

Living In Reality

(Written By : Michael S. Hansen, 2021)

In writing this I realize that I may not say anything new. That being said, I have come to understand that every voice counts. So, here is my story.

I am a forty year old white man. I lived thirty-seven years of that life inside a box. Sheltered from the way things really are. Taught to believe in a world that does not exist. The best way to put it is this, I was raised in a world where racial inequality was the past. It started with school where in history class, we were taught about slavery and the civil war that ended it. At home I grew up as a Jehovah's Witness (J.W.'s).

For those of you unfamiliar with the J.W.'s, one of the biggest tenets is being no part of the world. For many that means not falling into the pitfalls, or sinful nature, of the world. For my parents, that meant everything. I was not allowed to be involved in any activities outside of the J.W.'s. No clubs, sports, parties, dances; nothing. My only friends were J.W.'s. I only associated with J.W.'s. The worst part about all of it was that if it did not involve J.W.'s I did not, and was not allowed to know about it.

By now I am sure you are asking yourself, "you went to school, right?" or "you could not have been totally blind!" And you are right, it is sensible to think that exposure there would open my eyes. The reality is that I went through my days with tunnel vision. I had been indoctrinated to such an extent that the world around me did not exist. It was unimportant. If you did not live in my realm of reality, I did not see you. The really sad part is that this followed me long after I left the J.W.'s, on into my adult life.

I am ashamed to admit this, but I was one of those people who thought that all the racism that was talked about was being exaggerated. I thought people were just hanging on to hatred passed down from generation to generation about really bad things that happened 200 years ago. I even thought that if people would just let it go, everything would be okay. How wrong I was!

In 2012 I was sentenced to thirty years in the state of Illinois prison system. I entered a world I did not understand. It was a world I was taught to fear. It was a world I was taught that if you're in it, you deserved to be there. At first I tried to do what I had always done, be no part of it, even though I was in it. I quickly learned that was not feasible. I learned that who you chose to talk to , or hang out withy can and will get you labeled. The label I hated most was being called a racist simply because most of the people I hung out with were white. Every time someone called me that I denied it vociferously.

Five years into my bit I met the man who would change my view of things. In 2018 I met James. We quickly became friends and he took it upon himself to educate me. Despite our friendship we had many disagreements, especially about me being a racist. Obviously, he is African American and my whole argument was always "how can I be a racist if I have black friends?" He was always trying to get me to watch movies and even documentaries that showed how things are. I would always get mad. For two reasons really; one, I felt like I was being force fed rhetoric that fueled the hatred in the world and I did not want to see it or be a part of it, that in turn made me feel like he was doing it to use my not wanting to watch that stuff as fuel to call me a racist. After many discussions, in which James never gave up on me, I stopped being an ass. I started watching what he asked me to watch. Then I started asking questionslike; "is that true?","Does that really still happen?","Is that really how it is?" The most embarassing realization I had was that by keeping my blinders on, by not being able or willing to see the world as it really is, I was being a racist.

I see more clearly now, largely thanks to James. That, however, has made me even more pissed off at the world around me. I grew up in a society, a world if you will, where there was no such thing as race. J.W.'s do not see life that way. The problem is that the world of J.W.'s is miniscule in comparison to the reality around us. I still struggle with disparities that exist in the world. I do not understand why it matters what your skin color is or where you came from. I see this on the news

as well as in movies and television shows; and while I can agree that these issues exist, no one wants to say why or do anything real about it. For me it is simple, I am a human being and so is the guy next to me, and so on, and so on. I am not so naive as to believe in total equality. That can not exist, because we are all individuals who grew up in different environments, different places, and different beliefs. The answer really is simple. It is called acceptance. We have to accept that we are all human. Despite this commonality we have to accept that we are all not the same. Ultimately we have to accept that these differences do not justify hatred or violence.

Now I know that seems to be a tall order in a world that is so divided right now. In fact, for most of us adults it may damn well be impossible. It is not impossible, however, for the next generation. For our children, and our children's children.

Just because this generation cannot set aside its prejudices does not mean we have to teach our children the same ones. If we want a world where being black or brown skinned means "criminal" or someone who should be shot, or where wearing a hoodie automatically means hoodlum no longer exists, then we need to teach our children to see the world around them and what it is going to take to change it.