Racism: Opening our eyes, speaking our truth

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Fighting racism also has to happen from within

By David Lichter
Executive Director

I often feel grateful for my college years in the late ‘60s during the civil rights movement, especially the fair housing marches led by Fr. James Groppi, a legendary figure in Milwaukee history, and the Milwaukee NAACP Youth Council. In 1969, I had the privilege of serving at St. Boniface, Fr. Groppi’s church. On weekends he drove one bus and I the other, taking the youth to religious sites to share the Church’s tradition and commitment to social causes.

During the week, I drove a school bus to help cover expenses, and I learned a lot about racial injustice and intolerance in so many forms. Once I was driving middle schoolers past the House of Corrections, where Fr. Groppi had to spend some time. “That’s where my dad works,” one boy boasted. “He asked his boss what he had to call Fr. Groppi, and his boss said he could call him whatever he wanted.” Then the boy proudly strung together a string of demeaning expletives his father had shared at home. This young boy did not know Fr. Groppi, but he was being groomed in racial wariness and hate.

Half a century later, our nation still lives with racial divide, wariness, and hate. But for me, it’s much different now from the late ‘60s, when I experienced the social justice movement as a white man working alongside of the NAACP. Looking back, I realize that at that time I was acting more to be helpful than to understand myself and others. Now I find I am called more to be myself, my truest self. I want not just to help but to live and love together, and respond genuinely out of who I am with others.

These past months have made us all too painfully aware that the embers of distrust, disappointment, and disillusionment with our paltry progress in racial justice have been fanned into rage. As I mentioned in NACC Now on June 8, at age 72, I find that the invitation to grow in my own understanding and respecting all of humanity is still a daily call. I am blessed with a Black son-in-law who shares the world from his eyes, as every person shares his/her world with me from their perspective. I am learning so much from this young man, husband and father.

In my June 8 reflection, I also referred to an article by Fr. Bryan Massingale in National Catholic Reporter, titled “The assumptions of white privilege and what we can do about it.” The article helped move me from “wanting to help” the other to facing my own whiteness and my many forms of complicity to racism, challenging me to many actions I could do now. My wife, Jackie, has been much better than I on confronting messages on social media, where I am not very active. I am learning slowly to be attentive. This is requiring of me a more contemplative stance while we seek a way forward together.

For the NACC, I am very grateful for Jim Letourneau’s and Carolanne Hauck’s board leadership at this time, and the steps to set up more listening and conversation sessions among us for greater understanding. I am grateful to all the contributors to this issue of Vision who are helping us to have a wider vision of this reality. I am grateful to all my brothers and sisters in NACC who, like my son-in-law, are letting me more into their world and how they experience racism. I look forward, brothers and sisters of NACC, to our shared efforts to listen, understand, love, respect, experience life together and then respond.
Chaplains’ skills of listening are tool to address racism

By Jim Letourneau
NACC Board Chair

“History will have to record that the greatest tragedy of this period of social transition was not the strident clamor of the bad people, but the appalling silence of the good people.” – Martin Luther King, Jr.

This quote has haunted me – perhaps for years – but especially since George Floyd’s death led to a cascading series of cries for racial justice.

I used to work in a Catholic healthcare organization where the CEO himself led our efforts for diversity and inclusion. Every ministry within the system was expected to appoint a diversity leader, articulate a strategic plan addressing diversity and inclusion, and address health disparities within their facility.

That was in 2006. I led the effort for my ministry. We had strategic goals and rolled them out to the edges of the organization. Each goal had identified outcomes that we were expected to meet or exceed.

And here we are in 2020. Have we made any progress? At the system’s corporate office, I can name Black senior executives. That is an important step, but true progress requires so much more than visual models. I am a person of privilege as a Caucasian male … and I find myself frustrated, angry, and dismayed at racial prejudice and discrimination. My attempts to be in solidarity with people of color fall far short of appreciating their experiences.

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 and other similar laws, as monumental as they were, could not change people’s hearts or attitudes. I believe conversion of heart happens when we listen to one another’s stories and experiences. As chaplains, that is our strength. We hear stories of those we serve every day. We bring a skill set that can lead to social change … if we knew how. I’ve been intrigued with the Faith Matters Network, which seeks to integrate faith with social movements. It seems that some chaplains have been able to use their listening skills in a meaningful way leading to cultural transformation.

