# Who are you?

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      If there's one thing that I got from The Mississippi Civil Rights Museum, it's that everyone who goes in will be affected in some way and that they will be thinking about the museum for some time after they leave. It doesn't matter if you're "connected" to the Civil Rights movement or anything; someone from Russia or Iran could walk into that museum and come out a different person. It has a profound effect on you. The entire building seems to weigh on you as you walk through it in the way that a heavy coat does. What is really impactful is that the museum is set up chronologically so that you can somewhat grasp the scale of slavery and institutionalized racism. The museum shows you all of the horrible violence and hopelessness that the Africans and African-Americans encountered before it shows you any inkling of a way out, because the slaves certainly saw no way out other than death.

      But seeing all of this did more than just educate me on the horrible things that black people went through at the hands of their white oppressors. I already knew most of the facts that the museum had to offer through years of learning about the civil rights movement and slavery in various history classes. Seeing it all in one place is what really connected me with my past, with the museum, and with the events portrayed in the exhibits. My family has a long history of racism. We have always lived in the deep South and my great-grandpa was a raging racist who lived in a small town where everyone was racist. For instance, my great-grandpa had a black man who worked at his pipe and steel shop (the same shop my grandpa runs now) and this guy was illiterate. So whenever it came time to pay his black employee, my great-grandpa would give him some one dollar bills while telling him that he was paying him a lot of money. This is just a taste of the kind of things my ancestors did.
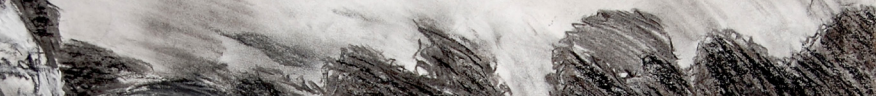
As I walked through the museum, stories like that one ran through my head. Knowing my history and the things that my ancestors did made the museum weigh on me more than it might weigh on someone else. While I know that I personally did not commit the atrocities that my ancestors committed against black people, some of that blame still sits within me. That's mainly what I thought about when I left the museum. But most of all, I wondered what would have happened if I had been born in the 19th or early 20th century instead of the 21st. Would I have committed atrocities as my ancestors did? Would I have thought that racism was a way of life because it was ingrained in society? I know it's easy for us to say, "Oh, if I lived back then, I would have helped the slaves" or "how could people do such horrible things?" but we take the nature of societal racism for granted. There are several reasons why people did not rise up sooner against racial injustice.

The only reason that most people are not overtly racist now is because racist acts and speech are socially unacceptable and unpopular. A hundred years ago, it was perfectly normal, even encouraged, to be a racist. The KKK romanticized racism backed by Christianity. When that kind of behavior is normalized, people take it for granted and roll with it. Back then, people were racist because it was normal. So there is no way that someone can say for sure that, back then, they would have stood up to racism. When you are born into a society like that, it becomes ingrained in you forever and it is extremely hard to change. This is why the one question I asked myself after leaving the museum was, "would I be the same person I am today if I were born a hundred years ago?" It is a question we all need to ask. Many of us are the way we are because it is convenient for us to be that way. Right now, it is convenient to not be racist, sexist, or any of that which is why the majority of people aren't openly racist or sexist. But at the beginning of the 20th century, it was a different story.

Racism flourished in the US and other places as well. There was so such thing as a hate crime. This is why we must ask ourselves; are we who we are because it is who we are, or are we who we are because it is convenient for us? The French found it extremely convenient to cooperate with the Nazis when they invaded and occupied France even if they did not identify as a Nazi before German occupation. We so easily defame Nazism in the US but what would have happened if the Nazis had occupied the United States? If we are being honest, probably the same thing that happened in France and other places in Europe during World War II. In France, people quickly evolved from who they were under French rule to who they needed to be to survive the Vichy Regime. Many French willingly gave into the Nazis and helped them kill people who they did not agree with and there is no reason it would be any different in America.

I often tell myself that even if I were born a hundred years ago, I would never be like my ancestors. But I cannot be sure of that. It is very hard to be who you really are when you have a specific moral compass branded on your soul at an early age. What is important is that I did not grow up then and that no matter what happens, no matter what values become "popular" to have, I will never be my ancestors. Sticking to what you believe when everyone else believes it is one thing but doing it when no one else shares your values is entirely different. The latter can mean social isolation and sometimes death. To be sure that your values are really your values, just ask yourself if you would still believe what you believe if the entire world opposed you. I have done that and found that my values are truly my values and I will gladly die for them. If you are not willing to die for what you believe then you do not really believe in what you say you believe in, which is why I am an Atheist -- but that is a story for another day.

I am glad to have grown up in this pocket of time because it has given me a perspective unlike any other and shown me who I want to be. The Mississippi Civil Rights Museum is incredibly important and people need to see it because everyone needs to experience the deep thought that it stimulates. I can now say with certainty that unlike many people around me, I will always hold on to my values even if my surroundings change. I might not know what kind of person I would be a hundred years ago but I was not born a hundred years ago. I do, however, know what kind of person I will be in twenty years or even fifty years. I don't mean that I know exactly what I will be doing in the years to come but I do know that I will either be living by the same basic values that I do now or I will be dead because of them.