

An Answer To Rex Murphy's Questions on Racism In Canada

Daniel Quan-Watson

In a recent column, Rex Murphy asks some importation questions about racism in Canada. Among others, he asks "How much are racism and discrimination actually 'a part of the Canadian reality'? Are they overwhelmingly present? Are they . . . a central part of Canadian life?". It would appear that these are posed as rhetorical questions to which the answer is "No". He concludes that, "To any fair mind, Canada is a mature, welcoming, open-minded and generous country" and that "has been doing its best to be tolerant and welcoming".

Mr. Murphy's life experience appears to have brought him to the conclusion, after having had a remarkable opportunity to get to know and see Canada and Canadians from coast to coast to coast, that racism in this country is only an individual and exceptional phenomenon. I am genuinely happy that he has not felt himself the victim of racism in his life. No one should ever feel that.

I will take his questions at face value, though, because the very essence of understanding racism (or sexism, or other prejudices) is to understand whether or not those from other backgrounds live a different experience. The views I offer below are derived from my direct and personal experience over a period of more than 50 years. I do not speak on behalf of other individuals and certainly not on behalf of an entire country. The best that I can do is to tell some part of my story.

To begin with, I was born in Canada, have only ever lived here and will only live here. I have lived in 5 provinces and one territory. I have visited each and every jurisdiction in the country, from the northern tip of Ellesmere Island to Point Pelee and from the Yukon/Alaska border to Cape Spear. You would have a hard time telling whether French or English is my mother tongue. I have been a Deputy Minister with the Government of Canada for over a decade, meaning that I have been given one of the greatest opportunities that any Canadian could ask for in helping to shape the life and future of this country. I have been given the privilege of leading cherished national institutions, writing legislation that will shape this country for generations, and helping solve issues that affect all of us. Very, very few Canadians have had more support, more opportunity, more encouragement, and more acceptance by Canada and Canadians than I have. I have access to the highest offices in the country within government, industry, academia and the not-for-profit sector. I have more privilege than all but a very small number of Canadians, regardless of their race. Consequently, for much of my life, I have had more scope and more access to power to respond to problems than all but the smallest number of Canadians.

But that is not my whole story, and that is what I write about today.

I am of Chinese-Canadian ancestry on one side of my biological family and Polish and Irish on the other. It is generally immediately obvious to most people who meet me for the first time that I am of Asian ancestry. I was adopted and lovingly raised by the descendants of Scottish and English immigrants whose ancestors arrived in Canada well over a century ago.

When it comes to the prevalence of racism, it is worth noting that even the most meticulous record-keeping victim (not that I've ever met one) will never truly know how many times it has affected them. Many tend to think of racism as the obvious outbursts and the spectacular. The burning of a cross or the shouting of a racially-based insult. Racism, though, is like an iceberg to a ship traveling at night. You may or may not see it as you travel, but if you do, the visible part is only the smallest percentage of the danger you face. Because of this, sometimes you don't notice it at the time. You just realize later that a gash has been torn below the waterline that you need to deal with. The easy instances to spot are when you hit racism head-on and it's spectacular and everyone around can see it. As a result, there will never be a perfect count of the instances of racism.

The list below is a small sampling of things that happened to me that I believe were based on race. To put an order of magnitude to it, I would estimate, now in my mid-fifties, that I would have faced something in the order of 10,000 slights, insults, decisions or actions directed at me based on race over the course of my life. I might be out by a couple of thousand in either direction, but not by much. On many days in my youth, when peers had not yet learned that being obvious could lead to trouble for them, 10, 20 or more incidents would not have been unusual. If you can't get out of your own dressing room in minor hockey without facing multiple insults, by the time the other team gets involved, the numbers grow quickly. A group of bullying children can accomplish a lot when ganging up on another. High School, university, career and daily life saw the continuation of these patterns. Some of the incidents listed below are very, very recent.

If it sounds to you that this could not possibly be true or that it must at least be exaggerated in some way, I would suggest this: ask a person of colour who you know and trust to be honest with you if this list reminds them of their experience. If not, great, it means that I may be the only one. If it does resonate, it means that we probably have some work to do. It also says something very important, though, if there is no person of colour in your life with whom you would feel comfortable asking that question. Particularly if you're sceptical or you've already concluded that I must be wrong.

