

Being Black Helped Me Be Blind and Being Blind Helped Me Understand that #BlackLivesMatter

by Anil Lewis



From the Editor: Anil Lewis is a person with such prominence in the Federation that writing a headnote about him seems almost as unnecessary as writing an

introduction for President Riccobono, Immediate Past President Maurer, or our first vice president and chairman of the National Federation of the Blind Board of Directors, Pam Allen. Therefore, I will not use the space to introduce Anil but to express my appreciation to him for the writing of an article that required going beyond the past and the present and demanded that he look into his soul and share with us what he found there. This takes guts; it takes honesty; it takes humility; it assumes that for all of his effort we, the readers, will invest some of ourselves, including our souls, in trying to understand the messages being expressed. I will never know what it is like to be a black man, but Anil Lewis believes that I have the capacity to learn more than I now know, and both publicly and privately I give him my pledge to honor his faith and trust. Here is what I believe to be the most moving and educational article I have ever had the privilege of editing and publishing:

Although my father died when I was six, I grew up as part of a large extended family. My mother raised four children on her own, two of whom were blind (I became blind at age twenty-five). I am also blessed to have a host of aunts, uncles, and cousins who are all like mothers, fathers, sisters, and brothers.

Growing up as a young black man in Atlanta, one of the most progressive civil rights cities in the country, I was aware of the challenges I would have to face as a black person in a predominately-white society. I grew up realizing that I am the beneficiary of the work of many civil rights leaders who paved the way for me to receive a proper education and opportunities for gainful employment. Thanks to my family, I developed a positive

self-concept of myself as a black man despite society's negative depiction of black people throughout the mainstream media. With their support and encouragement, I was able to secure opportunities to receive the interventions that made it possible for me to excel. I was told that I would need to be better just to be perceived as equal, and as a result, I became extremely self-confident, regardless of any environment or situation. My academic success enabled me to receive college scholarships and subsequently made it possible for me to obtain relatively good jobs with above-average pay.

My extended family also taught me the skill of successful interracial interaction, or how to wear the "mask," a skill that allows me to navigate within a racially charged environment in a manner that is not perceived as intimidating, but allows me to use intimidation when it helps me reach my objective. Although I code-switch (use vocabulary that is appropriate to the audience), I am able to do this without compromising myself or altering my true identity—"When in France...." Little did I know, but this lived experience and acquired skill set would help me adapt to being blind later in life.

With the relatively quick onset of my blindness due to retinitis pigmentosa (RP), I lost a significant amount of my sight over a weekend, leaving me unable to read the text on my computer screen and making it next to impossible for me to continue to operate as a sighted person. My mother made no excuses. She encouraged me to "Get up and do something." Luckily, I was referred to the services offered by the state vocational rehabilitation agency and a local community rehabilitation center, where I learned that I needed to acquire the alternative skills of blindness in order to regain my independence. However, the systems in place set the bar so low that I would not be encouraged, supported, or allowed to reach my full potential. I attained a mediocre skill set at best. My acquisition of limited cane travel abilities using routes, a Braille reading speed of thirty-three

words per minute, and an inability to cook anything without the use of a microwave allowed me to graduate from my blindness training with praise and accolades. Fortunately, I possessed good computer skills prior to my blindness, so I was able to teach myself how to use JAWS to access the computer and was an above average user.

Soon after my graduation, I quickly became a staff member at the same center, teaching others Braille and access technology. I was proud of my accomplishments, but I did not realize that my “achievement” was perpetuating a system of inadequate training and low expectations. Then I met members of the National Federation of the Blind. This newly acquired extended family acknowledged my skill set and immediately began encouraging me to set higher expectations for myself and for other blind people. With their support, I worked hard in order to maintain my self-confidence and develop a positive self-concept as a blind person. I improved my blindness skills and learned a new language of blindness: Structured Discovery, long white cane, competing on terms of equality, etc.

