

# Chipping Away at Stone-hard Prejudice

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Walking up the wide, two-lane frozen food aisle, I am just about parallel with the oncoming cart across the middle display cases. The man pushing the cart is a tall, older black man who suddenly whips his head around and yells in a deep, angry voice, "If you are following me, I will sue you for discrimination!" My heart jumps. I follow the man's eyes and spot the uniformed security guard who says something in a low voice that I cannot hear. But I hear the boom of the black gentleman's voice again coming back at him, "You certainly were following me! Every aisle I go up and down, you are right behind me!"

I am turning into the aisle at the back of the store, heart pounding, agitated by the outburst, sneaking a glance back, unsure of what, if anything I should do.

I am sure of one thing though. The black gentleman is right. On some level I had been aware that this guard was walking up and down the aisles because I remember thinking, or half-thinking, "They usually stand in the doorway at the front." On that same half-conscious level I had noticed this gentleman, for he was a very large man, but also I remembered the gentle expression on his face. He looked grandfatherly. We had been

parallel shopping for most of my 20 minutes in the store.

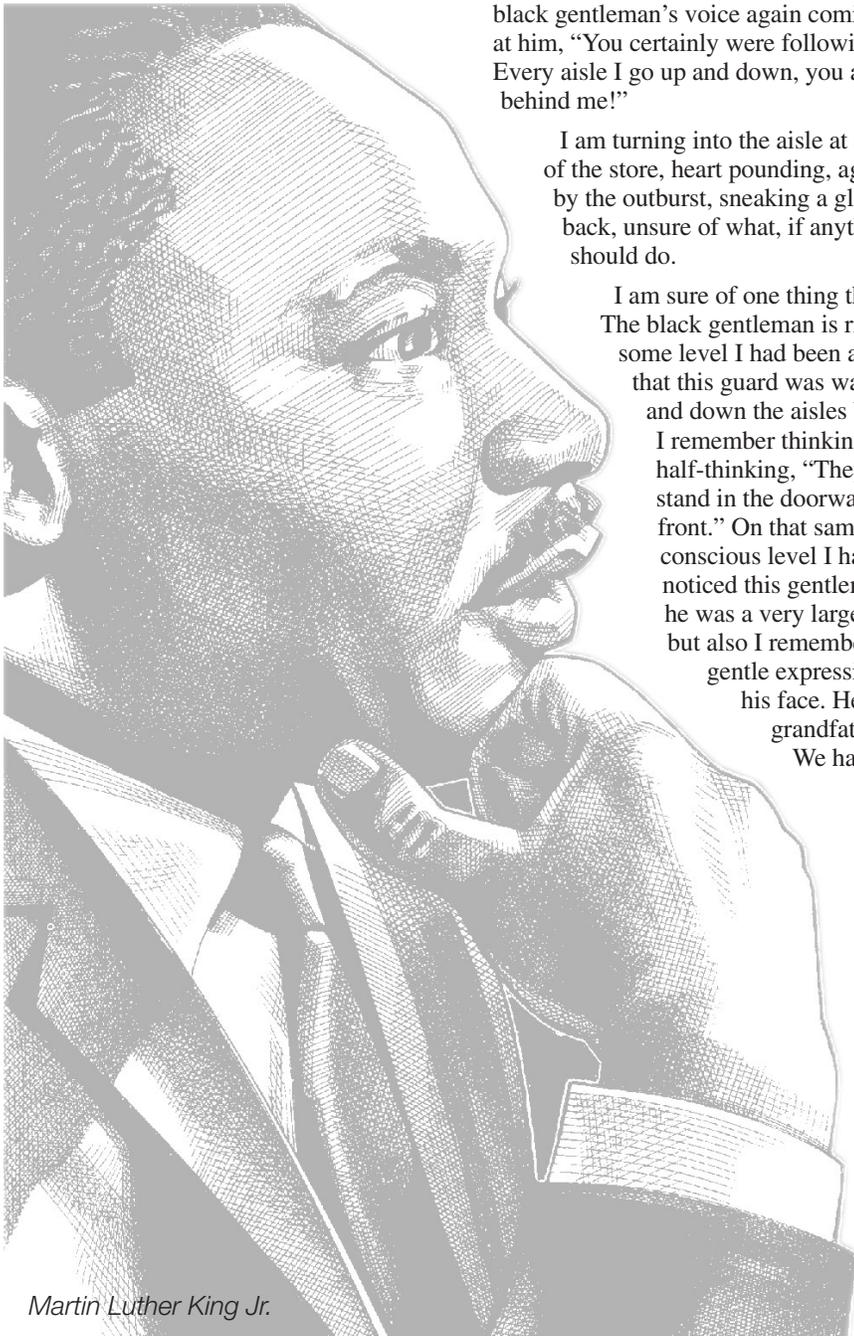
I circled back a moment later to take a peek, and they were still yelling. I wanted to defend this black older man, but I wasn't sure if that would help or add fuel to this raging fire. Everyone else seemed to be doing the same as me—walking by, stealing a glance. The voices stopped, and several minutes later I saw the black man with what I perceived as a tense, angry look on his face as he pushed a cart not as heavy as his heart. The guard was nowhere to be seen.

