

PART 2 of 2

Last week part one of an editorial on Racial Reconciliation was printed in the Gallup Sun.

At the end of Part One, I talked about my first experience with blatant racial stereotyping when I was 7 years old. When the little girl in the playground called me a “dirty rotten redskin” I don’t think she was born with that thought. It was a learned way of thinking. It is what children may see in the home when they grow up, what their peer groups practice, what they hear in music or see on other forums of life.

When my wife and I first moved to Gallup years ago we set about attending different Churches to see which one best suited our needs. In one Church one of the Elders during hand shaking time kept reminding me that “their Sister Church” might be better for me. So, after a couple of weeks I finally asked him why he was recommending that. He said: “Well, I just thought you might be more comfortable with your own kind. They speak Navajo over there and you might understand things better since we only speak English here.”

So, I said: “You know what I don’t think I want to do that.” He said “why not?” I said, “Do you see that blond lady sitting over there? That is my wife. So, if I go to the “sister” Church where does she go? I also pointed out that I didn’t speak Navajo, English was my main language.

Just like the Police assumed the Black Pastor [spoken of in part one] had stolen the nice car he was driving, I was “pre-judged” by the Elder to be more suited for a Navajo speaking Church environment. He had no idea that I might be married to an Anglo or that I spoke only English or that I had two College degrees so I would not have a problem understanding the Pastors sermons presented in English only.

Then the question is: Was he trying to be nice and accommodating or was that a coded message to say “you don’t belong here.” This is the type of thing Edward Gilbreath [author of Reconciliation Blues] says happens all the time to people of color. They get double messages when they integrate into Anglo society. Sometimes people with good intentions are just trying to help, while there are people giving them as a “coded message” knowing full well what they are

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Written by By Richard Kontz
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doing. Just for the record that particular Elder was really just trying to help – he and I have become very good friends.

I was once [for a short time] the Director of a Christian organization operating on the Navajo Nation and as we were waiting around for our staff meeting to start several Anglo missionaries were sitting around talking. Then they started talking about “those Navajos” and they went on and on making fun of “them” and criticizing “them.”

After a while, I finally said “Hey you know what I am Navajo and I can’t believe I am hearing this from the very people who were called by God to minister to these people [the Navajos].” They were very embarrassed when I said what I said. They tried to back tract by saying “Well, you’re not like them your educated and you know how to behave”.

So, I guess if you are educated sometimes you are not viewed the same way as let’s say the “uneducated Natives” from the “reservation.” What this experience showed me is that if you are “educated” and “behave” you might be viewed a different way.

Look at any major study of poverty and you see that “education” is the key to getting out of poverty and succeeding in life. Also, after working at the Gallup Housing Authority for over 3 years when I evict people it is because of their own bad “behavior,” which results in them being evicted. So, learning to “behave” might be something to think about when a person moves into Gallup from the “rez” to become a productive citizen of Gallup.

So, what does this all mean? Well, I think it is about a minority group [the Indians] becoming the dominant group in a city where roles are being reversed. Some are going to love it, some are going to hate it and a large majority will just go with the flow. And, I still stand by my previous admonition to local leadership to develop a real Vision and Strategy to guide the process where all are welcome to live in Gallup and become productive law abiding citizens of Gallup. As Rodney King said after the LA riots: “Can’t we all just get along”.

Richard F. Kontz

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A Citizen of Gallup, NM

Email: rmkontz@q.com

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