As a member of the 1999 Three Strikes Leadership Seminar, I participated in a week-long leadership training at the NFB national center that exposed me to the history of the blindness movement, educated me about the achievements of the NFB, and inspired me to work collectively to overcome the challenges to our liberty that still remain. I became aware that I have benefitted from the work that many have done before me to create opportunities to learn, grow, and be accepted as an equal in society. Once I gained this consciousness of the struggle and the dedication of the blind people that came before me and the continued systemic ableism that still exists and prohibits blind people from reaching their full potential, I engaged in the collective action of the NFB. My Federation family taught me the skill of coping with public attitudes about blindness and how to blend in on terms of equality. My new mask allows me to navigate within a custodial-rich

environment in a manner that commands respect. Often the only blind person in the room, I am able to make others comfortable with my presence and still be able to engage in those uncomfortable conversations in a manner that facilitates learning rather than denial. However, in order to educate myself so that I could influence others, I needed to learn the truth about blindness.

The knowledge I needed to acquire was not readily available, and the role models I needed were not depicted on TV or radio. In fact, mainstream coverage of blind people perpetuates negative stereotypes and misconceptions about blindness, much like the media has for too long portrayed black people. I knew it would require a dedicated effort to gain a true understanding of blindness, and I soon received the support and guidance of my Federation family. I read *Walking Alone and Marching Together*, the written history of our movement, along with other informative materials. With these and my ongoing contact, I gained a greater understanding of the truth about blindness and the systemic obstacles to our full participation. Subsequently, as an active member of the NFB for over twenty years, I have worked to address the discriminatory policies and practices that prevent blind people from living the lives we want and to fight for the security, equality, and opportunity that will enable us to serve as full participating members of society.

Recently, in the wake of the extreme social unrest (awakening), brought about by the videos depicting the racial injustices leading to the murder of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, and far too many other black people, I have realized that I have not exercised the same degree of dedication to address the systemic racism that prohibits black people from living the lives we want. If I am to be honest, my lack of dedication to educate myself has resulted in my ignorance, which is no excuse for my silence and is shameful. It has made me complicit in the tragedy, which is completely unacceptable. As Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. stated, "The ultimate

tragedy is not the oppression and cruelty by the bad people but the silence over that by the good people." I consider myself a good person, and I am recommitted to acquiring the knowledge to effectively exercise my voice toward ending the tragedy of systemic racism.

First, I had to process the internal and external anger that grew from my guilt and newly evolved awareness. Most do not know that I have a really bad temper, but anyone who really knows me understands that I process anger through humor. I do not mean laughing at the situation but adopting a less frustrating perspective that helps me dissipate the anger and focus on the problem toward a solution. It is imperative for me to be able to decompress before taking action, or my anger results in my making bad decisions.

I had to resolve a profound internal conflict in order to determine how I would take action. A dear friend shared a video from Trevor Noah, the host of the *Daily Show*, which was about a twenty-minute train of consciousness giving his perspective on the recent racially charged situations that have raised worldwide awareness of systemic racism. Trevor possesses an amazing talent to use his humor to address socially relevant issues in a manner that offers alternate perspectives that challenge your existing paradigm. Subsequently, I read Trevor Noah's book, *Born a Crime: Stories from a South African Childhood*, which, for my blind friends, is available on BARD. This was the therapy I needed in order to deal with my emotional crisis and to begin my real education. Trevor's lived experience, chronicled in this book, serves to entertain and enlighten. I encourage anyone who like myself, has anger issues that prevent them from making a conscious decision to educate themselves about the nuances of race, racism, and racial interaction to read this book.

Let me be clear: I am not suggesting that reading *Born a Crime* is the textbook to the understanding and enlightenment about systemic racism. I am only stating that it helped me to get past the

anger to be open to learning more. Far too many people stop at denial, or in my case, presumed enlightenment. We want to be able to ingest all understanding by watching the news, reading a newspaper article, and watching YouTube videos. Although these are tremendous resources to stay informed, as demonstrated by the impact of the George Floyd video, true understanding requires a dedicated effort to educate oneself.

