

# When it comes to race, fear is a common enemy

**“My friends have come to me unsought.  
The great God gave them to me.”**

— Emerson, from his essay “Friendship”

**I**t was different when I came to America as a moneyed, privileged, articulate, English-speaking international student. I did not experience racism despite the color of my skin. Ignorance, yes. Until recently, Americans found any name that isn't Joe Smith difficult to wrap the tongue around. After some initial glitches with my American roommate, who thought all Indian-looking people were alike from India, or her Chicago backyard, we became firm friends.

My roommate and I had many discussions that led to an understanding of race, class, gender and culture that none of our professors could have taught in the classroom. Unlike the Malaysian-Muslim-government-sponsored students at the University of Missouri-Columbia, who lived in little communities of their own, I lived in the dorms. It was an experience, an eye-opener far more valuable than the degree I returned to Malaysia with. The



**ANUSHKA  
ANASTASIA  
SOLOMON**  
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frank conversations and outbursts we had in the dorms with no parents or professors or preachers present led to relationships of honor, respect and friendship that still last. Racism, I have learned, is taught and perpetuated for economic and political power and control over resources perceived to be scarce.

Here now, in America, under significantly different circumstances, initially a traumatized young woman writer/poet fleeing family persecution, political tyranny and police intimidation, then an immigrant, I experience America differently. Still, my past in America as a student and an R.A in the residence halls at MU, and my experiences with the diverse student population at Hampshire College in Massachusetts, inform me. Racism is an ugly word, a scourge, and I can understand why any people would want to deny it, refuse to acknowledge or confess it. It is double-edged sword, for while it falsely aggrandizes one individual, race or culture, it abases the other. What we don't realize, however, is that dehumanizes all.

On my first job as a barista at Starbucks, a politically active woman in the area walked briskly up to me and said, “I am sorry, but you look Hispanic.” Startled, I said “Oh” and busied myself cleaning the countertops.

On a different occasion, on a jaunt around the neighborhood, my white American neighbor confessed that she had not realized she had always used “Hispanic” and “Latino”

as pejorative words. Children are rather more honest; I remember another friend's, blond, blue-eyed grandchildren staring at us with wide-eyed innocence and exclaiming, “I have never, ever seen brown people before!” My friend was embarrassed, but there, out of the mouths of babes, was the truth.

How do we build bridges and overcome our differences if we do not first acknowledge the newness of what is happening now as the world becomes a village? In Malaysia, race, nationality and religion are an ugly Molotov cocktail that politicians manipulate to garner power. It is with deep sadness in my heart that I see and hear American politicians and religious leaders do the same.

As first lady Michelle Obama has pointed out, however, behind racism (and false religion) is our common enemy — fear.

Henri Nouwen, the Dutch Catholic writer, wrote that we become neighbors when we become willing to cross the road for one another. He also said there is a lot of road-crossing to do. I recently met an American soldier, fellow poet and man of faith, Maj. Jay Yancey, who through his poetry and essays shows me just how much road-crossing and bridge-building the American people (yes, military) are doing in Iraq. We can do the same, here.

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*Anushka Anastasia Solomon is a Malaysian-American poet living in Evergreen. Check out her work at [www.atthewindow.us](http://www.atthewindow.us).*