

From the PES Confronting Racism Task Force:

## **RE-LIVING AND RE-THINKING**

by Henry Pashkow

Participating in this Task Force got me looking back on personal experiences, some from long ago. It got me re-examining my previous assumptions about racism and privilege. This is my account of them. The story isn't finished, by any measure. It's an ongoing process, not taken alone but in relationship with others.

### RACISM

In the early 1990s I was walking with my girlfriend along a small street behind Pennsylvania Hospital. It was after sunset and dark but not too late at night. There were two young black guys standing under a lamppost on a street that was otherwise deserted and dark. They looked definitely unfriendly. We came within 25 feet of them and I got frightened, and so did my girlfriend. We turned and hurried back the other way, but heard them laughing. Their laughter was derisive. I stopped and turned back and just beneath the derision I thought I saw the pain. The image of their faces has long faded from my memory, but the pain I caused stays with me to this day.

### FEAR

In the fall of 1970 after having spent a few weeks in Nairobi, Kenya, I decided to hitchhike to Mombasa on the Indian Ocean. I got a ride from a white guy in a land rover on his way from Kenya to Tanzania. He told me he was a diamond smuggler, and that he spoke Swahili better than the native speakers themselves. Back then the road was narrow and old and poorly maintained and part of it was unpaved, and it was not heavily travelled. It wound its way through several villages that drivers plowed through without slowing down. When we stopped for a drink he spoke to the waiters in Swahili, but since I didn't know the language there was no way for me to tell whether he spoke it better or worse than they did.

Once we were back on the road there followed racially derogatory remarks and I got uncomfortable, but we were on a sparsely travelled and poorly maintained road traveling through jungle and bush and the African plains. When he stopped to pick up two young white Britishers, the derogatory remarks turned uglier. It didn't take long for them to get to the Jews. "The Jews", they snarled, their eyes narrowing, the look on their faces turning contemptuous. They looked ready to tear the flesh off the next Jew they saw. "The Jews", I snarled, trying to look as contemptuous as they did, but my voice was shaking and I doubt I made a good impression.

Looking back on it now, I can't remember whether I really snarled, as I hope I did, or I simply got away with pretending I was something I was not. I do remember that I got out twenty minutes later at an intersection in the middle of nowhere, still shaking from that experience.

Shaken, but alert to every sound. I turned every time a breeze picked up, a shadow fell, or there was movement in the bush. I thought I was easy prey for some hungry animal, an equal opportunity predator, who didn't care what color or race his next meal came from. I listened for

a car, any type of motor vehicle, but heard nothing. A sound in the bush caused me to turn abruptly. A woman appeared, dressed according to the customs of the tribe she came from. She looked utterly mystified by what she saw. There I was, standing on the road, my suitcase by my side. What could she have thought? I was transfixed. She said something in a language that was incomprehensible to me, and motioned with her hands, as if I was to go with her. But I was too afraid to make any kind of a move. Then I heard a car coming down the road towards Mombasa. Yes! The driver stopped for me, and opened the door on the passenger side and said, "get in. There's a bull buffalo coming down this road." I got in. Bull buffaloes were known to charge cars. Lions won't tangle with them. The woman was gone.

#### PRIVILEGE

I was dropped off at an intersection of sorts on the way to Mombasa. Up upon a rise to the left there was a small settlement and what looked like an inn. There was an African man going the same way and I asked him if there were lodgings and what they might cost. He told me the price and I said, "not bad." "Not bad for you," he said. The price of lodging, while favorable to tourists, would not be something he or his family could afford easily.

I did get a room for the night, and when I had washed and came down for dinner, saw that there was only one other white person in the dining room, and he was sitting at another table. A military vehicle pulled up in front and a black man in a Kenyan army uniform came in, and when he looked around it seemed as if a chill had come into the room. All activity stopped, and the quiet was palpable, as was the fear, and everybody in the room look down or away, so as not to meet his gaze. They were all afraid. I was rigid with fear as well. He started barking orders in English, and the waitresses and the kitchen help jumped to obey his commands, as if whatever he said was law. Then he looked at me, and told the young waitress standing by, "you will go to his room tonight." And she agreed without hesitation. I heard the jeep drive off. Later, I thought: why me? Because I am a white man, because, as a white man, in his eyes, I still maintained a semblance of power and ownership, and had a right to what he had control over? My blood runs cold when I think about it. As it turned out, she never did come, and I was glad of it. Sometimes I try to imagine what I'd have done, had she come. I like to think I would have held her hands and tried to comfort her. I was lucky, privileged to be leaving the next day, whereas she had to endure this terror whenever that army man appeared.

#### PRIVILEGE

When I worked at the shelter in Philadelphia about fifteen years ago, there was a young black woman working there. She was bright and outgoing, and brought a breath of fresh air into an otherwise disquieting environment. I usually saw her in the lunch room where the shelter prepared meals for large crowds of homeless men who came from all over the city, and sometimes in the mornings when I came to work.

One day I walked in to find them preparing for her memorial service in the lunch room. This young woman had been beaten to death by a former boyfriend or husband with a baseball bat. I was beyond shocked, and totally at a loss. Everyone there got an opportunity to say a few words. The

black guys working in the kitchen, and they were mostly black, didn't say much. I thought back then that this was not so uncommon an experience to them, as it was to me. I got up and said, I couldn't believe this. She was just here yesterday. I looked around, and read into their looks something that might not be true: that this was common in their neighborhoods, and I was privileged to live in a place where beatings like that one were very much out of the ordinary. I believed that up until a few weeks ago.

Now, I believe I was wrong. Spousal abuse and beating of this kind are an equal opportunity scourge, as common to the rich and empowered as it is to the underprivileged and underserved.