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In death, Trayvon Martin offers a gift

by Mary Ann McGivern

NCR Today

Slowly, I'm beginning to understand the freight of meaning in President Barack Obama's comment that Trayvon Martin could have been him.

George Yancy's "Walking While Black in the 'White Gaze' " in *The New York Times* sent shivers down my spine. Fifty years ago, he was a kid in north Philadelphia carrying a telescope, and a white police officer said to him, "Man, I almost blew you away. I thought you had a weapon."

Yancy says he's waiting for the day a white president says, "There is no way that I could have experienced what Trayvon Martin did (and other black people do) because I'm white, and through white privilege, I am immune to systemic racial profiling."

"Walking While Black in the 'White Gaze' " is an elegant essay that considers Martin Luther King Jr., Bernice King, Malcolm X and Frantz Fanon on being black and David Hume, Immanuel Kant and Thomas Jefferson on being white looking at blacks.

This is an essay worth reading if, like me, you are white and struggling every day to identify white privilege. We can't resist it if we don't see it.

A companion piece to Yancy's scholar's cry of anguish is a post on Questlove's Facebook page recounting a moment of anguish in an airport. Questlove, a musician who plays with The Roots and just released a new album with Elvis Costello, wrote a stream-of-consciousness reflection on being a big black man and frightening people. Questlove isn't writing for us whites. He's writing for his Facebook friends and fans. But his essay has attracted attention from *Rolling Stone* and *New York Magazine*.

Questlove recounts one time when his presence frightened a woman: "all the time i'm in scenarios in

which primitive exotic looking me (6'2, 300 lbs, uncivilized afro for starters) finds himself in places that people that look like me aren't normally found. i mean what can i do? i have to be somewhere on earth correct?"

And he tells us his constant struggle, even today when he's rich and famous, not to feel like he's worthless. As he says in his Facebook note, "the overall message this whole trayvon case has taught me: you aint shit."

In his death, Martin offers us a gift, an opportunity to ponder and be changed by the anguish of the other. If we can open ourselves, if we can remember, if we can tell one another. Or else we can forget, and in forgetting, inflict more anguish.

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