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The Newspapers Tell Only Half Of The Story

Americans Read About Acts Of Racism Daily, But Most Of Us Know Things Aren't Nearly So Bleak

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Whenever I pick up a newspaper, I see articles about the dismal state of race relations in America, and I feel as if I have once again entered a long, dark tunnel where I'm surrounded by anguished faces and heavy hearts, and where no one dares speak of anything positive. The truth is, relations among the races are far better than many thoughtful and concerned Americans give themselves credit for. We are without a doubt a prejudiced nation, but there are countless numbers of us who refuse to give in to our own worst impulses.

But everyday kindnesses that cross the color line don't make good copy like churches' being burned or a black man's being dragged behind a truck in Texas. When Sen. Trent Lott said publicly that our country would have been better served if arch-segregationist Strom Thurmond had won the presidency in 1948, the story gained so much momentum that Lott was eventually forced to resign. I'm glad he did, and that the story forced us to ask ourselves how our society could have allowed this individual to rise to such an elevated post.

These examples of bigotry and ignorance prove that racial tension is always bubbling underneath the surface of blacks' and whites' interactions with each other, but I don't think that should cause us to lose hope. The fact is, most people choose each day to treat each other with respect; we'd live in a state of chaos otherwise. These acts of tolerance may not sell newspapers, but they are what ultimately moves us forward.

My understanding of how far basic fairness can take us came early on in the form of Miss Daily, my eighth-grade teacher. Though she was only five feet tall, she was a very powerful lady, the queen of her domain. I was one of three black students in the class, but she made me feel equal to every other student in the room. She didn't do this by delivering searing diatribes on race relations; she simply treated me like everyone else. She never gave even a hint that her students' race mattered to her. Regardless of our color, we all had to adhere to the highest academic standards. What she demanded of one, she demanded of all. Eventually I, too, became a teacher, and when I encountered students whose backgrounds were racially and ethnically diverse, the memory of Miss Daily helped me to judge my young charges on nothing more than the quality of their work.

In my personal life, I'm surrounded by decent people who continue to choose kindness over bigotry. One white neighbor built some steps for me this summer and has yet to ask to be paid. Another white neighbor repaired my mailbox after some kids smashed it with a baseball bat. He never mentioned it to me; I discovered his generosity on my own.

I remember another example of the brighter side of race relations that happened just before my best friend died in November 1992. Though terminally ill, Melvin was always hopeful that he would see the sun rise for one more day. Two weeks before he died, I visited him and his wife in his hospital room. Mel was especially pleased because on this particular evening, he was being entertained by a young white guitar player who came to the hospital twice a week to play for cancer patients. Mel, whose dark skin was blackened even more by the chemotherapy that ravaged his body, listened with rapt attention to the jazz music, his favorite.

While Mel was absorbed in the music, I was thinking of something else altogether. I was marveling at the scene--a young white male playing for three black friends with whom he had not the slightest acquaintance. This, I thought, was at least a partial answer to our country's racial misunderstandings. We had discovered a common thread, in this case music, and were enjoying it with equal passion. Loving what is shared leaves little room for loathing what is different. In that room and among those four individuals, there were no rules, no regulations, no quotas, no affirmative-action concerns--just one caring musician, a loving wife and a lifelong friend transcending race to bring joy to a suffering man.

Moving beyond race, like all human involvements, always comes down to caring. To think beyond race is commendable; to act beyond race is to take a real step toward a more equal society. We'll know we've made progress when we can automatically look past the color of a person's skin and focus on his or her value as a human being. I believe we're getting there, one small act of kindness at a time.

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