# Why I am a Racist

Hello. My name is Don, and I am a racist.

I don’t like to think I am. I don’t mean to be, but I can’t help it; it is who I am.

By making this admission, I am not criticizing myself; instead I am actually empowering myself by acknowledging and being in touch with who and what I really am.

Perhaps a review of some of my life experiences will help you understand how and why I reached this conclusion.

In the 1950s I grew up in a rural segregated Alabama town of less than 1,500 people, half white, half black.[[1]](#footnote-1) I can vividly remember the whites and colored signs over the water fountains, and went to the white school. As a five year old, I really wanted to sit in the balcony at the movie theatre because I thought that would be a cool experience, but I couldn’t—that was reserved for the Negroes. I had to resign myself to the orchestra seats.

My very liberal parents moved there from Detroit in 1947 to start a hat and cap factory. My father was the first to integrate a business in town, when he hired a man named “Greenberry” to take on custodial and mechanic responsibilities. I was largely insensitive to the import at the time. I also really didn’t get the significance then of us being the only family of Jewish background in a town consisting primarily of evangelical Methodists and Southern Baptists.

My neighbor across the street was my best friend, and we often played together. Down the street a little ways was a Negro community, and occasionally we also played with a couple of black kids, named Soapy and Rabbit. I also vividly remember visiting their dirt floor one room wood frame home and seeing their large black cast iron cauldron in the front yard that was used for heating water with firewood so they could wash their clothes by stirring with a large stick after adding their homemade soap made from lye and pork fat.

When I was seven, I, along with another friend, a scoundrel though unrecognized as such by me at the time, bought some illegal fireworks with money I stealthily borrowed from my mother’s purse, and took our stash to one of the cow pastures behind my house. Just to show off my own ability to be a scoundrel, I quickly struck four matches and tossed the igniting sticks one after another to the ground. To my dismay, I quickly discovered that dry hay burns faster than I had quickly discovered that. We tried in vain to put out the fire. Before it was all over, a quarter acre of healthy grazing pastureland had burned, my parents had communicated my alert to the town’s volunteer fire department, and they had responded and extinguished the fire.

My feelings of guilt were disproportionate to my size, but that did not keep me as a seven-year-old from trying to blame the fire on the “nigger” down the street. My young self had no sensibility of malice in doing that; I knew it was just what white people do. Still, it did not fool anyone, especially not my parents. Sensing my intense guilt, they reasonably did not attempt any additional punishment. (Although it really has nothing to do with this topic, it would be at least another five years before I would again try something of that magnitude of stupid.)

Two things happened to my parents in 1960 that led them to move the family to Atlanta. The first was a visit by a buyer from New York. She happened to be of Italian descent, and as such had a healthfully dark skin tone. The motel my father took her to refused her a room as she wasn’t white enough for the motel. The second was the presidential election. Alabama was the only state in which party electors were voted for individually instead of as a party slate. The result was that, even though Kennedy received a majority vote, more electors ended up voting for a conservative Democrat.[[2]](#footnote-2) My parents saw this and other anomalies as having the effect of disenfranchising them from voting for the candidates of their choice. These two incidents, coupled with concern for avoiding a segregated education of their four growing kids, and a desire for greater cultural opportunities, resulted in the move to Atlanta in 1961. We attended Henry Grady High School, the first integrated high school in Atlanta. Gradually I gain awareness of race issues, am moved by Martin Luther King’s dreams, am devastated by his assassination, and ultimately move beyond my racism.

Jump to 1968. I’m an 18 year old in Baltimore to attend the Peabody Conservatory of Music. Time to get my checking account. In the bank, the agent I’m working with is interrupted by a less experienced agent. They talk about a man needing assistance. I see a well dressed white man in a suit and tie, polished shoes on his feet, and a poorly dressed black man wearing overalls, work boots and a baseball cap. My agent asks “which man?” I’m expecting the logical answer, either the white man or the black man. The other answers: “The man in the hat.”

Boom! It suddenly hits me. I’m still racist! I still put people into racial categories first and into humanity second.

Still in Baltimore. I do volunteer work teaching soccer and other activities at the Crispus Attucks Recreation Center[[3]](#footnote-3) in the heart of one of Baltimore’s black ghettos. One of my consequential tasks is to defuse arguments between kids. I get to do this on my own unless significant violence is involved, in which case I get to drag the kids into the rec office where they get to deal with Mrs. Green, a powerful person and the director of the center. The other reason for dragging them to her is if they attempt to cast aspersions at each other by reminding each other of their lower social standing by calling each other the “N” word.

At the end of my work I take the twenty minute walk back home to the dorm. Daylight savings time kicks in. Suddenly the 6PM walk is in the dark. The first day walking home in the dark, carrying my school books, dressed in my soccer apparel, three youths jump out of the shadows and I feel something hard and cold in my back. “Give me your wallet.” They start riffling through my wallet as I start babbling. “There’s not much cash, but you can use the credit cards. Maybe you can sell the books. Here, you can sell my soccer whistle; I use it when working with the kids at the rec center…” Silence. A deafening stillness. When they heard me mention the rec center they stopped, looked at each other, dropped the wallet fully intact with cards and cash, and walked away. They were so rude; they didn’t even hand it to me! I was sincerely confused by what was happening, not just with them, but with the whole race thing in Baltimore and elsewhere. I actually caught up with them and asked if they were still in school. They said no; they had dropped out of tenth grade last year. They had no qualms about my seeing their faces; they knew the truth, and it was indeed the truth, that I would not be pursuing them further. In today’s times, it is most unlikely a similar exchange could take place without some form of concluding violence.

