

Racism in Visalia: Reflecting on MLK Day in Visalia, 2006

By David Chandler

Racism. That went out in the 1960's. Right? Apparently not. The experience of the Pankey family ("Vandalism Comes Home from School," Visalia Times Delta, Dec. 9) is a throwback to times past, but the experience of the Pankeys is not unique. One of our friends received very similar treatment when she and her son moved to this area last summer. These are not random pranks. People in our own community are being consciously targeted because of their race and they are literally being terrorized.

Being made to feel that you are not wanted or that your humanity is not worthy of respect is a real assault to your person. Eggs can do some property damage, but the real hurt goes much deeper. When a family feels they must sell their home, move to a different neighborhood, and change schools to find peace and a sense of safety, anyone can see the pain is real and deep.

Egging, taunting, racial epithets, and similar behavior are not merely youthful pranks. When such behavior is not taken seriously by authorities, when there are no investigations and arrests, no irate parents mandating apologies and restitution from their offending children, the adult culture is nourishing the behavior. Most adults, regardless of their attitudes, have enough restraint not to egg someone's house or car. But when they indulge in behind-the-back comments and racial innuendo, and consider racial humor good clean fun, their children are watching and listening. Children haven't fully worked out their own identities and value systems. They are mimicking attitudes and beliefs modeled for them by their parents and their community. Having less inhibition than adults, they act out their attitudes. When they act out racial hatred they are uncovering hidden attitudes the adults around them might rather harbor in secret.

It is time to end the denial. We are a racist society. It is built into the way we run our economy. We have never outgrown our dependency on slave labor, so we outsource what we can and create an underclass here at home. Poverty and unemployment have a strong racial component. Racism is built into the way we operate our legal system. We selectively arrest people based on "racial profiles." We selectively penalize the use of the "ghetto drug," crack over the chemically identical "celebrity drug," powder cocaine. We selectively execute black people who murder whites at a far higher rate than equally guilty white people who murder blacks.

Racism is not limited to African Americans. In the Valley it most strongly affects Mexican immigrant workers. In our society at large it is increasingly being felt by Arabs and South Asians. Thousands have been rounded up and deported since 9/11 without due process (and without uncovering any terrorist plots in the process). An Indian doctor in Porterville was even shot in a post-9/11 assassination attempt.

So many in this community see themselves as being "good Christians," but fail to follow the teachings of the dark skinned Semite, Jesus, who saw all people equally as children of God and said we would all be judged on how we treat the least of our brothers.

I wish racism were a thing of the past. We have created a national holiday to give lip service to the life and work of Martin Luther King. But we must not forget that Martin Luther King's work was cut short by his assassination. Racial hatred outlived him, and it killed him. Progress has been made in remedying institutional racism, but in many ways his dream is still a dream today.

[This editorial was not published. The opinion page editor said there had been so much response to the Pankey article that he was reluctant to do an editorial-length article on it, but he would welcome a 250 word version for the Letters column.]

Here is the Letter to the Editor version:

One of our friends received the same treatment as the Pankey family when she moved to town last summer. These eggings are not random pranks. People in our community are being terrorized because of their race.

Eggs can do property damage, but the real hurt is the assault on someone's dignity and humanity. When people must move and change schools to find peace, the pain is clearly real and deep.

Egging and taunting are not merely pranks. When parents and authorities overlook it, the adult culture is nourishing the behavior. Most adults would not egg someone's house. But when adults make racial comments in private, their children are listening. Children act out the racial hatred they see modeled for them in adult society.

Racism is built into our society. We have never outgrown dependence on slave labor, so we outsource to Asia and create an underclass at home. We racially profile criminal suspects. We prosecute and penalize "ghetto drugs," more than "celebrity drugs." We execute far more Black murderers of White victims than equally guilty White murderers of Black victims.

So many see themselves as "good Christians," but fail to follow the teachings of the dark skinned Semite, Jesus, who saw all people equally as children of God and said we would all be judged on how we treat the least of our brothers.

Racial hatred outlived Martin Luther King: it killed him. Progress has certainly been made, but in many ways his dream is still a dream today.