

## A Pilgrim's Progeny Takes a Knee

by Gretchen Cook-Anderson

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I am a Needham resident who embodies America's historical paradoxes on the notion of race and what it means to be an American and a Patriot. I am an African American woman whose heritage directly descends from both slaves forced into bondage from Africa and 2 Mayflower Pilgrims.

I enjoy a relatively privileged life with a wonderful husband and children, loyal and generous friends and extended family, undergraduate and graduate degrees, extensive global travel experiences, a solid roof over my head, and a rewarding career. Yet, because of how others perceive me, my lived experience has been fraught since childhood with the minefield of issues around equity, bias, stereotype, misperception and fear.

We've each lived a different story no matter our race, gender, ability, or other identity. Yet for some of us, our narrative has been historically, disproportionately, and involuntarily disrupted by identity bias. Identity bias is often borne of an inability to connect with someone else's personal story, whether through lack of exposure or general disinterest. In the midst of identity bias, many may fail to consider and understand how another's story – their lived experience – has justifiably influenced their feelings, and therefore their actions which may differ for good reason from their own.

My 10<sup>th</sup> grade year in 1984 altered my perception of what it meant to be black in our society. I read 3 books that awakened a consciousness in me that has never abated: *Bloods: An Oral History of the Vietnam War by Black Veterans* by Wallace Terry; *A People's History of the United States* by Howard Zinn; and *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* by Alex Haley.

I realized then why my Uncle Charles returned from WWII so bitter and broken when his service did not translate into opportunity in the country for whose freedom he fought. I understood why I was taunted as part of a group of black students who integrated a suburban Atlanta elementary school in the mid-1970s. And, 15 years later, I grasped to a chillingly greater degree why my uncle, Ricky Byrdson, was shot in the back by a skinhead on a racially-motivated killing spree (he died the next day) while

jogging with his children in his idyllic Skokie, Illinois neighborhood in 1999. I came to grips with the fact that no amount of Mayflower Pilgrims' blood would change how America, my own country, saw me. I knew then that despite the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, and the Brown vs. Board of Education decision in 1954, I was still not as free as my white peers to realize my full potential as an American and be seen only as the bright, inquisitive young woman I was.

And so, in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade I began my own private and silent form of, yes, patriotism. In my desire to see a more perfect Union for *We, the People*, I exercised my right to free speech by refraining from participating in the Pledge of Allegiance and the Star-Spangled Banner in school or anywhere. It was just me. I wasn't forcing anyone to join me. I wasn't being disruptive, or violent, or uttering profanities. I was merely using my right as an American to express my understanding that our "justice for all" didn't always include everyone.

After 30+ years, I finally feel vindicated for feeling this way as I watch young athletes like Colin Kaepernick take a knee at recent NFL games. I expect that Kaepernick's actions will, in the years to come, be viewed by the broader American public as having been quietly courageous. Let's not forget that those who seek change in our world are often misunderstood, unpopular, and unheralded in the moments of their acts of protest. And, we should remind ourselves that when we reflect back on change makers – including Americans and Europeans who sought to rescue Jews from the Holocaust, Vietnam War protesters of every race and class (thousands of whom also declined in the 1960's and early 70's to stand and sing the Star-Spangled Banner in protest), and countless black and white Civil Rights marchers and Freedom Riders -- they were ultimately on the right side of history.

I have a personal narrative that feeds my actions -- as both a patriotic American who loves the country of my forebears and respects the service of our military service persons, and as a peaceful conscientious objector to injustice. It's the institutional racism that still exists in our country that I protest, not the vast majority of the people who work hard for those institutions to protect and serve. My story and that of so many others is complicated by America's own legacy of slavery and discrimination, but my actions are clear. I am a Patriot. I am a Pilgrims' progeny. And, I will continue my own version of "taking a knee" until greater justice for all rings true.