I wished to investigate further. On Charles Avenue in Baltimore, there was a line on the sidewalk that unwittingly demarcated the division between the White city and the Black ghetto. Here, you were safe; there, you placed your life in jeopardy. On the evil side, after approaching several blacks, I finally found someone who appeared hungry enough to sit down with me in exchange for a meal and a cup of coffee to talk race with me. He had the look and demeanor of a farmer. The initial exchange went something like this:

Excuse me, would you have a moment to talk? I ain’t done nothin’ wrong. I jus’ lookin’ for work. No harm in that.

No, I just want to ask a few questions. What? You the police? I tell ya, ain’t done nothin’ wrong. Don’t wanna answer no questions.

No, I’m not the police. Look, here’s my driver’s license. I’m a student at the music school. I just want to find out some things about what’s going on here. I’ll buy you a meal, and we just sit down and talk. Don’t wanna talk to no one.

I don’t even need to know your name or see your ID; I just want to talk. (Pause.) No police?

No nothing. Just you and me, sit, eat and talk.

As so often happens, turns out he was appreciative of a sincere listener, and ended up telling me a most amazing story. His simple way of expression and thinking assured me there was no way he was making it up. He grew up in South Carolina and worked on a tobacco farm. About 20 years ago as a teen he was arrested and convicted for a robbery, even though it had taken place miles from his home and during a time he was out in the field. A few days ago when he finished his time, he moved to Baltimore to start a new life. As our mutual trust was established, he did decide to show his ID to me after all, including the standard recommendation letter from the sheriff. He explained that everywhere he applied, he was rejected because of his criminal record. I asked if he had contacted any government agencies for help. “Say what?” No one had advised him of his options. This incident occurred after the Civil Rights Act, but many, many years before today’s concept of “white privilege.”

Once again, with my improved perspective, I ceased being a racist.

Years later, I heard an interview on National Public Radio in which a writer pointed out that racism can be extremely subtle. The example given was that if one hears a black person speak with a European accent, there is a presumption of highly educated, but if he speaks with a Southern accent, he is ignorant and stupid. Boom! It suddenly hits me! I’m still racist! I realized I hear it that way, too!

Many other incidents with the same false conclusions of non-racism have occurred over time, each one ultimately cancelled out by the truth of my ongoing status of racist.

What does my talk have to offer you? Perhaps it is nothing more than a vaguely interesting narrative of one individual’s Deep South experiences, if that. For some, it may be a reminder of when things went boom for you and you realized something about your own racism. For a few, it might even be a source of inspiration for your first ever boom!

To me, it is astounding how resistant the human persona is to recognizing its own weaknesses that are observed in others. What I mean is, I’ve been the target of racial, religious and ethnic attacks, yet have never been good at translating that into empathy for others who experience similar (or worse) attacks. Thus the red neck has no empathy for blacks, blacks have no empathy for Koreans, Koreans for Japanese, Japanese for Chinese, Chinese for red necks…or whites for any of the above.

Simply stated, people in general dislike stereotyping!

From my earliest childhood experiences, my parent’s liberal views notwithstanding, my inner being was imbued with a racist attitude toward life. In the first edition of the 1970s “Psychology Today” college textbook, the introduction discussed reasons for studying psychology. On page 11 (I remember!), it gave the example of learning about how food preferences, developed from infancy, are first and foremost emotional rather than nutritional, and gave the following example (roughly quoted): “Your Polynesian hosts would be insulted if you refused their offering of raw newborn mice dipped in honey.” Ugh! There is no way I would ever eat that! It happens to actually be very nutritious, but I couldn’t handle the emotional connection. I decided to intellectually override the emotional as much as possible regarding trying new foods; the consequence is I’ve had sushi, raw quail eggs, raw oysters, and one of my favorites is fish head soup.

This emotion mechanism is also what makes me racist. Although one’s prejudice can be rationalized and often is, prejudice is exclusively an emotional response, not an intellectual one. But like nutritional preferences, racism can be powerfully tempered so as to minimize its detrimental impact on others. It was during my time in Baltimore that I watched Poitier’s movie “Patch of Blue.” At the end, the grandfather tells the mother “Let her be; she’s a grown girl now.”[[4]](#footnote-4) Her mother and grandfather never stopped being racist, but they did decide (albeit reluctantly) to not let their racism impede their daughter’s life.

Most of the time I can contain my own racism so that it does not impede other’s lives. Sometimes I’m more human than I like to think I am and I slip up, in which case I try to clean things up if appropriate to do so. Indeed, if the right person comes along, I would have no hesitancy to marry that person, whether red neck, black, Korean, Japanese, Chinese…or Polynesian. They would however have to be willing to accept the facts that I am a racist, and that I will not eat raw newborn mice dipped in anything!

Don “Orfeo” Rechtman

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1. For a collection of Camp Hill anecdotes and pictures, see <http://eatonb.tripod.com/photo/camp.html>
Today the town’s population is around 1,000 and is more than 80% African-American. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United\_States\_presidential\_election,\_1960#Alabama\_popular\_vote](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_presidential_election%2C_1960#Alabama_popular_vote) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The aging Crispus Attucks Recreation Center was closed in August, 2012, but not without controversy. See <http://articles.baltimoresun.com/2012-08-01/news/bs-md-ci-rec-center-closing-20120801_1_rec-centers-recreation-centers-three-new-centers>
For a youtube video featuring the rec center during protests of its closing: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_5BAqqIc4RQ> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The actual words in the script: “She ain’t a kid any more, Rosanne.” [↑](#footnote-ref-4)