

I Am A Racist

I am a racist. But then again, so are you.

How does that make you feel? A little uncomfortable?

Are you sitting there incensed and creating a rebuttal in your head about why you are not a racist?

Because you have black friends? Because you're of mixed heritage or because your skin is too dark, so you've got the get-out-of-racist-jail-free card?

No one wants to admit to this ugly piece of shadow—but, here's the reality: no individual can erase from their psychological system the culture in which they were raised. We can change, grow, evolve, deepen—but, we still carry our culture within us.

American culture has deep racist roots (and yes, I am aware that we could have a whole discussion on the definition of American culture, but that's for another treatise). I'm not saying our culture doesn't also have some amazing beauty; but, we've got a nasty shadow that's still alive and well—it can't help but seep in.

See, there's this thing called neural networking.

Basically, what happens is that our brains record information and make paths with the information we receive. If you're hiking in the forest and you find a well-traveled path, you will walk down that path—you will not bring a machete and carve out a new path that will take you a whole day to travail, when the well-beaten path will take you 30 minutes.

That's how the brain works, too.

Now, to make change, we have to get out the machete. We've got to hack the forest down, acquire some nice fat calluses on our hands, get scratched up by some brambles, try to find the most even ground, stumble a little—well, stumble a lot actually—and walk that path over and over again until that path is somewhat smooth.

How long do you think it will take to get that new hewn path to be as smooth and bare as the original path? Years, maybe decades right?

And how long do you think it will take for the original path to grow back fully, so that you cannot see where the path once was?

A life time, at least. So what makes you think, somewhere in your neural networking, that you don't have some vestiges of racism?

Some years ago my girlfriend, who is Jewish, and would not generally be defined as racist by most folks of color, was working at night when the maintenance guy came around to take out the trash. Now, she had a nice rapport with this guy and they chatted each other up most nights and had a sweet connection. He was Native American. One day, he shows up and she, in an instant, without thinking, raised her hand palm forward and said "How."

The instant it happened, she was, of course, mortified—it was a thousand "Cowboys and Indians" childhood games and TV shows she saw as a child, the Lone Ranger and Tonto (which means stupid, by the way), and the neural networking that in a millisecond traveled down the path (i.e. neural network) that was clearly still intact.

My niece, who is part Filipina, has said on more than one occasion, "I hate Asians," and then went on to explain what she meant by that and proceeded to justify it by saying "Well, I can say that because

I'm part Asian."

Let me just be clear: being of mixed heritage does not mean you cannot be racist.

Now, I'm not name-calling here; I'm just saying, we've all got a piece of it. Yes, even people of color.

I know the PC world says you can't be racist unless you're white 'cause the whites got the power.'

I say bullshit.

Having grown up as a white minority in a border town that was predominately populated by Mexicans and Chicanos, in which power in our community was not only in the hands of white folk, I can firmly attest that racism can and does exist, even in communities of color.

I'm just saying, having been on the other side of the dominant culture, yes, brown folks can be racist too. I can't tell you how many times I was jumped for being white, or called pinchi gringa.

But it's not just what happened back then; I still get it today. Coming from a mixed culture and a mixed family, I might be less racist than your average white person. I can't tell you how many times well-intentioned non-white friends, when discussing racism, have said to me, "Yeah, but you're not really white."

And yeah, I get it, I'm culturally mixed—but, I am, physiologically, a white girl.

When they tell me that I'm "not really white," what they are contextually implying is that white is bad (however they view bad: racist, stupid, ignorant, etc.) and I am not like that.

I get that they're trying to give me a compliment; they are trying to say that I'm not racist, and that I have a broader view of the world, but the way they say it is with the assumption that white is equivalent to ignorant/racist/pig/dominating/stupid/small-minded.

As a white person, that's offensive. It is no different than if I were to say to a black friend, "Yeah, but you're not really black," denying culture or heritage, implying that white is better, implying all blacks are hoodlums, gangsters, addicts, wife-beaters, or whatever bullshit or racist stereotype I'd be laying on them.

It's not the overt racists I worry about; it's the relatively evolved and aware folks who won't admit to the shadow that concerns me, regardless of heritage or color of skin.

We are all victims and we are all perpetrators. We are mothers and fathers, healers and destroyers, lovers and betrayers. We are multitudes. And maybe, a more accurate way of saying this is that we each have a part of us that is racist.

You may not agree with me and that's fine; what you do, what you claim, well, that's your own business.

But, for me, I will claim that a part of me is racist. If I own it, then when you call me on that little piece of racist neural networking that rears its ugly head, I will not have to defend against it.

Instead, I will see that old path and be able to plant new seeds where the path is still showing.

So yes, for today, I will willingly admit, that a part of me is racist.