

God, Life and Everything "Who's a Racist?"

This past Monday, we celebrated the birthday of The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

How did you celebrate? I'm afraid I did nothing of worth to the community - deferred household chores mostly.

But I did read an article called "Racism Without Racists." It pointed to a book with the same name by Eduardo Bonilla-Silva.

In both of them, there is a fascinating premise: We still have a lot of racism in our society but very few professed - or even self-aware - racists.

How is this possible?

It all starts with a simple phrase most of us know and maybe have even said: "I don't see color, just people." Mr. Bonilla-Silva writes that, "Nowadays, except for member of white supremacist organizations, few whites in the United States claim to be 'racist.'" He says that, like Dr. King, most whites believe that "they aspire to live in a society where 'people are judged by the content of their character, not by the color of their skin.'"

So, we think of ourselves as color blind, as truly seeing people for as nothing more than people. There was an old Army joke from the 60s in which the drill sergeant says, "This is the Army. There are no blacks and no whites. Everybody is green. Now, the darker green soldiers move to the back of the bus."

The truth of that joke is that we do see color. Of course we see color. We see race even if we think somehow that's a bad thing.

Frankly, I am glad to see color. I love the wide range of skin colors, facial features, hair, everything. The world is a lot more beautiful and interesting for it.

The good Lord made us all different, from deep black to chocolate to Cappuccino to golden to light cream to pinkish to blinding white - and who knows what else. Every one of those differences is a celebration. It would just be too boring if we were all green.

When we try to say that we don't see color, we try to pretend there aren't any problems, that people don't treat others differently because of their skin. We get angry when anyone dares to complain about being treated differently because of their race.

We say they need to let go of the past and quit using it as an excuse.

On the positive side, it's good that none of us wants to be considered a racist. In a way, that's progress.

On the negative, the evidence is solid that plain old fashioned racism still exists, even if people perpetuating it have no idea they're doing it.

Studies have shown that we generally fear black men more than white even when the white are doing the threatening. In one example that Bonilla-Silva cited, scientists showed pictures of two men fighting, one of whom had a knife. When both men in the picture were white, test subjects could easily pick the correct man holding the knife.

When the picture showed a black man and a white man fighting, with the white man holding the knife, most people - even black participants - thought the black man in the picture held the knife. We are conditioned to think of black men as threatening.

Could that be why the number of black men in prison is disproportionate to their population size? Could that be one reason why black men are killed by cops more? Not because they're more dangerous as a group but because we see them as such.

It's not just about violence. Another study in job searches gave identical applications to employers - these were sight unseen application processes. The only difference in the applications were that half had "white" sounding names (Bob, Frank) while the other half had "black" sounding names (Jamari, Rakeem). The applications with white names were picked 50% more often for interviews. Nobody's calling the interviewers racist - they would probably be as surprised as anyone to learn what they'd done.

So let's face it. We all see (or perceive) color. And it does affect how we treat each other. I'm white, so I know I have an easier time of it. I get fewer hassles and more breaks from the police. I don't get followed around at the store. I can get a loan more easily. I can get a job more reliably. I get into schools I want more often (regardless of the occasional situation of "reverse racism" - which always causes an uproar - you are still much more likely to get into the school you want if you're white).

This is just the way things are. To deny it is to bury your head in the sand. It's like the little kid who shuts his eyes, covers his ears with his hands and shouts, "La la la la la!" in order not to hear or see something.

The question is, what do we do about it? Systemic racism is such a tightly woven pattern of our societal structure that it seems nearly impossible to unravel. Where do you begin?

I wish I could give a step by step recipe for ending it.

I can't. Still, the first step to improvement of any situation is recognizing the problem. We could do worse than making a conscious effort to recognize our own awareness of color. We could do worse than acknowledging that not only do we see color but our feelings are different about seeing people of different colors. Then we can look around and recognize that indeed, black men, women and children do face hassles that others just don't have to bother with.

That may not seem like much, but until there is awareness, there is no change. And change in the area of racism, my friends, would do us all some good.