Again, I wanted to say something. But what I wanted to say went far deeper than this one incident of injustice. I wanted to cry at the horror of this blatant example of prejudice and discrimination. I wanted to say, "That happens all the time, doesn't it?" I wanted to say, "You are tired and weary of always having to be the target of stereotyping, profiling, subtle and not so subtle daily indignities, aren't you?" I had too much passion.

I walked aimlessly through the store with my half-filled cart trying to decide what to do. Eventually I went into the checkout line, bagged my groceries, and then checked out the guard that I now saw standing where he always stands—in the large foyer between the grocery store and the liquor store. He looked the part—poor, uneducated, tough, and brash—am I now being prejudicial?

The helplessness crushed me for the rest of that day. The unhealed wound of America—a black and white issue to be sure—this wound festers and the poor get poorer and the poor get blacker. My internship in race relations was a three-year pastorate 20 years ago in the Roxbury section of Boston, a city that had no middle class black neighborhoods, at least then, and I suspect still doesn't in this geographical racial divide.

All the daily injustices that I witnessed in Roxbury—hell, that I experienced in Roxbury—flood my soul. My white suburban friends, priests too, wouldn't come into my parish because it was a "bad area." If I gently raised the issue, I would be remonstrated (I knew that gospel word would come in handy someday) for even thinking that I would suggest they risk their lives or the lives of their families coming into "that area." Well, I lived with people just like them who had the same



Martin Luther King Jr.

fears and same worries about crime and risk, but because they were black, they had no choice but to live in “that area.”

A week later into this new year, I go to dinner with my friend, John. He is a wonderful, faith-filled man. He is single, a little younger than myself, and someone with whom I enjoy sharing conversation and friendship, often discussing our faith journeys, over a beer or a nice dinner. We are at this fashionable bar/restaurant where the theater crowd goes before or after, or the singles go to be seen and to see. It’s always lively, packed, and noisy. It is also noticeably integrated black and white, or at least appears to be.

We go inside and walk the long narrow path between the bar and the front end of tables to give our names to the hostess. “Do you have a preference where you sit?” John looks to me and I shrug, “I don’t care.” He whispers to me, “I’d rather not sit out in the back because a lot of *them* sit out there.” I respond knowing what I just heard, but wanting to make sure that I heard what I just heard, “What?” He must have read my face because he motioned to the hostess, “Anywhere.”

Again I ask, “What are you saying?” “You know, lot of the blacks sit out there.” We are following the hostess—back *there*—and I turn to him, take his arm, and look him in the eye and declare slowly and clearly, “That, John, is raw prejudice.”

He is quickly remorseful. “I know, I know.” We sit down.

“This isn’t the first time, John.” I am remembering the last time he made a remark in this same restaurant, maybe even another one before that. I continue, “You said last time that the only problem with this place was that it was dark in here. I naively thought you were talking about the lighting. John, that is simply wrong.”

He agrees. “I am from South Milwaukee. That’s the way we were raised. I’m sorry. It is wrong.”

I am touched by his honesty, his lack of defensiveness, his genuine remorse. But that is the caliber of this man of faith. And yet his prejudice is little different than the uniformed security guard, only more subtle, which is often worse.

But like all of us in the dominant culture—whatever that means in a given situa-

tion—we will only become more compassionate and loving when someone loves us enough to chip away at the stone of our hearts. Eventually we may come to the pieta underneath in our deepest and truest selves.

It is Black History Month. I am mindful of how as individuals so many of us are like my friend, John. Our society, our schools, our media, even our Church has formed and molded us within a Euro-American culture that formerly split Italians from Poles and Germans from Irish. The color divide, however, is embedded in our history as a country. We continue to fight an uncivil war that is still not over.

The questions for me as I enter into this month: How can I become more aware of my own prejudices? How can I be vigilant of my own reactions and biases when I find myself in a setting of blacks and whites, or when I am driving my car, or when I am watching television, or when I am reading the newspaper?

How might I bring those to my God in the conversation of prayer individually, or to my friends and colleagues in the conversation of sharing collectively? For Black History Month, could I perhaps read a black writer, fiction or non-fiction? What about Maya Angelou’s phenomenal book, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, or Toni Morrison’s, *Beloved*, for example?

Finally, we have to do something about integrating this association of ours. Many of you have rightly raised the issue of diversity in the strategic planning process and this will most assuredly be a part of the strategic plan that goes to the Board of Directors later this month. We have black Catholic parishes, black Catholic associations, black Catholic diocesan offices. But we have few black Catholic chaplains. We need to move creatively and proactively.

Diversity encompasses far more than the black/white issues of race, but this is a good starting point during this month of Black History.

Even as I am writing this article, I struggled with the language—African-American or black. I chose the latter because I recently referred to a person of color as African-American who is not African-American, but Jamaican. I am trying not to be “politically correct,” but to be respectful of persons.

We chip, chip away, and underneath the stony hearts are hearts of flesh. ▼

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