

DO YOU KNOW ME?

Racism includes major atrocities of hate and everyday put-downs as well.

Patricia G. Brown

The 18-wheeler came barreling up behind us from nowhere. Its huge face poked its meanness at our bumper. Its horn honked in loud and ugly repetition.

We changed lanes and the truck pulled toward our side. We sped forward and the truck chased, inches behind. We dropped back and the 18-wheeler tried forcing us off the road. The dangerous dance continued in all its life-threatening tension until we slowed to a crawl and the truck driver tired of the game.

More than likely, someone at the truck stop where we had just eaten had noticed us. He did not know he was seeing the Moderator of the



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Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and her host, a Presbyterian pastor. What he saw was a Black woman with a white man, and even in 1998 he did not like it.

My name is Patricia Brown. I served as Moderator of the 209th General Assembly, 1997-98. Racism has no respect for honored, elected positions or education or wealth or status. It is loud and it is subtle. Sometimes it is mean-deliberate and sometimes mean-accidental, born of ignorance.

To understand the notion of white privilege is to begin to understand the continuing challenge of membership in a denomination that is 94 percent white, Anglo, European. The 1998 General Assembly in Charlotte featured many different racial ethnic traditions within our worship experiences. *The Presbyterian Layman* slammed the 1998 opening worship. Particularly offensive to this publication was the Gospel read in Spanish. While the translation was inadvertently missing from the program, many worshipers used this God-given opportunity to experience the sense of separation that comes with the power of language. All who attended that service were spiritually touched and lifted in their knowledge of who Christ is.

Racism is a word large enough to include major atrocities of hate as well as the everyday put-downs that challenge people of color in the United States and around the world.

For several years Marge Schott was owner of the Cincinnati Reds. Racial slurs seemed to spill from her lips like she had some kind of foot-in-mouth disease. I had met Marge Schott—she is a fellow Woman of the Year at the *Cincinnati Enquirer*. Rather than condemn her, I wonder if anyone had ever explained to her what was offensive, and why.

When I was invited to speak at the high school from which she had graduated, I welcomed the opportunity. Amazingly, the city of Norwood has remained a working-class, white, mainly Appalachian community, as has its high school. The class was an honors course in social issues, and I had been invited because of my experiences during the civil rights movement in the 1960s.

I walked into the classroom and said to the students,

I already know about you. You don't wear shoes. You play instruments made out of washtubs. You have junky cars propped on cinder blocks in

your backyard. You eat scraps. You will never make it to college. And your father sits around on the couch in a T-shirt with cigarettes rolled up in his sleeve.


I had captured their attention.

Then I said,

When you saw me, you decided you knew how I smelled, what I ate, that I could sing and dance and, if I moved next door, the property values would go down.

To understand is to know that stereotypes are misinformation that has been recycled for generations. To understand is to know that stereotypes planted by fear, watered by hate, and cultivated by power become racial bigotry and unrelenting violence. To understand is to question thinking that has become tradition and to promote long-promised justice.

Anti-racism training is a way of discovering who you are and how you can function in an unbalanced system of societal power and privilege.

I have been speaking to that class at Norwood High School for five years and I will continue for as long as they invite me. Why? Because broadening the experience of young minds is one of the most important things I will ever do for the Kingdom of God on earth. 

—— For Reflection, Discussion, and Action ——

- Patricia Brown refers to white privilege here. What do you think she means by “white privilege”? Why do you think she would see it as a continuing challenge in the church? What are your experiences of/with white privilege?
- The author mentions a General Assembly worship service where the English translation of Scripture read in Spanish was inadvertently left out and angered some people, while others experienced it as a “God-given opportunity.” How might such an experience be an opportunity? an occasion for anger?
- Fear is mentioned as an element of stereotyping. How might fear play a role in racial violence and hate crimes?

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