

## Black Lives Matter

We took the Lexington Avenue train up to 125<sup>th</sup> Street, for the rally at the corner of Seventh Avenue and 125<sup>th</sup> Street. Nowadays, the corner is called the intersection of Martin Luther King Boulevard, and Adam Clayton Powell Boulevard. It was September of 1963, and the rally was to protest the bombing of the church in Birmingham, AL, which killed four young girls, and wounded many others. Bob told me that the issue for the rally was the participation of Malcom X. He had been invited not to speak; this raised some hackles.

At the time, Birmingham was the test case in non-violent civil rights protest. After the home of a civil rights attorney was bombed, a riot broke out, which the police suppressed. Some say that the police were also the ones who planted the bomb. Bull Connor was sheriff, and the KKK was very active. The firehoses pelted the mostly non-violent protesters, the same firehoses whose grainy pictures inspired Barack Obama to leave Wall Street and become a community organizer in Chicago.

More accurately, Malcolm X had been invited not to speak, because the organizers of the rally wanted to avoid violence, avoid looting, avoid bad press in liberal New York, and build the political support crucial to the success of the fragile civil rights movement of the South.

The organizers knew more than me about how the rally might turn out. Speeches over, we walked up to 125<sup>th</sup> Street as a mini-riot broke out. Store windows were smashed, clusters of kids raced up the sidewalk, police cars, lights flashing, sirens screaming sped up and down the broad street. I had never seen anything like this, and was somewhat appalled. Bob and I stood there, talking, wondering what we should do next, when he suddenly suggested we should move on. I then noticed we were in the center of a circle of about twenty people our age, not our race, all waving their fingers and shouting at us.

So I walked between two of the guys in the circle, Bob followed me, and we made our way the three blocks to the Lexington line, to go back to our apartments in the Lower East Side. On the way, an elderly woman, who might have been all of five feet tall, looked at me, said some words, and whacked me on my legs with her umbrella.

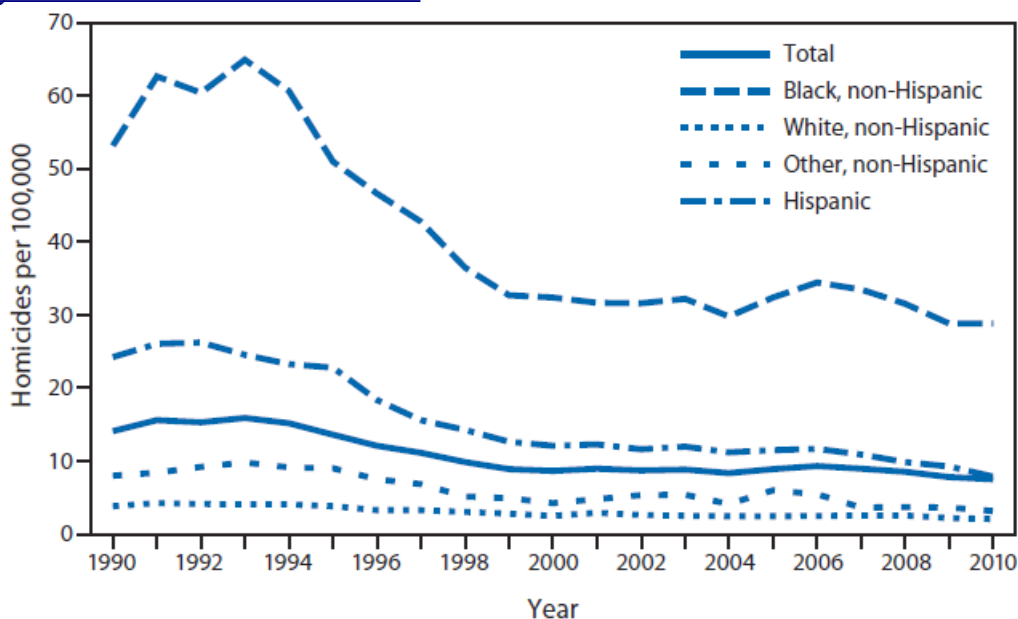
I did not know the term then, but I had just demonstrated what is called “white skin privilege.” “Profiling” and “Micro-aggression” might also be appropriate ways to describe the experience. The micro aggression is easiest to explain. The whack on the legs was not that hard, and more of a friendly warning that white kids like us did not belong in Harlem on that particular night. Note the racial component. “Profiling” is also part of the equation. Once the peaceful rally was over, Bob and I were no longer seen as members of one big family, irrespective of race, but part of that race which had bombed the church, and killed those four girls.

I know this is turning these terms on their heads, but I do it to elucidate the term, “white skin privilege.” As well intentioned as we might be, we white people have little understanding of the innumerable petty slights which brown people face, the legitimate fear of police overstepping their lawful authority, and the broad numbing fog of lowered expectations, both from society, and internalized by society. We were never taught to always have a receipt publicly showing as you left a store, so you would not be stopped by security, we were told we probably could not do the school work, and thus should go into the trades, or worse, passed into higher grades without having mastered the material, we never experienced the odd situation of standing near the entrance of a hotel, and being asked to call a cab, a cab that would most likely never stop for us but for the fact that we were standing in front of a hotel.

