Journey to Awareness:
Learning to Recognize Invisible Racism

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Ignorance and fear drive racism. Being willing to confront that ignorance is often uncomfortable, scary, and overwhelming. However, a lack of willingness to confront our ignorance often leads us to excuse ourselves for our unintentional and prejudiced comments, which are not only hurtful to people, but wrong. Covert racism is the inability to understand the part we play in a society that helps perpetuate our fears and discomfort around people who are different than us and denies us the ability or willingness to see ourselves as part of the racist system that has been created.

Though it may seem ludicrous that I, a 38-year old White woman, was not aware of the Civil Rights movement until college, I simply had no way to connect with the experience. My rural Missouri hometown, population 707, had no people of color living there. In fact, the entire county, I found out later, was 99.998% White. (The .002% Eskimo/Aleutian Indians always seemed curious to me.) I did not see a person of color until 7th grade, when my family took me to Kansas City on vacation.

I felt as if I was in a time warp when I realized that people who had survived the torture and abuse of the Civil Rights movement were still alive. The authentic black and white footage of Eyes on the Prize (Williams, 1992) put me face to face with a reality that shocked and appalled me. After watching short clips of the documentary in my multicultural class in college, interest moved me to seek more information about my newfound reality. I borrowed the Eyes on the Prize videos from my professor so I could view the entire series. The eight-hour documentary showed personal testimonies and actual videotaped footage. As I watched, I became increasingly incensed and outraged at the horror of each successive event. Realizing I had been denied a dark, yet important, part of my history, I wept uncontrollably. The pride on the twisted, angry faces of White people as they tormented Black people made my stomach turn. That moment in my college class launched me on a quest to seek understanding about my own history, which
I discovered meant I needed to understand the experiences of cultures other than my own.

Personal Background

Shortly after college, I began working for a non-profit, urban ministry. At the beginning of my tenure, a book called *Real Hope in Chicago* (Gordon, 1995) caught my attention. The author’s choice to move into the inner city community where he worked inspired me. Not long after reading the book, I moved into the low-income, African-American and Hispanic neighborhood where I worked.

People tried to discourage me. They cited safety, sanity, and burnout as reasons I shouldn’t live there. Very few, if any, offered positive encouragement. It troubled me that my decision to live in an inner city, African-American and Hispanic neighborhood caused great concern for me and my safety, but not for the residents who already lived there.

My initial interactions in the community were primarily with the children. Though I was new to the community, didn’t look like anyone else in the community, and had never lived in a low-income neighborhood, I was convinced I knew the best way to relate to the children and help them out of their situation. I did not think of myself as a savior, but looking back, my journal seems to illustrate my disregard for what already existed in the community and my immediate knowledge of how I could help them change. As you can see below, I wrote many comments about what I thought I could do for the children, my assumptions about what they didn’t have, and what I thought they needed:

> I feel like I will eventually move into [the apartments where the kids live]. I’m not sure why I haven’t just yet. I miss those kids when I don’t see them. … There’s so many things I feel I could do there. Those kids have nothing to do over there. They need some outlet. They’re kids. They need to be able to play. If I was over there, I could at least provide an apartment for them to hang out at. Tonight I went over and we all ended up hanging out at Big Mama’s [apartment] brainstorming what we can do to raise money. They were coming up with all sorts of things. They need to realize they can dream their dreams and fulfill their vision. (Personal journal entry, 9-27-95)

My terminology of “those kids” throughout that short paragraph makes me cringe. I realize now how much that language separated me from