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Let s all join **Racists Anonymous;
ME: "Hi. I m Dan and I'm a racist"" RECOVERY GROUP (in unison): "Hi Dan!"**

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I wish there were **Racist Anonymous** groups that all Americans - including we "Appalachians" and "old blue-collar white men" - could attend. The objective would not be curing "Nazi skinheads," but healing the smug.

Since the recent election exit polls, every TV babbling head, talk radio Jabberwocky and keyboard banger has told us why a quarter of us "poor whites" wouldn't vote for a black man. None has spoken from the perspective of crosscultural experience and conversion.

How I became a white racist

My roots are in what was then one larger Virginia. Mom's German-origin Shenandoah Valley ancestors owned slaves. My father's father was a potato famine shanty Irish railroad laborer. I grew up when "colored" sat in the back of the bus and theater balconies, used a different restroom and water fountain, couldn't sleep or eat in "white only" hotels and restaurants. I attended segregated schools.

There, we did minstrels in charcoal blackface, performing "B'rer Rabbit an' th' Tarbaby" and "Lil' Black Sambo" dialectically exaggerated to audience laughter and applause.

The few times blacks were ever mentioned at home, Mom said "colored people." Dad's language was more explicit.

My first direct contact with a "Negro" was about age 7 in the lily white trailer park beside the Norfolk Naval Shipyard where we lived during World War II. A "colored boy" showed up one day. We played, then he had to go. A few days later he returned. After he left, my new Lone Ranger book was missing. I never saw him again and had no idea where he lived. The "thieving n---" stereotypes I'd overheard from adults were reinforced.

The next contact was five years later. My parents had literally "bought the farm" in Mercer County. The only people of color within miles were a middle-aged couple who owned a subsistence patch nearby. Neighborhood boys called him by his first name, "Hunter." Every year Dad paid him to help us slaughter livestock. Mom instructed me to address him as "Mr. Henderson." The cultural exchange he and I shared was scraping and gutting the same hogs. Working my way through high school at a drive-in theater concession, a black man, staggering, smelling of wine, loudly accused me of short-changing him. He had given me a five. He came back later, claiming it was a ten. The boss ordered me to empty my pockets and wallet. I had under \$3. The register checked. A hundred other transactions

with black folks went smoothly.

My next job was restaurant carhop. "WHITE ONLY" signs were prominently posted. One night, a southbound car with Michigan plates parked. The occupants were a black couple with several children. As instructed, I pointed to the signs and apologized.

The lady said they had been driving all day (no Interstates then), pleaded that the children were starving and please, could they get food to go? They'd drive on.

I sympathized. "Pull around back."

I delivered their order in several paper sacks.

A biddy dining room waitress had to have climbed onto a chair to look out the only back window and watch me. She told the boss. He fired me.

His daughter, home from college, arrived as I was leaving. "Why so glum?" she asked. She heard my side, intervened vigorously, and I was rehired. From then on we served blacks takeout orders through the back door.

It began to sink in: (1.) People of every color have families they love who get hungry just like "us." (2.) Laws and cultural customs often have nothing to do with justice or plain common decency. (3.) If you do the right thing, sooner (as in that case) or later, someone will stand with you.

In 1955, three of us teenagers went to a dance/show at the Bluefield Municipal Auditorium. Appearing were Little Richard, "Fats" Domino, Laverne Baker. That night, black people got the ground floor. Whites sat in the balcony. We three had it to ourselves. Visiting the mens' room, we received dagger looks. In spring 1956, Chuck Berry, Bo Diddley, Smiley Lewis and Ledbelly performed for a packed ground floor. Two whites were in the balcony.

We went because we loved the "newness" of the music and performances that were "real." Local radio stations played none of it. Nashville's 50,000-watt WLAC did, midnight to 3 a.m., sponsored by "Negro" hair care products. Six months later, at Fort Jackson, S.C., black recruits bunked above and on either side of me. Hispanics and Orientals rounded the mix. It took a while to adapt, to trust others to "have your back." The catalytic factor was that our Army noncoms, black, brown and white, tolerated nothing less.

Perhaps a compulsory military experience would make certain voters think differently about a black presidential candidate. Perhaps not.

Beyond cooperating on duty, racism and mistrust still lurked, both ways. Some whites' bigotry was amplified by increased contact with those few blacks and Hispanics who tried to intimidate or overplayed the "discrimination" card.

Fast forward through 40 years.

There are 24 time zones around our planet. I've spent weeks, months and years in most of them, crossed both Tropics, the Equator and neared the Arctic Circle. I can converse in the local language with 98 percent of people in the Western Hemisphere.

I have thumbed thousands of miles, still take a Greyhound some places, ride local transportation, walk around cities and neighborhoods, try to fit in and hear people's stories. I've never been bashful about starting a conversation or trying to learn. Handshakes and embraces have been exchanged with people of every pigmentation. Not once did I "catch something." Nor did their color rub off on me. But each time, a little of their humanity did.

In 1999, visiting my mother (then age 83) about a month before she passed away, I told her, "A lady from South America and I have

become friends. I've been invited down to meet her family."

Mom's blurted reply was, "I hope she's white."

Have you met my wife? Too bad Mom never did. Isabelita (Betty) is of African-Spanish-Indigenous origin and one of those Hispanic immigrants so many people snarl prejudice against.

Why did Mom care about the color of Betty, whom she never met and whose photo she never saw? Maybe she didn't want me marrying beneath myself?

I didn't.

I married "up."

Betty's five-bedroom family home in Colombia is far nicer than the dinky trailer or batten board two-room shanty in which I grew up. They have running water, indoor bathrooms, a telephone, gas service, TV. All we had that they do is electricity, but we went nearly a year without power when we moved to "the farm."

Betty is smart, witty, warm, charming, honest, decent and we love each other like crazy. Everyone who knows her loves her, too. I'm sure Mom would have come around - if she had lived.

My sweetie came to America legally in 2000 and we immediately married. Until 1967, when the U.S. Supreme Court did the right thing, our marriage would have been a crime in many states.

She recently passed (score 100 percent) oral and written tests (in English) on U.S. law, history, civics and culture that 90 percent of my fellow "patriotic" Americans would likely flounder upon. (Who is Chief Justice of the United States? Name the 13 original states. Who was Patrick Henry?) In October 2008, she will be sworn in as a U.S. citizen at Charleston.

Not all the hard looks and churlish behavior toward us as a "pepper and salt" couple comes from whites.

Want to know the basic difference between you, me, Betty, Barack Obama and all those other people I've met around the world compared to "Appalachians" and "old blue-collar white men"?

Not one damned thing that matters!

Every "working person" I have met from Siberia to Summersville had exactly the same hopes and fears, wants and wishes - a job that provides decent food, clothing, shelter. To live in unmolested safety, good health and peace with family and friends. To retire with dignity and security.

Those hopes merely restate the basic human rights of all humanity that Thomas Jefferson concisely enumerated in our Declaration of Independence - life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

It was not until I understood those things that I became a recovering racist. Anyone can change, if they open their minds and try.

Cook, a novelist who lives in Hurricane, has worked as a welder, mechanic, carpenter, bricklayer, sign painter and printing equipment operator. The complete commentary, from which this essay is excerpted, is online at www.daneagle.us.

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