

Editorial: Judgment and empathy

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Let's say it up front: A white person doesn't know what being black feels like. And a man can't completely understand a woman.

But during this long, hard summer, I've tried.

First came the George Zimmerman trial. A Hispanic man stood on Florida's "stand your ground" law and was acquitted in the murder of an African-American teenager, Trayvon Martin.



Editor Marv KnoxShock waves rolled, particularly in African-American communities. Predicted riots did not occur, thank God. But you'd have to be tone deaf not to recognize the grief, pain and anger that emanated—especially from African Americans—when people wondered whether Trayvon would have been treated with such leniency if that bullet had taken the other life.

Unique perspective

President Barack Obama offered a clear picture of at least one African-American man's thinking when he talked to reporters about the killing and trial.

"Trayvon Martin could have been me 35 years ago," he said. "And ... it's

important to recognize that the African-American community is looking at this issue through a set of experiences and a history that—that doesn't go away. ...

“There are very few African-American men in this country who haven't had the experience of being followed when they were shopping in a department store. That includes me. And there are very few African-American men who haven't had the experience of walking across the street and hearing the locks click on the doors of cars. That happens to me, at least before I was a senator. There are very few African-Americans who haven't had the experience of getting on an elevator and a woman clutching her purse nervously and holding her breath until she had a chance to get off. That happens often.

“And you know, I don't want to exaggerate this, but those sets of experiences inform how the African-American community interprets what happened one night in Florida. And it's inescapable for people to bring those experiences to bear.”

Some people said Obama inserted racism into the situation, as if race weren't already the central issue. No, he spoke as educator-in-chief. He helped all who would listen glimpse what it's like to be an African-American male in this country. Still.

Hope deferred

I remember November 2008, when voters elected Obama president. Democrats and Republicans alike marveled at the march of history—we lived in a country that elected an African-American as its leader.

For a moment, I wanted to believe we had arrived at a post-racial America. I didn't believe it, of course. I have African-American friends, and I know some of their stories. Besides, I can read surveys and statistics and basic everyday reports from the newspaper. So, I knew our nation had not

achieved racial equality.

Naively, however, I hoped the election of an African-American president—whatever his political party—marked a giant step forward. Unfortunately, America has disabused that notion. The patina of racism appears thicker, even in the politest situations. And out-and-out racism crops up more frequently and ferociously than it did immediately before.

So, the only real surprise of the Martin-Zimmerman tragedy is that some Americans seem surprised to learn other Americans experience racism.

The woman behind the man

More recently, news outlets have reported 24/7 on disgraced New York City politician and sexting aficionado Anthony Weiner. He's morphed into a pathetic and disgusting sideshow. Frankly, he's not that interesting. If he weren't a former congressman and current NYC mayoral candidate, his case would be worth seven lines in the back of the local papers.

His wife, Huma Abedin, is fascinating. She's a smart, well-educated, accomplished woman. And—as of this writing, at least—she's standing by her man.

Stories about Abedin have been intriguing, whether or not you agree with them—or her. People wonder why she hasn't dumped him. She said she loves him and has forgiven him. They have lives together. They have children.

Some surmise she's staying because they're a political couple. After all, her boss, Hillary Clinton, stood with her husband through scandals. Others speculate on Abedin's and Weiner's co-dependent relationship. Some predict her career chances would improve if she leaves. They criticize her, on behalf of victimized women everywhere, for staying with a creep.

All guesses and conjectures are ludicrous. Nobody knows the inside of a marriage. Nobody can dissect love and describe the pathology of loyalty.

We need empathy

What do these disparate events have in common? Not much, perhaps. But one thing: The tendency to assume we know what it's like to be another. No, that's not it: The tendency to judge another based on what we assume and/or presume.

We assume our perspective—our worldview built upon personal experience, training and culture—is normative. Then we judge others by what we feel and believe, failing to account for the limits of our understanding.

For example, many white Americans downplay racism because we fail to see our communities and nation from the perspectives of people of color. We don't know what we don't know, but we judge others as if we did. Similarly, many Americans treat the failure, pain and shame of others as sport, as foils for comedy, as entertainment. Decency compels us to grieve with those who grieve and desire privacy for those who are humiliated.

We can't see clearly into the lives of others. We can't know what it's like to be them. But we can empathize. We can try to identify with them.

Christians, of all people, ought to work at this. We look to a divine Role Model. Jesus—fully God—took on human form in part to identify with our humanity. We must identify with the humanity of others. And while Jesus' identification resulted in the possibility of full redemption, at least we can take steps toward redemption and reconciliation.