I have not spent my life curating a list of injuries. Until I read this question, I had never even thought about trying to put a number to them. It's not exactly something that I have a desire to remember, let alone discuss or share. They are in fact amongst the most painful moments of my life. But, if the question is about the prevalence and centrality of these experiences in Canadian lives, I offer them here. Maybe, in this way, those injuries will serve a better purpose than I would ever have imagined and an infinitely better purpose than their perpetrators would have wanted or intended.

With that as an introduction, here is a sampling of events that I have lived:

- I have been called a Chink several thousand times. In elementary school it was multiple times every single day. Not only by students but sometimes by adults. Complaints to teachers were not welcome and just resulted in getting beaten up more once out of school.
- I had to fight my way home, beginning at the age of about 6 or 7, being followed by children who were older (usually strangers and sometimes teenagers) who followed me, called me Chink, and either tried to or did beat me up. The frequency dropped as the years went by, but it happened

from time to time in high school and even happened once in university. This would be at least in the hundreds of occasions.

- When I was 10 years old, two delivery company employees bullied a third but younger adult employee to follow me into the alley way and assault me, all three of them yelling racial insults and mocking my eyes as they did so. I remember the name of that company and refuse to do business with them to this day. I didn't bother reporting it to anyone when I was 10 years old because I had learned long before that nothing would be done.
- In elementary school, I tried with my younger First Nation brother to understand why everybody laughed at him when his substitute teacher said to the class "You're all fine white Canadian students, well (looking at my brother) MOST of you". Mostly we couldn't understand why nobody thought that this was a problem.
- When I was a teenager and had a white girlfriend, a middle-aged man who was a stranger to both of us came up to us in the concession line at a hockey game and angrily said to her "Who do you think is going to protect you if you go out with one of them?"
- A university professor mocked me loudly, in public and in front of several other students saying "You must be the first Asian ever to study anything other than math or sciences!"
- I have been told, while speaking Canada's official language that isn't English, "Speak white, you're in Canada now". This has happened to me more than 100 times in my life, sometimes when speaking to my children who my wife and I have raised bilingually. When I told them that if they knew Canada very well at all they would know that I was speaking one of our official languages, it was clear that their linguistic assumption had been very different.
- A man who took objection to something he felt I did on the road left his car at a stop light in downtown Victoria to come up to my window and shout "Chink, chink, chink!" while wanting to engage me in a fight.
- I was told by the employee of a private employee agency that he couldn't recommend me to a job working with the public "Because Canadians wouldn't feel comfortable dealing with me."
- That same individual, when I had told him earlier in that conversation that I was bilingual, said that speaking Chinese wasn't useful. Of course I had meant French, but he jumped to Chinese.
- On countless occasions, I have been told that the only reason that I have different jobs is because I'm a visible minority. Sometimes it's very direct and other times it's the explicit discounting of my achievements in comparison to the other person's situation – "They weren't going to lower the standards for anyone like me" is the most frequent comment.
- A Canadian Border Services Agency officer told me that I could not use the line that I was in because it was for Canadians only. I was actually travelling on a Canadian Diplomatic passport

having represented Canada abroad. He had not checked my passport before making the comment.