Conversations dealing with race can be fraught with emotion. If we are conflict-avoidant, if we shrink back at the perception of anger (which I confess is my tendency), these inclinations can hold us back from the good we can do. Having a listening heart means opening ourselves up to the possibility that we can and will change. Listening admits that I may not know the truth or have all the answers. Listening humbly acknowledges that my perceptions may be wrong.

Chaplains are trained to be emotionally intelligent and not to react thoughtlessly but to respond with intention, sometimes despite our feelings. It’s not always easy to carry out in practice, but it is something we can offer to address the effects of racism.

The USCCB’s Subcommittee on Certification for Ecclesial Ministry and Service recently recommended that NACC equip its members in matters related to restorative justice. We do not see this as a new required competency, but we as an association will seek to provide tools
for our members to use as needed. How can we restore the disenfranchised and isolated members of the human family to our community? Through conversation.

As the NACC Board Chair, I feel responsible for our response to systemic racism. I’ve said before that we cannot be the same as a result of all we’ve witnessed this year. A draft of a strategic plan devoted to racial justice has been presented to our Board, which has advised me to engage more members with the plan. In the coming weeks, representatives from our committees, panels, and commissions will respond to the draft with their suggestions for possible implementation. Select NACC members participating in the Hispanic and African-American networking calls will also offer their perspectives. We hope to roll out this plan by the end of the calendar year, but doing it effectively is more important than doing it quickly.

May we all continue to pray for social change and an end to systemic racism. It begins with each one of us.
Unpacking a knapsack full of privileges

By Sheri Bartlett Browne

I recently listened to a white Catholic deacon sermonizing on today’s evils — but he never named any of them. Without guidance, what were the white parishioners thinking? Given the recent murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and many others, I hoped everyone was thinking about the scourge of racism. But for most of us, it will take conscious awareness to begin to face this evil. If you are white like me, I pray that such contemplation will lead you to self-awareness, commitment to antiracism, and advocacy for justice.

One place to begin is the concept of implicit bias. Studies suggest that we bring to human interactions an array of unconscious messages about others. Implicit biases about race have a momentous impact on us. Unsurprisingly, individuals who took a visual sorting test on race from Harvard’s Project Implicit overwhelmingly linked images of white people to positive words (joyous, excitement) while associating images of Black people to negative ones (bothersome, selfish). These linkages held true regardless of the test taker’s race.

What should we do with this troubling information? Once we are aware of our unconscious prejudices, I suggest that a white person’s next step is to come to grips with white privilege. The term may seem like amorphous academic-speak — a way to label good people as racist, when they believe they are not. But two things come to mind. One is the writing of journalist Isabel Wilkerson, who asks us to envision an old house that we’ve inherited. We might not have been around when it was constructed, but it’s ours now. We are responsible for repairs, from the plumbing to the roof. If we don’t fix the broken-down house that racism built, who will?

Second is a reminder from historian Ibram X. Kendi: “The heartbeat of racism is denial.” If your first inclination is to deny your prejudices and the effect they have on our social systems, then I urge you to look again. After taking the implicit bias test for race and not liking the results, I dove deeper into white privilege, and what I found has made me think differently about every interaction.

White privilege, according to antiracist advocate Peggy McIntosh, is like a knapsack full of items for life’s journey. If you are white, yours is filled with unearned assets. They are keys that you did not ask for, but they unlock privileges solely because of your race. Here are a few assets that I found in my white healthcare chaplain knapsack:

- Responding to on-call crises at night, I never fear being stopped by the police when driving to the hospital.
- Confused in the parking garage, I will seek out, rather than avoid, hospital security. The guard has never asked, “What are you doing here?”
- Entering the hospital, I feel I belong. Art, background music, and quiet spaces reflect positively on my Anglo-European heritage.
The medical teams look like me. I am welcomed into the unit and feel comfortable working there.

Praying in an empty chapel at 3 a.m., my presence is not a matter of concern.

If you are a white chaplain, you could probably make a similar list. These privileges are not easy to name or discard, but awareness brings new opportunities for antiracist advocacy. Here are some ideas:

- Collaborate with your colleagues to organize an implicit bias training.
- Put racism on your meeting agenda and lead a conversation about it.
- Work together to develop an antiracist covenant and share it with other units.
- Envision a more inclusive and welcoming chapel. How can you help make these changes?
- Join a community forum about systemic racism and listen to the voices of your Black neighbors.

