PERSPECTIVE: The Perception of Color

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I sat in the audience at the Boston Community Center, listening to the woman tell about encountering racism in circumstances that otherwise would have been unremarkable, and as a Buddhist how she conducted herself and addressed the offenders with impressive results. The woman, Marilyn Busby, was a district leader in the Cambridge Chapter to which I belong. Marilyn was also, as a personnel officer for a major Boston employer, denied access to the coffee service while setting up her booth at a job fair, then given the insulting excuse by building management that they wanted to protect the place from vagrants (yes, vagrants!).

As she spoke, I was struck by the banality, thoughtlessness and mean-spiritedness of this expression of prejudice — the assumption made only on skin color that the woman I knew to be articulate and capable did not belong, did not deserve the most minimal consideration. The thought occurred to me, "What if it were me?" If it were me, I'd be outraged.

As I sat there, I remembered becoming aware of racism for the first time: It was the summer of 1957, and my family was traveling from California to Texas by car. We stopped at a gas station, where I got out to use the bathroom. It was a hot afternoon, the air filled with dust, and in my mind's eye I can still see myself, in my pedal pushers, ankle socks and pigtails, following the station attendant's directions, walking past the red Coca-Cola machine and rounding the corner of the fly-specked stucco building. At the far end of the side wall, past the doors labeled *Ladies* and *Gentlemen* and the water fountain between them, hung a sign that pointed to the back and bearing the word *Colored*.

I hesitated, confused and uncomfortable. I had seen African Americans before, but by some accident or naiveté had failed to pay attention to their skin color. The rainbow of human races was a Sunday-school poster, a UNICEF card, to me. What could this sign, this racial segregation of toilet facilities, mean other than that someone (or several someones) thought that my pale-skinned rear end should not touch the same toilet seat touched by a "colored" rear end? What if it were me being directed to the back of the building, away from the facilities for Ladies and Gentlemen? How would I feel?

Around this time, some Christian churches took up the cause of racial justice, speaking out publicly against segregation and participating in peaceful demonstrations. One Sunday in 1964, my minister related the message of his sermon to the Fair Housing Act, then before the voters of California, which prohibited discrimination in the sale or rental of property. Parishioners walked out, declaring that they came to church for peace of mind, not social involvement. They said they objected to the Fair Housing Act because "private property is sacred" — and I was astonished.

With the uncompromising zeal of youth, I denounced discrimination as inimical to the church's teaching of unconditional love and the spirit of democracy enshrined in the Constitution. Racism was nothing other than cruel oppression. I fully expected its objects to be enraged. "Sow the seeds of oppression ever again," I reflected, with help from Charles Dickens in *A Tale of Two Cities,* "and ye shall reap fruits according to their kind." Again, what if it were me?

My youthful idealism would become tarnished, however. Just as I expected, the rage of the oppressed gave way to riots. Sadly, as a young white woman, I came to fear for my safety on city streets. Another wedge was driven between my idealism and reality when minority advocates, opposing assimilation that denied history and culture, asserted the inaccessibility of the black experience to white people. Also, as I learned more about my

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family's history — owning slaves in the South and discriminating in hiring in the North — I was tormented by guilt.

Sitting there listening to my fellow member, the indignation born of identification rose in my heart: I remembered the girl seeing the sign to a racially segregated bathroom for the first time. In the wake of the heightened awareness of cultural diversity that has arisen since then, I wanted to appreciate the uniqueness of other people and their cultures. However, I did not want to console myself about the world's injustices just by feeling guilty.

After all, Buddhism teaches us that guilt is contrary to the fundamental law of the universe. It is backward-looking and undermines constructive effort in the present. Further, guilt separates us from ourselves and others. According to the Mystic Law of True Cause, or Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, we begin anew each moment. Instead of giving in to guilt, we can assume responsibility, take compassionate action and open the way to the future.

Deepening our human bonds underlies the SGI's promotion of culture and education in the pursuit of peace: Art has the power to transcend differences because it appeals to our common humanity; and education enlarges our knowledge of ourselves, others and the world we inhabit together. To overcome the debilitating emphasis on what divides us, I believe we need to work with many kinds of people whose humanity, character and individuality we can learn to love and respect. This is the opportunity the SGI provides. Standing for the equality and potential of all people, the SGI champions justice and compassion.

As for me, I never want to forget the girl who despised injustice, who could ask the question, "What if it were me?"

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