

# Los Angeles Times

## Op-Ed: Interracial friendships can be gratifying, but they're also complicated

By Judy Belk, June 27, 2020

"Hey, what do you think I bring to our relationship?" I poked my Black husband, who was half-asleep next to me.

"Huh, I don't know. I'm trying to sleep," he responded groggily as he turned his back to me.

I poked again. "Come on. I'm trying to see if we're compatible." I couldn't sleep and had come across one of those silly surveys women's magazines love to run about marriage and compatibility.

I snuggled up against his warm body and whispered, "So tell me, what do you think I bring to our relationship?"

"White people," he mumbled. "Now can I go back to sleep?"

I pulled back quickly and gave him a hard push. "What do you mean, 'white people'?" What kind of answer is that?"

Now we were both wide awake.

"Exactly what do you mean I've brought a lot of white people into our relationship?" Now I was getting worried. "You think too many? So, you don't *like* the white people I've introduced to you?"

"No, no, I didn't say I didn't like them. I like them a lot. It's just a lot of them. And I wouldn't know that many if I didn't know you. So that's good. Now can I go back to sleep?"

I do know a lot of white people and lately I've been thinking about the white folks I know and white people in general as I watch America search for its soul amid a rash of police murders, multiracial protests, and what feels like a national tutorial on racial injustice.

My mailbox has been filled with emails from white friends lately, allies, checking in on me, wishing me a Happy Juneteenth, apologizing, sharing their outrage and genuinely asking me what they can do to be supportive. Maybe I do have too many white friends — or maybe the white friends I have need to have more Black friends, so I don't have to carry the full load of their angst. It's been exhausting.

Like most Black people, I've seen the worst of white privilege and racism. Growing up in Virginia in the shadow of the nation's capital in the early '60s, I had a ringside seat. Our small Black segregated neighborhood didn't have access to clean water or indoor plumbing for the first 10 years of my life. My hometown of Alexandria was so determined to keep Black kids like my sister and me out of white schools that they filed court papers maintaining we were mentally deficient and would be best served by staying put in the "separate but equal" school we were bused to across town. And my parents and other Black people were denied voting rights due to bogus poll taxes and sheer intimidation.

There have always been white allies who have stood with Black people in the fight for racial justice and I have been a grateful beneficiary. Members of Alexandria's white Jewish community helped fund Black attorneys who won the court case that paved the way for me to get a quality education. Once we were admitted to the white school, young white law students volunteered their time for a year providing tutoring to ensure we were successful. Miss Helen Waide, the white, tough no-nonsense principal of Minnie Howard School, took my sister, Vickie, and me under her wing, protecting us from angry parents, nervous teachers and insensitive students who had an obsession with wanting to touch our hair.

But my interaction with white people hasn't been a lifetime of kumbaya moments. The real doozies still sting. My white high school counselor was angry that I applied to an elite university over her objections, and her words — "I worry you will have a hard time succeeding" — haunted me through my freshman year. A white landlord once enthusiastically agreed over the phone to rent us our first home, but when my husband Rog showed up, she abruptly announced that the

property had been rented minutes before. And there was that night on the town ruined when, waiting for a valet following a VIP AIDS benefit hosted in progressive San Francisco, my anger grew as one white guest after another instinctively gave Roger their parking tickets, though he was dressed in a formal tuxedo. They just didn't see him.

But probably the most painful experiences and deepest disappointments of all have been with white people who have, time and time again, failed to speak up when their voices would have mattered in chipping away at the impossibly sturdy wall of systemic racism.

All my life, I have navigated the land mines of living Black in America, but along the way I have collected a strong network of white friends who pass the test I use for any person I call a friend, no matter what color. They are comfortable in their own skins, can talk about race without hyperventilating, are loyal and committed to the common good, have the courage of their convictions, are fun and interesting — and they never, ever ask to touch my hair.

Now my personal circle of connections is expanding with a special young white friend who is about to become an official member of our family. Our son, Ryan, will be marrying his long-term girlfriend, Ann, in early July. Ironically, they live in Alexandria, a few miles from where I grew up. And their wedding date is almost 53 years to the day that the Supreme Court found that Virginia's interracial marriage prohibition violated the 14th Amendment.

The fight for racial justice must be fought on all fronts — ideally with a multiracial coalition — in the streets, in the courts, in the voting booth, in the workplace and even at the dinner table, where the seeds of justice or bias are often first planted.

And me? Well, I'm always on the hunt for new friends, no matter what color, who are willing to actively bring about the changes we so need and ache for in this country.

*Judy Belk frequently writes about family, race and community. She is president and CEO of the California Wellness Foundation.*