As Catholic Christians we are called to antiracist praxis. Antiracism is embedded in Catholic social teaching, offering a roadmap for our journey. Make room in your knapsack for those commitments, such as:

- The preferential option for the marginalized. Listen to and advocate for those who have been marginalized by racist thinking, violence, and disenfranchisement.
- Human dignity. How has historical, structural racism impacted this person, their relationships with others, and our communities?
- Reverence. The sin of racism perverts the belief that all people are created in the image of God. Do your actions attest to the sacredness of others?
- Solidarity. Stand unwaveringly with others to eradicate structural inequalities in healthcare, housing, education, and employment.

These changes are not easy, but that is really the point. If they were easy, we would have eradicated racist thinking and actions decades ago. Now, it’s time to repack our knapsacks with these commitments to justice. May they challenge and inspire you, open new doors, create bridges, and heal deep wounds on your anti-racist journey.

Sheri Bartlett Browne, PhD, BCC, is professor of history at Tennessee State University in Nashville, TN.
“Not from you”: Direct racism is still with us

By Maritza Ramos Pratt

Answering a consult for a pre-surgery prayer, I went to the pre-op room. “Hello, this is Chaplain Maritza, may I come in?” I asked from outside the curtains. “Yes, you may,” a female voice answered.

I saw a man in his 60s, ready for surgery, and his wife and daughter at the bedside. “I am Chaplain Maritza and I am here because you requested a chaplain,” I said.

“Yes, we did,” said the wife, “but not from you! Not a Black chaplain!”

There was silence for few seconds. So many answers passed through my mind. “Slow down, Maritza,” I thought, remembering my CPE units. “It’s not about you.”

Then, I answered aloud, “As you wish. But blessings come in different ways. You do not know what you missed. I will get you another chaplain. Have a blessed day.”

The wife and daughter were not a bit embarrassed, and I did not want to cause any distress to the patient, who was very quiet. Out of their room, I called a white CPE student to pray with them and told her that I would explain later.

That afternoon in the office, I debriefed with all four Hispanic chaplains, three CPE students, and my senior chaplain. I felt better having processed the experience. But it was a moment of truth for the students to realize that racism was still alive.

And for me, it was not the first time that something like that had happened. In my previous career as a hospital dietitian, I remember at least three times that white patients told me they did not want my services because I was Black – right to my face. All my degrees, certifications and licenses didn’t matter. In the hospital kitchen, about 90 percent of the employees were Black, and I felt at home among them.

I am a Black Hispanic woman who speaks Spanish and English with an accent. I was born and raised in a very low-income family, in a totally Black town in Puerto Rico. My father was a public transportation driver but his own boss. My mother had a sixth-grade education. She ironed clothes for a white family while keeping her own family united and strong.

But education and faith were very important for my father, who often told us, “No one can take this away from you.” My five sisters and one brother are currently working as an industrial engineer, two social workers, an executive secretary with the Puerto Rican government, a registered nurse, and a teacher.
The University of Puerto Rico was far from my town, and none of us had a car, so we had to take public transportation. Every morning, my mother would tell us, “You are beautiful, you are intelligent, and it does not matter what people say, you are a very special person.” It was her mantra. And we needed it, because the racism in Puerto Rico was silent and underground, but it was there. Many professors did not like Black students from my town.

After my graduation, I worked one year with the Puerto Rican government, spent 12 years in the Army dealing with my accent, and married my husband (a Black man from New York and career Army man). Our four sons always asked, “Are we Black or Puerto Rican?”

My answer was, “YES! We are Black Puerto Rican.” All my sons speak English without an accent, but I always spoke Spanish with them, since being bilingual would be an asset in their lives. Most summers, they spent two or three weeks in Puerto Rico with my family. I wanted them to recognize the importance of family (grandparents, aunts, cousins, new friends, and neighbors) and most of all the town experience. Most of their friends in the States were Black until we moved to Florida. There, they were also surrounded by a large Hispanic community at church, school, basketball games, and the neighborhood. They learned how to blend very well on both sides.

I am a board-certified chaplain, with a master’s degree in hospital administration, another master’s in theology, and a doctoral degree in hospital administration and leadership. But as I said, none of that matters to some people. Sometimes I feel so frustrated. But I think about my mother’s words to us every morning, I say, “Mom, you were right,” and I keep on going.

