

Ben Boyle
Mercer Island, Washington

Dear Mr. Griffin,

I recently read your book, Black Like Me, and it had a great impact on me. I think you were very courageous to change your skin color, especially at a time in United States history when discrimination was so evident. Your book touched my life, making me think about things I didn't pay any attention to before. Now I am much more aware of the different forms discrimination can take and realize that, while it doesn't attract as much attention as it did 40 years ago in our country, prejudice is still alive, here and around the world.

The way you lived at the start of the book is close to how I live today. Like you then, I am part of the white upper middle class in the United States. I don't have a lot of worries. When I joined you on your journey, I suddenly realized for the first time just how sheltered a life I have lived. I was reminded that I have never done without, and that a good education, nice home and comfortable world have been handed to me, not because I have earned them, but because of where and to whom I was born. This made me ask myself some serious questions. What if I had been born to poor black parents in Mississippi in 1958? My life would have been very different, even if I had the same brain and body but simply different circumstances and, most importantly, black skin. And, what if I had been born today as an African American?

I also started asking myself about courage. Would I be willing to risk everything I had -- my job, my home and maybe even my life to get real answers? These were hard things to think about. I have to admit that it scared me to realize that I would probably fall short on this. I think I have strong values and good ethics, but now find myself wondering how strong they really are. Would I put my family at risk the way you did to find the truth? I will keep asking that question every day and hope that when I have to put it to the test, I am up to standing strong. You were brave enough to stand up for your values even when others hated you for what you had done. Would I be able to handle watching my friends walk away from me?

You took me back in history and gave me a look at what it was like in 1950's and 1960's in the United States. I admit I was amazed at how things have changed since then. Back then discrimination meant that people with different skin color had to go to different restaurants, drink from different drinking fountains, and even use different bathrooms. I had read about how the buses were segregated, but I hadn't known that so many other everyday activities were segregated also.

Finally, your book made me much more sensitive to what is happening around me, right here in the United States today. What is it like to be a Muslim today in our country? How easy is it to get a job or take care of yourself if you are an immigrant with dark skin or an accent? Prejudice is still here, even if people of any color can stay in the same hotel and eat at the same table. I hope I can be brave, standing up for all and speaking out against social injustice when I see it.

Sincerely,

Ben Boyle