

Background Reflections Activity

The list below includes many individual life experiences and situations that are usually beyond our control as children, but when put together in various combinations, these factors can powerfully impact our lives as we grow up. You will notice that these questions address not only race, but also other characteristics that expose some groups to discrimination such as gender, sexual orientation, and social class.

Because our personal identities and histories are very complex, each of us will likely answer “yes” to at least several questions, and “no” to others. Please note that answering “yes” during this reflection does not diminish your hard work and personal sacrifices in any way, nor is it intended to produce shame. No matter how many or few of our own answers are “yes,” we can be grateful for what God has given us and proud of our accomplishments.

Instead, each “yes” answer invites you to reflect: how might your life have been different if the answer to this question had been “no?” Which of your life choices or accomplishments might then have been significantly more difficult, or perhaps even impossible? Following the questions, you are invited to take a moment to experience and examine any emotions that this exercise brings to light, then to join us in a short prayer of reflection.

Reflection Questions:

- Did you learn about the culture and history of your own ancestors in elementary school—for more than one month of the year?
- Were classes at your school taught primarily or entirely in your first language?
- Were there more than 50 books in your house when you were growing up?
- Did your parents take you to museums, art galleries, concerts, or theatrical events?
- Did you have health insurance and/or dental insurance as a child?
- Did your parents take you to the dentist every year for a checkup?
- As a child, could you count on eating three meals each day?
- Did you attend a private school or summer camp?
- Did your parents, teachers, or mentors encourage you to attend college?
- Were either or both of your parents “white collar professional” workers (doctors, lawyers, professors, executives/managers, etc.)?
- Did your family employ people (who were not family members) to help with your domestic work (gardening, cleaning, in-home childcare, etc.)?
- Did your ancestors choose to come to America to improve their life circumstances?
- Did your parents have at least one reliable family vehicle?
- Did your family own the home you grew up in?
- Did you see positive portrayals of your race, ethnic group, gender, or sexual orientation on TV and movies while you were growing up?

- Were you ever offered a job or other major opportunity because of a family or friend connection?
- Have you inherited money or property from a family member?
- Are you generally able to choose to avoid places that you consider dangerous?
- If you are married, would your marriage be considered legal in most countries in the world?
- Did one or both of your parents attend college?
- Are you able to interact with law enforcement officers without worrying that your race may affect how you are treated?
- Did your parents, teachers, or mentors tell you that you could become anything you want to be if you worked hard?
- Can you go shopping without sensing that you are being singled out for surveillance by store employees or security guards?
- Can you safely assume that if you ask to speak with “the person in charge” in most local businesses or institutions, that person will look and speak similarly to you?
- Can you walk into a room at work, school, or a government building and assume you will probably not be the only person of your race, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation there?

Emotional Debrief

We encourage you to take a few moments to notice any emotions that this exercise produced. It can be startling to notice how deeply some factors in our early lives—all of which were beyond our control—may have impacted our opportunities and choices. Both positive feelings (such as gratitude) and negative feelings (such as anger or frustration) can be normal responses to this exercise. Taking some time to feel and examine the source of these emotions can be very meaningful. As we continue our journey toward racial reconciliation together, we hope that this exercise may move you to experience a deeper empathy with those among us who answer “no” to the majority of these questions and who face discrimination and injustice on a daily basis. As members of POP for Justice, we will work to open our hearts to God’s endless love and compassion and to change the unjust policies and prejudices that perpetuate cycles of generational trauma and discrimination in our society, leading generation after generation to answer “no” to the same questions.

Prayer of Reflection

Dear God, as we seek to answer your call to build a future that is more just and more filled with Your healing love, we ask for guidance. Please remind us that we can be grateful for Your many blessings and proud of our accomplishments, while also acknowledging that unfair policies and prejudice have placed obstacles in the paths of so many of Your children: obstacles that we did not face ourselves. Please fill us with Your healing love as we work to break down walls and replace them with bridges, building authentic relationships where there once was only brokenness and division. Amen.