

Sun Journal

COLUMNS & ANALYSIS

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Klara Tammany: Racism has become ingrained in our psyches

Setting things right will be like slowly peeling back an onion — one layer at a time. Sometimes it will make us weep.

I attended a small, southern, Episcopal girl's boarding school — Stuart Hall, class of 1973. The school was named for J.E.B. Stuart, a Confederate War general. His portrait, a battle flag and other memorabilia were proudly displayed in the front parlor.

It amazes me, now, that, while there, we were given books to read by Black writers like W.E.B. DeBoise and Frederick Douglass. We may have even read *The Autobiography of Malcom X*. That educational effort might have been because the first two African American girls to attend that school were admitted, on full scholarship, to my class. Perhaps the administration was going to great lengths to make the transition to integration work.

As part of that effort, I remember a famous Black man came to lecture once. My memory is that it was Alex Haley, although the publishing of his book, "Roots," was not until 1976. We met with him for a time of Q & A in that parlor where Gen. Stuart was so present. The irony of that contradiction did not surface in any of our minds.

However imperfect it was, I am grateful for those experiences. They began expanding my awareness of racism. Having grown up Yankee in a mostly white rural Ohio farming community, the civil rights movement, while very much in my family's consciousness through the news, seemed very far away. The most direct experience was the recovery of hidden tunnels and rooms

in town that had been part of the underground railroad. There were also family stories of my grandmother in Delaware, writing letters to the editor about the unfair treatment of “negroes.” Yet, years later, my racism hit me smack in the face. I was attending the national, triennial General Convention of the Episcopal Church in 1991, held in Phoenix, Arizona. There had been much debate about the location that year and whether or not the Episcopal Church should boycott the city and move the convention elsewhere, as did the National Football League in moving the Super Bowl from Phoenix to Los Angeles. Three decades after the civil rights movement, the issue at hand was that Arizona had twice voted not to recognize the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday as a paid holiday.

The decision was made to keep the General Convention in Phoenix but, while there, to do all we could to raise awareness about racism. Several resolutions on the topic were presented and passed, speakers addressed the topic and Bible studies focused on racism, as did one convention eucharist.

We were all seated at the same tables that were used for the daily morning Scripture conversations. At the great thanksgiving, I looked behind me at the large group of clergy who were organized to bring the bread and wine to each table. They each held a chalice and paten and, after the consecration, they were to distribute the elements to the tables.

I remember looking over my shoulder at that group of assembled clergy. Startled by what I saw I spontaneously whispered with exasperation to my neighbor, “Oh my, they are all men!” To which she, an African American woman, replied, “Yes, and they are all white.”

Suddenly, it was a triple shock. Yes, they were all men; and, yes, indeed, they were all white. But, most personally, I had only noticed half the problem, even after over a week of focusing on racism. I felt so embarrassed as I quietly wept.

Between then and now, as repeated situations have periodically called us to consciousness, the church has offered anti-racism trainings. I have participated in more than I can count. From time to time, legislators are compelled to debate and resolve. Even so, murders and accusations

continue to be inflicted on our black and brown brothers and sisters. Indigenous peoples still have to fight for their rights to land, health care and recognition. Institutional systems of oppression and white privilege remain largely in place. Economic disparities grow and equal representation is a long way off — even in the church.

Why?

That is the reality of racism. For centuries, it has been so very ingrained in our psyches that, unconsciously, we look, but just do not see. Only now are we thinking deeply about what the Civil War symbols, that we so proudly displayed, have said to people of color. Maybe we are finally at a tipping point. With social media, we can no longer so easily avoid seeing the realities of injustice. They come to us immediately, rather than only in newspapers, weeks, days or months later (if at all). In response to recent events, there are protests and the old symbols, such as Confederate statues and flags, are coming down.

Regretfully, I recall the name of only one of the two African American girls who were in my high school class — Rene. Shamefully, I don't recall her last name. My memory of her is mostly that we both had a part in our class play and, because we as classmates, we were notified of her untimely and tragic death years back. I have no clue about the other student of color.

In these past weeks, I have listened to both the memorial service for Rep. John Lewis and the reading of his letter to the nation, penned just before he died. They brought me to tears.

Setting things right will be like slowly peeling back an onion — one layer at a time. Sometimes it will make us weep.

May this time bring deep change and renewed life for us all. I will start by finding out the names of the two students from my class.

Klara Tammany is the executive director of the Center for Wisdom's Women. She is the author of the book "Living Water: Baptism as A Way of Life."