

How I finally came to understand systemic racism.

DESPITE THE FACT that the term "systemic racism" spills off the tongues of antiracists the way "disease" might roll off a physician's, I struggled to understand what it meant. Explanations like "It's the way racism is systemic" or "It's the way racism shows up in our institutions" or "It's structural" did little to enlighten me. I think I now understand why it so confounded me. Like "headwinds" and "tailwinds," the terms I now use to characterize systemic racism, there are many factors in play. Until one understands each factor, it's tough to imagine how they interact. On its own, each element might not look like a big deal. The momentum takes hold when they work together.

Here's one way I've come to think about it. Think about three basic elements:

1. skin color symbolism: using skin color to imagine innate levels of intelligence, athleticism, aggression, and so forth in oneself and others
2. favoritism: the idea that one is the best
3. power: the ability to make decisions for and/or distribute resources to people

skin color symbolism + favoritism + power = systemic racism

Take away any one of these three factors, and the kind of racism that makes and breaks lives would not exist. Until I got the power piece, understanding racism as something more than prejudice eluded me. It started to come together when a black woman at a workshop offered this perspective to those of us struggling with the concept: "All racial groups have problems with people in other racial groups," she said. "White folks have not cornered the market on that. The difference between white folks and everybody else

is that they have the power to turn those feelings into policy, law, and practice. White folks run everything in this country." I realized that while power is an age-old issue, attaching it to skin color is not.

Once I got clear about the power differential, I went back to the drawing board, trying to understand the word "systemic." I made myself think about what a system is. In its simplest form, I realized, a system is a procedure, a way of doing something. Language is a system. Banking is a system. But even those stymied me, because I immediately tried to bring race in, and then I got all confused. So I had to start even smaller. I have a garbage system at my house, for instance. We put food down the disposal, and everything else in either the trash or the recycling under the kitchen sink. When they're full, I harass my children until one of them takes it out. That's our system.

Now let's throw a barrier—a divider—into the system, something that allows some to benefit from the system and others not to. Because taking the garbage out involves going down a flight of stairs, if someone in my house had a physical disability, they would be unable to participate in the Irving family garbage system. In the case of garbage, this might be considered a joy, but what if taking out the garbage earned you \$1 every time you did it? The family member with a disability would no longer be able to benefit from the system.

Okay, so that's a simple system with an easy-to-understand barrier. If someone in my family had a disability, and participating in the garbage job was important to them, we'd come up with a different system. Because we all know and care about each other and the barrier would be obvious, we'd figure it out so everyone would be served by the system.

But what about when systems are designed for big groups of people? What about when the barrier is less obvious? In his book *Outliers*, Malcolm Gladwell writes about the unintended consequences of Canada's youth hockey system, a big deal given how central hockey is to Canadian lifestyle and identity. The way the system is structured, kids have to be a certain age as of January 1 to enter their age class. So in the same grouping, you could have a kid 8 years 360 days old (January 5 birthday) with someone 8 years 5 days old (December 28 birthday). At age 8, that's a big difference in physical and cognitive development. The January kid is a full 12 percent more developed than the December kid.

So how does this play out? Coaches select the bigger, better players (disproportionately the older kids) for all-star teams. Not only does that boost

the all-star kids' confidence and deflate the rejected kids, but the all-star kids go on to get better coaching, play with increasingly stronger players, and practice two to three times as often as those who didn't make the cut. Compounded that over the years, and what do you get? Professional hockey teams with disproportionate numbers of players with January to March birthdays who rode the tailwind of birth-date advantage. Those born later in the year are more likely to face a headwind of insurmountable system-induced challenges that prevent a professional hockey career; it's not impossible, just far more unlikely. It would be so easy to look at the individual hockey star and ask, "Wow, what is it about that kid, or his family, that gave him those hockey superpowers?" Much harder is untangling the invisible system that played a significant role in the outcome. The birth-date cutoff acts as a divider between those who benefit from the system and those who do not.

In American society, racism acts as a barrier, a divider, allowing white people to benefit from the system in ways people of color do not. Skin color itself is not the barrier; it's the beliefs attached to it. And beliefs, compared to birth dates or other more tangible barriers, are harder to pinpoint and also much harder to change.

My biggest aha moment in understanding how the skin color barrier plays out happened while watching an ABC News Nightline video, *The Color Line and the Bus Line*. By the end of the report, I understood not only how systemic racism worked but the mechanics of it in my own life. The film starts off with Ted Koppel describing a tragic yet simple story. In 1995 a Buffalo, New York, black teenager named Cynthia Wiggins was hit by a truck while crossing the road. She died from her injuries. The driver didn't see her; it was by all accounts an accident. As it turns out, however, it was a preventable accident.

