caused by racist taunts, yet the harsher (or sometimes only) punishment was served upon the Black child. As the world showed itself to me, I began to realize that racism was real. While segregation and Jim Crow laws had changed, many people’s hearts and minds had not.

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In high school, my experiences with racism became more pronounced. I overheard teammates calling opposing players the “n” word. When confronted by me or on their own volition, things like, “I was just trying to get under their skin,” “I’m not racist,” “I would never call you that,” “It’s just part of the game,” were used to justify the racist slur.

I graduated from high school third in my class. I was voted most likely to succeed and served as president of various organizations. I ultimately attended Mississippi State University on the Schillig Scholarship, a full scholarship and the top honor for an incoming freshman.

While interning in college, I finally saw what the “wrong side of the railroad tracks meant”—the Black side. The Black side had a school, and the white side had a school. The Black school was always lacking, while the white school had an abundance of resources. My mentor explained that although he lived on the white side of town and his kids went to the white school with a handful of other Blacks, no one would sell him a house. He could only lease or rent a home for his growing family. The company for which I interned provided me an apartment on the white side. I recall visiting friends on the Black side of town. When I crossed the railroad tracks heading back to my apartment, I would regularly have a police escort home. I worked in other southern towns and I can give you other examples, but so can many other Black people you know.

After earning a degree in Industrial and Systems Engineering, I attended law school at the University of Mississippi. I am currently a partner at Forman Watkins & Krutz LLP. I'm a married father of four children; I'm actively involved in my church; and I'm a proud American. Yet, when I walk outside my law firm, my house, or my church, I'm seen as a Black male and perceived negatively by some for no other reason than the color of my skin. Unlike my white counterparts, I spend a significant amount of my time combating microaggressions while dispelling white people's negative perceptions of me to make them feel comfortable in my presence. Personally, it's exhausting; professionally, it's disappointing; spiritually, it's dampening.

These negative perceptions follow me inside the courtroom. Justice should be blind, but it is not. Tell a Black man walking into a courthouse named after a segregationist with Confederate statues out front that his pleas for justice will be heard. Tell him that justice awaits him in front of a judge whose daddy's granddaddy owned slaves. Justice is colored; it is colored by race, money, influence, power, and the media. This bias is innate in our society and historically propagated by those in power to retain and perpetuate that power. I've come to believe that it may be in our nature to discriminate. However, in the greatest country in the world, we must neutralize the effects of systemic bias and racism. We don't have any more excuses. We know better and should do better.

No one is born with bias or racist views. They are taught to us by our families, our experiences, the media, and even our faith leaders. Although I wish we could press a button and undo this programming, whether overt or

subconscious, it may be too late for some of us—and others don't want to change. Instead, those who want to fix the issue must be intentional in seeing color and eliminating the effects of bias and racism on our society. We must be intentional, because for far too long we were intentional in using color to the detriment of the “colored.”

If you operate in the American system, then you must take active steps to overcome the bias inbred in it. Most importantly, we must teach our children that there is one human race, and skin color is merely a physical characteristic, not an indicator of character. We must enlighten them about the truth of America's treatment of my ancestors and the results of that treatment on Black people in America. If we do not, then systemic bias and racism will continue to perpetuate themselves. They will continue to incubate in our souls; grow in our children; and thrive in the systems we create, the businesses we operate, and the laws we promulgate.

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