



Auckland Unitarian Church
Love beyond belief

Racism—a tree in the forest

Clay Nelson © 14th June 2020

"If a tree falls in a forest and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound?" It is a philosophical question raised first by philosopher George Berkeley in 1710. He offered no answer. In 1863 the question was raised again in the magazine *The Chautauquan*. Their answer was, "No. Sound is the sensation excited in the ear when the air or other medium is set in motion." Their scientific view was supported by *Scientific American* in 1884, "Sound is vibration, transmitted to our senses through the mechanism of the ear, and recognized as sound only at our nerve centres. The falling of the tree or any other disturbance will produce vibration of the air. If there be no ears to hear, there will be no sound."

Albert Einstein is reported to have asked his fellow physicist and friend Niels Bohr whether he realistically believed that 'the moon does not exist if nobody is looking at it.' To this Bohr replied that however hard Einstein may try, he would not be able to prove that it does, thus giving the entire riddle the status of a kind of infallible conjecture—one that cannot be either proved or disproved.

This riddle from my first philosophy paper at university came to mind as I have read about and watched the multitudes, not only in the US, but around the world (even here in Aotearoa New Zealand) marching in the streets protesting racism. It both makes my heart glad to see a long overdue recognition that racism oppresses untold millions everywhere and depresses me that at my age I'm still protesting against something that happens mostly in ways people of privilege like myself can't hear, can't see, can't experience.

Donald Trump recently whinged that if they weren't testing for it US Covid numbers wouldn't be so horrific. It is a little like a person who doesn't take a pregnancy test so they won't get pregnant. By this logic if a culture infused with systemic racism does not question its existence, it does not exist... unless you are black.

It could be argued that certainly in the age of Trump racism is not a lonely tree in the forest. The world was horrified by the death of George Floyd at the hands of police. Clearly the cause of death was being black. And he was the only the last of a long list of others who have recently died at the hands of police, few of whom have been held accountable. Yet, this is only the tip of the iceberg of racism we who are privileged not to be black can see.

If we don't think we are privileged by our skin colour, how many of us wish we were black?

And of course, why would we? If black, we would be more likely to be incarcerated, unemployed, and living below the poverty line in substandard housing. Our children would more likely go to poorly resourced schools. We would be more subject to abuse and hate crimes. We would be more likely to experience violence. We would more likely suffer from anxiety, depression, low self-esteem and high blood pressure, putting our physical and mental health at risk. We would have greater difficulty getting loans and mortgages, and when we did, we would pay more for them especially if our last resort is credit cards or predatory lenders. Lastly and most humiliatingly, we would be blamed and denigrated by the system for the consequences we endure because of our skin colour. Our cries of protest would go unheard. We didn't enslave ourselves. We didn't invite Europeans to colonise us. We didn't write the laws that disadvantage us. We did not create an economic system that thrives at our expense. And when our protests become too loud we don't silence ourselves with riot police.

This black experience is the tree in the forest. Can we hear it? Can we see it? Can we feel it?

Perhaps because of the worldwide protests, more people are interested in understanding racism. The first thing they learn is that racism comes in different forms, but all of its forms are rooted in preserving privilege and power for one group of people based on their race. We have a name for it ... white supremacy.

Stokely Carmichael gives a vivid explanation of two forms of racism, "Racism is both overt and covert. It takes two, closely related forms: individual whites acting against individual blacks, and acts by the total white community against the black community. We call these individual racism and institutional racism. The first consists of overt acts by individuals, which cause death, injury or the violent destruction of property. This type can be recorded by cameras; it can frequently be observed in the process of commission. The second type is less overt, far more subtle, less identifiable in terms of specific individuals committing the acts. But it is no less destructive of human life. The second type originates in the operation of established and respected forces in the society, and thus receives far less public condemnation than the first type. When white terrorists bomb a black church and kill five black children, that is an act of individual racism, widely deplored by most segments of the society. But when in that same city — Birmingham, Alabama — five hundred black babies die each year because of the lack of proper food, shelter and medical facilities, and thousands more are destroyed and maimed physically, emotionally and intellectually because of conditions of poverty and discrimination in the black community, that is a function of institutional racism."

There is another form of racism that supports these. It is sometimes referred to as casual racism. This racism is in the deepest part of the forest.

Casual racism to conduct involving negative stereotypes or prejudices about people on the basis of race, colour or ethnicity. Examples include jokes, off-handed comments, and exclusion of people from social situations on the basis of race.

Some associate racism with a belief in racial superiority or deliberate acts of discrimination. Casual racism concerns not so much a conscious belief in the superiority of races but negative prejudice or stereotypes concerning race. Unlike overt and intentional acts of racism, casual racism isn't often intended to cause offence or harm. It might be called polite racism. In the mind of the perpetrator it is polite enough to give them the deniability to claim they are not a racist.

Yet, this seemingly benign form of racism protects that tree in the forest from being cut down.

Clearly ending racism begins with us.