

## A CONSCIOUS DECISION

Melanie Koenig  
Business Administration  
John F. Kennedy Senior High School, Cedar Rapids, IA

[Assignment: Write an essay in response to our readings on race. You may want to use comparison-contrast as a method of examining attitudes; make sure you work from a clear thesis.]

When I was in elementary school, I remember hearing the "tall tale" of the giant, Paul Bunyan. As a child, I was fascinated by the thought that someone could actually be that tall. But as I grew older, I realized that realistically, Paul could never have been one hundred feet tall. I decided that I did not believe in this "tall tale" anymore.

Racism is like a "tall tale." Racist people are usually taught prejudice through family. It fascinates a young child to hear his/her parents speak with such emotion about something. It is easy to be so influenced by a parent's strong viewpoint at this age, because children do not know how to doubt. But there comes a time in life when one begins to question what one believes, and begins to form one's own opinions. This is when one realizes that Paul Bunyan is a myth.

Racism ends with the individual. It requires a conscious choice to say, "I don't accept that," or "That's not what I believe." Through a friend's story and my own experience, I have decided that racism constitutes a "day of reckoning" for an individual--a personal choice either to accept or reject prejudice as a standard used to judge others.

Lisa Alexander is an African-American who has experienced racism. But not in the way that one would think: she encounters it, not through people of other races, but within her own black family.

Lisa's ten-year-old son, Levi, returned home from school one day to report that he had been called a "nigger" by another boy. This being Levi's first experience with racism, he did not know how to react. Lisa's husband, however, reacted by using what he had learned in his childhood. He said, "Well, why didn't you call him a honky?" This frustrated Lisa, because she did not agree with her husband's belief.

Lisa knew the importance of a parent's word in the home. Children look to their parents for guidance, and pick up words and phrases easily. Lisa did not want the words "honky" or "nigger" to be ones that her children would remember. She wanted to teach them the Christian ideals of brotherhood, while not sheltering the children from the fact that racism existed.

Lisa's husband, Jim, had grown up in the same city as Lisa but with a very different background concerning racism. Jim lived in an all-black area of Chicago. His father had been a victim of much abuse from whites in his younger years, and made sure to let his children know the bitterness and hatred he felt from those experiences. Jim grew up hearing "honky" used frequently, along with "those damn whites." Being a

child, he accepted this attitude. As he grew older and encountered white people himself, he never decided to change his mind.

By contrast, Lisa grew up alongside white people, where prejudice did not exist. Her first experience with a racist name occurred when she was in her 20's. She had moved to a town just outside of Chicago and was labeled a "nigger." Her first reaction was devastation and anger. However, she turned to her religion to help her understand.

Here she learned that people are taught prejudice. Hearing racist remarks from an early age makes deciding not to be a racist much more difficult.

Lisa made the conscious decision to combat racism by teaching her children not only Christian values, but to look for substance before color. While still struggling with racism in society today, Lisa tries to help her husband forgive his resentful feelings. But she realizes that ultimately only he can decide to change.

I have a white friend, Rachelle, who has grown up very much like Jim. She was raised in a black and white area of town, where she encountered blacks frequently. Rachelle's father, like Jim's father, is prejudiced against those outside of his race. From her childhood Rachelle remembers hearing, "Look at that damn nigger," while watching a TV show, or when looking out the window into her street. She, like Jim, chose to accept these prejudicial remarks as a way of life.

Rachelle and I were walking out of the mall one day, and we saw a young black man run, without thinking, in front of a car. He turned as the car screeched to a halt two inches away from him, with a look of sheer terror on his face.

Rachelle started laughing hysterically, and said loudly, "What a dumb nigger!" I was furious and embarrassed to be with her. I turned to glare at her and said, "You're so low! Don't ever use that word or say anything like that around me again." She became very defensive, and we ended up talking about it the whole way home in the car. For her, that remark was natural and habitual, but I hadn't grown up that way.

I lived in a secluded, white area on the outskirts of town. As I was growing up, my parents, like Lisa, stressed the importance of Christian values. My parents are not prejudiced. I never heard much about black people when I was younger. They were around me in school and church, but I never had any reason to pay attention to color. When I was sixteen, I brought home a close male friend, who happened to be mulatto. After meeting him, my parents would ask from time to time how he was doing, never mentioning anything about his color.

Growing up in this environment, it was easier for me to make a decision to fight prejudice. I do not ignore the fact that it exists; I may not encounter it at home, but I've been in many other situations like the one with Rachelle. My friends all know how I feel about the word "nigger," and all other prejudicial remarks. I will not be around anyone, black or white, who uses these words.

This is a conscious choice that I have made. For me, it did not take an earth-shattering encounter to make that decision. But it was a decision I made because I do not like the hurt and the hatred that result from prejudice. I had an advantage, as did Lisa, because we did not grow up being taught discrimination. But we stepped back, took a look around us, and did not like what we saw. Until that "day of reckoning" comes and each of us decides to leave what we "learned" behind, there will always be those who believe that a man named Paul was one hundred feet tall, and that racism is an acceptable reality.