

Living Room Talk #2: Racism

Hello, my name is John Graham and this is Living Room Talk, a video blog focused mostly, but not entirely on current issues and events. Tonight's topic is racism.

12 years ago, when Barack Obama got elected, I said to myself, "You know, this racism thing—maybe we've finally got it figured out." How naïve was that?

One event, one election, did not change the reality of black lives.

Two-thirds of black children grow up in low-income families with an average net worth in 2011 of \$6,300, compared with \$110,000 for the average white household, according to census data.

A black child in those families has a life expectancy five years shorter than a white child and one factor is that they're much more likely to suffer lead poisoning, mostly from old lead paint in substandard housing.

Our flawed system of school financing perpetuates inequity, with mostly white suburban schools spending far more per student than mostly black inner-city schools. One result is that black students in America are much less likely than whites to attend schools offering advanced science and math courses.

Black men in their 20s without a high school diploma are more likely to be incarcerated than employed.

And on and on with stunning clarity.

But it was recognizing the blindness inside me that was most stunning.

I was in the men's locker room in the local gym one day a few years ago and there was a black guy at the locker next to mine. In the course of our chitchat I asked him what he did for a living and he said he worked with horses. I immediately thought he was a groom, one of those guys that takes the horses out for their early morning warm-ups and makes sure there's enough food in the stall. But this guy keeps talking in a very matter-of-fact voice, telling me that he bred and raced horses. That's the top of the line for people "working with horses" and my assumption had been that he worked at the bottom.

There it was, staring me in the face—my own racist assumption. And then I thought of the knee-jerk double takes I'd done when I saw that the guy who was piloting my flight down to Los Angeles and then the surgeon who was going to operate on my injured knee—were black.

But I never considered myself a racist. Nooo—I was an open-minded liberal on the right side of issues of race and gender. I had *credentials* to prove it. I was intensely proud that work I did at the United Nations helped end apartheid. Since then, at dozens of committee meetings and board meetings, I consistently speak out for inclusive decisions and policies. I vote for affirmative action even when such policies could keep bright young white people, like I once was, out of elite schools in favor of candidates of color.

See? How could a guy like that be a racist?

Well, it's clear that my racism is something I'll be working on for the rest of my life.

If *you're* White, does any of this resonate with you?

So what are we Whites to do? Let's talk about that. Just us Whites—we can't expect Black friends and acquaintances to invest their time in educating us. We have a problem and we have to solve it.

For starters, you and I need to know our place. Black people are leading their own movement. You and I aren't in charge, and have no right to lay advice on them.

We can offer back-up support and certainly funding where we can, while recognizing that we've not lived their struggle, and we never will.

We can be brutally honest with ourselves. I'm not suggesting flagellating yourself for attitudes you probably grew up with. I'm saying—from as deep a place as you can go, take a look at your own life story, recalling incidents that demonstrated your attitudes on race. Did you ever make a wrong assumption about a Black person, as I did about the guy at the gym?

We can educate ourselves. Absorb, for example "The 1619 Project," to understand the long history of racism in the United States. And that it included government-sanctioned slavery for 240 years, then Jim Crow and lynchings for the next 100, then maybe only for the last 50 years anything that could be called concerted efforts to establish genuine equality in national laws and practices—efforts that took us three steps forward and two steps back and still permitted George Floyd and Brianna Taylor to be killed by "officers of the peace." Read a broad selection of Black authors and honest histories, like *Caste* and *So You Want To Talk About Racism...* There are so many good ones.

We Whites can reach out to listen and understand the stories of those who are different from us, and to do it not once, not in one or a few Kumbayah moments, but as part of our daily lives.

We can pay closer attention to elections, especially local ones, voting in leaders who will act with courage and persistence to end racism, even if that costs them votes. It means getting involved in local issues like homelessness, school funding ,and business and government hiring practices.

We can take part in an honest national effort to finally deal with real social, educational and economic problems that unfairly target minorities. That includes diverting resources from programs that favor the rich to programs that at least *begin* to close the wealth gap that saps hope and closes off opportunity for people of color.

We can create equal opportunity in our schools, meaning at least something close to parity on what we spend per student in White schools and in Black. That means more early childhood programs for Black kids, which offer the most cost-effective interventions to create a more even starting line.

There's so much more to say. On subjects like policing, for example. Perhaps next time.

In the meantime, what do you think about all of this? Let me know. Let's begin a dialogue

Signing off for now, from the living room.