

Confessions of a Southern White Guy

A lot of white people today struggle to know what to say to their black friends. "I'm sorry for these police killings" doesn't help much. "I can't imagine how you feel" is maybe a little better. "I'm not a racist!" can sound defensive.

Many white people have withdrawn from the conversation. We just hope all the tension will end soon so we can get back to normal. But the issue of injustice has reached a tipping point. It's not going away. We have a huge racial wound in this country, and every time a white police officer kills a black person, it underscores the fact that black people are often viewed as less valuable than others.

Some of us struggle with "white guilt." I know I do. My father's name was Jackson Lee Grady. His older brother named him that because he was learning about the Civil War when my dad was born in 1927. My name is Lee. Imagine how awkward it is to be named after a Civil War general when monuments to Robert E. Lee are being removed from public squares in this country? And one of my distant relatives who fought for the Confederate Army is buried near Kennesaw, Georgia.

For the record, I have never owned a Confederate flag; I never saw any Confederate symbols in my house growing up; and my father helped integrate his workplace in the 1960s in Alabama. No one said a racial slur in my house when I was a kid, and I know if I ever uttered that word, my mother would have whipped me with a "switch"—a small branch from a bush in our backyard. I was not allowed to disrespect anybody.

You can judge me for being Southern if you want (I've experienced prejudice from Northern whites who assumed I was uneducated because I say "y'all"), but I can't change my

roots. What I can change is my attitude. Ever since I had an experience with the Holy Spirit at age 18 (in a Southern Baptist church, by the way) God has changed my views on race. I can shout from the housetops today that I'm not a racist. Jesus Christ made me a new man.

Here are three things I'm saying to my friends to help the healing process:

1. **"I'm not a racist, but I do come from a racist culture. I want to be part of the healing process."** There are many things I love about Southern culture: The fact that strangers say "Hey!" to each other on the street; the way little kids politely say, "Yes, Ma'am" and "No, Sir" to their elders; and of course the fried chicken, cornbread, gravy, barbecue, collard greens and sweet potato pie.

I spent my childhood in Alabama and attended high school in the Atlanta suburbs. I have a Southern drawl. I grew up eating grits, drinking sweet iced tea and attending family reunions where the elderly people sat on wide porches and fanned themselves while the kids ran barefoot and the teenagers listened to Lynyrd Skynyrd.

But I'm not going to deny the fact that I grew up with some form of white privilege. The black people my dad knew as a young man could not even vote. Our culture abused African Americans for decades and decades, first with slavery, then with Jim Crow laws and later by refusing to grant equality in education, banking and police protection. Today, with all of our progress, racial justice is moving about as slow as molasses on a cold morning. That needs to change.

2. **"How are you feeling? I want to hear about your experience."** One of my young black friends, Marcus, told me recently how some cops in California bullied him when he was 18 and made him feel like a criminal—even though

he wasn't doing anything wrong. A pastor friend in Baltimore described an incident in which he was pulled over by cops just because he was driving in a neighborhood looking for a new house. A black missionary I know was bullied incessantly on her school bus every morning, and even at age 65 she still can't talk about it today without crying.

African Americans know racial profiling is a real thing. Let's talk about it. You may be surprised when you ask your neighbors or church friends to share their horror stories.

3. **"When can you come over to my house for dinner?"** These are the most important words we could ever say right now. We need to sit at the table together. I've seen many racial forums on Instagram lately as well as televised panel discussions. But celebrities in front of cameras are not going to resolve our racial tensions. We need everyday people to talk to each other in their homes and on their porches.

We're in a season when we need to listen more and talk less—and to be a lot more careful what we post on social media. We need to let down our defenses and ask our black friends to point out our blind spots. And after we chat and drink some iced tea, it would be amazing if we could cry and pray for each other. {eoa}