

CONFESSIONS OF A 'NICE RACIST'

Fr Ronald Rolheiser

I grew up in a good family. Our parents instilled in us the notion that everyone on this planet was equal, regardless of race or colour, and that we were never to look down on anyone or consider ourselves superior to anyone. The very idea of racism or racial privilege was repugnant to me. Every moral fibre in me was anti-racist.

But I also grew up in a white family in a totally white community in a totally white rural area. The only non-whites I ever saw were a Chinese couple who ran a local café and African-Americans playing football, baseball or basketball on television. Up to my early twenties I had never talked or related to a non-white person even as every bone in my body told me I was not a racist. By the time of my later studies for a degree in theology I had some minimal contacts with African Americans and Black Africans all of which had been positive and friendly. This reinforced my naïve sense that I was above racial prejudice.

I was due for an unpleasant awakening. While studying at the University of San Francisco I served as a chaplain at a hostel for young women. There were a number of young African American women there and I got to be good friends with some of them. One night, sitting with two of them in my office, one of them said to me; "You know, Father, you're a racist. Now you are a nice racist, but you're still a racist. You don't have the same ease with us as you have with the others here." She didn't need to elaborate. Her words, though spoken without judgement, stung. I knew it was true. I was a racist (even if I was a nice one).

Recognising this truth was a wake-up call, a beginning, a place to start from. I asked these two women to help me move beyond feeling safe and trusted only in what was familiar to me, and they helped me with my "nice" racism as I helped them with some of their issues from broken relationships and broken hearts.

Since those days my ministry as an Oblate missionary has had me living with multiracial communities in many different parts of the world. I have worked closely with women and men of various races and made very close friends across racial lines. But this doesn't erase the way I grew up, nor is it supposed to. I still treasure the home I grew up in as I now treasure deeply the multiracial homes that I have lived in for most of my nearly 50 years since.

But am I still a racist? I am now pretty comfortable one-on-one with almost everyone and feel anti-racist inside. But just as I breathe the air of whatever city I live in, I breathe in too our culture, a collective unconscious racism, a white privilege, which mostly like the air I breathe, I don't see. I am living in and in multiple ways supporting a cultural ethos that privileges me as a white man and dis-privileges others. We can be good-hearted and still be racist, a "nice" racist. Our good-heartedness and our racism can comfortably co-exist inside us.

The killing of George Floyd and the international protests that followed helped many to understand that while we may be nice racists, we are still racists and our society and culture may also be nice but still racist. And, partly, it's our niceness that needs to be confronted by Black Lives Matter and other such movements. Moreover, we need to accept too that such movements will not come to us pure. They will contain some very mixed and malevolent agendas. But, despite that, we must still let them challenge us to recognise and confront something unhealthy in ourselves and in our culture, beneath our niceness.

(Adapted from The Tablet, 20th November 2020)