



What I Can Teach You About Racism

Carol Swain

Let me tell you how my story ends: I become a tenured, award-winning professor of political science at an Ivy League university, and then at one of the leading universities in the South.

Now let me tell you how my story begins: I grow up in rural Virginia, literally dirt poor. I drop out of school in the eighth grade and have three children by the time I'm 20.

I consider myself to be a reasonably modest person, but even I have to admit that's quite a journey.

How did I do it? I worked hard. Not crazy, 24/7 hard—just hard. I made good decisions. Not brilliant, three-dimensional-chess decisions—just good ones. I met people along the way who helped me and sincerely wanted to see me succeed—not because they had something to gain, but because they were decent people. Almost all of these individuals, by the way, were white.

But mostly, I think I was blessed in one crucial way: I was born in America, a true land of opportunity for anyone of any color or background. In this country, where you start your life does not determine where you end up.

That works in both directions, by the way. You can start out with every advantage and waste them all. Or you can start out with nothing and become a success. It all depends on you. Your attitude is far more important than your race, gender, or social class in determining what you will accomplish in life.

When I hear young blacks—or anyone, for that matter—talk about systemic racism, I don't know whether to laugh or cry. I want to laugh because it's such nonsense. I want to cry because I know it's pushing untold numbers of young blacks into a dead end of self-pity and despair. Instead of seizing the amazing opportunities America offers them, they seize an excuse to explain why they're not succeeding.

I was born into a world where systemic racism was real—no-fooling, outright-bigotry, back-of-the-bus real. But here's what you need to know: Yes, that racism shaped the black experience—but even then, it did not define it. Change was in the air. Call it systemic reform.

The modern Civil Rights Movement was in its infancy, and the leaders who fought for equal rights for blacks were men and women of all races. They believed in America and were determined to see it live up to its highest ideals—ideals manifest in the Declaration of Independence and the US Constitution.

Did I know, growing up, that George Washington and Thomas Jefferson owned slaves? I don't think I ever thought about it. If I did, I'd like to think that I would have had enough common sense to know that we can't judge men who lived 250 years ago by the moral standards of our own day.

But I know that Jefferson wrote the words in the Declaration of Independence that made slavery ultimately impossible: that *all* men are created equal. And I know that Washington, Hamilton, Franklin, Adams and the rest of the Founders risked everything to make my world, my America, possible. How could I not be grateful for that and for the sacrifices so many others have made to preserve it?

The truth is I cannot remember a time when I did not love America and feel pride in the belief that I live in the greatest country in the world. I knew if I diligently pursued my ambitions, I could leave the poverty of my early years, with all its abuse and depression, behind me.

I was fortunate in another way. I was spared the life-sapping, negative messages about America that are crippling a generation of young people. These ideas are poison:

White privilege. Whiteness as a form of property. Unconscious racism. Reparations. Microaggressions. Police have it out for blacks. That the United States was created to protect and promote slavery.

These are the ideas young people are told they must accept. And then they're told to reject the ideas that can save them—the antidote: the success principles that enabled me and millions of other Americans to escape lives of poverty.

These principles aren't complicated: work hard, learn from your mistakes, take personal responsibility for your actions. When I made the decisions to get my high school equivalency, attend a community college, and then earn four additional college and university degrees, I believed that my education would open doors. And it did.

It was only when exposed to academic theories of oppression in graduate school that I was informed that because I was black, poor, and female, I could never do what I had already accomplished.

Thank God, it was too late for these toxic messages to stop me. Don't let them stop *you*.

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