

On being white

I used to think racism could be surgically removed. But it's not that easy.

by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [August 16, 2017](#) issue



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I know that I will never be on the receiving end of blatant discrimination, at least not due to my skin color. It simply won't happen. There is no way that the stars of my birth circumstance will align in such a way that would allow me to suffer regular discrimination. The contours of privilege from what I know and enjoy as a white person mean that I never need fear being pulled over in my car or paying hundreds of dollars in questionable fines simply because of the color of my skin.

It hurts to write this truth, yet putting it on the table is critical. Those of us with white skin tend to take our whiteness off the table in discussions of race. We don't see our whiteness as a *race*; it's just "normal humanity"—the template from which other people are judged to be different or abnormal. Those with different skin color have race; we whites don't. Ever notice how schools celebrate Black History month? The other months are just plain history. We know black poets, preachers, and

mayors. Nobody has ever referred to me as a white preacher or a white columnist.

As for white privilege, I like to think of it less as a charge of racism and more as a descriptor of the way things are for us who receive daily societal power and benefit simply by virtue of our skin color. Such an understanding of white privilege was made clear to the teenagers in my congregation during a recent work trip in Appalachia. “We knew we were in for an experience when we started seeing Confederate flags popping up in Kentucky,” recounted one of the trip leaders. “The black kids in my van immediately tensed up. They started to speak of being scared.”

At a gas station stop in Virginia, four boys climbed out of one van for an ice cream run. Inside the convenience store was a local customer who gave Tremiere, the one black kid in the bunch, a fearsome glare. Once he finished looking over Tremiere, the man pointed at him and said, “You better get the hell out of here right now!” The boys took off running.

A worship experience at an all-white megachurch didn’t help calm group anxiety. Two of our teenage girls, one black and the other white, turned around to exchange Christ’s peace. The church member standing before them greeted the white girl warmly. She took one look at the black girl, rolled her eyes in disgust, and turned away. That gesture of ungrace became valuable conversation material for a mostly white group of kids unaccustomed to noticing racism.

I used to think racism was something one could surgically remove, like a precision airstrike taking out a terrorist haven, or a surgeon manipulating a sharp scalpel. But it’s more difficult than that, of course, especially in an imbalanced world that tilts toward white privilege and perspective. It makes no moral sense that people should suffer simply for being wrapped in a skin color other than the majority. Yet it happens all the time.

Our U.S. Constitution enshrined the idea that African slaves were only three-fifths of a person for the purposes of legislative representation. It’s clear we have a ways to go before that fraction becomes a whole number in everyday life.

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