Ruminations of "Minnesota Nice"
William D. Green, Ph.D., J.D.

I still see a lot of sincere pain in many white faces nearly a year and a half after the killing of George Floyd. There is relief that justice was done with the conviction of Derek Chauvin, the former Minneapolis Police sergeant who was caught on video with his knee on the dying man's neck. To many it was one more example of police brutality of a Black man, though this time, the act was uniquely captured for the world to witness. For many others, the tortuous killing presented an even graver circumstance of the choking off of opportunity, human dignity, and even in its most fundamental sense, the recognition of Black humanity.

No person of good conscious could watch and not feel horror for Floyd which provided a window, on a larger scale, into the fortunes of Black men in America. It was also traumatic for most of us – myself, included - to actually witness a murder being committed before our very eyes.   The juxtaposition of the two – horror and, it must be said, disbelief – make for a curiously disconcerting combination that inevitably form when two largely separate realities collide. What is different about this time, is that while Blacks and whites still live largely in parallel worlds, the inhabitants of either world are at least aware of the realities in the other. Specifically, white people, perhaps greater than at any other time in our history, know of racial injustice – perhaps even of the systemic dimension of it. But even with this knowledge, the sense of outrage and commitment to make a more just and equitable society soon fade into the abstract when the urgencies of their daily life take over.

Yes, one wants an integrated society, but gives little thought to when the church one attends, the office in which one works, the social groups with whom one commonly interacts, the classrooms of our children nearly three-quarters of a century after Brown v. Board of Education, remain nearly if not all, white - and not just white but also middle class.

This last grouping is key, for people in this socio-economic category seem to more readily articulate the discomfort they feel in their privilege. Though earnestness can provide relief, it is temporary if the reason that their discomfort is no longer present, when life draws them back into what we all, for many legitimate reasons, seem to want most now – normalcy. But the paradox of wanting normalcy is to want not only to return to the days before Covid, and to a time before we could see just how fragile

our national government and economy could really be: in other words, to a time when circumstances allowed us to overlook factors that led up to the moments when Chauvin choked Floyd to death. It is the once-again encounter with the unfiltered African American experience that unalterably reminds them that they had failed their own best intentions, and it is their "niceness" that manifests from their guilt with knowledge that they fundamentally had done nothing to sustain the effort for real change. The cost simply was too high. The sacrifices were too great. There simply was a lack of intestinal fortitude to make change a priority. "Niceness" becomes a way of reckoning with this awkward truth, just long enough until the moment passes, or when the African American leaves the room.

I am aware that "niceness" in some may also hide repressed bigotry; but I think it more often characterizes genuinely benign feelings that often mask a combination of deep-seated guilt. But worse, "niceness" comes when the well-intended person feels ultimately resigned that injustice is part of the sorry norm to be endured unless <u>you stay in school, dress and sound "preppie," stay off the streets after the sun sets, stay out of certain neighborhoods, keep your hands always visible because (in some people's eyes) your skin color alone makes you a suspect, and consider each day you're alive a blessing,</u> knowing all the while that this may not even be enough to get through the day. "Niceness" is the assumption that being Black is always living within a "worse case scenario." And yet, one extends an open invitation to be called to the next demonstration. It is also a paradox that, in this sense, in the end, "niceness" becomes a way of avoiding making change.

"Niceness" has historical roots and it wasn't always a "white thing."

With fresh memories of slavery, the Civil war, emancipation and enfranchisement, and of white Minnesota men who voted to insert Black suffrage into the state constitution before the Fifth Amendment was ratified, ban school segregation, and enact public accommodation laws, Black Minnesotans recognized that the path to racial advancement in the state seemed to be well paved. This was also a time when virtue was found in lifting oneself up by his own bootstraps. As a leading Minnesota politician of the day said during a celebration of Black citizenship in 1869, "We [meaning white Republicans] had done our part. The rest is up to you." The implication to all seated before him - Black and white men, alike (this was a man's world) – was that his character would be measured by how well he succeeded in that effort. But especially to African Americans, the white men most sympathetic to the

Black were in charge, which theoretically further enhanced the chances for racial advancement. There was no excuse. Though all of the white men knew of racism, and many harbored that feeling, they outwardly dismissed it as an obstacle. Even when Black couples were denied service in restaurants and hotels on account of their race and despite the law, or Black children were discouraged from either attending or matriculating from an otherwise white public school because of their race and despite the law, or Black homesteaders were denied the opportunity to purchase farms that they could afford, even from men who had the land to sell had fought on the side of freedom, racism, white patrons felt, was a thing to be overcome, much like any economic downturn. It was, they believed, weak character of the Black man that kept him down.

To avoid losing the good will of their white patrons, the "successful" African American in Minnesota learned to comport himself, even acquire the trappings of Victorian propriety, to convey that all was well. "Niceness" displayed by the African American was the countenance that vindicated the white patrons in the belief that their own sacrifices were not only just, but ennobling. With large numbers of Blacks continuing to be yoked by white supremacy in the South, humiliated by Jim Crow in the North, and always mindful of the seemingly accepted horror of mob violence in both regions, the so-called Black middle class had a hard row to hoe to singularly assure their white patrons that their alliance for freedom was not for naught. The Black middle class was the embodiment of the exceptional, and the good works of their white patrons was the consequence of white exceptionalism. It was in the interest of the Black client - his economic and occasional physical survival demanded it - to perpetuate through being agreeable, the sense that all was indeed well. But it was shrouded within a dynamic in which power was neither shared and candid – a thing most needed between true friends. But to challenge the dynamic was an unforgiveable impertinence that the African American could not afford to display. Being "nice" by accepting the grace that white people chose to extend,
was only being prudent.

But that was a different time and "niceness" had a whole different connotation. When the Black Minnesotan ceased to elect to please and to feel obliged for being one of the few Blacks "allowed" to reside of the state, but, in turn, find the language to explain their own reality and demand recognition – gain, in short, moral power - the dynamic changed.

[under-told]
STORIES

Minnesota does deserve its reputation for tolerance. And, notwithstanding all of the above, "niceness" is preferable to living in a community where a whole community is known – at least figuratively – as a place where white people at least care about social justice. The question remains, will niceness launch us into social progress or mire us in complaisance. (1377)

- William D. Green, Ph.D., J.D.

References

Samuel Myers, "The Minnesota Paradox," https://www.hhh.umn.edu/research-centers/roy-wilkins-center-human-relations-and-social-justice/minnesota-paradox

William D. Green, *Degrees of Freedom, the Origins of Civil Rights in Minnesota, 1863-1912* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2015)

-------, *The Children of Lincoln, White Paternalism and the Limitations on Black Opportunity, 1861-1876* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2018)