

Awakening to a Painful Reality

We've all heard the quaint missionary cliché: "I went to change their world but when I got there they changed me," or a variation thereof. I've heard it enough that it almost annoys me to write it down. It certainly annoys me that it applies to me!

Of course, I like to tell myself that I don't entirely fit the stereotype. When I first became involved in the Caribbean and North American Council for Mission (CANACOM) in 2005 I did expect *some* personal change. I was going to be working in the oft-maligned Jane-Finch community in Toronto with a Joint Mission Action Team (JOMAT) of four people: two from Jamaica, one from Trinidad, and myself. I was thinking things like maybe this experience might offer a little discernment in my "life path"—and I say life path because at the time, it was like giving birth out of my mouth to say out loud that I thought I actually might be on a "ministry path."

But did I expect that the team would all mesh perfectly and beautifully? Pretty much. Of course I feared it wouldn't. (Who doesn't worry about that sort of thing when they ship out to work with a team of people they've never even met before?). But I didn't actually think there would be problems (yet there were). As a young White female coming from southern Alberta, did I expect that my lack of intercultural experience would be a hindrance? Maybe. I definitely remember crying one night to some friends that I was secretly terrified I was racist. But I hoped against hope that it was all in my head, that I was just being overly sensitive and paranoid.

Today I believe that very hope might just be the counterfeit security blanket of many of us who are members of a majority culture—in particular, the majority culture that I am most familiar with: that of White European descent.

If I had kept clutching to the belief that our participation in racism is merely a fiction, a figment of our imagination, or a concept created by those liberal bleeding heart intellectuals with more time on their hands than common sense, then I would have kept living in a world that suited me just fine. I would have kept living in a world where I was gloriously safe and secure in the belief that by treating people as *I* want to be treated, I would be treating people as *they* want to be treated—that my behavioural norms were the norms for people all the world over. I would have kept living in a way that ignored the Apostle Paul's vision of a radically inclusive church with room for *and a resounding appreciation of everyone* and the gifts they bring to it. And I would have kept wondering why there seems to be an unbridgeable gap between my world and much of the rest of humanity.

Fortunately, that particular security blanket was wrenched from my hands when a pastor supervising our JOMAT suggested to me that I needed to observe the surrounding (largely first- and second-generation immigrant) culture for a few months before offering any opinions on it. It was wrenched from my hands when he strongly suggested that I watch that I didn't continue to act in certain situations as the stereotypically White Canadian team leader—especially since in theory our team *had* no leader. It has been wrenched from my hands again and again as I've heard firsthand stories of how a lighter colour of skin is still often seen as representative of wealth in the Caribbean countries I've visited. Its loss has brought me to tears as I listened to stories of discrimination experienced firsthand, as I've heard stories of girls who try to make their hair look straighter, sleeker, more "White"...who try to lighten their skin to fit what the dominating White world is telling them is beautiful.

Awakening to a Painful Reality

You see, in addition to opening my eyes to how other parts of the world live, in addition to offering the privilege of experiencing different styles of music and ridiculously delicious food, in addition to realizing (with some shame over my certainty that it would be otherwise) that sometimes tap water in economically poor countries *is* safe, in addition to the undeserved joy of travelling to various Caribbean countries to participate in ecumenical meetings, including helping to facilitate one incredible international gathering of youth and young adults in Jamaica last summer, being involved in CANACOM since that first fateful 2005 JOMAT has awakened within me the reality that racism still exists—and that the more I deny it, the more I participate in it.

That last statement comes with a hopeful flipside, of course. Race has been identified, since the idea originated in the era of the Enlightenment(!) as a social construction that privileges those considered White.¹ The more I acknowledge the sometimes sly, sometimes overt presence of racism in the world today, the more I am becoming equipped to join the fight against it—equipped to incorporate this struggle into the path I am taking toward ministry, and in life.

As Verbal Kint paraphrases Baudelaire in the movie *The Usual Suspects*, “The greatest trick the devil ever pulled was convincing the world he didn’t exist.” For who fights evil when they live in blissful ignorance of it? Or when they think it’s just a story that probably doesn’t apply to them?

—Chelsea Masterman, May 2010

¹ Eze, 1997; Mosse, 1978, in Patricia Parker and Jennifer Mease, “Beyond the Knapsack: Disrupting the Production of White Racial Privilege in Organizational Practices,” in *Intercultural Communication: A Reader*, ed. Larry A. Samovar, Richard E. Porter, and Edwin R. McDaniel, 12th ed. (Boston: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2009), 316.