Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Got a racist relative? Call 'em out

R. Daniel Foster · Wednesday, June 3rd, 2020

Racism is inherently generational. We often mimic what our immediate family models, carrying bias onward in time to infect our own family or circle, much like a virus searches for a host.

To break the chain, generational racism must be called out – named. Such racism often hides as a family secret. In private, it's met with shudders of disgust but never truly challenged: the grandfather who yet rails against President Obama in racist terms. The aunt who has her favored derogatory term for Asians.

Hey, it's family. And every family has an oddball who doesn't believe in filters, right?

Stop enabling the oppressors

They're allowed to be oddballs, but their racist remarks must be dealt with. Either lay down a boundary that has consequences if breached – such as telling them to leave: the room, the house, or if need be, your circle. I've spent too long helping others to feel comfortable about their bias by not speaking about it. Racism – and yes, we're all racist to degrees – needs to be named. Otherwise, it festers. Moreover, it grows.

Case in point: my racist relative. And no, I won't merely label his vile remarks as "racially charged" or that he had "racial resentment." You need to call a spade a spade. He was a racist.

At meals with my family, he would toss around the N-word liberally. *N this and N that.* It was clear to me as the youngest of five (I was around 7 or 8) that my parents were uncomfortable. Unfortunately, they never said a word. They should've kicked his ass to the curb – in front of all of us.

Visit after visit, this relative would rail about black people, toss around that incendiary N-word. In my late teens, I started having racist thoughts – not entirely unusual, but the thoughts felt foreign, almost like an implant. I traced them back to my relative and his stream-of-consciousness slam against African-Americans that was never decisively challenged. It had hung in the air amid our family – this person's strain of hate gradually infecting others,

In my late teens, I had to challenge those noxious thoughts and pluck them out of my head much like removing some Star Trek Borg-implanted device. They were lodged, and without challenge and erasure, they would grow.

Break the cycle – expose the festering family secret

I write about this now in order to name it, and moreover, to end it and break the cycle – to expose the family secret and the festered toxicity. The usual argument against doing so is that it will make people feel uncomfortable and hey, so much time has passed – *so what is the point*?

That is exactly the point – so much time has passed without the poison being named and nailed. I name it now – and I encourage you to name it within your own family and circles. Get it off your back and get it off the back of history that's weighted with prejudice and hate.

Also – name racism decisively. Although I always knew this relative made my family feel uncomfortable, my 7-year-old ears needed to hear something far more profound than *empty say-nothing silence* as he sat at our dinner table, spewing hate.

I needed to hear the roar of distaste. I needed to hear a forceful challenge and the example that a strict boundary would set.

A song from the 1949 Rodgers and Hammerstein Broadway musical "South Pacific" – "You've Got to Be Carefully Taught" – puts it well with this verse:

> *You've got to be taught before it's too late*
>
> *Before you are six or seven or eight*
>
> *To hate all the people your relatives hate …*

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