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Seeing grief but missing anger: A moment of cultural learning

By Jennifer W. Paquette

The young Black man raged in despair and anguish. His wife and firstborn child had died that morning. His wife had begun bleeding, and he took her to the community hospital near their house. The baby had spontaneously aborted, but his wife kept bleeding. “I told them there was something wrong with her, but no one would listen to me. No one!” he yelled. “They acted as if I wasn’t even there.”

The hospital had transferred her to the trauma center where I was working, but she died before she arrived. Now, the husband and ten or so family members were waiting for “the chaplain,” and their grief carried down the hallway. On my way to the room, one of the ED physicians commanded, “Get them quieted down. They’re too noisy and upsetting other patients.”

From the audible wails, I suspected this was a Black family. “It is how they grieve,” I told him. “They must be allowed to grieve in their own way. There is no stopping grief.” More than a little surprised by his directive, I was also irritated. This was a big-city trauma center that served a mostly Black population. The physicality of their cultural grieving was normal. They grieved as they prayed, their entire bodies participating in the movement of their souls.

I had history in Black culture, and perhaps for that reason, I believed myself to be more astute than I was. For the first six years of my life, I was raised by a Black woman, whom I loved dearly. Later, my family moved near Washington, D.C., a predominantly Black city where power and authority were vested in the white population. In college, I lived near a Black church. Their Sunday mornings of praise for Jesus came alive in their hymns, many of which were vestiges of slavery. I felt joy in their midst and an enthusiasm for Christ missing in my white Catholic church.

Years later, my CPE class reminded me often that where there was an older Black woman in the hospital, I would find her. And I feel driven to advocate for Black patients in a clinical setting.

But despite all that, I was blind to the underlying causes of that young father’s rage. It wasn’t until much later that I realized his wife’s color had alienated her from the clinical care she should have received. Also, I did not understand that the race of the young father prevented his voice from being heard. I understood the misery of his loss, but I failed to understand and support his outrage that his family was invisible merely because of the color of their skin – and that this was likely one more repetition of a lifelong pattern.

I do not ever want to be appalled again by my lack of insight in the moment. Since then, I have worked to be more intentional, especially in discovering the causes of events. I must examine more closely my actions, reactions, purposes, and motivations among communities of color. I must find my way into the depths of their experiences. I must be more aware of our separateness and seek the place where the boundaries fade and we are joined by our humanity.

Jennifer W. Paquette, BCC, is now retired and previously served as director of spiritual care at Providence Mount St. Vincent in Seattle.
Micro-aggressions represent the subtle side of racism

By Charles Kibirige

A colleague asked me recently at lunchtime, “Charles, as someone who grew up in Africa and is now an American citizen, how would you describe your current racial experience in the USA? Has it changed since you came here?”

That was a chance to think about a subject I have talked about privately but never written about until now. I told my colleague that I feel more uncertain about my future today than when I first came to this country. What I hear and read in social media and the news have sowed seeds of doubt and uncertainty. I hope it will change, but it is as scary as it is disappointing.

Most of my experiences with race in the USA have been in the form of micro-aggressions, the everyday, subtle, intentional or unintentional interactions that communicate some sort of bias toward historically marginalized groups.

My very first experience happened back in 2003. I had been in the USA for two years, and I don’t know why it took that long, but it happened. I was a young priest invited to a family gathering in a predominantly white neighborhood, and my host called me to give me some tips. Essentially, he told me that the police might stop me for no reason other than being a black man in a white neighborhood. My host suggested I wear my official clerical dress to the party in order to avoid a surprise police check. He apologized, even as he stated that this was unfortunately true for anyone of my race. This was an early lesson in the history of race in the USA for me.

America is a country that has always held a promise of safety, freedom, and endless possibilities for someone like me, who grew up an orphan in a Third World nation and survived three devastating wars. In the twenty years since I came to this country, I have experienced some fulfilment of this promise, but my race still stands in the way of the full promise.

This brings me to micro-aggressions, from both friends and strangers. For instance, I am often asked “Where are you from?” or “Where did you learn to speak such good English?” The subtle message is clear: I am a foreigner. I usually respond by saying that it is not fair to expect me not to speak or write good English.

Another example was when an intern addressed me as “you people.” I summoned the educator in me and reminded the intern that I was an individual with a unique cultural heritage. I also reminded him that such attitude went against everything a professional chaplain is supposed to be. Another time, a clerk followed me around the store pretending to clean up something. I have seen this phenomenon on TV but never thought I would one day be a victim of such blatant profiling. I often laugh it off and ignore it eventually, because it is so ridiculous.

