

## The fog of racism still clouds American society

Mary Ann McGivern | May. 23, 2013 NCR Today

Some years back, an African-American boy asked me if the reason my dog and cat got along was because their backs were the same color. I told his grandmother because I thought this was an astute question for a 4-year-old, but his grandmother was embarrassed that her grandson, Ray, had spoken so directly about skin color to the nice white neighbor lady.

I am color-conscious. I notice if someone is black or brown or the extreme whiteness that goes with red hair. I would notice if the person before me were green or purple.

It is a little like the Zen practice of noticing one's breathing ? but only slightly similar because I notice what I'm noticing along with color: who smiles and speaks to me on the street and who glowers; who buys healthy or junk food at the grocery; who is arrested; who is the boss.

What I am noticing in myself is the bias I have internalized in this society. By noticing, I am striving to free myself from acting out of prejudice. It's part of my struggle to see more clearly through the fog of racism that imbues our society.

Fifty years ago in April, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., wrote his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" in response to eight local clergymen who complained that actions in the street were extreme and that African Americans should wait for the courts to make judgments.

It's a long letter. We used to read the whole of it at an annual General Dynamics 24-hour vigil for peace to remind ourselves of the nature and purpose of civil disobedience. But I'm thinking about it today in the context of Michelle Alexander's book, *The New Jim Crow*.

Despite seeing that more than half the inmates in a prison are black, the U.S. Supreme Court has ruled that it must be proven an individual arresting officer intentionally discriminated in arresting a black man.

Despite the evidence that proportionally more whites than blacks use and sell illegal drugs, again it must be proven that the intention of a stop-and-search, the choice of site of that search, the prosecution of the arrestee, and the lengthy sentence imposed were each the result of deliberate discrimination by race.

Despite the data that the murder of whites brings on the death penalty while the murder of blacks generally does not, the death penalty is not seen as capricious.

The Supreme Court has removed the realm of institutional racism from litigation.

So, 50 years later, blacks can eat at lunch counters, if they are not incarcerated. Blacks can work without fear of being fired for being black, if they were not barred from hiring in the first place by the label of "felon." Black men are absent from their communities for decades, increasing the chance their children will be incarcerated, reducing the opportunities for black women to marry, and barred from participation in the American dream, the

dream so clearly described by King.

?Letter from a Birmingham Jail? was rejected for publication by the *New York Times*, was excerpted without permission by the *New York Post*, and finally published in its entirety in June 1963 in *Christian Century*, *The New Leader* and *Liberation*.

I urge you to read it to honor how far we have come. Then read *The New Jim Crow* to better grasp how we have learned in these 50 years to use prison to disappear African American men.

We don?t have to notice that they are black if they are in prison.

---

**Source URL (retrieved on 07/26/2017 - 15:46):** <https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/fog-racism-still-clouds-American-society>