- A Canadian airline employee told me that I could not board a flight from New York City to Canada because I didn't have an entry visa in my passport. The employee was actually holding my Canadian official diplomatic passport in their hand while saying this, a document that NEVER requires a visa for a Canadian to enter the country.
- I was personally called a mulatto in a public and formal session while representing Canada at a major United Nations meeting (ironically on racial discrimination). In fairness, this was done by a delegate of another country.
- On probably something close to a dozen separate occasions, a hotel guest has either dropped their luggage at my feet or pointed to their luggage to have me bring it up to their room, assuming that someone of colour in a hotel must be staff.
- Hotel clerks, on more than one occasion, have put up their hand to wave me back when my turn came to be served and said "You'll have to wait for a Japanese-speaking clerk" and summarily called the next customer in line. If they had been right, how would I have understood?
- On my honeymoon, a woman shouted across the hotel lobby at me, saying "Driver, driver!" and got angrier when I ignored her. Given the nature of our subsequent exchange, I suspect that she wished, in retrospect, that she had allowed me to continue ignoring her.
- Very recently at the Edmonton International Airport, a woman walked up to me and demanded to know if I was waiting for someone. Since I was standing in the waiting area, the answer seemed obvious to me so I said yes. She angrily told me that I was at the wrong gate and that I was supposed to meet her at Gate 1. She had assumed that I was her taxi driver.
- While I was having the exchange about not being her driver, my sister was being held up at secondary inspection coming off her international flight because the officer could not grasp what her status was in Canada, despite the fact that she held a Canadian passport. In case you're tempted to think that it was something else, the question was asked repeatedly, "But what is your STATUS in Canada?". As the passport says, Citizen . . .
- I remember comforting my bewildered and inconsolable First Nation sister, when she was 7 or 8 years old, when a group of older boys would regularly call her "N####r".
- I have spent decades of my life in churches where a common focus on missions and outreach was that the Christian version of "les misérables", who seldom resembled anyone in the congregation, would be saved (both spiritually and temporally) by those who knew better.
- I was greeted by a real estate agent who I was meeting for the very first time with her standing at the door of her home stopping and saying as her very first words: "I'm looking at you and I see an Indian. . ." It got worse when I told her that I was Chinese Canadian. She accused me of

lying about that because she had seen that I worked at what was then known as Indian Affairs and Northern Development.

- My adoptive father was a church minister who traveled from time to time to be the guest speaker at other churches. He and my mother would generally sit up at the front in their roles. I tended to hang out on my own near the back of the church as all good Baptists try to do. On my own, I would regularly get pointed questions about what I was doing in the building. It was an unholy glee that I took watching their reaction when I told them why I was there. They might have had to accept me when I was there with my parents, but it was clear that I shouldn't expect to come back on my own. This often happened right below the painting of a very northern European-looking Jesus.
- I have had a police car race up to me aggressively and at high speed while I crossed the street, had the officer roll down his window and commence with a long string of swear words asking "What the &%\$! did I think I was doing?". I am convinced that he thought that I was Indigenous. I didn't bend and I think that he realized that there were easier targets to pick on. He left, but not without unleashing another torrent of swear words. I was federal Assistant Deputy Minister at the time going to get a coffee during a break.
- I have been told at Canadian missions abroad that I couldn't use certain parts of the facilities because only Canadians had access to those particular areas. We hadn't yet had the conversation about my citizenship and I was in fact a very senior federal government official.
- A woman I barely knew asked what I did for a living. I told her that I worked for the federal government. Her spontaneous and incredulous response: "But you're not even a real Canadian!"
- The question of my racial background and comments about what people think of the mixing of races have come up probably close to a thousand times by complete strangers, with the same tone and tact that they would discuss an animal in a zoo. People often declare freely what my racial background means about my abilities and shortcomings. If I had asked them how much money they earned, they would no doubt find it offensive.
- I have been told, on many, many occasions, that it was just not right that I had girlfriends who were white.
- I was deliberately run off a sidewalk by a man riding a bicycle shouting "Out of the way, Chinaman!"
- Unsolicited, people suggested when I was single that I should go out with the one Asian person that they knew. As between Japanese, Filipino, Korean, Kazakh, or Chinese, we would apparently have had a lot in common. Apparently not, according to those making these recommendations, with anyone who looked more like them.

