

In our marriage I experience the complexities of racism in the most ordinary situations. Take hiking or driving for instance. In unfamiliar territory, Gary likes to drive less-traveled back roads or walk on trails just to see where they go. On excursions early in our marriage we'd come across trails or dirt roads in rural regions of Alaska with "No Trespassing" signs. Now, I'm always up for an adventure. But there is a time and place for certain ventures.

"I'm not crossing," I might say.

"Why not? It's just a sign," Gary replies with irritation.

"They see you trespassing, no big deal. They see a black woman. I might not live to see the day."

"I never heard of anything so crazy. I can't believe you sometimes. I say we're going."

"I already told you I'm not. Don't mess with me on this. Just because you're a white man you think you can do anything, go anywhere at any time. 'Oh. La-dee-dah, there's a sign to keep out, think I'll go on anyways.'"

"My love, I swear. You are not making any sense."

"My love, you don't have to think about the color of your skin like I do. Well, I'm black. I don't know this area. I don't know anything about anyone around here. For all I know, this could be Ku Klux Klan territory. I'm not going on land posted 'Private Property, Do Not Trespass!' See those skull and crossbone signs? We're turning around or you can go on by yourself, either way, I'm headed back."

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Who was he to tell me to go beyond my comfort level? My reaction was based upon a belief that blacks are generally held suspect and meet with cruel, unjust treatment for disobeying the law. Does my response stem from racial prejudice, systemic racism, or a sense of generational victimhood—a lingering legacy of slave mentality? I mean, who or what am I really afraid of? In this instance, a mere “No Trespassing” sign stopped me in my tracks. Irrational or not, this experience underscores how growing up in a racist society affects my life. If racism affects me, then it affects how I relate to my husband. Why should my fear limit Gary’s experience of venturing where he desires? If I am not free to simply exist without fear related to perceived racial repercussions, then Gary isn’t free either.

Gary declares, “I accept I’ve benefited from racist policies. But I don’t automatically think of these benefits on a daily basis because, at least in majority white settings, I am rarely challenged on the basis of being white. When an incident like coming to a ‘no trespass’ sign, occurs, I have to remember Kim-Marie’s consciousness of being black, moving in a white world, is like this automatic, constant state of awareness. Having her kind of awareness is totally alien to my experience.”

Gary and I are learning. Race can reach beyond stereotypes or prejudice to alter our level of intimacy. If we don’t take time to listen and understand each other concerning issues of race, we decrease our likelihood of having a closer and deeper bond.

Like most couples, Gary and I strive to be respectful when discussing emotionally charged issues. Moving through tension caused by racial issues motivates us toward creative and

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thoughtful solutions. Gary now realizes my outbursts about racial inequalities are part of a process to move through emotions.

Gary says, “I still don’t like hearing Kim-Marie rage about stuff. I hate seeing her suffer. And I get confused because I don’t know how to help. But I realize her reactions are justified for her. Before, I probably took things personally and felt powerless to help or protect her. Now I know better. She is not targeting or rejecting me. And she doesn’t need help or protection; she just wants to express her emotions.”

On the other hand, Gary’s response of “I don’t want to hear it” is valid even though he may not totally understand my pain. I’ve learned to respect Gary’s request to not have highly charged, emotional expressions bombarding his eardrums. Turns out, I have lots of options. I scribble in my journal. I go into another room. I take a deep breath to affirm, “I am part of divine creation. I move easily and effortlessly through this breath, emerging more powerful and aware of my divine place in creation.” I can also call upon family members and friends who understand exactly what I’m going through. When I calm down, I find Gary is much more receptive to listening. Can I still love someone who may not totally understand my deepest sorrow? Absolutely. It would be an altogether different matter, though, if I thought he didn’t care.

Living with and loving Gary has challenged some of my core beliefs about race relations. If I work toward eliminating racism, mustn’t I let go of internal attitudes which paralyze me from living to my fullest potential? How do I rise above being a generational victim of racism? How do I distinguish who I am in a society which has, at every turn, black and white, tried to tell me who I am?

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[...] Here's what I know for sure: communication is a sacred act. Gary and I have logged

enough hours to know neither of us would willingly diminish one another through actions or the spoken word. We accept moving through the world as a couple is totally different than when we're apart. We understand we have different lenses which filter the way we look or move through the world. I may never be able to see the world without looking through a black lens.

Since my feet have been in both worlds since the day I was born, Gary may never understand how I can also see this world through a white lens, socially and culturally.

Gary may never be able to see this world without reacting to me looking through a black lens. That's okay. Our commitment is to be real with one another. Together, we help each other look through a kaleidoscope of realities and colors.

Most people carry racial baggage which never gets unloaded or examined. Learning how to talk about race-centric issues in a mixed marriage can raise the level of sensitivity and awareness for every other conversation.

Sharing and listening builds a bridge toward understanding. If mixed couples fail to do this, how do we expect others to follow our lead? The choices are to maintain "surface" talk or uncover layers of knee-jerk reactions.

For starters, couples can share personal stories about their upbringing to discover deeply rooted fears or emotions. If a partner listens closely without judging, they may learn how their partner creates survival mechanisms which come into play whenever they feel, or were made to

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feel, different or less than others. This simple approach can establish common ground to explore racial prejudice and racism.

However, be aware. The outcome of examining racial baggage or discussing racism with a loved one will seldom end up in a neat little box tied with a pretty red bow. Sometimes what comes up is scary. Sometimes there are only more questions. Sometimes you reach across a great divide to deal with humanity's capacity to hate or its total indifference; only to be amazed at the resiliency of love. Surprisingly, there can be a fits of laughter along the way. Always, though, there is the possibility of discovering something rich, something to be treasured.

With awareness, there is hope to fling the racism beast into the Neveragain Zone—the universe's original naughty corner.

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