Even the formal systems meant to educate usually present an inadequate presentation of our history. In school I learned black history from a perspective that was so watered down. I took pride that a black man invented the cotton gin. I actually thought the *Brown vs. Board of Education*—after initial resistance that required National Guard intervention—eliminated school segregation. I thought the Voting Rights Act was no longer necessary because I had no problems exercising my right to cast a private, independent ballot. My work within the NFB has taught me how to effectively advocate for the passage of civil rights legislation. Moreover, I have learned that passing legislation is not enough. The ongoing work of advocacy toward enforcement is essential, lest we regress to the system that we fought to change. I am extremely embarrassed about my lack of understanding of the systems and practices that exist and serve to limit opportunities for black people in this country. I actively work to cope with a significant amount of guilt related to my ignorance and constantly seek information to educate myself so that I can fight for the change that is necessary.

In my recent recommitment to self-educate, I have turned to two books: *White Rage: The Unspoken Truth of Our Racial Divide*, written by Carol Anderson, and *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk about Racism*, written by Robin DiAngelo, both also available on BARD. In *White Rage*, I read information about black history that shook me to my core and had never been shared with me in any of my history books. Moreover, the details provided about everything from school segregation to

the Iran Contra scandal offered information that framed these in a completely new light. *White Fragility* was written by a white American author from a white point of view to address “the challenges of talking to white people about racism.” I thought it would be helpful for me to take a look from this perspective, and it was more than helpful. It helped me in my quest to acquire the language to have meaningful conversations about racism by differentiating between the discrimination caused by prejudice, and the systemic racism resulting from racist policies and practices.

I encourage everyone to read both books. However, if you identify as black or any other minority, I suggest that you start by reading *White Rage*. The information you gain will be helpful in maintaining your conviction that the struggle is real. If you identify as white, begin with *White Fragility*. I specifically suggest starting with chapter four, “How Does Race shape the Lives of White People.” It begins with a quote from Ijeoma Oluo, “White people: I don’t want you to understand me better, I want you to understand yourselves.” I realize the flaw in executing a strategy that attempts to get white people to understand the lived experience of black people. It is similar to the challenge of getting the sighted to understand what it is like to live as a blind person. However, it is my experience that a better understanding of your ignorance helps you better understand the problem and will hopefully motivate you to become part of the solution.

Many of my white brothers and sisters within my Federation family have reached out to express their support and understanding. I am blessed to have these relationships, and I hope and pledge to continue to build more allies to advocate for the systemic change that is necessary. The work we have done within the Federation to address diversity and inclusion is exemplary, and I feel it will continue to build awareness in a manner that empowers our blind black members and our allies to play an active role in this effort. My plan is to take the skills I have learned as a member of the

National Federation of the Blind and use them to support the work of another organization focused on addressing systemic racism. I believe I have the capacity to work within both circles and hope to find concentric areas that leverage what I learn from one organization to strengthen the work I do for the other.

The National Federation of the Blind fights tirelessly for the rights of blind people. Other disability organizations continue to encourage us to become immersed within a broader coalition of people with disabilities. We have specific needs that need to be addressed that are unique to blindness, like Braille, nonvisual access technology, and accessible instructional materials.

Although we participate in advocacy efforts that help to meet our goals, we cannot afford to have our voices diluted in a sea of other voices seemingly advocating for the same things. We realize that blind lives matter and require specific intervention and action to eliminate the discrimination blind people face. This is also the case with black lives. The systemic racism that black people face requires specific intervention and action.

#BlackLivesMatter is a movement that acknowledges that we cannot afford to build a larger coalition of “All Lives Matter” when we need to use our time and talent to add resources, develop specific strategies, policies, and legislation to address systemic racism. Reinforcing that #BlackLivesMatter will help you #LiveTheLifeYouWant.