

January 18, 1995

There has been a great positive change in this countries attitudes toward race and equality as a result of work by Martin Luther King and others.

Unfortunately, we have such a wretched history in this country on this issue that the journey is still only beginning. Dr. King scratched the surface - he forced us to look at ourselves. The terrible temptation now is either to backslide to past evils, or to lose hope that positive change will ever happen.

Our ATTITUDES, I believe, basically derive from ANECDOTES - stories, perceptions - that we have absorbed over our life span. They are often negative. They are conscious and they are subconscious.

I grew up in North Dakota in a time when there were perhaps 300 Negroes (the term of the time) in the entire state. There were many more American Indians. I can recall seeing only one African-American person in my growing up years. I didn't have television and almost never saw movies.

When I first thought about Race and Me, I thought that discrimination in my state was about Indians, solely.

I was wrong.

Two memories will illustrate how wrong I was:

My mothers family was first generation American - my grandparents came from neighboring farm families in Wisconsin. They homesteaded in North Dakota. There were no African-Americans in their experience....

Still, in the 1920s, my Aunt recalls that they had a black work horse - and that horse's name was "Nigger"....

So much for my illusions.

On July 17, 1942, my Uncle, then 27 and about to become a navy officer in World War II, wrote to his girlfriend from the farm. "[I] haven't worn a suit or hat lately and am beginning to look like a Malaysian or worse as mother says...." I emphasize "or worse".

This is how ATTITUDES are formed and perpetuated.

It must be said, in fairness, that bigotry in those years didn't stop with race. In North Dakota in the 1920s there was a very active Ku Klux Klan. Its mission was anti-Catholic. My mother's parents were German, and about the time of World War I there was a lot of anti-German sentiment.

In each one of us there are ANECDOTES - incidents or perceptions. They are pervasive and often held subconsciously. They are hard to manage and almost impossible to eradicate.

On Martin's issues, our country has a dismal legacy.

While Martin and those who worked with him in the 1950s and 1960s broke the ice, there is a tremendous amount still to be done.

**It is up to the current and coming generation to provide the future  
ANTIDOTES for the ANECDOTES of a cruel past.**

Martin's dream will be realized through people like my niece, Rebecca, who is Caucasian and goes by choice to a high school in Rochester NY that is 85% African-American and in a rough part of town. She was outraged in November, 1994, when a group from her school - mainly white - went to a museum and the docent "continuously glanced around just to check and see if everything was still there." Not willing to sit on her outrage, she chose to express it in a report on the trip to the museum. She reflects the best of a new generation.

Martin's dream will be realized though people like my cousin, Georgine, my uncle's daughter. She lived, and became a community activist, in the Selby-Dale neighborhood in St. Paul.

And his dream will be realized through people like Annie, a young mother, Chippewa, from northern Minnesota. Annie, who has an infant she named Justice, wrote me in October. "There is much to be done. I fear it won't be done in my lifetime. It is a struggle that my mother and I have chosen to give ourselves to. Some days I wonder if there is hope...but there is always that. And I can never be still and quiet and "just live" you see. It is for Justice and his children that we are concerned. My oldest brother one day said to me, "Annie, why do you and Mom even try...nothing is going to change...." This strong young Anishinabe man...many have lost hope..but [with encouragement from people] we can work together and leave more hope than we found here."

So, where do we go from here?

We support those who wish to make a difference - who hope for a better day. We encourage their efforts to build community, respect and responsibility. Most importantly, we examine our own attitudes and perceptions, and if we harbor evil in our hearts - and I believe we all do, regardless of race - that we examine that evil and change behaviors.

I think there is hope. People like Rebecca, Georgine, Annie and Allison give me that hope.

Dick Bernard