- I have had perhaps a hundred conversations over the years where the topic was about mixed-race relationships and children (never once started by me). One question that has appeared with some frequency is “But what will your children actually be if you’re from different races?”. A not too distant second line of questioning is “Won’t they end up being ‘retarded’ or deformed?”. More than once, I have been asked “Why would you want mongrel children?”
- I have had to comfort my own tearful children after so many racist attacks. I have had to watch their frustration and to know that there is very little that I could do to effectively stop them for the most part. Predators are very good at doing things just outside the light and in front of just enough witnesses to optimize the victim’s shame. It makes them very difficult to catch, even if the system in question wants to. The result is that I had to content my sometimes crying and bewildered children, when they were younger, with simply being strong enough to endure.
- I have had to help my children face the reality that many people and systems are particularly unforgiving of those who make it undeniable that uncomfortable problems exist for which they have responsibilities. I have watched the withering fire, in my life and in my children’s, of the irrelevant assertions and counterarguments made to contort racist attacks and bullying into “You see, there are two sides here, so you two have to just do better. I am now absolved of any responsibility”. “There are good people on both sides” was a part of my life and my children’s long, long, before it became a part of the general lexicon. Except that the victims weren’t generally seen to be as good as the perpetrators in those conversations.
- I have had to explain to my white wife what would be waiting for our children when they started in school. That was hard. What was infinitely harder was watching her learn that the seemingly incredible things that I had told her were actually true.
- I have endured at least a thousand conversations or monologues where the protagonist has decided to grant me the status of “one of the few good ones” while simultaneously arguing that no one who looks like me has any business in Canada because I can never adapt, will never learn the language, will bring un-Christian religions into the country, will want to mix races, etc., etc., etc. This happens with airplane seat neighbours in business and economy class, with professors, teachers, with medical professionals, with people sworn to serve all Canadians or provincial or municipal residents, with taxi drivers, with people in expensive and cheap restaurants, with people who I thought were friends, with the occasional colleague, at church and just about everywhere else I go at one point or another. Very frequently, the conversation ends with a “Well I don’t mean you” after I point out that I am squarely in the middle of what they have described. What’s very clear, though, is that they really do mean me.
- I have been asked several, several hundred times “When did you come to Canada?” and told “I’m amazed at how good your English (or French) is!”
- I have spent a great deal, but certainly not all, of my career in rooms with very, very few people who look anything like me or who understood the types of stories that I am recounting here. My

reality has often been or felt suspect in those circumstances. My recounting of these aspects of my life experience is regularly the subject of significant and open expressions of doubt or denial.

- I have had to teach my son that, no matter how unjust, how vicious, how sustained, how hurtful the racist attacks were on his sister, the consequences of him seeking the resolution he desperately wanted could very well end up damaging or destroying the dreams he was pursuing. I had to look him in the eye and give a completely unsatisfactory answer when he asked me “Well, what are you going to do about it? You’re just going to let it go on, aren’t you?”. He and I both knew that he was right. And so did my daughter.
- There is not a single element on this list where someone has not told me, at some point in time, that the issue in question wasn’t really about race. The contortions employed to explain how it was something benign are often stunning but always hurtful.
- There is not a single element on this list where I have not been asked, at some point in time, whether or not things “really happened that way” or if maybe I was exaggerating them. Trust me, if I were inventing stories about myself, they would be heroic, not stories of being degraded.
- I have heard as a response to almost every single element on this list, at some point in time, that the person I’m speaking with has had hard moments too, generally followed up by an anecdote about something that happened once or a few times but that wasn’t an attack on their very existence and the very existence of their past and future family within Canada. I point out that lots of strange, unfortunate and hard things have happened to me too, but that that is a different long list of things, one that doesn’t involve race.
- Not once, in relation to a single event listed above has the person involved ever offered a genuine or sincere apology. Acknowledgement is generally the fleeting but best possible expectation. Not the people who called me driver, not the people who dropped their luggage at my feet, not the airline agent, not the employment agency, not the university professor, not the passport control person, nor any of the others. In fact, some were quite indignant when I wouldn’t take their luggage or wasn’t their driver.

This is a small sampling of my life. How often do I encounter racism and how present is it? When will it happen next? Maybe when I buy gas today. Maybe when I meet a new neighbour. Maybe when I attend a meeting. Maybe when my child calls me at the end of the day to tell me how it went. Or maybe not today or tomorrow. One thing is certain, though, it will happen again at some surprising moment. The same is true for my children.

