

“Hi, I’m White”

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The Boy Scout troop that I was in as a junior high boy was a pretty typical city Boy Scout troop in my East Mt. Airy neighborhood of Philadelphia.¹ The troop met in the basement of my church and, as was also true for my Sunday school class, I was the only white boy in the group.² Growing up in this neighborhood, I am not sure how much I was really aware of race. I mean, I was white, and that was different, but I don’t think I quite got what that meant or how others viewed me based on race.

I do still remember one day, almost forty years ago, when my patrol, a subset of my troop, was playing touch football in the street outside my house. A group of other boys, boys from a few blocks away, I assume, and whom I did not know, came up and asked if they could play. After playing a while, we took a break and, as junior high boys will do, we introduced ourselves to each other.

“Hi, I’m Pinkerton.”

“I’m Cole.”

“I’m Evans.”

Then it was my turn. “Hi, I’m White.”

One boy quickly shot back, “Yeah, I figured that.” But I didn’t really get it. Like I said, I am not sure that I was really even that aware of race at that point. So what did I say? “No, I mean I’m White. My whole family’s White.”

When I think back on that day, I am reminded of an episode of *The Colbert Report* when Stephen Colbert proclaimed to someone who he was interviewing, in his over-the-top satirical manner, that he was “colorblind” and that he could not tell what race people were, including his guest, or even himself, and then he asked something like, “Are you black? Am I? I don’t know. Would you tell me?”³

Now, this was one of Colbert’s most ridiculous statements – which is truly saying something – but it did get me thinking about myself and how, as a white boy growing up in my neighborhood, I was undoubtedly the least aware of race of any of my Boy Scout troop and my Sunday school class. I am sure that my heart did not pound when a police cruiser with a white officer from Northeast Philly passed the house when I was sitting on our front steps. I suspect that many of my friends may have felt differently, even if I saw no reason to fear the drive-by.

And, when I left my neighborhood, I was not a minority. I was probably the only one of my troop who could relate even slightly to the idea that race didn't matter. It was naïve of me. Or is this one aspect of what is meant by "white privilege"? As a white junior high boy, I had the privilege to ignore race and be fairly oblivious to how race affected even the closest of friends around me.

So President Troha, Provost Bowen, faculty, and most importantly, honorees and graduating seniors, I would like to thank you for this opportunity. As a professor of physics, it is rare that I have a chance to give a presentation about anything I find important and not feel compelled to tie it to gravity, laser optics, acoustics, the Big Bang, or even *The Big Bang Theory* – all topics I greatly enjoy and love to talk about, but not my topic of choice for today. My topic today is race and my growing awareness of white privilege.

When I chose this topic many months ago, I immediately panicked. I asked myself, can I, as a white man, with no formal academic credentials in the study of race, presume to stand up and add to the conversation on race? And panic sets in again.

Fortunately, Dr. Jen Streb, last year's winner of the Gibbel Award for Teaching Excellence, taught us at this past fall's Opening Convocation the importance of just breathing, so I'll first just try to breathe.⁴ Hopefully I will do right by you.

You might think, ah yes, how appropriate that he's chosen race as his topic in this fiftieth anniversary year of Selma. A group of Juniata faculty and students participated in that march and ended up in a famous photo in *LIFE* magazine.⁵ And this year, filled as it has been with the tragic series of events in Ferguson, Staten Island, Cleveland, and now Baltimore, with both riots and peaceful marches, there is clearly a compelling need to encourage the conversation about race. And we all need to breathe.

But I don't want to give an emotional talk about racism, but rather just continue a conversation about race. If nothing else, this past year has shown us all that we are not ready to declare that race is irrelevant in our country, and so we need to continue the conversation. Frankly, white folks like me need to do our homework on this topic to be able to engage in this conversation in a responsible way. As scholars educated in the liberal arts tradition, we need to inform ourselves: use our research skills to dig into the history and ongoing consequences of racism, use our analytical tools to place current events in context, and act with scholarly integrity to shun easy stereotyping and superficial explanations. The conversations need to be frequent, but not necessarily long or even that profound, until we are all comfortable with the topic and with the differences and the similarities of all of us. We just need to get familiar with the topic, with ourselves within the framework of race, and with each other. If every conversation about race is about racism and is emotionally explosive, I am not sure if we can really make the kind of progress that I hope to see in my lifetime.

One way to move forward in the conversation about race, perhaps in very small but steady steps, is to tell stories – to tell our stories as they relate to race. Not just the big, bad stories invoking emotion about racism, but also the very little, almost insignificant stories. These are often the stories that have framed our thoughts about race over the course of our lives. I offered one story, and now here are a few more of my very small stories.

Even though I was pretty oblivious to race early in my life, my parents were far less ignorant of the civil rights movement and racism that swirled around typical American communities in the 1960s and 1970s. So, the next story I want to relate is more about my dad and how it is that my family moved from East Cleveland, Ohio, to East Mt. Airy in Philadelphia. My dad was a pastor in a Lutheran church in the sixties. He was very active, behind the scenes, in enabling civil rights groups. When my parents decided to buy a house and move out of the home provided by the church, my dad convinced the congregation to keep the house for a while and allow community groups to use it as a meeting location and office space. At some point in the mid-sixties, he was part of a small group that picked up Martin Luther King, Jr., at the airport and facilitated him getting around to different meetings with pastors and community groups in Cleveland. When my dad finished his Ph.D. in political science a few years later, with a thesis about the role of churches in community actions and community changes, he was called to serve at the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia as the director of a new program in developing a mission for preparing current and future pastors in urban settings. And so, when I was four, my family – my mother, father, older sister, my two older brothers, and I – moved from East Cleveland.