But the worst of this attitude happened back in 2014 at a furniture store when a clerk said to my face, “Are you sure you can afford that furniture?” He made the shocking assumption about my financial status based on nothing other than my appearance. I sarcastically expressed how
his attitude is such an asset to his company. I felt it important to speak up and speak out in the moment against this blatant stereotyping.

Race has never been a factor in where I chose to live or work or send our child to school, but I am frustrated to be reminded of it regularly. A little over a year ago, a fellow first grader told my daughter that she looks like poop. I know they were both kids, but kids do not live in a vacuum. I told the teacher that I would not tolerate harassment toward my daughter regardless of who propagated it. It is bad enough to know that you have little control over a situation. But it is even worse to feel like the only thing some people see about you is the color of your skin. It makes you feel invisible. I worry about how to navigate these challenges as I raise my daughter.

Olufunke Oba, a fellow African who is a professor of social work at the University of Regina in Canada, has written an article in which she shares some of her approaches to racism. I agree with her that I may not be able to change the world, but addressing micro-aggressions gently “in here” can affect the work we do “out there.” It is not enough that things happen to us, it is important that we reflect on them to make meaning of the experience and grow.

That is why when anything happens today, I have resolved to be more intentional in addressing the issue right away in a meaningful way instead of harboring fear or resentment. I ask questions to check out the intentions of the perceived micro-aggressor, so that moment becomes less of a confrontation and more of a learning opportunity – such as the intern who addressed me as “you people,” or such as my daughter’s teacher. It is important to address these issues in real time, because these moments hold the opportunity for learning and growth for both parties.

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White people, recognize the racist water we swim in

By Kevin S. Crowder

I was raised to be a racist.

Transparency is hard. It involves risk. It involves trust. Today I am going to break one of the rules of white privilege: I am going to be racially vulnerable in a racially inclusive conversation.

Before I ever knew it was happening, I experienced privilege by being white. I continue to be privileged by being an educated white man with an American passport. I am privileged by being in the dominant religion (Christianity) in America. Being cisgender and straight have also privileged me not to deal with stuff if I preferred not to.

But I recognize my need to deal with stuff. I am learning. I am on a journey with my friends of color. I get it wrong. According to Robin DiAngelo, the author of *White Fragility*, I’ve gotten most of it wrong, most of the time, in spite of my efforts not to. I don’t want to let down my colleagues or profession, but I especially don’t want to let down my friends of color. The truth is, though, I’ve been letting them down my whole life. I just did not see it. I just did not know it.

I was born in Little Rock, Arkansas. I attended public schools in an era of court-ordered desegregation. Every year at the beginning of school, I watched each teacher complete a card documenting the race and ethnicity of children in the classroom to demonstrate compliance with the court order. No children of color lived in my neighborhood. In fact, I was in high school before I knew where any people of color lived. The schools may have been integrated, but our lives were separate and definitely not equal, not in Arkansas.

As I said, I was raised to be a racist. I am certain my parents did not do this on purpose, but they could not see the racism in which they swam – because they had not been socialized to see it. I had three parents most of my life. Two of them worked at not being racist, but all three occasionally denied their racism, like virtually every white person I know. In spite of their protestations to the contrary, I heard things no child should hear. The pet of an extended family member was named a common racial slur. The so-called humor which I heard both at home and in the media was inappropriate, insidious, and even poisonous. If you are white and at least 50 years old, I bet you heard it too. I could go on.

That was some of the obvious, conscious racism I saw, and I knew it was wrong. But for most of my life, I was blind to the unconscious attitudes, biases, actions, and inactions that I inherited. Like too many white people, I was socialized to believe that I could not have racist views if my intent was pure. White people, you can have the best of intentions, not mean anything bad, and still commit acts of racism and micro-aggressions that virtually any person of color would identify instantly! We are all swimming in racism. None of us created it, but all too often we contribute to it with our silence. Every time we think, act, or speak in white-normative ways, we demonstrate our unconscious bias.
I see this in the hospital every time a white clinician asks the chaplain, “Can’t you quiet them down?” referring to a grieving family of any race. The problem is not the volume of the grief. The real problem (aside from inadequate sound dampening) is the white staff’s expectation that grieving should be done quietly. Whether the professional staff has white-normative or quiet-normative expectations, people of color are often on the receiving end of an unfair bias. (I am not assuming that people of color grieve loudly or that people who grieve loudly are people of color. But in my experience, when a white clinician calls a chaplain for a loudly grieving family, that family is often not white.)

