

My neighbor named Joe



John Walker

"Gentleness, self-sacrifice and generosity are the exclusive possession of no one race or religion." –Gandhi

In May 1985, my family (which, at that time, consisted of me, my wife and three children) moved into our new home. Our next-door neighbor promptly introduced himself while I was inspecting my backyard. My new neighbor was standing next to the fence that separated our property lines, with a large smile upon his face. In a strong and Broadway-esque bellowing voice, he said, "Hello, neighbor. My name is Joe." I immediately walked over to Joe, shook his hand and introduced myself. Joe was a retired military man who appeared to be in his mid to late 60s. We spoke for about 15 minutes, during which time Joe told me all about the good and bad of my new neighborhood. (After living in the neighborhood for about six months, I discovered that Joe's description was spot-on.)

Within just a few weeks, Joe became a very good friend to our family. He was particularly kind to our little ones. He quickly learned my children's names and didn't hesitate to say hello to them. And I always knew when the Schwan's truck had

been in our neighborhood because Joe regularly brought us a variety of ice cream treats.

My only complaint with Joe concerned the fact that each and every time I did something nice for him, he would do two nice things for me and my family. I could never catch up! For example, I often invited Joe over for backyard barbecues. Joe accepted my many invitations upon the condition that he be allowed to bring some of the meat. Joe had a good friend who happened to be a butcher, and the meat that Joe brought to our barbecues was second-to-none.

When it snowed, I did my best to anonymously and stealthily shovel Joe's sidewalks. I knew that I had been caught when Joe graciously gave my wife some money to buy snowsuits for our children.

It didn't take long before Joe became part of our family. We truly loved him, and I strongly suspect he loved each and every one of us. During the many years that we closely interacted, we never experienced any conflict or negativity in our relationship. Joe always had my back, and I hope that Joe knew that I always had his back. Joe was a wonderful neighbor.

It was a very sad and challenging time for us when Joe died. Joe was truly an important part of our life.

By outward appearance, many misguided and prejudicial individuals would have perceived that Joe and I had nothing in common. Joe

was an elderly man, of African descent, who did not grow up in Wyoming. I was a young man, of British/Irish descent, who was born and raised in Wyoming. Outward appearances can be so deceiving!

Joe and I quickly sought and found our common ground: 1. Even though we were of different denominations, we were both Christian; 2. We believed in the sanctity and strength of family; 3. We loved our country; and 4. We did our best to love our neighbor.

I have previously written columns which strongly denounce racism ("Strive to become socially colorblind," WTE, 4/6/19, and "Reasons why bigotry isn't for me," WTE, 12/31/16). From the positive feedback that I received on these columns, I suspect that the majority of my readers do not perceive themselves to be racist. However, if you are inclined to support any racist viewpoint, I ask that you change your perspective.

Joe mattered because he was and is a child of God. However, the most important reason that Joe mattered to me was because of the content of his character.

What a tragic loss it would have been if bigotry had prevented or otherwise impeded my cherished friendship with my neighbor named Joe.

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