

Confessions of an American Liberal

by Ruth Lofgren

Now that I'm retired from my intense environmental projects, I have the time to think about what is going on in the world, especially in the U.S. I do this in the context of memories of a lifetime of experiences. I was born almost 98 years ago in Utah to a devout Mormon couple

who loved life and their fellowmen. My father was a civil engineer, my mother was a writer and musician, and they both loved teaching. I was taught at home until the 4th grade. I was the first of 5 children who all were free to explore nature and learn about life first hand.

Since I've retired, I find that I can no longer ignore the gulf between my idealistic view of what America stands for (liberty, equality and justice for all, etc.) and what is actually going on in our cities and neighborhoods. Over the years, when un-American incidents happened, I tucked the memories away and continued with my optimistic view of life in a world without serious personal challenges. My way of taking care of social problems was by making donations to worthy causes. It is obvious that that is not enough!

The Trayvon Martin death was a tragedy, but my attention soon moved on to other issues. That has not happened with the Michael Brown death. People need to protest injustice as they see it. As we know, "All that is necessary for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing." As I wondered what I could do, I began to realize what a comfortable life I have led. I have lived in a world of family, nature, community, education, science, church and travel over my long life, and only occasionally have I been aware of American racism. What a segregated, privileged life I have led! No wonder I don't understand the power behind the peaceful protests so many are making!

I finished graduate school at the University of Michigan in 1944. Soon after, I attended a party in San Francisco where I received my first shock. As I came in, a lovely Indian girl wearing a beautiful sari made a beeline for me and asked me to step out in the hall with her. She said, "Please don't give me away." She was the daughter of the black Pullman porter at the Union Pacific train station in Salt Lake City. My mother was her father's friend, and I guess she had seen me with my mother. What a curse our culture imposes, that a beautiful, intelligent young woman has to deny her heritage! I tucked the memory away and went on my comfortable way.

After I resigned from the faculty at the University of Michigan and joined the Biology Dept. at Brooklyn College of the City University of New York in 1956, I was working with Dr. William Goins, the head of Science Education. An

outstanding chemist who was black, his wife, Annis, told me of an experience she had had at a faculty tea at the College. She was talking with a group of faculty wives when her husband came over. Until then, the wives had assumed that she was white. When they saw her husband, they realized she was black. Suddenly, the atmosphere changed. The other wives became very polite and moved away. I could feel the depth of her hurt and rejection!



Ruth Lofgren is a retired biology professor, a Quaker, a long-time supporter of Esperanza, and currently on a personal journey to "know thyself".

Another experience that shocked me at the time happened in Atlanta, GA. A friend and I had been looking forward since graduate school to visiting famous water gardens there. Now, almost 20 years later, we were here. As we moved forward to get into one of the little boats that would take us through the gardens, I felt very apprehensive. A very black boatman was sitting in each boat. They were all unsmiling, with blank, opaque eyes. I had never seen people like that before. Fortunately, my friend had.

Looking back, I realize that my apprehension was a fear of the unfamiliar, one aspect of racism.

The memory of an experience that happened 40 years ago in Brooklyn still haunts me. Two of my former student teachers were assigned to teach bottom 7th grade classes in the same Junior High. (It's not uncommon for the least experienced teachers to be assigned the most difficult classes.) They appealed to me for help. The principal approved a project in which these two classes could plan together with the teachers how they would deal with the science information they needed to learn. The students were smart enough, they just couldn't read well. When they discussed the exercises, they knew what they were doing! The project was going well, so I invited a graduate student I was supervising at the College to visit the project.

This student from Grenada, spoke with a British accent and was black. I couldn't believe the change in the 7th graders' behavior when the Grenadan taught them simple scientific techniques. Where they had been tentative and trembly before, they seemed to have self-confidence and energy when they followed his demonstration. I found that he had recognized how hungry the young black students were for mentoring. He identified a large cleaning closet as his "office" and wrote notes to teachers asking that particular students be excused for conferences with him. (He saw a need and was meeting it!) I was shocked. This was not part of our science project. My focus at that time was not on how racism affected a student's ability to learn. Now, forty years later, the segregation and racism in America seem to have increased.