White allies need to educate ourselves, but not at the expense of our Black colleagues and friends. Our ignorance is our own problem to mitigate. We need to understand the insidious but subtle barriers that hold back all people of color. We need to read James Cone, Howard Thurman, Peggy McIntosh, Ibram X. Kendi, Robin DiAngelo, John Lewis, and others, but reading is not enough.

This is not a time to say, “But I have a black friend!” This is a time to invest in the lives of persons of color, clergy of color, chaplains of color in real, tangible, and emotionally honest ways.

All is not lost. Knowledge really is power. Self-knowledge can lead to changes of beliefs, attitudes, and biases. We can decide to be otherwise. We can and must look for our own micro-aggressions. We can and must look for systemic racism. When we find it, we must do something about it. If we see it all around us, our calling, our vocation, and our profession demands that we take a moral stand, that we take decisive action to right past wrongs.

I suggest we look for opportunities to support and encourage people of color personally and professionally. We need to seek ways to be antiracist, even if from time to time, maybe even regularly, we fail. But when we fail, we recommit ourselves to a common antiracist future.

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“Where are you from?” is a loaded question

By Ruth Jandeska

When I moved to the United States from my native Colombia many years ago, answering the question “Where are you from?” or “Where is your accent from?” was delightful. I felt I was free to share who I was, my goals, my dreams, and so on, without being judged. Here I was, a young aspiring black Latina scientist, the first one in my immediate family to earn a terminal education degree, alongside other foreign students and native English speakers.

It quickly became overwhelming, though. Anybody would ask those questions: people I met at the university, the bus driver, my neighbors, the cashier at the grocery store, even complete strangers waiting in line with me. Sometimes I would sense an authentic curiosity and a desire to learn that made me feel appreciated. I used to eagerly answer them, and sometimes an appreciative listener made me feel proud to describe the beauty of my birth land, its people and its culture – a different picture than the one of drug trafficking and cartels that is most often portrayed in the news.

But soon I noticed what these questions are truly about for some: suspicion and bias. My answers would be met with scoffs, eye-rolling, or just plain dismissal. In social or professional gatherings, no other comment or question would follow. No other inquiries, such as “What was like to grow up there?” Or, “What was the culture like?” Not even a comment about how much nicer the weather there might be! Those kind of non-responses made me wonder about people’s necessity for “othering” and its pervasiveness in this society.

What is the intention of someone asking these questions? What fuels the desire to learn the answer? And what are they going to do once they learn the answer?

To this day, I am asked one of those questions at least a couple of times a day. I talked to my classmates of different racial backgrounds, and I was very surprised to discover that so many people shared similar experiences. But our experience was made worse if we challenged the question or refused to answer it. We would then be perceived as “overly sensitive” for “overreacting” to a presumably very harmless question. Even people who were born and raised here in the United States, but whose race is not Caucasian, experience profound discomfort when asked where they were from. It was discouraging to hear that, but I felt validated and affirmed to know that others felt the same way.

I have now lived in the United States nearly half my life, and I decline to answer these questions when complete strangers ask. If it’s a friend or acquaintance, I sometimes jokingly say that I am half baked in Colombia and half baked in the United States. I am from here ... and also from there. I am from the land of currulao, vallenato and cumbia as much as I am from the land of rock ‘n’ roll. I often follow that with explaining how the question is emotionally and mentally draining for immigrants and their children.

“Where are you from?”¹ seems innocuous, but it is a very loaded question. It shows that the asker needs to know in which category to place the hearer. It insinuates the hearer does not
belong, that to be American he or she ought to speak and look a certain way. Is it a disrespectful question to ask? Well, yes and no. What is the intention of asking? What fuels your desire to learn the answers? And what are you going to do once you learn the answers?

It is selfish to ask this question merely to satisfy one’s curiosity, and it is extremely offensive if the intention is to show one’s superiority. But if you genuinely desire to seek connection or to learn about other ethnicities and cultures, spend some time with the person before asking. Allow them to talk and share their stories. “What is your cultural background?” “Where did you grow up?” or better yet “Where are you a local?” are better questions to ask afterwards. Questions like that allow the hearer to share stories about their rituals, relationships, and restrictions – things that, as writer Taiye Selasi⁰ says, really tell you where someone is from. As Mark Gonzales says in his children’s book *Yo Soy Muslim*:

There are questions this world will ask
What are you? And where are you from?
On that day tell them this:
Yo soy Muslim. I am from Allah, angels, and a place almost as old as time.
I speak Spanish, Arabic, and dreams.

