

Sterling story a chance for reflection

May 4, 2014 By Daniel J. Bauer

Behavior that is obviously evil may shock, titillate, or even, in a weird, Edgar Allan Poe-like way, entertain us. Evil behavior may also bring anger or sadness. Last week's racially-tinged controversy surrounding an American basketball team indeed stirs anger and sadness. The controversy also offers a valuable opportunity for social as well as self-reflection.

As I've mentioned in the past here, my time as a college student spanned the early years of the American Civil Rights movement. Martin Luther King was murdered at the very time I was indulging myself as a philosophy major in the writings of Kierkegaard, Buber, and Sartre. Before King's death, I remember the nightly news coverage of growling dogs set loose on unarmed demonstrators in the southern part of the United States. My siblings and I watched and heard the classic speech in which President Kennedy termed racism "a moral problem." His key question: "How many of us would be content to have the color of our skin changed?"

By implication, he was asking people of my physical appearance how we'd feel if we were forced to be treated the way millions of Americans at that time were in fact treated, merely because of the color of their skin.

Kennedy had in mind of course injustices such as the denial of access to quality schools for persons of color in certain parts of the country, and at times the refusal in segregated states to share beaches, drinking fountains and bathrooms with African Americans. The list of wrongs went on and on.

It is yesterday's news that Donald Sterling, the owner of the Los Angeles Clippers in the National Basketball Association (NBA), managed to get himself tape recorded recently while making blatantly racist remarks.

If the commissioner of the NBA gets his way, Mr. Sterling will not own the Clippers much longer. As a punishment for the offense and hurt his words caused, Sterling may be pressured to sell his team. He was also fined \$ US 2.5 million dollars, and banned for life from attending NBA games or involving himself in any way with NBA activities.

Only rarely do I invest time in tracking down audio coverage of leaked recordings linked to scandals, but I made an exception in this case. The Internet provides of course instant access to the conversation in which Sterling, in the careful hands of his wily mistress, speaks of blacks in American society and of his wish that she stop accompanying them to Clipper games. You must actually hear his voice to grasp how completely foolish and revolting his words were.

Valid issues related to entrapment and deceit, and to what I call an abuse of friendship ethics, are clearly present in this dismal story. Mr. Sterling's girl friend may have stripped the emperor of his clothes, and in a most spectacular way. She wins in so doing no positives for herself. If the woman were sincere in her apparent care about racial justice, why has she stayed his sugar daddy for so long?

The real question is not Donald Sterling's racist views or even a broader concern about racism in American culture. The question is our views, not someone else's, on skin color.

We won't make any headway in a mere newspaper column on the matter, but after nearly 30 years of a largely happy life in Taiwan, I remain baffled and dismayed by what appears to be an Asian fixation on skin color, especially when it applies to girls or women. I've often asked students if they perceive any connection at all between the value many Asians put into "light skin" and attitudes in this part of the world that smack of racism and bigotry. Like the old Rolling Stones song, I don't get no satisfaction. Ho, ho, Jesus might have said "Ask and you shall receive," but when I ask Taiwanese friends about skin color and its importance, I nearly always get silence for an answer, or, now and again, an embarrassed giggle or a shrug of the shoulders.

Mr. Sterling got tricked into saying aloud what he really thinks about African-Americans. That's his problem.

Our problem is our own demons, and our will to look them in the eye and fight them. Racism does not only dwell in far off Los Angeles. It dwells safe and sound right here inside of us in Taiwan. (*Father Daniel J. Bauer SVD is a priest and associate professor in the English Department at Fu Jen Catholic University.*)

Talking points:

1) This Bauer column focuses on the topic of racism in the United States. A wealthy owner of an NBA basketball team was tape recorded by his "girl friend" and trapped into sharing blatantly negative views of blacks. Does it surprise you that some people "hate" others or respond negatively to them because of the color of their skin?

2) The NBA has fined Donald Sterling, the owner of the Los Angeles Clippers, 2 1/2 million American dollars, ordered him to sell his team, and banned him from attending any games in the future. Why was the punishment so harsh? Was it fair?

3) The column ends with a strong challenge to readers here in Taiwan. The writer asks if skin-lightening lotions, highly popular in Asia, are related in any way to racist attitudes about skin color. Is this a fair Q? There are relatively few people of dark skin in Taiwan. So, is racism a problem here?