

# OPINION

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## Lives Shaped by Race in Many Ways

### My crash course on the subject

BY JILL RICHARDSON

This spring, the University of Wisconsin-Madison campus has been the site of several heinous acts of racism: An Asian



student was spat on and a black student received a note with obscenities and racial slurs slipped under her door.

The university is, of course, taking it seriously. Zero-tolerance policies for the N-word and assaults like spitting are the norm these days.

But what's the relationship between these outrageous incidents and the subtler varieties of racism — the sort that often goes

unrecognized, or gets dismissed as some people being "too sensitive" or "politically correct?"

That racism is rarely dealt with, because doing so would ruffle too many feathers.

I've had a front row seat to learn about the environment for students of color on campus. As a white woman assistant teaching a class on race, I got a crash course in the subject. But it's possible to see it everywhere.

The everyday experience of a person of color generally doesn't involve being spat on. But it's often shaped by race in more ways than a white person might guess.

A black friend told me, for example, that she selects her clothes so that she doesn't look threatening to white people.

Another black friend watched cops eyeing her 13-year-old son, an honor student who was doing nothing wrong. Perhaps he forgot to think about whether he looked threatening when he got dressed that day? Or was it because he was born black and male and grew to be six feet tall?

A white student asked an Asian classmate for math help. When the Asian girl said she's no good in math, she was told: "Yes you are. You're Asian." A Korean-American friend, born in Illinois, gets asked how she learned such good English.

It keeps going.

A Chinese person is routinely mistaken for other Chinese people — you know, because they "all look alike."

A black girl's friend tells her, "I don't even think of you as

black," as if that's supposed to be a compliment. Should she not be proud of her identity?

A Mexican woman is told jokes about Mexican people and — when she points out they're offensive — she's accused of not being able to "take a joke."

These are the experiences people of color have day-in and day-out that many white people remain entirely unaware of.

When whites say they aren't racist because they're "color-blind," they're blinding themselves to these experiences of their neighbors and classmates. Such attitudes prevent us from having open and honest conversations about the realities of race in our country.

If you don't feel confident talking about race, start by reading online articles. One can learn

a lot from blogs like Angry Asian Man or media outlets like The Root.

And if someone you know says they find something racist or offensive, ask why. Listen. Resist being defensive or immediately accusing that person of being too sensitive.

Instead, if you don't agree that it's racist, consider that perhaps there's something you don't understand. Don't feel attacked — it wasn't your fault you were born into a racist society and socialized by it.

In short, stopping the most disgusting incidents of racism should start with ending the everyday racism that pervades our society.

Jill Richardson is an OtherWords columnist. Distributed by OtherWords.org.

## The Time is Always Right to Do Right

### Putting our bodies and souls in motion

BY MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s last Sunday sermon was March 31, 1968 at the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C. before his assassination four days later.

In the speech "Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution," Dr. King said he believed a triple revolution was taking place in the world — a technological revolution, a revolution in weaponry, and a human rights revolution. To face this triple revolution, he said we must figure out how to develop a world perspective, eradicate racism and economic injustice, rid our nation and world of poverty, and find an alternative to war and bloodshed — all with great urgency.

I have said often that too many Americans would rather celebrate than follow Dr. King. Many have enshrined Dr. King the dreamer and ignored Dr. King the "disturber of all unjust peace," as theologian Vincent Harding said.

Many remember King the vocal opponent of violence but not the King who called for massive nonviolent civil disobedience to challenge the stockpiling of weapons of death and the wars they fuel and the excessive ma-

terialism of the greedy which deprives the needy of the basic necessities of life. And many celebrate Dr. King the orator but



ignore his words about the need for reordering the misguided values and national investment priorities he believed are the seeds

ever made and challenging a President who had declared a war on poverty? Because he saw that our nation's ills went far deeper and that fundamental structural and priorities changes had to be made and that the War on Poverty and Vietnam War were inextricably intertwined.

In the Cathedral sermon he announced that in a few weeks he

are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.' But if a man doesn't have a job or an income, he has neither life nor liberty nor the possibility for the pursuit of happiness. He merely exists."

"We are coming to ask America to be true to the huge promissory note that it signed years ago. And we are coming to engage in dramatic nonviolent action, to call at-

hard and long, and I have never doubted that we would prevail in this struggle. Already our rewards have begun to reveal themselves. Desegregation...the Voting Rights Act...But what deeply troubles me now is that for all the steps we've taken toward integration, I've come to believe that we are integrating into a burning house" riddled by excessive militarism, materialism and racism. When asked what we should do Dr. King answered: "We're just going to have to become firemen" and sound the siren of alarm.

Our nation and world desperately need loud sirens and firefighters for justice right now to curb morally obscene child poverty rates; wealth and income inequality; massive miseducation of poor children of color; preventable hunger and homelessness; mass incarceration and unjust criminal justice systems that criminalize the poor; and bullying and demagogic politicians encouraging assault of non-violent protesters.

The time is ripe right now to do what is right and reject the ugliness, violence and greed that have permeated too much of our political discourse. We need to move forward and not backward and teach our children we can disagree strongly without disagreeing wrongly.

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of America's downfall.

Dr. King's greatness lay in his willingness to struggle to hear and see the truth; to not give into fear, uncertainty and despair; to continue to grow and to never lose hope, despite every discouragement from his government and even his closest friends and advisers.

Contributors deserted him as he spoke out not only for an end to the Vietnam War but for a fairer distribution of our country's vast resources between the rich and the poor. Why was he pushing the nation to do more on the tail of the greatest civil rights strides

would be coming back to Washington leading a Poor People's Campaign: "We are going to bring the tired, the poor, the huddled masses . . . We are going to bring children and adults and old people, people who have never seen a doctor or a dentist in their lives . . . We are not coming to engage in any histrionic gesture. We are not coming to tear up Washington. We are coming to demand that the government address itself to the problem of poverty. We read one day, 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights, that among these

tention to the gulf between promise and fulfillment; to make the invisible visible. Why do we do it this way? We do it this way because it is our experience that the nation doesn't move around questions of genuine equality for the poor and for black people until it is confronted massively, dramatically in terms of direct action . . . And I submit that nothing will be done until people of goodwill put their bodies and their souls in motion."

As always Dr. King's voice and vision were prescient and right — and speak to where our nation is today. Towards the end of his life Dr. King said to a group of friends: "We fought