

Whitewash

By Robert Francis

© February 2006

In a dream, my son Peter and I were applying for a job with a large company. I'm not quite sure what this company made or did, if anything. However, it was a large company, and Peter and I were, evidently, in need of employment.

We waited with several other applicants in a large waiting room, until an important looking woman asked us to accompany her to what would probably amount to another waiting room. Walking across the company grounds, Peter and I noticed the buildings were all brightly whitewashed. The roofs of the buildings, as well as the walls, were blindingly white. The sidewalks and pavements were also whitewashed, along with the short, mowed grass between the sidewalks and pavements. In fact, looking around as we followed the woman, we saw that everything on the company property was whitewashed, and there was nothing there that was not whitewashed. Even the trees, not just the trunks, but entire trees were whitewashed, as well as all the landscape shrubbery and even the birds unlucky enough to have been perched in the trees or shrubbery at the time the whitewashing was done. As we approached one of these hapless whitewashed avians that appeared glued to a twig on a whitewashed bush, we discussed its uncertain identity. "Is it a blue jay?" we wondered, "or someone's escaped cockatiel?" The bird seemed to be dead, but as I touched its chest and went to scraping off layers of whitewash with my fingernail, it blinked its eyes. A spark of life remained under all that whitewash after all.

Years ago, in what often seems now to be a different lifetime, I was interviewing with a pastoral search committee from a Baptist Church in a small western Missouri town. One question asked of me by an elder deacon during the course of the interview was, "Are you colorblind?"

"What?" I replied, "I'm not sure I understand what you are getting at."

Attempting to clarify his question, the deacon asked, "Are you racially prejudiced, or are you colorblind?"

Since that day, I have come to the realization that being "colorblind" and having a lack of prejudiced or biased towards those who are different from ones own group are *not* one and the same thing. The very term "colorblind" presupposes that any differences between human beings are confined to the various colors of our skins and that cultural differences either do not exist or should be ignored as everyone is given equal opportunity to adapt and be melted into the pot of the dominant society.

I wore my hair short in those days. Once each month, I performed a ceremony of mourning. Kneeling on the floor of the bathroom, my head bowed over spread newspapers, the electric clippers whining, I shaved everything to within a half-inch of my head. Even so, I made a point of making sure my parishioners and my would-be parishioners in this new church that was considering me knew that my family and I were

Cherokee Indians. It was right there in the taped sermon sent for review before anyone from the church had ever even met me. I brought it up with the pastoral search committee and was assured that was “no problem,” since everyone in *their* church was “colorblind.” I brought it up a third time with the entire assembled congregation before the church voted on whether or not to call me as their pastor. Even so, the reality that they now had an Indian for their pastor didn’t even begin to sink in with some parishioners for the first two weeks after my family and I moved to their town. Staying after church until nearly everyone else had left, the piano player approached and asked, “Are you an Indian?”

“Yes,” I answered, not a little surprised by the question. “I’m Cherokee.”

“But,” she began, “You don’t.... You don’t think like an Indian.... do you?”

“Yes,” I said. “I do.”

We developed many close friendships with members of that church while we were there. There were a few other families in the church who were of Cherokee ancestry who had not spoken openly about it before we came. In that little town there was also a woman who was Dakota Sioux, a young woman who was African American and an extended family who had moved there from Honduras. All these began attending the church while we were there. And, what about the piano player? She was of entirely English and Scandinavian ancestry, as were most of those of what were considered the founding families of the town. Even so, she and many others among those “first families” were very appreciative of having a pastor who was not afraid to be himself. She went on to become one of our best friends from that congregation and remains our friend to this day.

However, the first pastor and founder of the church was an old Indian fighter, a cavalryman. From reading the church’s history, I could feel the pride in this first pastor being one of those who had initially “won the west.” This will sound strange to some of my readers, but while I was pastor there, the spirit of the old Indian fighter slipped in to a worship service or Sunday school class from time to time, as often as someone would invite him, which was more often than not. And, I discovered that those who claim to be “colorblind” will accept anyone, so long as they try to act “white” and stay in their place. But, whenever anyone presumes to start scraping off the layers of whitewash, feathers will be ruffled. I learned from this experience that it only takes a few people to actively create or maintain an oppressive situation or system whenever there is a majority who are willing to turn their heads and remain silent.

Toward the end of our stay at that church, a man in the church, speaking in reference to some things I had said concerning how Columbus, the Pilgrims and the founding fathers of the United States may not be worthy of all the worship they receive, expressed the thought that I might be racist against white people.

I didn’t answer immediately. It was a statement worth pondering. When I finally spoke, here is an approximation of what I said: I’ve been affected by racism all my life and even

before that. As for my being racist, I believe a person has to have access to racist power structures in order to be officially a racist. I have no such access. But if you mean to say that I'm prejudiced, well, yes. I have a constant struggle with feelings of prejudice, but it's not like you think. The feelings of prejudice with which I struggle are not against white people. Just as with most people in America, the feelings of prejudice with which I struggle are against non-white people, especially against Indians and especially against the one Indian I see in the mirror each morning. I think this is a common struggle among non-white people in this country, whether they are African American or Mexican American or American Indian. And I think this prejudice against the self is also a struggle among many white women.

The man I was speaking with was a pretty tough fellow. I assumed he would be ready with some retort, but as I finished speaking and looked up at his face, I saw tears in the man's eyes. Very quietly, he said, "I never knew it was like that."

I might add too, that this man was my friend before this conversation and has remained my friend to the present time, even though we still do not agree about everything.