

# Diversity Gazette

## July 2020

### Facing Systemic Racism

by Rick Morse

One of my favorite writers is Wendell Berry. In 1968 he wrote a *The Hidden Wound*, an extended personal reflection on racism in America. Berry explains: “I am trying to establish the outline of an understanding of myself in regard to what was fated to be the continuing crisis of my life, the crisis of racial awareness—the sense of being doomed by my history to be, if not always a racist, then a man always limited by the inheritance of racism, condemned to be always conscious of the necessity not to be a racist, to be always dealing deliberately with the reflexes of racism that are embedded in my mind as deeply at least as the language I speak.” (48-49)

I think that is a more helpful way to think about systemic racism. Labeling folks (alive or dead) or even institutions as racist implies that those pointing fingers are not, which is a delusion. Research on implicit bias demonstrates that people of all races are subconsciously influenced by

systemic racism. It seems to me that awareness of our own “inheritance of racism” and its deep cultural embeddedness is the starting point for change, for being able to consciously opt-out of that system and be a part of changing it.

The analogy that comes to my mind is epigenetics. Genetics can tell us if we have genes that predispose us for certain diseases. But the predisposition is not fate. Epigenetics is the study of gene expression, understanding why certain genes “turn on” for some people, but not others. It turns out that environmental factors (what you eat, where you live, the kind of sleep you get, etc.) plays a huge role in gene expression. Not everyone with a genetic trait for cardiovascular disease develops the disease. People can make conscious choices about diet, exercise, sleep, etc. that greatly increase the odds that those genes are not “turned on.”

This is how I am thinking about my inheritance of racism. I

cannot change what I’ve inherited, whether that is subtle (or not-so subtle) racism in attitudes and language of people in my life growing up, or my experiences being raised in the South where the stars-and-bars and overt racism was normalized. I cannot change that past, that psychosocial legacy. But I can make conscious choices now that impact the extent to which those genes are “turned on” or not, if you will. I can listen better. I can reexamine my assumptions. I can improve my mental diet in terms of what I read and listen to (e.g. check out this book list [www.left-bank.com/black-lives-matter](http://www.left-bank.com/black-lives-matter)). And while reading and thinking is great, I also believe that I must act. The key question is how, in my sphere of influence, can I better promote social justice and help dismantle institutional racism? As my friend Dr. Forrest Toms likes to say, “it’s time to get comfortable with uncomfortableness.”