So Bob and I were uptown in Harlem, doing good, comfortable, without fear of the authorities, or the shopkeepers, knowing that, if we wanted, we could get a cab. It never occurred to us, or to me, that this was not the experience of most of the people at the rally, the people with brown skins. That privileged perspective, because of our skin color, allowed us to slip through the circle surrounding us. I was oblivious to the sketchiness of the situation.

Another, morbid, aspect of white skin privilege. The next summer, 1964, was the Mississippi Freedom Summer. Liberal whites were trained in voter registration tactics, and distributed through Mississippi. Two went missing, Schwerner and Goodman, along with a black Mississippi native Cheney. Their bodies were found, buried in an earthen dam. In the search, a half dozen bodies were found, some of them civil rights workers, all of them black, all of them would likely never had been found but for the privilege which we white people have. Our lives were simply more important.

And they still are. In so many ways, it is clear that our society values white lives more than black lives. Perhaps the starkest evidence of this is comparative homicide rates, as demonstrated below in a [graph prepared by the Center for Disease Control](#):



### Homicide Rates Among Persons Aged 10-24 Years – United States, 1981-2010

For further information, and breakdowns of the data, visit the page referenced in the link above. Most notable is the following sentence: “Homicide consistently ranks in the top three leading causes of death among persons aged 10–24 years in the United States.” The CDC rightly considers this an issue of public health.

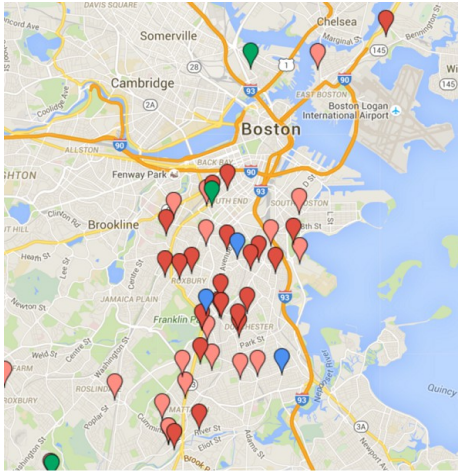
All things being equal, we can estimate that black lives matter far less than white lives, at a ratio of about 10 to 1. Shocking I know, to even think about things this way, but, if we are to implement social policies to end this particular epidemic, then we must be able to measure from where we came, and to where we went, in order to see if there is any progress.

This is not profiling, nor is it micro-aggression, nor is it even white skin privilege. It is the reality of what happens in communities of color, acts perpetrated by black people on black people. It has nothing

to do with the reprehensible police homicides, such as what happened in North Charleston, SC, and has a lot to do with the police homicides in Ferguson, MO, and Boston, MA.

Even the Black Lives Matter web site now admits the substantial evidence which indicates that Michael Brown attempted to wrest the gun from the police officer. Don't believe me? Go to this [link](#).

Or consider what happened in Boston last Spring. The police stopped a car in a dicey, black neighborhood. How dicey? Look at this map, which shows all homicides in Boston in 2014. Those of



of you who know Boston will immediately see the how well concentrated homicides are in the communities of color. No surprise, given the ratio of black to white homicides demonstrated above. The incident happened in the dead center of the map.

They knew career criminal Angelo West was inside the car, but they did not draw their guns. West did, and shot police officer John Moynihan in the face. Moynihan lived, but, in the ensuing gun battle, caught on security cameras, West did not.

The Black Lives Matter Boston chapter held a meeting. It excluded white people. It even ejected Joao DePina, whose brother was killed in 2014, who is one of the markers on this map. He was objecting to the meeting's focus on police actions, as opposed to homicides. [According to the Boston Globe](#):

Members of the civil rights group Black Lives Matter Boston gathered behind closed doors in Fields Corner on Sunday afternoon to discuss the shooting. Some at the meeting said the police stop was a result of racial profiling, according to Joao DePina, an activist and the brother of Michael DePina, who was shot and killed in Dorchester last June. DePina, 36, is not affiliated with Black Lives Matter Boston and was escorted from the meeting after arguing that the discussion was unfairly critical of police.

Are the police the problem? Certainly in some cases, but, for example, if we look at a [map of 2014 homicides in the St. Louis area, prepared by the St. Louis Post Dispatch](#), we will see how few of the homicides are committed by police.



The map is color coded. The police homicides are the ones in brown. In the map at the right, you can scarcely see them, because, at this magnification, they are overwhelmed by what appears to be the normal number of homicides. Don't believe me? Go to the link, expand the google map, and you will even find that one in Ferguson which ignited so many protests.

Over the past couple of years, there has been a focus on the black people killed by the police. The Black Lives Matter movement has focused on this, and gained much publicity, and sympathy. But if black lives really mattered, then the movement would focus on all the

homicides, not just those committed by the police, and look for underlying structural changes, organizing methodologies, societal transformations, which might move us forward.

