

I am a racist.
November Musing

It was very difficult to write that title. A mentor of mine told me that the easier it is to determine a title, the truer the essay. She said that a title of acuity comes in that moment when the writer finally bites down on a nail or hits the nerve in the tooth. When the writer digs down further than she ever could have imagined and dredges up something alive and bloody.

I always thought my mentor was a bit over-the-top dramatic. She was right, though.

It wasn't difficult to accept that title. Instead, it was embarrassing. With self-admonition mixed in. And, I admit, a degree of surprise.

Until this early spring, April 7 to be exact, I had never thought of myself as a racist. Racists are violent, in verb and action. That was not me. That term, though, is slippery.

When I was a little girl, my mother had a friend named Rudolph. She described him as that, a friend, to my sister and me, but he didn't come into our house, and when Mother took a meal out to him, she served him in paper containers and asked that he throw them in the trash can, implying that she was reluctant to touch them after he had.

Rudolph was known throughout the affluent white neighborhood that stretched along Old Annapolis Road as a handy man. He was good at fixing anything, as long as the project was outside, or carried outside. It was just wrong for him to work inside one of these homes. If Rudolph needed to use a bathroom, he knew to trek through the manicured lawns to the woods, where my sister and I were not allowed because of ticks and snakes and poison ivy.

A black widow spider set up residence in our mailbox. Mother knew that killing it would involve Rudolph's having to put his hand clear to the back of the mailbox, but Mother nevertheless begged him to help her. Rudolph said it would be no problem.

Mother often paid Rudolph with boxes of clothes she had determined were no longer appropriate for our family. Rudolph thanked Mother and assured her that his wife would make good use of the clothing. Mother explained to me and my sister that Rudolph's family and their neighbors were very, very poor. That was just how colored people were, she said.

Mother knew nothing about where and how Rudolph lived. She only knew that Rudolph walked up a narrow dirt road to our paved highway every day but Sunday. She knew there must have been other houses besides Rudolph's. "Shacks" she called them. She explained to us that we mustn't ever go down that road, because "we just don't mix with these people. We mustn't."

My entire young life, my mother stressed to me that we were not to mix with people whose skin and language did not match our own.

My sophomore year of college, I moved into a new dorm with suites. Four in a room, shared bathroom, two in the other room. I was close friends from freshman year with the other five

girls. Six girls moved into the suite across from us. They were colored girls, and if my memory serves me correctly, they were the only colored girls in the sophomore class at my southern girls' college.

When I heard the Motown wafting from beyond the closed door across the hall, Mother's voice became a tiny, tinny, insignificant, distant dot of sound. It could not compete with the saxophones. One of my suitemates, the one from New Jersey, walked across the hall that first Friday afternoon of the semester and knocked on the door. The music and the twelve of us spilled into the hall, and we concocted our own primitive style of line dancing. "You Can't Hurry Love," "Tracks of My Tears," "Dancin' in the Street". Aretha. We white girls offered up Gracie Slick. That afternoon, that night, color dissolved and was replaced by beat, soul, rhythm, blues, and rock. It felt good and it was good.

Except, when describing any one of my new friends across the hall, I began with "My *colored* friend." I didn't do that with my white friends.

My first teaching job out of college was at what was labeled, in my southern town, as a "ghetto school." Most of the students at the junior high were black. Yet, in our small cadre of English teachers, only one of us was black. That was Chris. Chris was a tall, imposing woman. When Chris stepped down the halls, the oft-unruly students stepped politely out of her way. In her class, complete order ruled. The students learned; the students performed. The students loved her. Turn-arounds were quick when Chris would say, in her gentle and deep voice, "Do I need to call your mama?" Chris took one look at me that first day—90 pounds maybe, cheeks spotted by acne, a Leslie Gore flip, nearly the same age as quite a few of my students—and said, "I'm taking you over or you're gonna die in that classroom. You're just not ready, girl." All of my Ed Foundations and Ed Curriculum classes did nothing for me the way that Chris did. In one year, she hugged me, slapped me down, stood me up, chided me, rode my tail. My teaching creed, still a part of my portfolio nearly forty years later, was and is mostly Chris.

Late in the fall, the southern days still steamy and buggy, Chris decided that I needed something more than just classroom instruction. She invited me to church. I left a paved highway and drove along a gravel road cloaked in gnarly trees and thick undergrowth. Soon, I came to an open field and a sturdy but small structure. Chris's young son, Junie, waited for me at the door. Junie was slight, short, but he introduced himself, welcomed me, took my hand and led me to a front pew like a diplomat. Chris was in the choir, and oh, how that choir did sing and stomp and clap. How that preacher cut into my soul. I felt swallowed up and in that hour, I prayed it all would never end, but when it did, we filed out to long tables laden with meats and greens and pies and tea and lemonade. Chris, broadly smiling, her arm around me, told me to eat up, and I did. Still smiling, still hugging me, she introduced me to everyone as "my honky friend" as if she knew the struggles and confusion that this white girl didn't know.

As if she knew of the smugness and pride this White woman has unwittingly felt. I have Black friends. I hate the injustices to the African Americans in our country. I want to shout out that I am color blind but culturally embracing.

On April 7 of this waning year, I exited the interstate and headed into Denver, to have supper with a friend of many years, a white friend, at a restaurant in a strip mall just off Peña Boulevard. Ready to relax after my long drive, I pictured potted plants, cute shops, a restaurant with a large, carved wooden door and similar pillars.

The strip mall's façade included not much more than stucco and wide store windows decorated with glass-paint lettering announcing sales. The façade was crisp-white stucco, the sidewalk well-lighted. Customer traffic, a mix of individuals and families, was heavy. Numerous groups in the parking lot visited, laughed. Younger groups crowded around painted, polished cars of my vintage, with re-built engines and chassis. Behind one wide window was what seemed to be a plain eatery with a few metal tables. My heart took a thump, and I made a nervous 360-degree sweep of the parking lot from my driver's seat. Not a single person in the lot or on the sidewalk was white. I was the single honky.

Normally, I would have left the car, strolled the strip mall to stretch my legs while waiting for my friend. Instead, I sat in my parked car, locked the doors, and only after some time turned off the motor. I played in my head the words I would say to my friend: "Let's go somewhere else."

My friend parked, walked to my nearby car, said, "Does this look like an okay place to eat?" Just the slightest bit of concern in her voice. For me? For what the restaurant had to offer? For the fact that now there were only two White people in the area? Did I even ask her for an answer?

"No, this is great," I said, doing my level best to mask my fear, and we went in. The fellow at the counter welcomed us, broadly smiling. The food was good. The music emanating from a radio was loud, but good.

Yet, I am haunted still. By the fears that roiled from someplace deep. And I feel shame.

I wonder if others like me—surely there are many?—feel the same inner struggle. Oh yes, we speak of color blindness and cultural blindness, but that is unnatural, isn't it? That should be unnatural. We don't want a blending to the point of the erasure of pride—in our country—of diversity of color and culture. That's not what we want to achieve.

Instead, somehow, someday, these must be erased: fear of difference, condescension toward difference, hatred toward those unlike us, "us" being many of all kinds and colors and cultures.

Within a community, *a good and lively and working community*, is diversity. A white-washed community of all one color is a drab, lifeless thing. It will go nowhere. It will grow nowhere. Out of differences come viable, vibrant ideas.

Change that: Out of a *commitment* to respect, understand, and embrace differences comes a willingness to maturely play with those ideas. From those ideas, peace may come. And love.

And where am I now with this? I promise myself that next time, I will stroll the strip sidewalk.