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Don't look away

Now that you've noticed that I wrote yet another column, don't look away.

When you are walking down the street and pass someone who is different than you are, don't look away.

If your first reaction is that you may not be able to relate to each other because you are of different colors, don't look away.

It is amazing to see how some faces of the people who ordinarily would look right past you, or who might have a frown on their face, immediately change that look into a smile when you merely acknowledge their existence with a smile or "hello." (Better yet, try both.)

Even teenagers who might seem unapproachable as they walk down a city street with a look that lets the rest of the world know not to "mess" with them — insert your word of choice instead of the word "mess"; I can't write here what I was thinking — by displaying a grim look on their faces are human beings who are yearning for acceptance and trying their best to deal with the hand life dealt them. Often that look melts away if you merely maintain eye contact, smile, and say "hello."

Every day in our community, and throughout our country, people of different religions, colors, ethnic backgrounds and classes of wealth, are intertwined in their daily activities without taking a moment to recognize that the wall of ice between them can be melted in a fraction of a second.

Now, let's discuss what we're not really supposed to discuss. No one wants to be a bigot, a racist, biased against any particular religion, gender or sexual orientation, but we are. I recall Sammy Davis Jr. once saying that anytime even a small group of people tolerate a racist joke, it perpetuates racism. I'd like to hear from one reader of this column or one listener of my radio show who honestly can say they haven't politely smiled at a joke that promoted bigotry and racism in some way. I certainly have heard them and, although there have been times I've told the person telling the joke that I did not wish to hear such a joke, that really has happened mostly in the last half of my life, at best. For the times when I did not speak out, I am ashamed.

If you have ever driven down the street and watched a driver

make an insanely stupid move while behind the wheel, and upon seeing the driver thought to yourself "Why that stupid ___," rather than just thinking "Why that stupid driver," then you need to search deep into your heart of hearts to recognize that the ethnicity, gender or color of that driver is irrelevant.

We all have biases. They are the product of our life experiences. If you were treated cruelly, had a bad relationship — even a distant or platonic relationship — with a particular person who was different than you are, you likely walked away from that relationship with some conscious or subconscious bias.

Thus, in jury selection, one of the primary goals is to attempt to find a panel of jurors who are least biased against either party. I do not believe it is possible to find a group that has no biases.

The next item to address in searching your conscience is whether you can at least minimize the impact of your own life experiences. Simply put, imagine you are a black person who is stranded alone in a rural, all white community. If that doesn't cause enough terror to put a knot in your stomach, simply imagine you are a white person who is stranded alone in the worst inner city neighborhood of any city in the U.S.

Obviously, my writing this column will never eliminate society's ills. If all of us took a moment to realize that, rather than being stranded in an unwelcoming community, there are times throughout our daily lives when we ought to interact with those we might prefer to avoid, perhaps the idea of reaching out with a smile to a stranger you pass on the street won't seem so absurd.

I've been surprised at the reactions I've garnered from such interactions, and I'm willing to bet you will be as well. Don't look away.

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