How It Feels To Be Colored Me
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Just as Zora Neale Hurston explained in her article, "How it Feels to be Colored Me," I never thought much about race until I was about thirteen years old during my junior high school years. As Zora stated, "I remember the very day that I became colored" (30). I, too, recall the day I realized that I was white and that it meant something more than just a Crayola color. No longer was white just a color; it was the race I belonged to with its own rules and regulations.

Prior to writing this essay, I really had not noticed the effect that race had on my life. That is, not until I was forced to look race straight in the eye. This was a very difficult thing to do because it brought back some unpleasant memories I thought I had locked away in permanent storage. I had to be brutally honest with myself and examine my inner most feelings on how race affected my life. Only then did I truly realize how race impacted my attitude, behavior, education, employment, and privileges.

As a kid, I didn’t understand what race meant or its implications. I was pretty much oblivious to it. Race meant getting some kids together and running a foot race. The one who made it to the end of the block won. I never felt that I was special because of my race. Nor did I feel discriminated against. Of course, I was sheltered from race and racism. I never knew any people of color because I grew up in an all-white, lower-to-middle-class blue-collar neighborhood. I never encountered someone of another race, and my parents made sure of it. I wasn’t allowed outside of our own neighborhood block, as my mother kept a strong leash on me. Not until I was much older did I wander outside the safety net of our all-white neighborhood.

Without a choice, and after graduating from elementary school, I, like many others in the same grade, had to change schools and begin junior high school. Since I lived within one mile of school, there were no free bus rides. Like many other kids in the surrounding neighborhoods, we had to walk to school. We often heard horror stories about how the black kids would gang up on the white kids and start fights. Naturally, we were afraid to leave our comfort zones and negotiate through uncharted waters. As much as we dreaded that walk to school, we were even more fearful of what would happen to us once we arrived at our new school. Regardless, we didn’t have a choice in the matter; we had to do it despite our worst fears. We dealt with these fears by staying with our own kind and made sure we were never alone. We always walked in groups of two or more because we didn’t want to be "sitting ducks."

Once acclimated to our new surroundings, we noticed there were a lot of black kids at the junior high school—more than we had ever seen in a our lifetime. However, we were sure to notice that we (the white kids) still outnumbered them. Even so, it was a little frightening to us. I’m not sure what frightened us most--perhaps it was fear of the unknown or the imaginings of our worst fears coming true--but I think the black kids were more afraid of us since they were outnumbered. For the most part, the black kids never really did anything to us. Sometimes they gave us dirty looks or made smart
remarks, but that was the extent of it. Every so often, a fight would break out in the hallways, but it was usually just two boys involved in a pushing and shoving match. Even so, we didn’t feel totally comfortable yet and always kept our guards up. For me, it took a while to get used to the different atmosphere, but within a short time I got to know several black girls pretty well. I liked playing sports, especially basketball, field hockey, and track, and so did many of the black girls. A lot of us played on the same intramural teams after school, and that is how I got to know many of them. Teamwork brought us together, and sharing our hopes, fears, and joys kept us from moving apart.

One experience during my junior high school years that really stands out in my mind is a bittersweet memory of a black girlfriend I once knew. We got along really well and decided to ride bikes together after school, and we had a lot of fun. Who would have thought that something so innocent as riding bikes with your friend could cause such a ruckus? I can vividly recall my mother pulling me aside one day as she instructed me to stop riding bikes with my black friend. She said we could still talk at school, but no more after-school bike rides. “My mother said, “It doesn’t look good being seen with a black girl in an all-white neighborhood.” She said that people were beginning to talk about this and, “you don’t want to be labeled a ‘nigger lover.’”

Naturally, I was very upset with my mother and “the people who were talking” who made such an innocent thing as riding with a little black girl a crime! I had to stop being friends with her just because the color of her skin was black. I didn’t think this was fair to deny us our friendship. Besides, who were we hurting, and why was it any of their business in the first place? I really liked her a lot, and I felt awful having to tell her that I couldn’t go bike riding with her anymore. I was hurt and confused, especially since my mother was always giving speeches on the importance of treating everyone fairly regardless of how they looked. Her famous words were, “It’s not what’s on the outside, but what’s on the inside that really counts!” I think she meant that only applied to people of our own color. She was contradicting herself, and it went against everything she ever instilled in me. How hypocritical! I respectfully voiced my opinion on the matter, but I was not so bold to accuse her of being a hypocrite. Back in those days, you would not dare criticize your parents because that was called "back talk." You did not give your mother "back talk" or the next thing you knew, you were being punished.

After that incident, I didn’t talk much to my black friend and, come to think of it, I haven’t heard from her since. Thinking back, I wonder how she felt knowing that her color could get in the way of our friendship or, more accurately, knowing that it was my color that got in the way of our friendship. I wonder if it made her distrust white people. I really didn’t understand what my mother meant by being a “nigger lover,” but because of the tone in her voice, I knew it had a negative connotation. I thought about disobeying her orders, but if I were caught, I would have been punished. Looking back on this many years later, I know that she was just trying to protect me, but it affected the way I saw things from then on. I finally noticed the difference of skin color, and how it could cause so much controversy. For some reason, which I didn’t understand at the time, having black skin had a negative connotation. This was my first real experience with racism. I didn’t understand all the politics, but I knew it had serious implications if I went against the status quo.