This is what Sendhil Mullainathan did in his recent article in the New York Times. Many of the supporters of the Black Lives Matter movement see the occasional incident, such as what happened in North Charleston as emblematic of profound and endemic police prejudice against black people. Not so fast, I say. Just because some police are racist does not mean that arrest rates, and homicide rates, are caused by this racism. [Sendhil Mullainathan](#) demonstrates that such homicides, and homicide rates have far more to do with basic social issues, or, as he writes, “In fact, the deeper you look, the more it appears that the race problem revealed by the statistics reflects a larger problem: the structure of our society, our laws and policies.”

Some of my friends did not find his argument compelling, but they mistook the incidents for the trends. They make what is known in statistics as the [“exception fallacy”](#), in which the behavior of one person is applied to the group. For example, a man with a hat makes a left turn in front of you, no signal. It would be incorrect to therefore state that all men with hats are lousy drivers. Sure, some police officers are racists, but as Mullainathan demonstrates in his article, the data do not support an assertion that police killings of blacks are racially based.

The problem is, and the reason I write this, is so much of the Black Lives Matter community has focused on presumed police bias. If that bias no longer exists, and it certainly did in the past, at least in Birmingham, Alabama, and Nashoba County, Mississippi, where Schwerner, Cheney and Goodman were murdered, then protests and policies based on the presumption of police bias, will have no effect, and may, as apparently happened in Baltimore, following the death of Freddie Gray, actually lead to an increase in the homicide rate in that city.

Black Lives do Matter, but the problem is not the police. The strategy of confrontation, and shutting down roads, and rallies, will do little to solve the very real problem of differential homicide rates. Now, I know that differential homicide rates are only one marker for the pervasive oppression of African Americans in our society, and that there are many others, such as incarceration rates, or poverty rates, or life expectancy, the list goes on and on, but, it seems to me that the focus and tactics of the Black Lives Matter movement, and its white allies, is counterproductive in the extreme.

For me, what is wrong is the widespread support such a narrow view has been generated in the white liberal community. Instead of facing the public health menace that faces young black people, we are handed lists of “micro-aggressions,” warned not to “profile,” urged to become more conscious of our white skin privilege.

Well, becoming conscious of white skin privilege is certainly a good idea, but I think it would be far more helpful “TRIGGER ALERT” if we called a spade a spade, admitted the abysmal voting participation in black neighborhoods, analyzed the differential in black and white student achievement, faced the obvious fact of employment discrimination, especially for higher paying jobs, and told the activists to buck up, produce, “pull up their pants”, or shut up.

Abysmal voting rates. That happens to be my specialty, and most of the other pieces published on this blog examine various aspects of this failure of our political system.

I am a real dreamer. I believe we will have finally dealt with this original sin of the Americas, racism, when the question, “Yes, but would you want your daughter to marry one?” is met with an

uncomprehending look. This future is a long way off, I know, but I believe it is within our reach.

I have a friend who grew up in a large Southern city. She was born about the same time as the church was bombed in Birmingham. She came to Boston, to go to school, and has spent the rest of her life here. About thirty years ago, as she was graduating from college, she established a relationship with a brown skinned man. They are still together, thirty years later. She shared with me the manner in which she eased her friends into acceptance of this relationship. Her mother, Southern by birth, clearly accepts the relationship now, and, my guess, with some misgivings, accepted it back when it started.

Slowly, things change. Well, sometimes, more swiftly. My friend also shared her now deceased father's personal history, in which he describes the cultural life of that city, the beginning of a ballet company, and the sudden end of that company. The implication was "sexual deviancy," and the powers that be in that city would not permit such behavior.

Today, fifty years later, same-sex marriage is legal, and sodomy is no longer a crime. "Would you want your daughter to marry one?" now has a new meaning, even in Southern cities, and demonstrates the emotional poverty of such a question.

And somethings don't change. Following the horrific slaughter at the Emanuel AME church in Charleston, SC, I was reminded of Ten Commandments of the Non-Violent Movement in Birmingham from the early sixties.

1. Meditate daily on the teachings and life of Jesus.
2. Remember always that the non-violent movement in Birmingham seeks justice and reconciliation, not victory.
3. Walk and talk in the manner of love, for God is love.
4. Pray daily to be used by God in order that all may be free.
5. Sacrifice personal wishes in order that all might be free.
6. Observe with both friend and foe the ordinary rules of courtesy.
7. Seek to perform regular service for others and for the world.
8. Refrain from the violence of fist, tongue or heart.
9. Strive to be in good spiritual and bodily health.
10. Follow the directions of the movement and the captain on a demonstration.

I was reminded of this by the remarkable sentiment which the members of that church had toward the shooter. They forgave him.

Where in Black Lives Matter, in profiling, in micro-aggression, is this feeling of forgiveness? I have not seen it.

And I was reminded of [Sweet Honey in the Rock's song, Ella's Song](#), whose first line is "We who believe in Freedom cannot rest until it comes, and, of course, its second line, "Until the killing of Black men, Black mothers' sons is as important as the killing of White men, White mothers' sons".

Listen to it. Sing along. It is the future we are building.