Now, you probably noticed that I just did some name-dropping. In particular, I mentioned that my dad met with Martin Luther King, Jr. In some ways I am bragging. I mean, I am really proud that this meeting took place and that my dad had some role to play in the civil rights movement. But this is something that I frankly did not know growing up, for that is the kind of bragging that my dad just did not do.

I learned a little bit more about my dad's role many years later when my daughter was in a play where she recited a few of Dr. King's speeches. My father very casually remarked that he was quite taken by how King could not only size up a large audience and deliver a moving speech, but could also quickly assess what a small group needed to hear and what he needed to say to get people to respond and work together. When my father said this, I was astonished and I turned to him and said, "What? You met Dr. King?"

So he told me about his interactions with Dr. King. It was a decade later, as my siblings and I were planning my dad's memorial service, that my two oldest siblings heard for the first time the story of King's visit and the role my dad had played. Now, I can recall all of the Sunday school teachers that I had growing up who would proudly tell of their travels to Washington to hear King's "Dream" speech. They

would recount every march they had attended. As black men and women, they were full of pride of their support of the cause and their motivation to go to hear King speak. But my dad, he didn't seem to speak of it. He was always more focused on the work he had before him in the community at the moment – diversifying the local economy beyond liquor stores and pawn shops, working towards peaceful integration, and increasing safe public spaces. He was not focused on what happened ten years earlier, or even on how far things had come. He always focused on the next step.

I don't think this is white privilege – that my dad rarely spoke of meeting King, or that it was not as significant to my dad as it was to us, or would have been to many of my friends growing up – but I do find it interesting, and I am not sure what it means. Maybe my dad was just politically astute enough to know that, although he saw civil rights as a human justice issue, not simply a black person's issue, he – as a white man – could facilitate but not really lead, and it was not his place to tell stories about race. After his death, while I was going through his papers, I discovered he once wrote that a group wanted him to be their spokesperson in a meeting with some city officials, but he refused, saying that what needed to be said and the leadership that was required in that situation could not come from a white man.

I get that, but I find it somewhat sad, and I think that mentality has helped to lead us to where we are today: white men – white men of great conscience – have been taught by societal pressure that the topic of race is not something that they should ever bring up in casual conversation, unless it is tied with a story of outrageous racism.

Which returns us to my thesis: We have to get over this. We need to get comfortable talking about race. The conversation about race needs to be okay. There has been a lot written about white privilege over the past thirty years. But what I am just starting to grasp is that culturally, most of us have grown up with the ability to completely ignore race most of the time, where others are forced to see through the lens of race all of the time. The work of King, and our work toward true equality, can only be declared a complete victory when all people have the same privilege of being able to talk about race or being able to ignore race when they choose to.

Last story. Again, this is not a particularly big story, but in the spirit of being able to tell our stories that have framed our thoughts about race, here goes.

When I arrived at college (a small, liberal arts college in Minnesota), I met my new roommate. He was from a small suburb of Minneapolis and lived only about a half an hour from our campus. He had a girlfriend back home, and so he would often go home Saturday, after his football game, and arrive back on campus late Sunday night. After a semester or so, he started realizing what everyone else on the floor already knew – that he was missing out on much of the social life on campus because the only night in a week that he didn't have football practice and didn't need to do his school work, he was away.

But, before he realized this, about a week before fall break, he very sheepishly said he had to apologize to me. I was a bit clueless. He started by saying that he was sorry for not having taken me with him to his hometown one of those past weekends. I thought to myself, “What?! So I could have hung out with his girlfriend and him, while all my new friends were back on campus?”

And then he explained. He said that when he had gotten the note that he was going to be rooming with James White from Philadelphia, he had told all of his high school buddies that he was going to be rooming with a black man. Having known no black men before coming to college, he felt like he was quite the celebrity, and after meeting me, he was too embarrassed to tell his friends back home that I was not, in fact, black after all. But he wanted to make it right and take me home with him for fall break to hang out with his buddies. Let’s just say I was blindsided. I mean, it never occurred to me that race was that important to anyone. Maybe I was more colorblind and clueless than I knew.

I could choose to ignore the fact that my new roommate had framed our first meeting in terms of race. That was my privilege. I think about friends that I grew up with from church and the Boy Scout troop and sincerely doubt that they would have had that luxury.

So, in closing, I challenge you to make yourselves vulnerable: Risk reflecting on and telling your stories – and whether they are about race, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, or economic class, or even educational level, I hope you will devote some time to discussing honestly with your friends what you have taken for granted and what you have had the privilege to ignore. Please breathe deeply, and then take the plunge.

NOTES

1. For more background on my neighborhood of Philadelphia, see Jerry Buckley and Stephen Shames, “Mt. Airy, Philadelphia (Cover Story),” *U.S. News & World Report*, July 22, 1991, p. 22.
2. Reformation Lutheran Church, 1215 East Vernon Road, Philadelphia, PA 19150.
3. Please forgive my hazy recollections of exactly what Stephen Colbert said, but it was something like that. Some episodes are available at <http://thecolbertreport.cc.com>.
4. Jennifer L. Streb, “Be Present . . . and Breathe,” *Juniata Voices*, 15 (2015): 1-4.
5. Charles Moore, *LIFE*, March 26, 1965, p. 37.
6. For more background on white privilege, see Peggy McIntosh, “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack,” *Independent School*, 49 (1990): 31-36 and Daniel M. Welliver, “The Quest for White, Privilege-cognizant, Antiracist Character: An Autoethnographic Inquiry” (Doctoral dissertation, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, 2001), <https://dspace.iup.edu/handle/2069/377>.