

# ENGAGE Writing Contest

## MaryAnne Flier, 2<sup>nd</sup> Place Winner

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“With Liberty and Justice for Some” written for EN 102

“I’m a good person, and I believe that being racist is wrong. A sin, actually. But I don’t believe that *systemic* racism exists today,” an unknown man stood to say. It was the question and answer period following a speech on how the church should be involved in the Black Lives Matter movement. The speaker, Ekemini Uwan, graciously asked him what he had to lose by admitting that it does, in fact, exist; he replied that it just isn’t how he sees reality in front of him. Again with more grace than many could have mustered, she responded by gently encouraging him to do his homework. Read the true history of our country. Read books and articles by those whose viewpoints differ from his own perspective. Speak with people of color and really *listen* to them. Allow me to summarize: If you’re not seeing the reality that exists in our country, please open your eyes.

To fully grasp the reality that systemic racism exists, you must, of course, start with the definition of systemic racism. It is not simply racial prejudice, although that plays a part. Debby Irving, the author of *Waking Up White (and Finding Myself in the Story of Race)*, explains systemic racism this way:

1. skin color symbolism: using skin color to imagine innate levels of intelligence, athleticism, aggression, and so forth in oneself and others
2. favoritism: the idea that one is best
3. power: the ability to make decisions for and/or distribute resources to people skin color symbolism + favoritism + power = systemic racism (54)

Debby goes on to quote an unnamed woman who said that prejudices exist among all racial groups, but “the difference... is that they [white people] have the *power* to turn those feelings into policy, law, and practice” (54-55).

To me, the “skin color symbolism” and “favoritism” of which Debby speaks go hand-in-hand. We have been conditioned our whole lives to think of people of color as *less-than*. Slavery painted black people as property, as work-horses here solely for the white man’s benefit. The original Constitution of our country counted slaves as less than a full person – 3/5 of a person, to be exact. Even when slavery was abolished and the constitution was amended to say that slaves were full citizens, it was still another fourteen years before they were supposedly allowed to vote (yet were actually turned away at the polls for a variety of reasons.) Nearly one hundred years after that, during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s, people of color were still fighting to be allowed to even use the same drinking fountain, ride the same buses (or sit wherever they desired on those buses,) sit in restaurants, or attend the same schools as white folks. *Less-than. Inferior.*

*Aha!* You may be thinking. *You brought it up yourself: The Civil Rights Movement! It happened, and all those problems went away! There’s not a racist system in place anymore!* But in reality, the skin color symbolism and the favoritism never changed, and the power (the final piece of the systemic racism equation) never shifted beyond what amounts to white people throwing people of color a bone and nominally desegregating schools and places of business. For example, even when desegregation did occur, the children of color who were sent to white schools were often physically and verbally abused. Their parents were threatened and even faced job loss as a result of sending their children to white schools. Why? Because of the constantly-held view that those children were inferior and didn’t deserve to be in school with white kids.

Additionally, by the time of the Civil Rights Movement, African Americans had already been relegated, by official policy, to live in ghettos. After World War II, while vast numbers of white veterans were taking advantage of the GI Bill and buying homes at low interest rates in suburban areas, black veterans were kept from the same benefit in a myriad of ways. They often were not even informed about the bill, and if they were informed, they were told they didn't qualify for the benefits. If they somehow *were* allowed to partake of the benefits of the bill in some measure, discriminatory practices in mortgage lending and real estate kept them from purchasing homes or moving anywhere outside poor urban areas (McKenna).

The GI Bill and subsequent housing discrimination has had long-lasting effects on people of color, still felt today. Keeping people of color relegated to specific areas perpetuates the stereotypes and the inferiority complex that white people hold, by allowing them to view people of color as *other*; if a group is living in an area other than your own, you don't need to cross paths with them if it's not something you want to do. This allows you to believe without question whatever stereotypes about that group that you have been fed by family, by whitewashed American history, by media, the list goes on. As well as *other*-ing people of color, the discrimination keeping them from home-ownership kept them inferior to white people as those white folks began, through home-ownership, to increase their wealth and legacy to pass on to their children. So while there are now of course some people of color in the suburbs, the cycle of poverty that began long ago with such discriminatory practices has in many cases proven difficult for black families to break.

Beyond housing discrimination, which alone kept (and still keeps) whites above people of color in society, we must also take a look at our criminal justice system, and particularly the disproportionate number of people of color affected by the War on Drugs. Michelle Alexander, in her New York Times bestselling *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, states that "the system of mass incarceration operates with stunning efficiency to sweep people of color off the streets, lock them in cages, and then release them into an inferior second-class status" (103). She goes on to explain how this happens: police officers are given completely free rein when it comes to who they choose to arrest for drug offenses ("thus ensuring that [their] conscious and unconscious racial beliefs and stereotypes will be given free rein.") Further, anyone who wants to question in court the impact of racial bias on their charges must have undeniable proof that blatant racism occurred (103). Because police officers generally don't shout racial epithets as they arrest a person of color, it can be hard to prove racial intent was present.

In February of 2016, the Drug Policy Alliance published a fact sheet entitled *The Drug War, Mass Incarceration, and Race.*" In it, the following is stated:

Black people comprise 13 percent of the U.S. population, **and are consistently documented by the U.S. government to use drugs at similar rates to people of other races.** But black people comprise 31 percent of those arrested for drug law violations, and nearly 40 percent of those incarcerated in state or federal prison for drug law violations. Similarly, Latinos make up 17 percent of the U.S. population but comprise 20 percent of people in state prisons for drug offenses and 37 percent of people incarcerated in federal prisons for drug offenses (Drug Policy Alliance, emphasis mine).

We see, then, that the Drug War mainly targets people of color, despite the fact that white people use drugs at the same rate. This not only perpetuates the stereotype of the "criminal blacks" as we see the vast number of them being incarcerated, but it does so *so-very-wrongly*. And the effects of that mass incarceration reach far beyond falsely perpetuating negative stereotypes.

A favorite talking-point of the Religious Right is that the problems faced in black communities arise because the family structure is broken, and there are no fathers in the homes. While I absolutely agree that this negatively affects communities, we need to be asking, "Where *are* the fathers?" Where they are, often, is being disproportionately, unjustly, mass-incarcerated for nonviolent drug offenses. Michelle

Alexander puts it this way: “The absence of black fathers from families across America is not simply a function of laziness [or] immaturity. Thousands of black men have disappeared into prisons and jails, locked away for drug crimes that are largely ignored when committed by whites” (190).

Further, Alexander states, the people of color who are incarcerated are later released “as second-class citizens” (103). They aren’t allowed to vote, they are often unemployable due to their past criminal convictions, and aren’t able to purchase homes without employment. Like the home-ownership discrimination, incarceration (whether the person himself or the effects it has on his family) and the consequences post-incarceration can be an extremely difficult cycle from which to break.

We *must* seek to change this narrative in our country. We *must* open our eyes to the systems that have been, and still are, in place to hold down or oppress people of color. To begin, as Ms. Uwan stated, we must work tirelessly to *know* the reality that faces people of color, to really listen to their stories, to live in community with them. In doing this, we are unable to subconsciously keep them relegated as “others” in our minds any longer, and are truly able to squelch any implicit biases we hold. This is truly a crucial first step to racial justice. A sometimes-painful, but absolutely necessary, first step. Let’s begin walking.

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