

I Am A Recovering Racist **By James Holbrook**

The Pulitzer Prize winning black writer Isabel Wilkerson has written:¹

We heard the man on the ground pleading with the man above him, saw the terror in his face, heard his gasps for air, heard the anguished cries of an unseen chorus, begging the lighter man to stop. But the lighter man, the dominant man, looked straight at the bystanders, into the camera, and thus at all of us around the world who would later bear witness and, instead of heeding the cries of the chorus, pressed his knee deeper into the darker man's neck as was the perceived right granted him in the hierarchy. The man on the ground went silent, drained of breath. ... We saw a man die before our very eyes.

The image of the horrifying, brazen murder of George Floyd by a white cop in Minneapolis has touched a nerve among millions of whites, including me, in the same way that TV footage of police dogs and firehoses and night sticks and bloodied heads in Montgomery and Selma touched a white nerve, including mine, in the '60s. In 1963, I was moved by the poetry of a black man, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., in his "I have a dream" speech on the Capitol Mall. In 1968, I was devastated by Dr. King's assassination in Memphis by a white gunman. Then as now, cities across America erupted with shock and anger and grief.

I realized back then I was a racist in recovery. I was born at a racist time (1944) in a racist state (Missouri) and grew up in a racist city (St. Louis). My parents were racists. My public schools were segregated by a housing pattern of all-white neighborhoods. Though I have tried to overcome what Leonard Pitts calls the racist "water in which we swim," I still have demonstrable unconscious racial bias as measured by the Harvard Implicit Project test.² As one white commentator wrote, "Shedding racism is not like taking off a coat. It lies deep in the cells of the body, the dendrites of the brain, the chambers of the heart and the dark recesses of the soul."³

Dr. King has been my teacher in two other important ways. First, in a sermon he gave two months before he was murdered, he said:⁴

I always try to do a little converting when I'm in jail. And when we were in jail in Birmingham the other day, the white wardens and all enjoyed coming around the cell to talk about the race problem. ... And when those brothers told me what they were earning, I said, "Now, you know what? You ought to be marching with us. You're just as poor as Negroes." And I said, "You are put in the position of supporting your oppressor, because through prejudice and blindness, you fail to see that the same forces that oppress Negroes in American society oppress poor white people. And all you are living on is the satisfaction of your skin being white, and the drum major instinct of thinking that you are

¹ Isabel Wilkerson, America's Enduring Caste System, THE NEW YORK TIMES (July 1, 2020), <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/01/magazine/isabel-wilkerson-caste.html>.

² <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/Study?tid=-1>.

³ Robert A. Rees, *What happens to a dream deferred?* THE SALT LAKE TRIBUNE (July 6, 2020), <https://www.sltrib.com/opinion/commentary/2020/07/06/robert-rees-what-happens/>.

⁴ http://kingencyclopedia.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/documentsentry/doc_the_drum_major_instinct/.

somebody big because you are white. And you're so poor you can't send your children to school. You ought to be out here marching with every one of us every time we have a march."

In his book *Born Fighting*,⁵ white author Jim Webb writes that, during and after Reconstruction, anti-populist Southern political leaders "knew full well that as long as poor whites and poor blacks were blaming each other for their misery, the prospects were small that they would join together and address their mutual plight along class lines."⁶ Thereafter, a dirt-poor white farmer knew that, "no matter how poor one became, when he went into town at least he could drink out of a 'Whites Only' water fountain, use a 'Whites Only' urinal, and when traveling could sit in a 'Whites Only' railroad car."⁷

I grew up on Ferguson Avenue, about two miles east of where Michael Brown was killed in 2014. He and I are both graduates of Normandy High School. I graduated in 1962 when the Normandy School District was virtually all white. Michael graduated 52 years later when the same district was virtually all black, segregated again by a flipped housing pattern of all-black neighborhoods after the white flight to the suburbs.

The second great thing I learned from Dr. King is the idea of the hoped-for equality of brotherhood. In a sermon he gave in 1965, he said:⁸

The arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice. We shall overcome because Carlyle is right: "No lie can live forever." We shall overcome because William Cullen Bryant is right: "Truth crushed to earth will rise again." We shall overcome because James Russell Lowell is right: "Truth forever on the scaffold, wrong forever on the throne. Yet, that scaffold sways the future and behind the dim unknown standeth God within the shadow, keeping watch above his own." With this faith we will be able to hue out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith we will be able to speed up the day. ... This will be a great day. This will be a marvelous hour. And at that moment, figuratively speaking in biblical words: "the morning stars will sing together and the sons of God will shout for joy."

⁵ Jim Webb, *BORN FIGHTING: HOW THE SCOTS-IRISH SHAPED AMERICA* (Broadway Books, 2004).

⁶ *Id.* at 246-47.

⁷ *Id.* at 246.

⁸ Martin Luther King, Jr., *Sermon at Temple Israel of Hollywood* (February 26, 1965), <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlktempleisraelhollywood.htm>.