



## How Bigotry Is Born

The city in which I grew up was so white that in 18 years I almost never saw a dark-skinned person. The only exceptions were members of the professional football team.

When I was 6 or 7, my father, as part of his job, called at the house of one of those African American athletes. That evening, I overheard him tell my mother that the player's home was very untidy and that a little black child was running around the house naked.

From that eavesdropped snippet of conversation, my vulnerable young mind extrapolated that all dark-skinned people lived in messy homes with unclothed children on the loose. For reasons I can't fathom, that image stayed with me, festering, tucked snugly away in a dark recess of my brain for years.

It wasn't until I went away to college and met African American students and professors who were tidy and who assured me they wore clothes as children, that my brush with bigotry, born in grade one, finally dissipated. I was about 20 at the time.

Years later, I was teaching a college literature course and was discussing a novel in which the protagonist is a young Jewish entrepreneur. A student raised his hand and quite seriously told the class that all Jews have horns. His source for this "fact" was his grandfather, who had also told him that Jews make their living picking through people's garbage. Only by letting him examine my

own noggin did I manage to dissuade him of the horn mythology.

These are the kinds of seeds, accidental and intentional, that with nurturing can sprout into full-blown racism, a subject we are hearing too much about these days. Hate crimes—especially those targeting Muslims, Jews, and Hispanics—are on the rise. Even here in Bloomington, some self-proclaimed "good Christians" have publicly decried Islam as a religion of hate.

As a friend recently pointed out, and I believe to be true, it is the unknown that makes people fearful and want to lash out. If some of these people would get to know just one member of the minority group that so offends them, they might change their minds.

Most people, no matter their faith, skin color, or ethnicity, are hard working, love their families, want what's best for their children, and are good neighbors. And if they live in Bloomington, chances are they passionately follow Hoosiers basketball, root for the Panthers or Cougars, complain about the *Herald-Times*, and hate the downtown parking meters.

We are far more alike than different. Our likeness makes us one nation. But it's our differences that make this a great country.

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