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## My View: It takes time to fully understand the historic and contemporary realities of racism

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**I** was born in 1959. I grew up, went to school, built a career, raised a family and never once, as a young man, had a close Black friend.

That's not a confession. It's simply the truth. It was the world I lived in, and at the time, I didn't question it.

Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated when I was 9 years old. I was living in a white, Catholic neighborhood, and I have no meaningful memory of the moment as it happened. Looking back, that realization has stayed with me, that something so significant in our country's history could occur and I could move through it without truly understanding it at all.



Years later, I was driving home from a meeting with a close friend and business colleague of mine who is Black. We were stopped at a light when I asked him a simple question: “I’m white and you’re Black. What’s it like?”

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He didn’t hesitate.

“If my kids are in this car,” he said, “I’m looking both ways at this light and you’re not. When I leave my house every day, I’m looking both ways and you’re not.”

That stayed with me.

I had grown up hearing about civil rights in broad strokes, but it wasn’t part of my daily experience. Even something as recent and visible as the murder of George Floyd, which the entire country watched unfold in real time, forced many of us, including me, to pause and reflect in ways we hadn’t before.

Recently, I attended an event in Buffalo called “Building Black Wealth Day,” where my friend Don Jones was the keynote speaker. Don spoke for 40 minutes about a recent pilgrimage to Ghana, along with his involvement with the Felician Nuns.

He described visiting Cape Coast Castle, one of the major forts where enslaved Africans were held before being shipped across the Atlantic. Don has lived a life that gives him perspective. Over time, he has built a life grounded in resilience and

purpose. He said the trip to Africa helped him find his soul. He spoke about heritage, loss and strength, and about the people who were taken not as victims alone, but as capable, resilient individuals whose lives and futures were cut short.

Living in Buffalo, we don't have to look far to see that history still echoing. The massacre at the Jefferson Avenue Tops on the East Side is a painful reminder that these issues are not confined to the past or to somewhere else. They are here.

At the same time, I've been reading "Black Like Me," and it's already opening my eyes in ways that are hard to ignore. It's one thing to read history. It's another to try, even imperfectly, to step into someone else's experience.

What I've come to understand, at this stage in my life, is that awareness doesn't always come early. Sometimes it comes through a conversation at a stoplight. Sometimes it comes through a friendship. Sometimes it comes from sitting in a room and really listening to someone who has lived a different reality than you have. For me, it's been all of the above.

I've always believed that if you stay open, stay curious and stay willing to listen, you'll learn things no book or headline can fully teach you. But every now and then, a moment comes along that reframes everything.

For me, it was that stoplight, Don's speech and the realization that some people carry struggles through everyday life that others never had to see.