As the film unfolded, I watched Buffalo's black residents speak out about the racial injustice of Cynthia's death. In turn, white people accuse them of "playing the race card." Though I wouldn't have used the term "race card," I too was at a complete loss as to how this could have anything to do with racism—until the film walked me step by step through the issues, making visible what I couldn't see on my own. Cynthia's death, it turned out, resulted in no small part from a series of decisions on the part of white businessmen as they set out to develop a new mall on the white side of town.

Buffalo, like many US cities, is segregated along racial lines: black residents live on one side of the thruway, white residents on the other. The white side of town, manicured and full of stores and businesses, offers not

just better education and housing but jobs in those stores and businesses. The black side of town, rundown and far from commerce, offers substandard education, shabby housing, and few, if any, job opportunities. For Buffalo's white residents, avoiding black folks seems a matter of staying on the white side of town. For black folks wanting a job, avoidance of white people isn't possible.

This pattern of segregation and avoidance, so common across America, is a critical piece of this story. Avoidance allows an irrational fear of "the other" to take hold, which is exactly what happened in this situation. Fearing that black customers would scare off white customers, the white mall developers worked with city transportation officials to redirect Buffalo's bus routes, making it extremely inconvenient to get from the black part of town to their new mall. No one actually said, "You can't come to our mall, black folks." They just made getting there unwieldy.

This didn't stop Cynthia from pursuing the job she wanted. Thrilled to be hired by a vendor in the new mall's food court, Cynthia remained undaunted by the long and convoluted commute, a ninety-minute trip with multiple bus changes. At one connection, not only were there no sidewalks or crosswalks, but you had to make a run for your life across seven lanes of traffic to get from one bus to another. On-ramps and off-ramps to the nearby highway added to the precariousness. On a cold day just before Christmas, Cynthia was hit and killed as she made the crossing on the way to her job.

Whoosh, I saw it: an isolated outcome connected to an entangled and entrenched system invisible to the eye. A wave of horror rolled through me as I realized how frightfully easy it is for white folks to make decisions that don't just maintain but strengthen racism's hold on communities. It didn't even take evil, just ignorance. My mind flashed to the beginning of the film, when the confident white interviewees had been tsk-tsking, accusing the black folks of "playing the race card" and "crying wolf." Suddenly it felt ironic that white people had spent centuries questioning black people's intelligence. White people must look so stupid to black people who find themselves again and again in the position of thinking, *C'mon, white people, how can you not see this?*

Without setting out to perpetuate racism, the white mall developers did just that. All they had to do was what most business people do: put protecting an investment ahead of weighing the impact on people you don't know. How many millions of conversations like those of the mall developers have played out at conference tables surrounded by white decision makers?

Imagine if even one of the decision makers in this situation understood systemic racism and was aware of racial bias. Might he have questioned the idea that black clientele would create such pandemonium that white customers would stay away? Might he have understood that white fear had been built on years of media reporting the crime stories but not the everyday moments of socializing and patronage at "the black mall"? Might he have done the research that showed that the mall frequented by black folks had no higher a rate of crime than Buffalo's white areas? What about the bus system's decision makers? What about the store owners at the mall? What if a handful of these people had stood up and said, "I think we can both make a profit and make some positive social change"? What if someone, anyone, had dared to put some skin in the game of racial change? How can anyone be expected to do that, if they have no understanding of how racism works?

Without understanding systemic racism, it is easy to blame the victim and say, "She shouldn't have been crossing the street," or "She must not have looked where she was going," or "It was her parents' fault she was living in that far-off dilapidated neighborhood in the first place." Easy, but unfair and profoundly flawed. Just as easily, someone could look at my teenage life and credit my parents and me for making such excellent choices, when in fact they were practically tossed to me like candy from across the room.

Because of the white town I lived in and my parents' resources, I had a choice of work opportunities. Downtown Winchester was rich with profitable little clothing and hobby shops, a large grocery store, and two department stores. The town was small enough that a quick phone call from a parent to a store owner could get a kid a job. Transportation was a snap, thanks to an old Buick that became mine when my grandmother died. I had wheels. I had options. Because I loved horses, I opted to work at a barn through my high school years. I also babysat regularly, my wages paid by parents with spare change. By the time I graduated from high school, not only did I have a top-notch education and a wealth of social connections, but I had a couple thousand dollars (a lot in 1979) in the bank, work experience, and letters of recommendation. Yes, I was willing to work hard, but that tailwind sure helped.

