

They had a dream....

When I sat at my desk to write this talk I was trying to think of the first time that I came across racism. As you are aware, I grew up in the eastern part of England mainly in small towns set within agricultural areas. Many would describe the places where I lived as representing old England where English values and traditions could be found and where you would find all the characteristics of what it meant to be British. My friends came from families who had lived in the local area for generations. They were, of course, all white skinned.

I can remember the first time that an immigrant family arrived in my neighbourhood. They were from one of the islands in the Caribbean in the region we referred to as the West Indies. There was a fair degree of talk surrounding their arrival with many of the locals unsure what the future held. Would other migrants from the West Indies follow the example of this family and come and live close by? What impact would this have on house prices? What was happening to this lovely part of Old England and its traditional ways? The local people knew that migrants from the West Indies had arrived in the country and living in the big cities like London, Manchester and Liverpool. But why did some of them have to come and live here in our town? Surely, this wasn't right?

I moved to Australia to go to university and it was here that I saw racism on a larger scale. A few weeks after I arrived I attended my first game of Australian Football, a fast and furious type of football, rather like a combination of soccer and rugby. Australian football stadiums often had a covered grandstand on one side of the ground only with a roof to keep out the sun and rain. The rest of the ground was simply a grass bank on which spectators would sit and enjoy the game. I remembered noticing that all the seats in the grandstand were occupied by white skinned Australians. Yet out on the grassy banks were pockets of aborigines, the dark skinned original inhabitants of this vast country. There were none sitting in the grandstand. I mentioned this fact to the two university students with me that day. One looked me in the eye and said 'you're joking'? He then said, sarcastically, 'the reason they have black skins is because they would rather sit in the sun'.

But it was at the end of my second year at university that I experience blatant racism and officially endorsed measures to discriminate against another race. I was in Johannesburg on my first visit to South Africa. On one level Johannesburg was very similar to Perth where I lived. The air was clear and the streets lined with beautiful purple flowered trees called jacarandas. Of course, this was the part of Johannesburg where my friend lived. I had no concept of life in the parts of the city where the black population lived. On my first day looking around the city centre I decided to use a footbridge across a very busy road. As I walked up to the steps I noticed that the path across the bridge had a metal fence running down the centre. The sign at the approach to the bridge made perfectly clear the rules of the game. 'Whites, keep to the left; Blacks keep to the right'. My first taste of blatant discrimination based solely on the colour of a person's skin.

Later that morning I visited the highlight of any visit to Johannesburg, the television and radio tower. Similar to the communication towers in Shanghai and Toronto, the view from the observation deck over the city centre and suburbs of Johannesburg was said to be spectacular. I bought the entrance ticket and walked across to the elevator that would take me non-stop to the top. Yet as had been the case with the footbridge, the sign over the elevator door made it clear to everybody: 'White's only'. The staircase that ran beside the elevator was the only alternative for those who were not white skinned.

There have been two particular individuals in my life time who took on the long fight against racism: Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela. The first was murdered because of his views when he was only 39 years old while the second died in his sleep last week aged 95 years.

Martin Luther King led the way in the civil rights movement in the United States during the 1950s and 1960s. He was a Baptist pastor (priest) who fought the battle against racism and discrimination particularly in the southern States of Georgia, Alabama and Tennessee. He was regarded by the authorities as an activist. To many of the white population in the southern states he was a troublemaker whose views would come to ruin the lifestyle and privileges afforded to whites. In their eyes it was critical to preserve the old ways. Yet King worked tirelessly to spread his message to the black and white populations. He was a wonderful orator and his public addresses

galvanised people to fight for this cause. His most famous speech was delivered from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington to a crowd of more than 250,000. King said:

(I) still have a dream, a dream deeply rooted in the American dream – one day this nation will rise up and live up to its creed, that all men are created equal. I have a dream.

Nelson Mandela fought for racial harmony and assimilation on South Africa for most of his life. The country had endured many years of racial division based on the model of apartheid (meaning a state of being apart) with its total segregation of the white and black populations. As a young man, Mandela spent the 27 years in prison for his anti-government views.

Yet Mandela was resolute in his quest to see a united South Africa where all peoples were treated equally and with dignity. Apartheid had remained at the centre of life in South Africa for almost 50 years until the first democratic election in the country in 1994. Four years later Mandela was elected President of South Africa. Yet unlike many other African leaders who took over from a white government, Mandela kept to his central message, that people would be treated as equals.

King and Mandela: two remarkable human beings. The fight against racism, discrimination, segregation and intolerance must continue in all corners of the world. That ought to be the dream we all share.

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