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¹ See www.cnn.com/interactive/2017/08/opinion/where-im-really-from
² See www.ted.com/talks/taiye_selasi_don_t_ask_where_i_m_from_ask_where_i_m_a_local
When so many can’t breathe, chaplains witness to the breath of God

By Anne Windholz

In the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form and void. And darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the breath of God [ruach Elohim] moved upon the face of the waters. And God said, “Let there be light.” (Gen. 1:2-3)

The breath of God.

Later, “And the Lord God made a human from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the human became a living soul” (Gen. 2:7).

The breath of God.

For the last several months, we in this hospital and in medical centers around the world have been trying to save the lives of people whispering, gasping, coughing out the words, “I can’t breathe.” We, and so many brothers and sisters from all nations and creeds, races and cultures, have heard those words, or seen them written in the eyes of the dying, and tried – each in our own unique way – to respond. To preserve the breath, to buy the time needed with masks and quarantines and ventilators, so that maybe – just maybe – that living soul could be saved. And that one. And that one.

The breath of God.

Despite our best efforts, we have watched the slow and too-often brutal deaths of living souls who, because of the dark color of their skin, the zip code they live in, and the nature of the jobs they must do to feed their children, are particularly susceptible to the venom of COVID-19. And every time we lose one of them, surely the breath of God is stolen away from all of us.

But as people committed to the saving of lives, what can we make of the deaths that are not the whim of a virus, but carelessly or intentionally perpetrated because someone with power has judged that those “living souls” are not worth preserving? That somehow their breath is less sacred, their light less important, or that their lives don’t matter?

Black lives matter. Because every living soul bears the light and breath of God. Because goodness and compassion, healing and mercy, are not something earned. These are inherent rights born of our dignity as humans. And today, in this place, we kneel and give notice: That is my brother, my sister you shoot. That is my mother, my nephew, my spouse and partner and best friend you kill. That is my father you suffocate. That is my savior you crucify.
“Jesus uttered a loud cry,” says Mark’s gospel, “and breathed his last.”

Ruach Elohim.

The breath of God, moving upon the face of the waters. Moving in our hearts. Moving now, as we remember the fallen, reclaim their dignity, worth, and unique personhood. As we defy the chaos of societal diseases more destructive than COVID. As we reclaim the breath of those killed and don’t just say, but demand, “Let there be light!”

Ruach Elohim.

Anne M. Windholz, BCC, is a chaplain specialist at St. Alexius Medical Center in Hoffman Estates, IL. This is adapted from a reflection she gave at the “Take a Knee” service of solidarity on June 5, 2020.
Interracial marriage offers firsthand look at racism – and numbness

By Daniel Waters

My wife and I have been married for 38 years. I am white and she is Black. I grew up in a then-predominantly white neighborhood in the south end of Toledo. My wife grew up in the predominately Black south side of Chicago. We met at Our Lady of Perpetual Help Church, my wife’s first music teaching job out of college in Adrian, MI. I was directing a youth group playing music for Mass on Saturday evenings.

But as we fell in love, got married, and built a life together, I was forced to realize that racism is pervasive and systemic in our society. I am consistently treated differently when I am in public by myself that when we are in public together. And on reflection, I was saddened that I have learned to take it for granted. I do not even give it a thought when someone stares at us or makes vague disparaging comments behind our back, but just loud enough to hear. I have learned to live with all of it. That is so incredibly sad, and it is very wrong. When I learn to live with things like being searched every time we travel to Canada to enjoy the Stratford Theatre Festival, or when the border agent asks if we are married and clearly implies “you are disgusting” – I become part of the problem. That was a hard thing for me to admit to myself.

Sometimes racist comments are made out of ignorance, but our country and our church have grappled with this issue for decades. Ignorance is simply not a valid excuse. Even if someone claims that the comments are “just in fun” or “not meant to hurt anyone,” all racism is hurtful.

For many African-Americans, learning to live with it is common. My brother-in-law tells me that there are so many injustices, it is impossible to address every hurt, even in a single day. He basically said he chooses his battles.

