

Finding the Gray

In Just Mercy, it's relatively easy to judge the case of Walter ("Johnny D") McMillian. In fact, it's black and white. McMillian, a married black man who had an affair with a married white woman, was convicted of murdering a different white woman despite having nothing to do with her death. McMillian was the victim of racism and an unjust criminal "justice" system. He wasn't perfect, but we can all agree that McMillian didn't deserve to spend even one day behind bars for a crime he obviously didn't commit, let alone six years on death row.

A more complicated case in Just Mercy is that of Herbert Richardson, a black Vietnam War veteran who developed psychiatric illness from his service. Richardson was sentenced to death and eventually executed for accidentally killing a child with a pipe bomb that he left on his ex-girlfriend's porch in a misguided attempt to win back her affection. In the movie adaptation of the book, Richardson himself tells us why he deserves harsher punishment than McMillian and others on death row: Richardson actually did kill someone. Regardless of our opinion on the death penalty, we see that Richardson's case isn't black and white. It's more complicated. It's gray.

And gray is exactly what we find in most people.

We have no trouble finding the gray in people we know--our family members and friends. They've made mistakes in their lives, but we don't judge them too harshly because we understand that their poor decisions may have been linked to mitigating circumstances.

It is much harder for us to find the gray in strangers. All too often, we are quick to assess people we don't know in black-and-white terms based on very limited information. We judge them by their appearance, their mannerisms, and their actions on a single day.

This is a problem.

In his recent book, Talking to Strangers, journalist Malcolm Gladwell explains several reasons why we aren't very good at interacting with people we don't know: 1) in certain situations, we don't give strangers the benefit of the doubt; 2) we wrongly believe that we can determine a stranger's feelings by their demeanor; and 3) we diminish the role of context in shaping a stranger's behavior.

Gladwell implies that these problems only increase when strangers look and act differently than we do. He concludes that making sense of strangers “requires humility and thoughtfulness and a willingness to look beyond the stranger, and take time and place and context into account.”

So, what can we do to make Wauwatosa more inclusive? We need to acknowledge the problems that Gladwell identifies and work actively to combat them. This will take effort, as Gladwell maintains that our problems with strangers are long-standing and pervasive.

We need to give strangers the benefit of the doubt, and not greet them with skepticism. We need to gather more information about their experiences and personalities, and not make assumptions based solely on their appearance or mannerisms. And we need to try to understand the context of their behaviors, not label them in black-and-white absolutes.

On its website, the Equal Justice Initiative writes that, at Herbert Richardson’s trial, he was painted “as an outsider from New York, an evil person, and an intentional killer.” Even worse, “[n]either Mr. Richardson’s military service nor the trauma resulting from that service were acknowledged at trial . . . , even though trauma was especially crucial in explaining his behavior that led to his being in court.”

In short, Richardson’s case was depicted as black and white, despite the fact that it was decidedly gray. The all-white jury was confronted with a stranger who looked and acted differently than they did, without any context to explain his behavior. And, just as Gladwell would have predicted, Richardson was severely misjudged because of it.

Since moving to Wauwatosa, I’ve been lucky enough to have met a few strangers whom I now call friends, including some who look and act differently than I do. Those relationships have taught me about other cultures, backgrounds, and viewpoints. But they’ve also reaffirmed for me that people are people. And most people are complicated.

As Just Mercy author Bryan Stevenson puts it, “we *all* need mercy, we *all* need justice, and--perhaps--we *all* need some measure of unmerited grace.”

Let’s be brave and introduce ourselves to more strangers. Let’s give them the benefit of the doubt when they say or do something that seems unconventional to us. Let’s not rush to judgment. Let’s hear their stories and be merciful. Let’s find the gray.