

In honor of Black History Month, I want to reflect on my whiteness. I used to never think about being white. But now, surrounded by black students and co-workers, it is on my mind all the time. You see, building relationships with people that do not look like you does this really cool thing where it exposes negative mindsets, thought patterns, and biases that need to go. And boy do I have negative mindsets, thought patterns and biases that need to go.

One of my fourth grade girls approached me on the playground the other day. Her eyes were filled with pain.

“I’m having a bad day.”

“Yeah? You want to talk about it?”

She nodded her head slowly and tears formed in those pain-filled eyes.

“It just sucks that reality has sunk in.”

She proceeded to tell me about her basketball game over the weekend. Her team won and it should have been reason to celebrate. But she could not shake the way the ref looked at her. Or the way he continued to ignore the coach’s pleas to call the game fairly. And she certainly could not forget how he ignored her when she was blatantly fouled and her wrist was grabbed on a play. What stuck with her the most, though, was that look he gave. A look he did not give to the other team filled with white girls.

Do you know what my first thought was? *She must be exaggerating. He just missed a few calls.* But thanks to the exposure I mentioned earlier that comes with building relationships with people that do not look like me, I remembered that I have always been white, I am currently white, and I always will be white. Because of this truth, I will never understand, or at least not *feel*, prejudice or racism the way my black or brown friends can. I have never been given that look she was talking about because I am the majority. If I have never been looked at that way, how could I stand there and tell my fourth grader that she was not looked at that way?

My first instinct so often in conversations about race is to defend myself or other white people. My second instinct is to deny the accusation. What if, as white people, we replaced the desire to defend and deny with the willingness to listen and learn? Eventually, listening and learning leads to genuine relationships. Those genuine relationships lead to a desire to take action and inform others about racism. I have been listening and learning for the last seven years. In those seven years, I have never once personally experienced racism. But it has never been more real to me than it is now.