I have tried to approach the problem with humility, but directly and firmly. The change must be ongoing. One practical step for me was to share this reflection with our entire parish in a homily one weekend. Afterward, I was heartened by the number of written notes, emails, and comments I received. Over the years, there has been reconciliation and change in some people, maybe simply due to the longevity of our marriage and our continued service to the community. Two parishioners in particular wrote in detail about taking up the challenge of looking inside themselves, and offered gratitude for us.

In the Trinity, the thought of the Father emptying himself completely to the Son, and in turn Son emptying back to Father with the overflowing love of the Holy Spirit, gives us a vision of true community. We speak of God as the definition of love. Perhaps we can speak of the Trinity as the definition of community – and racism is an utter break in that community.

How do we make that vision of true community a reality? As a start, I humbly offer my experience of looking deep inside and facing a hard truth. It is only when each one of us is willing to look deep inside that we can have the unfailing commitment to make a bold difference. To never tolerate the filth of racism even in its most subtle form. Our country is better than that, our Church is better than that, and our world is better than that.

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Beyond competence: Cultural humility means lifelong openness

By Nicholas Perkins

What qualities come to mind when you think about cultural humility? I think about self-awareness, lifelong learning, empathy, compassion, and the willingness to listen and receive feedback.

But I have seen plenty of the opposite behavior: A person calls the coronavirus the “Chinese” virus. Another says, “The shop that I took my car to was an assembly line of Mexicans. I bet there wasn’t a single person that spoke English.” Someone says, “I couldn’t find an Arab cab driver because they were all praying.” A Palestinian man invites a coworker to dinner (Persian Gulf War veteran) and asks, “How many Muslims did you kill with your sophisticated bombs?”

All of those comments depict microaggressions, painful questions, or remarks that involve stereotypes. But how should chaplains respond? After all, the effort to achieve chaplaincy certification should equip us to manage and never tolerate such hurtful comments. Would we use the competency of respect for the boundaries of others? Or the competency that encourages a chaplain to use professional authority appropriately? I ask because I value chaplaincy, and complicity through silence only perpetuates injustice.

When the concept of cultural humility was introduced to the fields of medicine and public health 30 years ago, it catalyzed fascinating and continuing discourse on whether cultural humility is, in fact, more important than working to become competent in other cultures. For me, incorporating cultural humility into spiritual care is just the first step, since I must also integrate it into my life. I must be open-minded enough to learn about another’s culture and to examine my beliefs.

I have traveled to and lived in various countries, and I learned to avoid making assumptions about others and being a know-it-all. I adopted a mindset that I use with patients and families: I respect that you are the expert on your life. I must wonder and remain curious. I do my best to suspend what I think about a person based upon generalizations about their culture. If I intend to incorporate authentic cultural humility into my life and spiritual care, I need to appreciate historical realities and respect the legacies of oppression and violence against certain groups of people.

Earlier, I mentioned a Palestinian man who had invited a Persian Gulf War veteran and colleague to his home for dinner. I was that colleague and am that veteran. I served four years on an aircraft carrier in the United States Navy and did two six-month deployments into the Persian Gulf.

On another deployment, we received a distress signal in the South China Sea from a foreign container ship 300 miles away; a man had fallen from a high place aboard it and suffered life-threatening internal injuries. But an aircraft carrier can’t just leave its assigned
operational area; that requires authorization from high-ranking officials. We waited and wondered if we’d be granted permission to help an injured stranger.

Six hours later, we changed course and barreled through treacherous seas to save this severely injured man’s life – a Palestinian. I remember the chaplain reading the story of the Good Samaritan as we raced to help him. We didn’t encounter him on the side of the road; we met him on the ocean’s rolling swells and beneath a brilliant moon. We valued his humanity and respected his culture, ethnicity, and religion. Our surgeons performed a life-saving operation, and our chaplains respected his Muslim faith. After he was stable, we flew him to a naval hospital in Japan.

I told that story to my Palestinian dinner host, hoping in vain that it would change his mind. But as a result of my experience on the ship, I discovered that every person has a story which connects to a unique history — and that every human being deserves honor and respect. I emphasize respect and dignity in the prayers that I say for patients of color, since many may have been mistreated by terribly unjust and unfair practices.

Although that dinner party was difficult, it taught me to accept how I can act out of the wounded parts of my life. I learned that everyone has a responsibility to practice cultural humility and tolerance. I have learned to see the beaten and wounded Christ in the eyes of all people and to extend them affirmation and validation.

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