

Color Blind, Schmolor Blind

A Commentary for White People Like Me

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There's good news and bad news, my white kindred.

The good news: we come from a racial culture of hard work and achievement, and it's finally time to talk out loud about being white, without fear or ridicule or arrogance. A sense of humor helps: check out stuffwhitepeoplelike.com.

The bad news: we're fooling ourselves and hurting everyone else when we think we're color blind on racial differences.

The skin is the human body's largest, most visible feature. We see the skin color of each person we meet. It's wired in: we scan those around us, to ensure our physical safety, to negotiate boundaries, to establish connection, to confirm how strange and entertaining people are. Race is a social construct we build every day in our minds.

Simply said, *interracial color blindness does not exist*. Pretending that we don't see skin color doesn't change the fact that we do.

So how do we understand our blind impulse on race?

Color blindness is intended as inclusion by many white folks: "I don't really see you as black, Tanesha; I just treat you like anyone else". We're trying to connect, to say that our difference in race need not be a problem. Likely impact: Tanesha hears your disrespect for parts of her identity she cherishes – her black skin, her African-American culture. Color-blind? Not so much.

The illusion of color blindness fuels our tendency to externalize racial difference.

Consider a prevailing mental fiction among many white men: "Diversity is about those other people; it doesn't really include me as a white guy, unless I'm the problem." Such thinking stifles personal responsibility, and disengages us from supporting remedies to the race-derived disadvantage that others still suffer. The result: we are passive partners to our own exclusion and irrelevance. And we miss out on the learning a rich mix of people brings our way.

This delusion of color blindness helps us breathe in the unseen air of our own racial ecology. Most white men and women alike benefit as members of the hiding-in-plain sight, powerful culture of white people: brought up with strong family values, we work hard, we make things happen, and we enjoy many things life has to offer. We optimize our opportunity, and generally inflict no harm on people of color as we do so. Research consistently shows that white Americans tend to focus on individual merit, effort, family, and social connection, while not deriving much personal identity from our whiteness. So not seeing another's color makes it

easier for us to under-consider our own. This does not amount to a moral failure, but our pre-awareness and insularity weaken our reputation and influence.

Gladly, there is a visionary treatment plan for our imagined color blindness: *racial savvy*.

This is a skill set that helps us move with dexterity across cultures, learn about human differences quickly, maintain emotional intelligence in the face of conflict, and generally handle interracial boundaries with efficacy.

One behavioral question drives the development of racial savvy: *In this moment, how will I attend to the racial differences I'm seeing?* As you ask and answer this question in the situations your life presents, you will become a white person known for your racial savvy.

As such, you will give just the right amount of attention to race in any given situation, without exaggeration or ignorance. Returning to Tanesha, a racially savvy recovery might sound like this: “Tanesha, the other day when I said I don’t see you as black, I realized later you might find that disrespectful. So I wanted to check with you on your reaction....” If Tanesha’s fine, you’re fine. If she wants to talk, you’re ready to listen, and to share what you’re learning about the meaning of being white. Either way, she knows you’re working to build a relationship of trust. That’s what racially savvy people do.

Visualize what racial savvy can do for you: you will walk into any meeting, interview, party, customer interaction, or performance evaluation anywhere across the globe, and be completely confident that, when you encounter people of another race, you will know how to connect with them, offer them your best, and get something good done together.

No more blindness.

In each moment that we encounter a person whose race differs from our own, we make a very 21st century choice – our racial savvy grows the relationship, or our self-deluding color blindness corrodes the connection. I think we should rebrand our racial reputation: “We’re white – let’s get it right and be a delight.”

And let’s do it with our eyes wide open to all the beautiful people and colors on God’s green earth.

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