By the time I got used to one school, it was time to move on to another. This time it was senior high school. I wasn’t nearly as worried about attending senior high school as I had been at the beginning of my junior high school days. Not only was I older, but I was also accustomed to being around blacks. At age 16 I wanted to date boys, like other girls my age, but my mother ruled our home with an iron fist and was so strict that I wasn’t allowed to date until I was 18. I got tired of fighting a losing battle, so I just began sneaking out. I even considered going out with a couple different black guys in high school but remembered that was strictly forbidden. I was willing to take risks, but not that big a risk because dating black boys was another taboo subject in our household. My mother told me several times, “Don’t you ever come home with a black guy because your father and I will disown you!”

After high school, I was still employed in a dead-end job at McDonald’s. Even though I
attended a vocational program in commercial art for two years, I couldn’t find a job in my field of specialty, so there I was flipping burgers and taking customer orders. “Would you like fries with that?” I uttered that phrase so many times, it became part of my regular vocabulary. In the early 1980s, our state was hit hard by a recession. We had lost a lot of manufacturing jobs in our county, and the unemployment rate was in the double digits. Getting a job was very difficult, and anyone who had a job—even a McDonald’s job—was lucky to have it and held on to it with all their might. I remember prospective employees asking for job applications and telling them we weren’t taking applications at this time. I felt like a failure because I had spent several years preparing for a career in art, and there I was working at McDonalds, and this was not the “career” I had imagined doing the rest of my life. I was going nowhere fast in this dead-end job. About the only thing I looked forward to was the weekend—going to the nightclubs—dancing, drinking, and partying with my friends.

So after three years of this drudgery, I had to do something to get out of this rut. A friend of mine suggested the U. S. Air Force as a way out of this dismal and depressing area, so I went down to the recruiting station, took the test, and did pretty well. They filled my head with all the great things you could do in the military. I went home and pondered for a few weeks and decided to enlist. It sounded like a pretty good deal—free room and board, meals, education assistance, and travelling the world! What did I have to lose anyway? What I didn’t know was how it would forever change me. Nor did I realize all the people of different races, colors, and nationalities I’d meet. All in all, it was to be a very rewarding experience.

However, just as the first day of junior high school was scary, so was basic training. Like most of the girls in our unit, I was scared to death of the drill sergeants—never mind being afraid of the blacks. Our flight was a diverse group of girls, though the majority of them were Caucasian. We had Black, Hispanic, and Chinese girls in our unit, and they came from all over the United States with varied backgrounds. I could not help but notice their skin color, but I did not dwell on it for two reasons. First and foremost, we were just too busy to even worry about it. The drill sergeants kept us marching from sunrise to sunset, so our minds never had a chance to wander, and we had much less time for contemplation. Mostly, we were just trying to remember our left foot from our right one while keeping “in step.” Second and more importantly, we were all on the same team, striving for our mission: to graduate from basic training. If we were to get through this ordeal, we all had to pull together for the good of the team because there was no way in the world we could do it all on our own.

While in basic training, I became friends with several girls, but became especially good friends with a black girl of Hispanic descent. The color of our skin never became an issue. She was like the sister I never had. She and the other girls in my flight became my second family. All we had was each other, and it helped to tear down any racial tensions there might have been. We were all under tremendous strain, and it didn’t take long before we broke down and cried. Some broke down sooner than others, but eventually we all cried the same tears. The special closeness we shared helped lessen our burdens and brought us together in our common goal: to fulfill our mission by graduating from basic training.

From junior high school to the U. S. Air Force and to present, I have had to overcome my fears about race. Until just recently, I thought about race from my own personal experience. It was always “me” or “white” centered. I didn’t think about race from a black person’s perspective until I took an in depth look as I was writing this essay. I agonized over the writing of this essay because it was a very painful examination of my own ideas and belief systems about race. As much as I truly believe in the “it’s what’s inside that counts” ideology, American society places too much emphasis on “it’s what’s on the outside that counts.” I don’t agree with this concept, but I do believe it exists. Statistically, a person of color has many battles to fight, and I must confess how fortunate I am to be white. Who knows what my life would have turned out to be if I had been born black? Even if I had the same determination, would I have had the same opportunities? Probably not. That is why I was so intrigued with Peggy McIntosh’s article “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack.” While I do not agree with all of her ideas, she makes some
very daring comments in her writings. For instance, she compares white privilege to an "... invisible weightless knapsack ..." we carry on our backs, and don't even realize it's there (120). She goes on to state, "... [white] skin color was an asset for any move I was educated to want to make" (124). I think the key phrase here is "to want to make." Being white, I almost always have the option to choose my own destiny. Regretfully, I cannot say the same for most blacks. Perhaps that is exactly what she means by the invisibility of being white. Blacks see the privilege but whites don't. Compare this to looking through a window. Blacks are on the outside looking in, and whites are on the inside looking out.

When I first read her article I became defensive. How dare she tell me that I am privileged! She doesn't know the struggles I've had in my life, or how I came from a working-class family. At first I was defensive because I did not particularly care for the tone of this article. Was she suggesting that the reason I am successful is due, in large part, to being white? That is a hard pill to swallow, and I take offense to this line of reasoning because it discredits my achievements and my uniqueness as a human being. The author stirred something inside me, and she succeeded in challenging me to rethink my position. Being white, I have this asset available at all times even though I don't think about it. The key idea is being white has its privileges by giving us the opportunity "to want to make it." The point is not whether I use the asset, it's that I have it in the first place.

Works Cited
