An Editor's Invitation: Racism

Category: Racism
written by Paul Gross | June 1, 2020
It feels as if our nation is bleeding.
Bleeding from the death of 100,000 COVID-19 victims.
And bleeding from the recent reminders that racism is not only alive and well in this great land of ours, its consequences are deadly. Racism is killing us through illness, through police violence, through mass incarceration and through the myriad ways that children and adults are given or denied opportunities and second chances, based upon skin color.

When I say killing "us," I can't claim to be among those targeted. And yet I can hope that our notions of "us" could grow. That I could look at the Trayvon Martins of the world and see my sons. That white police officers could look at the Breonna Taylors and George Floyds and see their sisters or daughters, brothers or fathers. And that the suffering of communities of color, along with the imperative for change, can be owned by all of us.
This month's *More Voices* theme is Racism.
Racism has afflicted our nation since its inception, and I daresay that most of us have contracted this illness. Many of us are looking for cures—for ourselves as individuals and for the society that we are a part of.
One treatment for this disease is listening. Here is one man's story, Some Thoughts on Mercy by Ross Gay, which ran in *The Sun* several years ago. I'd encourage you to have a look.
In a tumultuous time, listening to one another puts us on solid ground. Stories are specific, real and personal. The process of listening itself is healing—an act of vulnerability and trust. Of hope. Of love.
Here's my own story about racism:
I'm eleven years old. My family is driving from New York down to Florida for a vacation. It's nighttime, we're making our way through South Carolina, and I've fallen asleep in the back seat. My Belgian mother shakes me awake.
"Paul, *viens ici.* Come look."
I stumble out of the car, rubbing my eyes, and in the dim light find myself standing by a roadside store in front of a dingy water fountain. Above it, a sign: "Whites only."
"You're looking at history," my mother says, and in her voice I hear an unspoken sentiment: *Good riddance*.
My mother was all about fairness—so much so that she wanted to imprint this vestige of inequality upon me.
Look! she was saying. *This is unacceptable!*
And yet…
At about this same time, an African-American physician who worked at Bellevue Hospital, a few blocks from where I grew up, tried to rent an apartment in our desirable Manhattan housing complex, Stuyvesant Town. He was turned down—and told he should check out a Harlem housing project, miles away.
I heard this story from the physician's son, who decades later bought a house down the block from where I now live. As it turned out, my neighbor's father persisted and prevailed, and his family became one of the first African-

American families to live in Stuyvesant Town.
So I grew up with a mother who taught me about fairness—while we lived in a segregated housing project in New York City.
What can we take from this story?
How things have changed? Stuyvesant Town is no longer segregated; my wife and I chose to raise our daughters in an integrated neighborhood.
How I have personally benefited from legalized racism?
Or how it's easier to spot racism when it's not in your own back yard?
A few years back, I came upon one of our health-center nurses, a cheerful, engaging African-American man. He was shaking his head.
"The police stopped me last night. *Again.* I was walking home."
New York Police Department's stop-and-frisk policy, in which civilians were detained, questioned and often searched, was in full force at the time. This harassment was directed mostly at young African-American men. And being a health professional offered no protection.
I could see frustration and anger on my colleague's face as he described this humiliating encounter. I shuddered at the thought of how vulnerable he would have been, and how easily things could have taken a bad turn.
I also reflected uncomfortably that stop-and-frisk had been happening for years—on *my* watch as an adult physician committed to social justice.
Where have you been? I asked myself. *Haven't you been paying attention?*
And now, executive editor Diane Guernsey pulls me away from this bleak recollection: She's passed along news clips of police in some cities marching alongside protestors and holding signs that say "Standing in Solidarity."
A flickering candle of hope? And yet, there's still so much to be done.
What's your story about racism? Please share it with us, and please focus on personal events. Rather than sending us an opinion piece, please tell us what's happened to you or your loved ones that's made you feel the way you do when you hear the word "racism."

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