So, to Rex Murphy’s question about how much is racism and discrimination a part of the Canadian reality, I will speak to my own Canadian reality and will say that it’s like high blood pressure. It’s always there. I don’t know when I’m going to notice it, or how or when it will show up. Even when it does, I can’t always see its consequences right away, but it is definitely present and it definitely isn’t good. My life does go on, and I am enjoying it immensely. No one who knows me has ever once described me as a complainer. I choose to not let it define me. But, just as with high blood pressure, I would be both

wrong and foolish to pretend that it isn't there, that it isn't something with negative impacts, and that it will just go away.

Many, many people don't have high blood pressure. They will never experience it. That's fantastic. But just because they don't have it, and because I have found ways of dealing with it and refuse to let it define me does not mean that it doesn't exist or that it isn't having an impact.

I have heard about each and every one of these things that it was all in my head. That maybe I was to blame. That I should have sat down and talked with the individuals in question to make them understand (first said to me when I was about 6). I have been plainly disbelieved and accused of fabricating the story for some benefit that would accrue to me (I never figured that one out, but I remain curious).

The real problem isn't with the things that I know happened to me. It's with what else these individuals are prepared to do in their spheres of influence, and with others who think and feel the same way but who wouldn't go as far as to actually say or do such things openly. If you're prepared to actually do and say things like what I've outlined above, what decisions and actions are you taking when no one can see what you're doing? Who are you hiring? Who are you never hiring? How are you welcoming your new neighbours who look like me? How are you treating my child when you're their coach or teacher? How welcome are people like me in your church or club? Through what lens will you see my potential when considering my school, job or promotion application? How seriously are you taking the life stories we are telling? What will your reaction be when we are being considered for positions and roles that will help shape our shared future?

The impact that you can have on a group of people without ever once saying anything openly hateful or violent is infinitely greater than the impact you can have in the spectacular moment of calling me or someone else a Chink in front of a crowd. We tend not to hand power to people who do that type of thing openly. But what happens when the person making life-changing decisions that affect me cannot fathom that anyone like me is a true Canadian, who is wondering or asking how I got to speak English so well or when I came to Canada, someone whose logic is that I am a less-deserving newcomer? What happens when the person making the decisions thinks that some, most or all of the stories of discrimination that people of colour "never seem to stop complaining about" are invented or exaggerated?

There are only five possible reactions to my story and others like it, if you discount the sometimes attractive option of simply ignoring it altogether. One of these must be true:

- 1) I have invented it all or deliberately exaggerated it meaning that no response is warranted;
- 2) It did happen to me, but it was just my bad luck because it didn't happen to anyone else or it happened to so few people that only individual and exceptional responses are required;

- 3) These things did happen, but I have misinterpreted innocent or benign actions incorrectly and should not have understood them to be malicious or detrimental. As a result, I am the one who needs remediation;
- 4) These things did happen, but people like me need to understand that that is just the price you have to pay if you want to enjoy the benefits that this country has to offer; or
- 5) My story is not only true but it is representative of those of many other Canadians. In this scenario, my story and those of everyone else who has had a similar experience deserve to be listened to, believed and acted upon in accordance with what we claim as Canadian values.

I take no quarrel whatsoever with the statement that Canada is a “mature, welcoming, open-minded and generous country”. In fact, I am staking everything on it being proven true.

My question, Rex Murphy, is can we be mature, welcoming, open-minded and generous enough to recognize that I haven’t invented what I have said, I haven’t invented the impact that I have felt, and that at least the essence of my experience may well be shared by even millions of Canadians?

I think that the answer is yes. In fact, I have great confidence that the answer is yes. If there is one country on the face of this planet that can do it, it is Canada. We have more than 153 years of experience confronting very difficult questions and coming out the better for having done so. We have the values and the abilities to address this one too and to do it better than anyone else from what I have seen around the world.

But if your question is “Aren’t we good enough already that we should drop this topic?” then my answer is a plain “No.”

A question was asked about my experience and that of other Canadians of colour. I have offered my response on the basis of it having been asked in good faith. If my situation is unique or nearly unique, then the conclusion offered by Mr. Murphy should stand. If my experience resonates with that of 100,000 other Canadians or 1,000,000 or more, there comes a point where that conclusion can no longer stand. If it can’t, we face another very difficult and defining question: “So what are we going to do now?”