

# The Scales Fall Off

Category: Racism

written by Pris Campbell | June 2, 2020

I grew up in a tiny town the Deep South in the 1950s. Racism was everywhere, but I was too young to know there was another way. "Colored people" (the term used then) had their own waiting room at the doctor's office. They had a separate entrance and sat in the balcony at the movie theater. They were never seen downtown; it was an unwritten rule that blacks could only be downtown if they were performing menial labor there.

The "colored people" all lived in one section of town, where they became "n\*\*\*\*\*s" when drunks drove through, throwing bottles and cans and laughing. I'm grateful I was taught that that was very wrong.

Until I went to Florida for college and lived in Manhattan in the summer of 1963, with a racially mixed group, I had never had a personal conversation with a person of color. I became friends with a man who had grown up black in the South. Over time, he shared his stories of humiliation and degradation, his rage. I felt like weeping. I wanted to go back and tell everyone I was sorry for every bad thing we had done.

It was too late, though, to change what had been, so I threw myself into changing things in the present. The Civil Rights Act was just being passed, and some things were changing—but churches, which should have been leading the way, remained the most segregated places, especially in the South. I begged my parents to ask their church to hold joint services with a black church from time to time. They told me it would never happen.

As the years went by, things became better than they had been, and one of my father's best friends in retirement was a former black principal. Some years later, we asked him to be a pallbearer at my father's funeral. His was the first black face seen in their church.

That wasn't what I had hoped for when I heard Martin Luther King share his dream that long-ago summer of 1963.

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