

The Need for a Conversation on Race in America

In the early 1980's I attended monthly Affirmative Action meetings as a professional person in corporate America. During that time, there was an expression that was used on a regular basis. That expression was "The White Man's Burden". When asked by one of my White coworkers concerning the meaning of the expression "The White Man's Burden", I described the burden as the responsibility White men had to create a society that their grandchildren would live in as minorities. I believed that this was a burden for them because they had to create that society then (early 1980's) and test it on Blacks who were the largest racial minority group in America at the time. Needless to say, it appears that the responsibility was not taken seriously by the powers that be at that time and as a result we now have Fox News 24 hours a day. Today we have a society that is going through a transformation unlike any America has encountered before. The racial balance has tilted as evidenced by the last two national elections and we are not prepared for the rapid changes that are upon us. Counselors have understood for decades that when a relationship is in turmoil, the most pressing need is for communications between the parties who are involved. As a person who has been involved in counseling for almost two decades, the need for conversation is all too obvious. On the other hand, there are some who disagree with my assessment of the situation and suggest that if we just work from where we are and not continue to talk about issues or concerns, that will sometimes inflame the situation, then things will be better. Some go so far as to suggest that the conversations have become a bigger problem than the subject of the conversations. One of the things I like about America is that they have a right to their opinions—even as I have a right to mine.

As we approached the 50th anniversary of the march on Washington D. C. this past August, there was a very extensive article written in the Opinion column of The Wall Street Journal that suggested a better way to honor Dr. King's Dream. Here's a quote from that article: "the notion that America needs a 'conversation' about race is a distraction". The author seemed to imply that this distraction was against real social progress. Of course he described that type of conversation as revolving around Blacks teaching Whites a lesson about what he referred to as "so-called" institutional racism. Again, I quote the author when he described the conversation on race as "rude idle talk of those who blow off steam by demanding a "conversation" that will not bear fruit". Now I have to admit that I was disappointed that the author was not some backwoods rebel-flag waving hermit who totally missed the 1960's. If he was, then perhaps I could have blown off some steam and been satisfied. No, that was not the case. The author was a Black man who is a professor at Columbia University. That's right. Columbia University is one of the most prestigious universities in the world—not just the United States but in the world. The irony is that the newspaper article itself is a Conversation on Race in America! The entire article is cloaked in a conversation about race in America and is attempting to defend the position that a conversation on race in America is a distraction away from real progress. I don't claim to be the smartest man in the world but I do know that if someone is talking about something and saying that anyone who talks about it is creating a distraction, then something is messed up about that. Furthermore, if someone blows off steam by having a conversation and they are afterwards better for it without bringing harm to others, then perhaps there was a need that has now been fulfilled.

There are numerous reasons that we need active conversations on race in America. All one has to do is read the aforementioned article from the August 28, 2013 edition of The Wall Street Journal with an open mind and start counting just based on the verbiage. A conversation on race is more than Black people and White people sitting down together to talk. In case you haven't noticed, there are more than two different races in America. Furthermore, some of these conversations need to be within individual races. Black people have issues that have nothing to do with White folks today or any other race but they are race issues because some of them were carried over from segregation and Jim Crow laws. Allow me to explain in more detail what some of these specific reasons are.

1. We need a conversation among Blacks about race in America so that we can see our own errors. We abandoned our Black-owned businesses because we thought they were inferior to White-owned businesses. We did not analyze or think about the impact on the Black community economically when over 90% of dollars spent leave the community to never return. Communities are built up economically when dollars spent circulate within that community before they leave. Many of us turned our backs on Public Schools in the Black Community after our children or grandchildren graduated or dropped out. We no longer felt the need for the village to be concerned about each child. These are issues that have vestiges a race consciousness that need to be talked about and plans developed to reverse the problems. Have we lost our Black Pride?

2. We need a conversation among Blacks about race in America so that we can learn to talk intelligently about the issues of abuse of power by elected officials (Black and White) towards the Black community but not towards the White community. Some Blacks are angry about what they endure and don't know how to effectively express themselves. This is not a conversation about how Whites feel about Blacks. There are Blacks that don't care for other Blacks. There are Whites that don't care for other Whites. We don't need to talk about how people feel about each other but we do need to talk about how people treat each other. When Blacks feel they have been wronged because they are Black, they need to be able to express it. When people lose the avenue to be able to do this, they become candidates for abuse. I believe that conversations such as these keep some of this abuse in check so that it is not running amok. How dare those who are protected by those who step out and have these conversations openly say that the conversations are the real problem.

3. America needs a conversation on race in order to constantly assess where we are as a nation of diverse races against the points of Dr. King's challenge to America. This could prevent us from straying from the gains that have been made and it could keep us from giving up on those pieces that have not been put in place yet. Dr. King spoke of the "right to vote" as a weapon against injustice and therefore the need for legislation to guarantee the citizens of this nation have that right. Yet, recently we see federal courts today overturning elements of that legislation. Even worse than that are the millions of eligible voters who never bother to go to the poll unless they believe it is a controversial election or vote. Dr. King also spoke of doggedly pursuing and discovering truth as it relates to the welfare of society. Today, it is common for institutions and individuals to sweep truth under the proverbial rug for the sake of convenience and avoiding having a talk about an "inconvenient truth".

4. We need a conversation on race in America between races because there are some cultural differences that we should learn to appreciate about each other because those differences are part of what makes America strong. People with different views are not communists and do not hate America as some suppose whenever they hear a different viewpoint from their own. This has been a constant refrain towards President Obama throughout his tenure as President of the United States. When President Obama says that he could have been Trayvon Martin it's because he understands America's past and present behavior towards racial minorities and he knows that he is visibly a racial minority in America. God help all of them who forget who they are. President Obama knows that the work of creating a just society has begun but it is a long ways from being finished. Those who are enjoying the fruits of what was started through much bloodshed and unlawful incarcerations should not be so comfortable that they don't see the need for the work to be finished so others can also enjoy the fruits of being Americans. We do need to talk about our differences across racial lines and learn to be tolerant of different opinions without thinking that those opinions should not be aired in a respectable manner. How many Blacks were allowed to be professors at Columbia University prior to the Civil Rights movement?

5. We need a conversation on race in America so we don't give up and quit just because someone has an opinion that is different from ours concerning race and race relations in America. The most preposterous thing about the article from The Wall Street Journal is the author's attitude of superiority that would suggest that he can write about race in America but anyone else who dares to have a conversation about it is creating a distraction away from progress. I dare say that his progress towards becoming a professor at Columbia University passed through a trail of blood in Alabama, Mississippi, Georgia, Louisiana, Arkansas, Tennessee, and other states of the Deep South. Lest we forget, we need to talk about it.

Now, I agree with the comment the author of The Wall Street Journal article made concerning a "post-racial society". I think the idea is ludicrous (forgive me Mike Tyson). We are never going to get to a point where we don't see a person's skin color. On the other hand, we should have expectations for what life should be like in a post-segregation or integrated society. Seeing the difference in the color of a person's skin should not cause us to treat them differently or expect them to be untrustworthy or even worse, dangerous. Would George Zimmerman have followed a White teenager who happened to be walking through the community? That question may be uncomfortable but we need to talk about it.