

# Racial Assumptions

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*By Joan Broadfield*

When we hear the word 'racism,' many people think of a perpetrator and a victim. The focus of the reaction seems most to acknowledge a black victim, a white perpetrator. In common parlance, the idea of broad effect is not immediately understood.

Indeed, for us who are 'white' it is easy to avoid the pain that comes from being 'black;' we need not recognize the assumption coming to us. (Other isms can be similarly affected. This article focuses on the specific effects of racism.) But, if a different expectation is made, and different assumptions, that pain can become real: we notice the assumptions and let ourselves feel what is going on. We can begin to create a sensitivity that clarifies these same assumptions.

This I know from my own experience. It came particularly strongly to me about two years after my spouse and I joined our current meeting. On this particular Sunday, we had considered the query on equality from the 1972 Faith and Practice:

For the meeting:

Are the schools, hospitals and boarding homes under your care, and are your Meetings themselves, free from practices involving racial discrimination?

What action is your Meeting taking to help assure members of racial minorities in your community equal opportunities in education, housing, employment, business and the professions?

What else are you doing as a Meeting to help remedy the consequences of racial injustice?

For individuals:

Do you endeavor to cleanse yourself of every vestige of racial prejudice, and firmly but lovingly oppose it in your home, among your friends and acquaintances, and in business?

Are you open to personal friendships with individual members of racial minorities?

Do you actively support equal opportunities for members of racial minorities in the business, educational and social organizations with which you come in contact?

I was so impressed with this query; the commitment to equality was so clear. This caring, so rarely seen in the world, was important to Quakers. In our conversation coming home I was elated. Ed

was quite restrained, however, which stirred impatience in me. When I asked him about this, his answer floored me. Where am I in this? The questions assume everyone is white.

Did I mention Ed is African American and I'm Euro American?

When we joined, I had assumed he would feel at home, as I did. The values certainly were welcoming in theory. And in many ways he undoubtedly felt at home; but this was a first clue to me that his 'at home' was a little more cautious than mine; he settled for a little less comfortable. I did not have to work as hard. After 30 plus years, I continue to see this is true in many aspects of life.

Remembering this incident continues to bring back to me the truth of our Light, and the prisms that we are. Without all of us of many colors, of diverse backgrounds, of diverse economic experiences, we lose bringing this full spectrum of experience to any consideration of a Meeting. The rainbow becomes more than a simple expression of different colors, serving a richer purpose; it is the reality of the breaking out of the unity into its diversity.

No matter our color, heritage or status, we do bring our own assumptions, stemming from these same sources. To begin to recognize our own assumptions, we can all ask ourselves:

What are the assumptions I bring to my meeting, to my interaction with people like me, to my interaction to people different from me?

How can I shake up or be more aware of my assumptions?

Even more challenging is what we do when we recognize there is an assumption. As a Euro American, I know that when I face taking the risk of acknowledging the assumption, I reveal an uncomfortable thing about me, and I am ready for the pain of that truth. I take the responsibility for the pain I have unknowingly caused in the situation. I walk through that pain and feel it. It is a humbling experience.

It is past time for Euro Americans to feel more ready to take these risks.

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