

Why a White Jewish Guy from Canada is a Member of the NAACP

By M. E. Kabay, PhD, CISSP

I have been a member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People for years, even before I came to the United States as a permanent resident. Now, why would a “pinko-gray” (E. M. Forster’s more accurate description of the skin tone generally called “white”) man join the NAACP? Some sort of pity for “the poor black folk?” A condescending desire to help “the unfortunate?” A high-minded identification with “the underdog” as defined by those who aren’t underdogs?

Nah.

It’s simple, really. When I think of black folks – and Chicanos and Vietnamese immigrants and First Nations people and Irish immigrants and Latvians and Poles, Indonesians and Indians (from India) – who live in America, I think “us,” not “them.”

I want to emphasize something that the common culture in the USA consistently overlooks: we Americans are the descendents of slaves. Now, as a Jew, that phrase means a lot to me: Jews remind ourselves that our ancestors were slaves in Mizrayim – Egypt. We are told in the Torah to be kind to the stranger in our midst, for we were strangers in Egypt. But I’m talking more generally than that. It is a commonplace to hear people blithely talking about how “our” ancestors came over from England on the Mayflower; how Puritans settled the east coast, how our ancestors in southern plantations grudgingly gave up the enslavement of black folks after the Civil War.

Children’s history books talk about “our” ancestors when speaking of the British immigrants and then use “they” and “them” when speaking of African slaves and North American aboriginal peoples.

But for many Americans whose roots are in Asia, Europe, Africa, South America and North America itself, we have at least as much in common with the black slaves who were abducted from West Africa for centuries as with white immigrants to America. I have read that the gene pool of “white” Americans has about 30% of our origins in Africa and that the “black” Americans have about 70% of our genes from Africa.

Why should I, the son of a Russian Jew from Lithuania and a Scottish-French woman from Quebec, feel any less affinity with black slaves than with white landowners? Skin color? Hah! Skin color has all the significance that eye color does; when was the last time (outside Nazi Germany) you heard anyone seriously talking about the “race” of blue-eyed people? If anything, the struggles and triumphs of black people in America speak louder to me, with my own family’s history of persecution and my own personal experiences of prejudice and exclusion, than the tales of a dominant majority.

My father taught us children from the earliest years to reject the concept of race and the identification of people by their nationality. “Never,” he thundered, “refer to someone as ‘the Italian’ or ‘the Negro.’ You can call someone by name if you know it, or you can identify them by some personal characteristic – yes, ‘that dark-skinned man’ is OK – but don’t ever fall into the trap of thinking that you know anything much about a person simply because of a label.”

I remember being rejected from a sports club in Montreal in 1964 on two grounds: they excluded Jews and they excluded French Canadians. I lost on both counts.

In the 40 years since then, I have tempered my father’s advice. I still don’t refer to people by their “race” (a patently absurd concept for human beings)

or by their nationality. However, I do recognize that in our social context, “race” is part of reality for anyone who doesn’t look like their ancestors came from Europe. In that sense, I allow that “race” does influence my thinking – but symbolically, not as a bunch of stereotypes that let me guess at an individual’s personal attributes. No, I do *not* know anything about a black person I meet before I talk with them; I don’t know if they grew up poor or rich; I don’t know if they like jazz or are cellists in a string quartet; I don’t know if they dropped out of high school or if they have two PhDs. What I do know as sure as anything, though, is that racism has been part of our lives from the day we were born.

I was chatting with a fellow student many years ago in Hanover, NH where we were both at Dartmouth College. “So,” I asked, “how much racism have you encountered so far in your first few weeks at Dartmouth?” The black guy looked at me with amusement. “Well,” he said, “you’re the only white guy I’ve ever met who realizes that’s the right question. Most white people ask ‘if’ we’ve encountered racism.”

Well, I’ve never met a black person in America who hasn’t encountered racism every day. One of my friends, a black lady, was waiting in line at the Montpelier Post Office a couple of years ago. The

clerk was real friendly with everyone in line – until she got there. “Yas’m?” he asked in an exaggerated southern drawl. She was so disgusted she just left without a word.

When I think of the experience of black people in America, I’ll tell you what I think of. I think of the steadfast resistance to injustice, the insistence on human dignity, and the triumphant conquest of adversity. To me, every black person I meet reminds me of my hope in the perpetual will to conquer narrowness of mind and exclusion of The Other. When I see people in mixed marriages, with children of varied hues, varied eye color, varied hair styles – when I see such people, I think of the strength of their love for each other, their willingness to see each other as individuals, and their courage in facing a hostile world together. Seeing “racially” mixed couples sometimes brings me almost to tears with the intensity of my silent good wishes to them for a happy life together.

So you see, for me, black people are no more and no less part of the American fabric than any other people who have come to build lives of hope in this country. Do I identify with black people in America? You bet I do. And proud of it – and of us, all of us.



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