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Introduction to Racial Reconciliation

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### **Racial Autobiography**

As a little girl sitting between my mother's legs while braiding my hair, she told me of a beautiful place. My mother said, "the lights twinkle off the tall buildings at night, and the snow whitens the ground in the winter months." She painted an incredible picture for my siblings and me, filled with a life of opportunities where our wildest and grandest dreams could come true. The streets were paved with gold to my young mind, and I longed to go there.

I arrived on a cold, snowy winter night in the seventies, and yes, the lights did glisten from the tall buildings as the plane arrived at JFK, and the streets were white with the freshly falling snow. My sisters and I were ecstatic as the stories of America told by our parents were now a reality. Coming from Guyana, South America, we knew the color of our skin was Black. Still, we never understood the history of our blackness as seen through the eyes of our Black American brothers and sisters until we came to the United States of America. Our vocabulary quickly increased with words like racism and prejudice, which ignited my initial consciousness and memory of incidents of racism. Still, because I was taught to see everyone through the lens of my Faith, I remained focused on the opportunities living in America afforded me. At that adolescent stage, I wanted to believe that I did not see color because I was taught that since God was colorless, I must view everyone, regardless of their ethnic composition, as such.

As my network of friends, which at the time included Afro/Black Caribbean, Afro-Latinx, and Caucasian, began to evolve, my awareness of our difference was now heightened. I vividly recall visiting one of my Afro-Latin friends' home and immediately feeling uneasy and out of place. The look on my friend's father's face when he saw me evoked an unfamiliar emotion in my heart. She was reprimanded for bringing strangers into their home. I was naïve and could not comprehend why she was being scolded until one of our other friends asked why he was so upset. Her response that she did not know why he hates black people quickly carved a hole in my heart since my other Caucasian friends visited her home numerous times without an issue. I was not invited to her home again, and our friendship slowly dissolved. This experience in my early twenties placed the focus on my racial identity, and it allowed me to now "see color," which became my awakening to being racially conscious. I considered the era of my twenties as the onset of the shift in my understanding of race and diversity. These years marked the beginning of my professional career and greater exposure to prejudice, inequity, and diversity in all its colors, attitudes, and blunt truths.

My childhood and adolescence, along with my Faith, played a primary role in the initial stage of my racial identity development. It was easy to conform to the attitude of "We are all God's people," "God does not see color," or "We all bleed the same color blood." However, as I became more exposed to what my fellow Black American brothers and sisters had suffered through for decades, my interest shifted to challenging the blatant injustice and inequity that I witnessed all around me from my professional position to just shopping a store on the upper side of Manhattan. Enrolling my son in a predominantly Caucasian High School entirely out of his community strengthened my position in the thought that the sacrifices my parents made to elevate me in life should result in greater opportunities for my son and grandchildren. This was the stage that uncovered my understanding of why my fellow Black American brothers and

sisters sometimes felt less than others in the community and underrepresented as a people. It became my mission to instill in my son that he is just as equal as any of his counterparts.

In my mid-thirties, I began to embrace the notion that I did not always need to challenge the behavior of different groups. Instead, I engage my faith, my belief, and my life experiences to co-exist with people of various backgrounds and cultures. This is the stage where awareness of my Faith coupled with understanding and forgiveness propelled me to my current perspective when confronted with the issues of race. I began to have a more tolerant position in my forties as I was now responsible for managing a diverse staff of different ethnic groups. At this stage, treating everyone with the same level of care and understanding was no longer a challenge.

When I think about my racial past, I can now comprehend but disagree with the reasons my parents failed to challenge the systemic racism they faced by coming to America. They accepted the status quo and did not give voice to the injustice they faced because it was easier than dealing with retaliation and resentment. However, I needed to traverse beyond my parents' understanding to navigate the layers of racism with courage, trusting in the belief that generations to come could move beyond the history of the past and have a brighter future.

When I reconsider my racial past, I am encouraged by three factors: (1) The knowledge gained from my understanding of the darkness of America's past and the fact that the atrocities of Slavery will not be repeated. (2) The sacrifices of our ancestors will never be in vain. By the sweat of their brows, they toiled, hoping future generations would strive beyond the interior and exterior chains that had them bound. (3) The contributions made by countless Black Americans who paid the ultimate price for the freedom and opportunities my parents brought me here to experience were realized.

Why do I "do" racial justice? I recognize how far Black Americans have journeyed from the cotton fields to the board rooms. Its purpose is even more significant on a personal level to a

single Black mother from South America, like me living in East Flatbush, Brooklyn sending my son to a predominantly white Catholic School in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn, and for him not having to deal with all the formidable barriers that stood in the way of generations before him. Another purpose is so my granddaughter can stand with her peers of different ethnicities and have the same choices as them, grow beyond the limitations of her ancestors, and develop into a responsible contributor to the human race.

Racial justice will continue to be what we as Christians pray for and work tirelessly to achieve. It may not occur in my lifetime, but the trail will continue to be blazed until the day our Heavenly Father appears.