My Thoughts Exactly

By Jim Dumville

Using white privilege to enact change

Through no planning on my part, I was born into a loving white family. While we weren't rich, I grew up surrounded by a wealthy helping of love and support. Plus, I never had to overcome obstacles of race. My success or failures were mine alone.

That's white privilege. It's not a reason to be ashamed. It's not something for which I need to apologize. It's something a flawed society has created over generations. It's what I do with white privilege that will make a difference. I was still a young teenager when I watched the civil-rights marches and riots on television and realized the meaning of racism.

It should not have taken news coverage of the brutal treatment of black men, women and children in the southern USA to wake me up to the horror of racism. If I had just looked a little closer, it was obvious closer to home. It was there in the way people talked about and treated the indigenous communities close to home. It was there in the racist jokes and terminologies otherwise good people used when talking about people of colour.

Anyone who accepts reality knows racism exists. In fact, most intelligent people acknowledge it is widespread and dangerous. But, if you were born white, there are so many things you take for granted. I know I did.

While I opposed racism in all forms throughout my life, I, like most people who don't face its dark realities on a daily basis, let it simmer at the back of my mind. The last few weeks delivered a stark reminder, at least to those who don't face it daily.. Racism is here, it's prevalent and it's dangerous.

It reminded me of the societal plight I thought my activist generation would solve a half-century ago. It is still with us. To be fair, I knew it was still with us. I just didn't realize that, in many ways, the divisions have grown wider and even more volatile in an increasingly polarized society.

I'm old enough to remember 1968 and the fear and anguish I felt as I watched from a distance America coming apart at the seams. But even in those dark days I never feared as much for the U.S. as I do today. Even after the assassination of Bobby Kennedy and Martin Luther King, there remained a degree of hope better days were possible.

President Lyndon Johnson had a racist background but had the courage to carry on President John F. Kennedy's first steps toward civil rights.

Richard Nixon was a corrupt angry bigot who sat in the Oval Office as four young people were gunned down in Ohio in 1970, but neither Johnson nor Nixon would consider sinking as low as Donald J. Trump.

Trump's ordering of troops, on live television, to fire pepper and rubber bullets upon peaceful protesters to clear the way for his church-front photo-op demonstrated a new depth of depravity for an America leader. What's scary is he didn't even realize how depraved he looked.

Instead of calming the flames of anger, frustration and hopelessness ignited by the brutal killing of George Floyd by Minneapolis police, Trump threw gasoline on the fire.

As the video circulated around the world and stabbed those watching in the eyes and heart, a new reality set in for the world's privileged classes, except for the president of the United States and his enablers. Unfortunately, it wasn't a new reality for people of colour. It was just another day in the life of many black men in America.

Floyd was just the latest in a long line of victims. I could fill this space with the names of people, the majority of which were black men, who drew their last breath in the brutal hands of police or someone who believed they had legal authority. And those are just the ones caught on video. Imagine what was happening beyond the sight of prying eyes or cameras.

The highly-publicized killing of Floyd didn't come as a shock to American people of colour. It did, however, prove to be the final straw. In the middle of a pandemic, they hit the streets demanding justice. This time they were joined by a diverse crowd of all races, all age groups and all income brackets.

For the first time in half a century, the cries of No Justice, No Peace" were being heard by those who for so long simply looked the other way.

But this is not the first time those cries are being heard. We have to make sure it's the last time they need to be heard.

As residents of small-town New Brunswick, we must understand racism isn't limited to other places and other people. Racism is right here in our community. It's here in our attitudes towards immigrants and refugees. It's been here in the generations of abuse, genocide and isolation of Canada's indigenous people and in the mistreatment they continue to endure. We are simply ignoring it. That has to stop.

In a recent online conversation with a local First Nation woman, it tried to express to her my failings in the past and my hope for a better future for all people.

I cannot even pretend to know what indigenous people have endured over generations and continue to experience today. I fully understand the privilege I've enjoyed simply because of my race. Even from my distance, I am bothered to see the stereotyping, misinformation and bigotry. It is hard to fathom what it must be like to be subject to that abuse.

That's why I believe the mandate, screening and training of all police forces must be reevaluated. Society as a whole must be better educated to the facts, the history and the culture of First Nations. That's true for all marginalized communities.

We cannot simply whitewash generations of abuse and say, "get over it."

We, and that includes me, talk about addressing systemic racism but words have no meaning without action. Regardless of what I say, it comes with only a fraction of the knowledge I need to truly understand what oppressed communities have experienced.

Too often the words of the oppressed fall on deaf ears. The change will only happen when we listen and the privileged demand those in power deliver the needed remedies.

Jim Dumville is a resident of Woodstock, a passionate journalist, and the managing editor of the River Valley Sun.