The thing of it is, I didn't just experience tangible benefits like easier-to-get jobs, a home near a vibrant town center, fully stocked classrooms, and hassle-free transportation. I received a whole host of intangible benefits. In addition to developing a sense of optimism and confidence, I developed

an unshakable faith in the idea that anyone could make it with hard work, in the freedom that comes with choice, and in the thrill that comes with high expectations. And I developed a sense of trust in American institutions and the belief that the future was mine for the taking. My life had been built on more than a diploma, a paycheck, fresh fruit, or medicine when I needed it; it had been cemented with a sense of access, belonging, and optimism.

The racially divisive belief barrier shows up in all American institutions: in medical policy, in emergency rooms, in education reform, in classrooms, in corporate hiring policies, in workplaces, in lending policies, in banks, in urban planning, on city streets, in policing practices, in courtrooms, in federal policies, in state policies, and in municipal policies. Racism lives in individuals' hearts and minds; those in power embed it into institutional policies and practices. Systemic racism touches every aspect of every American life, and skin color determines how.

Imagine if the Canadian hockey birth-date barrier operated not only in the hockey system but in other systems. What if housing went first to those with January, February, and March birthdays? What if hiring practices and medical care gave preferential treatment to folks based on birth-date preference? As the April through December citizens struggled to catch up or keep up, imagine the media highlighting what losers they were while never pointing to the birth-date system working against them. Imagine what might happen if the disadvantaged people organized to register their dissatisfaction. Would they get blamed for playing "the birth-date card"?

Suddenly my pride in my ability to work hard and carry the torch of my sacrificing forebears felt mixed with fraudulence. My ancestors did sacrifice and work hard, and I am a diligent worker. But no longer could I deny that my life had been borne on the wings of whiteness. I've had an unfair advantage since before I was born. Just as time has compounded disadvantages for people living on the downside of systemic racism, it has compounded the advantages I and other white people enjoy. My life is built on family members able to get citizenship status without a fight, land grants for free, GI Bill benefits, low-rate loans, good education, and solid health care. Each generation has set up the starting point for the next, perpetuating the illusion that white people are more successful, not beneficiaries of an inequitable system. As Jim Hightower said about President George W. Bush, and one could say just as easily about me, "[He] was born on third base [but] he thought he had hit a triple." Unacceptable is the counterpart to that: the

kid who hits and hits and still gets nowhere, ultimately coming to believe in his own inferiority.

The more I came to understand systemic racism, the more I longed to be able to talk about it with white friends and family. The one question that stopped me in my tracks every time was this: "If that's true, then how do you explain people like Oprah and Chris Rock and Tiger Woods?" I now see it would be like someone, in response to an attempt to describe the Canadian hockey system birth-date barrier, saying, "If that's true, then how do you explain [fill in the blank with a fall birthday player]'s career?" What I've learned is that the system doesn't make achievement impossible for someone affected adversely by the barrier, but it makes it harder. In the case of racism, which relies on an invisible belief-system barrier and has compounded over hundreds of years, I would say it makes it not just harder, but exponentially harder.

Averages, not outliers, tell the story, and the numbers regarding who is and is not achieving in school, attaining employment, enjoying good health, being incarcerated, and living in poverty have only grown further apart. Data, however, is only as good as the knowledge of the person interpreting it. As Tom Shapiro, author of *The Hidden Cost of Being African American* and coauthor of *Black Wealth/White Wealth*, said to me, "[The numbers gap] is like a racial Rorschach test. You see what you want to see."

Without understanding systemic racism, one could easily see a 2011 headline like "Wealth Gaps Rise to Record Highs Between Whites, Blacks and Hispanics," and think, *Man those black and brown people just can't pull it together. They are really dragging our country down.* The story emerging for me, however, tells a tale of black and brown people being held down so long that white folks have come to believe they got there on their own. The removal of legal barriers that once separated the races has done little to change the distorted belief system that lives on in the hearts and minds of millions of individuals. At this point, the only thing needed for racism to continue is for good people to do nothing.

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- Q Consider each of these tangible and intangible aspects of your life: work, sense of belonging, social connections, choice, education, healthy food, legal protection, housing, transportation, medical care. How easy or hard has it been for you to attain each?