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Corrective Lenses Needed When Looking at Race Issues

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Corrective Lenses Needed When Looking at Race Issues

By Rick Brunson
UCF Forum columnist
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His name was Eddie, and he was a lot like me. We both were studious, scrawny and 11 years old at the time. He wore a starched white shirt with sharply creased sleeves and heavy-rimmed glasses that probably brought teasing from classmates.

We sat awkwardly – mostly in silence – at the end of a table in a noisy cafeteria at Washington Shores Elementary School on Orlando’s west side.

The year was 1972 and we were part of a grand experiment – a test that I was about to miserably fail.

Eddie was black and I was white.

Washington Shores was his school. Mine was back across town – Shenandoah Elementary in the mostly white Conway neighborhood of south Orlando.

We were together that day because Orange County Public Schools was under court order to get its act together and desegregate. Seventeen years before Eddie and I met, the U.S. Supreme Court had ruled in 1955 that school districts must desegregate “with all deliberate speed.”

Orange County wouldn’t be getting any speeding tickets on the road to desegregation.

Since the appeal of the Brown vs. Board of Education ruling of 1955, the Orange district had taken some incremental steps, but the U.S. Fifth District Court of Appeals ruled in August 1971 that the county wasn’t moving fast enough and threatened to find the School Board in contempt for failure to desegregate schools that remained predominately black.

Part of the district's plan to get black and white students together included busing. But before launching wide-scale busing, which was being met at the time with sharp protests elsewhere – ironically in northern cities such as Buffalo, N.Y. – the district set up day trips where select kids were bused for the day to schools that were mainly white or black.

I was sent to Washington Shores, which is where I met Eddie.

Because I was a member of my school's student council, somebody in charge must have figured I might be a decent ambassador for Shenandoah and wouldn't embarrass the fair name of the Bobcats.

Boy, were they wrong.

Here we sat at lunch. Two gawky fifth-graders brought together by court decree, issued by men in black robes in faraway states and implemented by local school administrators who were trying not to run afoul of them.

In an attempt to make conversation, I asked Eddie a dumb question. I had noticed that on our standard-issue Melamine compartmentalized lunch trays, we both had a half a pear, lying face down in a pool of goopy green syrup.

"At my school they serve the pears without food coloring," I said. "Do they color your food here because that's the way black people like it?"

Eddie cut a sideways glance at me like I had done what I just done – asked one of the stupidest questions he'd probably ever heard.

"Nah, man. It's gross. Do you see me eating it?"

His look and words stung me with embarrassment and shone a light on my blindness. I had made an ignorant assumption: "colored" people like "colored" food, right? It wouldn't be the last foolish assumption I'd make in my life – about race, gender and a host of other ways we categorize people.

The memory of that day more than 40 years ago came roaring back recently as I sat at home and watched ABC News anchor George Stephanopoulos interview Ferguson, Mo., police officer Darren Wilson about the night Wilson shot and killed unarmed black teenager Michael Brown after Wilson said Brown attacked him. As I listened to Wilson, I

was astounded to hear him deny that there are racial tensions in Ferguson, even after he had just acknowledged watching night after night of televised protests and unrest on the streets of the city he patrolled.

“You can’t perform the duties of a police officer and have racism in you,” he told Stephanopoulos with a straight, emotionless face. When pressed, Wilson would only acknowledge that, “I think there’s a communication breakdown” in Ferguson between the majority-white police force and the town’s majority-black citizens, but he quickly added that he had never done anything to contribute to it.

The moment was stunning to me.

Yet, in the days and weeks that followed as we witnessed other similar acts of violence, including the choke-hold death of Eric Garner by police in New York, Wilson’s refrain was a common one I read among many commenters on social media or who were interviewed on television: There’s no way I’m a racist.

I’m the son of a cop. I respect the thin blue line police walk to protect the rest of us. But we’re in a fresh, raw moment right now in our country where we all need to step back and at least consider our assumptions about race. Doing so doesn’t presuppose that we are racist or bigoted – though we need to be prepared to confront that ugly truth in ourselves and realize the redemption, healing and growth that come from honest introspection instead of reflexive denial. We all need moments like I had with Eddie to help us see a little more clearly.

Speaking of healing for the blind, my friend Willie Jefferson Jr., a Texas minister and a former columnist for the Houston Chronicle, is in that business. I’ll let Willie have the last word:

“I know what it means to be black. I know what it’s like to have people ask me if I know who my dad is. I know what it’s like to walk around a store and be followed by associates. I know what it’s like to be pulled over and pray hard that the officer is not a racist. I know what it’s like to be at a Southern Baptist event and be looked at like I’m hired help. These aren’t assumptions, these are facts.

“There is still a race problem in the United States. People often assume that’s not the case, but it is. Just look at any story about Ferguson. Read the comments. ... The worst

ones say, 'The thug got what he deserved.' The saddest part is most of the people who say things like this do not realize they are prejudiced and racist.

"What's the solution? Respect and compassion. Every race has knuckleheads and no one blames the entire race for a few bad seeds. Question your assumptions. They may not be based in reality. You may see a black teen with a hoodie on and his pants sagging, but he could be an honor roll student. That black guy in an \$80,000 Porsche may be the manager of a radio station. That woman in the grocery checkout, on her iPhone 6 and whipping out an EBT card? You don't know her story. Focus on making your own life story a success."

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