

Memoirs of a Bodhisattva

Short stories by Skip Nelson



GROWING UP IN DIVERSITY

I am a 74 year old White man. I grew up in the 1950s and 60s in a small city south of Seattle located in The Green River Valley. It was a farming community. The Green River Valley is a 25 mile long valley that runs from Renton, Washington to Puyallup, Washington and was one of the most fertile valleys on the planet, which sadly has now been paved over for the most part.

My school classes from kindergarten all the way through high school were very diverse. Filipino, Mexican, Chinese, Japanese, Chinese, and Sicilians made up most of the non-white population and most were farmers. There were a few Black families in town, but a very small percentage of the population was Black. But they were popular in our school. I don't remember any of them being targeted by racism. It may have happened in private, but I have no doubt that publicly it would have been quickly and severely dealt with.

I remember seeing my first Black person up close and personal. I was about 6. My mother and I were waiting at a bus stop for a bus into Seattle. Standing with us at the bus stop was a tall, attractive Black woman, stylishly dressed with a beautiful brown wool coat. I can remember her to this day. I asked my mother about her.

My mother said, "Well, you know she doesn't look like us, but she is just like us and she deserves our respect." I never thought another thing about it.

My school classes throughout the years were made up of many diverse backgrounds. We always assumed that was normal, but, as we now know, especially for the times, it was not. Even today, my liberal friends and I joke that we always thought that was just how life was.

My mother always encouraged us to explore different cultures and to travel. She herself, at one point, was president of our local Japanese sister city program and we had my Japanese sister stay with us for a year. My sister's Maid of Honor at her wedding was Chinese. Being friends with people of color was never looked on as odd by my family. They were our neighbors. Our classmates. They were our friends.

Oh, I had uncles who used to tell racist jokes and use some racist terms occasionally, but none of them ever expressed the desire to harm or kill someone because of their background or race, and that kind of behavior was NEVER permitted in our own home and was always looked down upon as a disgraceful thing.

I, like many of my white friends during that time, remember watching news of the treatment of blacks in the South. People not allowed to drink at water fountains, sit in restaurants, go to certain schools, stay at certain hotels because of the color of their skin. I have visions of people being attacked by police and police dogs, hung from trees, burned on buses, and sprayed by high pressure water hoses because they did not look like “us”. Those images were repeatedly and permanently seared into my psyche. Those imbedded images seriously rattled my soul and woke in me an outrage that exists to this day.

As I look back on my life, one of the major benefits for me during my time serving in The Vietnam War with the US Army in 1967 and 1968 was the opportunity to become closer to many of my black brothers. They taught me a lot about a life and an experience that was foreign to me, but also a life that was beautiful, filled with beautiful people and rich traditions in spite of the horrific way the country they had put their lives on the line for had historically treated them. And all the black friends I’ve had since have done the same.

As White people, we didn’t experience what black people have experienced, but we were witnesses. From a very early age. And many of us have been supporters of Black Causes in the decades that have followed. We have followed the progress and failures. We also have witnessed the resurgence of blatant racism and hatred in recent years.

My first wife in 1974 was of Afro-Cuban, Spanish, Chinese and Syrian descent born and raised in Kingston, Jamaica. Her appearance was a mix of Asian and African, but especially during summer when she got darker was clearly African. My grandson from the my daughter from that marriage is all of those things, plus my background of German, Jewish, English, Scottish, East African, East Asian, plus his father’s African background and who knows what else. We both experienced racist remarks during our time together.

My current wife is Vietnamese. I also recently did my DNA and found that a Vietnamese woman and I share a Grandparent from about six generations ago. I haven’t quite figured that one out yet.

I have spent a lot of time in The Black Community, as well as the Latino and the Asian Communities. I feel totally comfortable doing so. I can honestly say I have never felt apprehension in doing so. I always see color. I always see culture. I always see differences. They are what I seek out. And I enjoy sharing it. I have never felt threatened by anyone because of their race or culture. I go in, sit down, grab a beer, share conversation and a meal without giving it a second thought. It saddens me that many people just can’t do that when it is so easy.

Admittedly, there have been times when I felt threatened by circumstances, like the time, when I spent the afternoon in Compton, California in the late 70s taking photos of the inner-city art around the area. Towards nightfall, I pulled up at a stop light and

glanced at the car next to me and the brother looked at me and mouthed the words "White Boy". I figured it was time to leave out of prudence.

I am, by profession, a photographer, who likes to wander city streets and alley ways. I am curious by nature. I am bold in my ventures. I am generally fearless in my endeavors. I have traveled extensively, both in and outside of the United States and I have rarely felt threatened, but never because of race or culture. I have my mother to thank for that.

I am stunned at how isolated some white people are and how they live in a cocoon and how they never have had the desire, or even just the curiosity, to explore different worlds and realities other than their own.

There are a lot of White people out there like me. We get it. And we live with the same rage that Black people have when we witness the injustices around us.

I have spent a lot of time crying in the past three years when I see where the Country and the Constitution I risked my life for has gone. It just makes me so angry. One million people have died fighting for The Constitution and for our democracy. I come from the generation of the '60s Civil Rights Era that thought we were witnessing the dawning of "The Age of Aquarius". It makes me very sad to see how much we failed, in spite of how much we accomplished.

Just know that there are many White people out here, such as myself, who have done what you propose. It now appears as though I need not to learn to have uncomfortable conversations with Black people. I need to have those conversations with White people.

Peace and love,

Skip Nelson
2020