When I first came to San Antonio in 1976, I provided science enrichment in a Quaker school for emotionally disturbed children. One of the former teachers, Cecelia Wiley, was a beautiful Guatemalan Quaker. We became good friends and traveled to Quaker conferences in Mexico. Cecelia said that she hadn't known that she was black until she came to the US. Color had been no issue before.

Before buying a car here, I was waiting at a bus stop downtown with other people. A young black man wearing a white lab coat and his girl friend joined the group. A fair-haired boy 8 or 10 years old was trying to sell us stuff he had in his pockets: string, baseball cards, bottle caps, etc. The young black man spoke to the child, "If you were my child, you'd be home in bed." I was amazed! Such a conservative, middle class opinion from this black man! I wouldn't have heard that in New York! Later, I described what I'd witnessed to a native Texan, and she explained that there was an elite community of black people in San Antonio. Then I remembered that when I first lived in New York City in 1954, Percy Sutton was the President of Manhattan,

and that he was a handsome, urbane black man from San Antonio. The Sutton family was important here. In the 38 years I have lived here, I have watched the rapid growth of the city, where new development has disrupted or destroyed many old neighborhoods.

Over the years I have been aware of discrimination, profiling and prejudice. But, my life has been comfortable until now. The "white privilege" I have enjoyed is no longer invisible to me!

When I was a child growing up in Salt Lake City, Utah, I was an active member of the Mormon Church. Black boys and men could not hold the Priesthood. The reason was based on the Bible story (Genesis 9.18 – 10.29) that explains that because Ham saw his drunken father, Noah, naked, God cursed his descendants with black skin. A few decades ago, I learned that the President of the Church had had a revelation that black men could hold the Priesthood. What a blessing! This fundamental change in culture is a miracle!

I wish our political system weren't so dysfunctional! We need lots of miracles. When we white folks do not accept the kinship of people of color, that we are all the children of God, white flight resegregates our schools and neighborhoods and on and on. I wish that each human being could have the revelation that the President of the Mormon Church had and recognize that there is only one human family. Racism is un-American. Let's affirm our "ideals" with actions. We all need to help each other to be kind and honest with one another. That would be a start! ♦

Defending our Right to Self-Defense ... con'td from p. 6

timized and imprisoned by the legal system that is supposed to protect us and imprison our batterers.

A committee needs to review arrests of battered women at the time of arrest; and review all the cases of battered women still in prison. The one thing we cannot do is watch another legislature go by without these changes. The Texas Legislature's misogynist priorities last session included passing "Romeo & Juliet" legislation to legalize sex between adult males and teenaged girls: heinous, normalization of male violence! Fortunately, the governor vetoed that.

Self-defense is a right. Male violence against women and girls is criminal. But it takes each of you speaking out to make the legislature see that. As feminist and anarchist Emma Goldman said, "Grieve the dead. And fight like hell for the living!" ♦

Bio: Cathy Marston, PhD, Founder & Director of Free Battered Texas Women, was on the Steering Committee for the 2014 Int'l Conference on Penal Abolition. She is also active in revitalizing the Alamo Chapter of the Citizens United to Reform Errands (C.U.R.E.). Her case is currently under appeal. Contact: cmarston.fbtw@gmail.com.

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& Dreamland Collective Present:

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A Call to end the spanking and hitting of our children



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Dreamland Collective

As the P.E.A.C.E. Initiative celebrates their 25th anniversary they continue to take the lead in San Antonio in observing domestic violence awareness month. For a full calendar of October events check out www.thepeaceinitiative.net

P.E.A.C.E. Initiative is dedicated to educating the public about the extent and often deadly consequences of domestic violence and to respond effectively through community collaboration.

24 HOUR CRISIS HOTLINES:
Family Violence Prevention Services' - 210.733.8810
National Domestic Violence Hotline- 1.800.799.SAFE