

Don't be paralysed by white guilt – teach yourself and your children about racism

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THE night before George Floyd was killed, I watched the scene in 'Normal People' where a group of attractive young white students sat around a table somewhere fabulous in Italy, sipping Champagne. One of the assembled made a racist remark, which was laughed off by half the gathering and ignored by the other two, who fled the scene leaving a contrail of white privilege in their wake.

What bothered me even more than twenty-somethings swilling fizz was the missed opportunity of a contemporary drama, written at a time when fascism is on the rise globally, to call out racism. The wherewithal and moral conviction just wasn't there.

Knowing how everyday racist remarks can lead to everyday job discrimination, everyday racist abuse and sometimes murder, I was vexed. I thought of all the normal people whose lives have been brutally torn asunder by racism. Such as Stephen Lawrence, whose mother Doreen I met when I was advising the Metropolitan Police on institutional racism. The grief-laden eyes of a woman whose life was normal until her teenage son was murdered by racists in London haunt me.

I built a life in England which ended 10 months ago when I returned home as a Brexit refugee. The epidemic of far-right bigotry unleashed by the EU referendum morphed into daily race hate attacks, directed not against immigrants like me, but those of a darker hue.

A Leave-voting mother approached me at the school gates, assuring me that



Action: People at the Black Lives Matter protest outside the US Embassy in Dublin last week.
PHOTO: STEPHEN COLLINS

“people like me” (white), didn't vote to kick “people like you” (also white) out. It's the “other” foreigners she had a problem with. The juxtaposition of Brexiteers issuing imaginary asylum passes to white immigrants while ordering black and Asian people, many of whom were born and bred in Britain, to “go home” was as surreal as it was sinister. I replied, “If the black and brown immigrants get kicked out, I'll be right behind them.”

Racism exists in Ireland, too, and with black voices amplified in recent days, we are hearing heartbreaking stories, such as that of Tré Jones, the 11-year-old who recounted racist abuse from adults and children, calling him the “n-word” and telling him to go back to Africa.

The words of civil rights activist Angela Davis have been widely invoked since George Floyd's death: “In a racist society, it's not enough to be non-racist, we must

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be anti-racist”. For white people wanting to know what to do in this moment, anti-racism groups are urging us to educate ourselves and our children about black history and racism.

I've been teaching my 12-year-old about black history, mostly through stories, since he was four. When his teachers talk about Florence Nightingale, he says, “What about Mary Seacole?” In the last year, we've watched 'The Great Debaters' (not suitable for younger children), 'Just Mercy', the spectacular dramatisation of Malorie Blackman's ground-breaking novel 'Noughts & Crosses', and the 'Doctor Who' re-enactment of Rosa Parks' story.

None of the above made it easier for my son to comprehend how George Floyd could die under the knee of a white police officer who ignored his anguished pleas, “I can't breathe” and “Momma, I'm through”. It just helped him understand

the anger that comes with generations of pain and oppression.

There is a plethora of educational resources online, but these are no substitute for listening to black voices in this country, now.

For leaders of institutions such as Trinity College, for example, that involves hearing the everyday racism experienced by black and ethnic minority students on campus, and stamping it out. For agents and publishers, it's about commissioning black stories and talent.

As well as educating and enabling, anti-racism requires the courage to challenge racist behaviour. Our children watch how we respond to racist “jokes”. Silence is tacit approval.

Not sure if someone is racist? The following is a useful litmus test.

Racists punch down on the powerless, be it “Nigerians coming here for a better life and sending all their money home” (unlike generations of Irish emigrants) or “the sponging asylum-seeking racketeers living it up in five-star hotels, while ‘our own’ are abandoned in the streets”.

Anti-racists punch up at those in power, calling out systemically racist policies that pit “our own” against asylum seekers.

Anti-racists might be inclined to think that the spongers are among the private contractors who pocketed around €1bn of taxpayers' money for operating often substandard and unsafe direct provision accommodation some liken to prison.

Anti-racists will have done their homework and know that the United Nations described the system as a “severe violation of human rights” and will be calling for an end to an inhumane policy described as the Magdalene Laundries of our time.

Our black friends are frightened and traumatised. Now is not the time to be paralysed by white guilt. It's a time to educate ourselves and our children and to call racism out. It's a time to speak up, reach out and show people of colour that black lives do matter.

NOTEBOOK

Roslyn Dee

Grandparents' love is truly a gift for life

OUT of the blue I witnessed something truly special on Monday. Able at last to drive that bit further from my Greystones home, I jumped into my car that morning and took off down the M11.

Newtownmountkennedy, Newcastle, Ashford – all the turn-offs flashed past before I eventually exited at Rathnew. From there I



headed inland, driving through Glenealy (where I once lived) and on out along the road to Rathdrum before turning left towards Deputy's Pass and then, a few minutes later, driving through the entrance gate and into the beautiful botanical gardens of Kilmacurragh.

A place so dear to my heart that I would normally visit every week or so, I was delighted to be back after a three-month hiatus, my joy only slightly diminished on realising that, this year, I had missed the early-May glory of Kilmacurragh's gigantic and abundant rhododendrons.

Strolling along the upper path before heading down to the yew-tree walk, I glanced towards the grassy area to my left, and that was when a particular sight caught my eye and held my gaze.

A little girl, seven or eight years of age, wearing a red summer dress and with her dark curly hair tumbling to her shoulders, was walking across the daisy-strewn meadow with an older man and woman. Walking between them, but at a distance, she kept looking from one to the other, her face alight while the older couple looked on indulgently, their own faces full of joy. Grandparents. Reunited at last with

their granddaughter. It was only then that I noticed the little girl's parents sitting further away, leaving the youngster and the older pair to their shared delight at being back in each other's company.

If ever we doubted the importance of the grandparent/grandchild relationship, Covid-19 has certainly shown us the reality.

From that endearing TV ad at the moment – “I think the monster's back, Grandad” – with the gap-toothed boy and his bearded grandad, to all the real relationships that we know ourselves, the role of grandparents is currently up there in lights. And rightly so.

We are almost unique as human beings in having a grandparental bond, for it's a feature of existence that we share with only one or two other species, such as whales. Yet time and again academic studies have concluded that the influence of grandparents can be a real force for good in children's lives. Maybe it's because, in the frenzied world that so many young parents now inhabit, grandparents simply offer children the greatest gift of all – their time.

My own maternal grandparents defined my childhood. There wasn't a day, right up until I left for university in

England when I was 18, that I didn't see them. When I was still a young child, however, Johnnie and Jeanie Dean were utterly central to my world and I honestly can't countenance what my life would have been like without them.

Despite their very different temperaments and an age gap of almost a decade between them, they were a joint force of guidance in my life and crucial in helping to shape the adult I would eventually become.

They taught me so much through everyday tales of their own lives in the locality where we lived within walking distance of each other's homes – about respect for others, the importance of school, the value of friendship, about having fun. And they instilled into me from an early age never to underestimate the power of love and loyalty.

How I would have coped without them for three months when I was a child I simply can't imagine. But when I looked across that Kilmacurragh meadow and saw that little girl and her grandparents, I thought of my own, and the memory of them made me smile. Like a comfort-blanket from my childhood, my grandparents, although both long gone, are with me still.