Do we really want to have this conversation?

Back in February 2009, the new Atty. Gen. Eric Holder told us that we Americans were all cowards about having a conversation on race. His actual quote was, "Though this nation has proudly thought of itself as an ethnic melting pot, in things racial we have always been and continue to be, in too many ways, essentially a nation of cowards." For the longest time, I thought that Holder was wrong, that Americans had been willing to engage on the topic of race relations over the past 50 or 60 years, but recently, I've revised my thinking. It's as if those conversations that needed to take place are no longer possible because of the strained relations between Black Americans and White Americans.

Instead of promoting a dialogue, the Black Lives Matter movement has deepened the divide between the races and has actually made it more unlikely that America will have the conversation it needs to have. I, for one, am not relieved at that prospect. In fact I'm pretty disappointed at the mere thought of it. So, here's my attempt at a dialogue, seen from the perspective of one Caucasian American.

It was not until my teenage years that I actually met a person from another race. It happened strangely enough at a 'Whites-only' country club where I was working as a bus boy. My job was simple. Fill water glasses, replenish the bread basket and remove dishes at the end of a member's meal and bus them back to the kitchen where they were washed by a Black man by the name of Sylvester. Sylvester was married to a jovial Black woman by the name of Alfreda. Alfreda made all the salads. Also in the kitchen was a sous chef by the name of Curtis who was also a very friendly Black man. I don't really know for sure if their friendliness towards me was because I was the nephew of the club's manager, but I suspect that that had very little to do with their kindness to me.

Like them, I was the hired help. We all worked in the same environment and all felt a kinship as being part of a very successful kitchen enterprise. Before my experience with Sylvester, Alfreda and Curtis, my only relationship with non-Whites was news reporting on the television and a few movies with Black actors appeared. I recall being moved by the civil rights demonstrations of the 1950s and 60s and felt a certain sense of shame at being part of the White majority even though I was just a child and had no responsibility for the racial strife in my country.

Growing up in the Midwest, where the percentage of Blacks was negligible in the population, we didn't feel the sense of ownership of the civil rights issue that our neighbors in southern states felt. In some ways it was very foreign to us, but that was because as I said there were so few Blacks in small-town Wisconsin. As a matter of fact, civil rights was not one of the conversations we had in our home or in our schools. While it was a national issue, it didn't really affect our community on a daily basis.

Later in life, as I grew to be a man, and read the works of James Baldwin and others I realized that I had lived a privileged life even though I came from a working class family. That realization did not make me feel guilty in any way, but it did make me aware that there were really at least two Americas; one for us and one for them. Like many of my contemporaries, I wondered what I could do to redress some of the disparities between the White and Black races. Since I had limited contact with the Black community I was aware that my education needed to be rounded out by understanding what the Black experience was all about. In 1966, I had the occasion to do just that. While working as an auto worker on the Chrysler Corporation automobile assembly line, I was able to interact on a daily basis with some Black co-workers. This was the closest I had come to being a part of the black community, albeit only during an eight hour shift five days a week. It was enough, however, to make me aware that our experiences were dramatically different.

While we were all brothers in the UAW union, we were still going home to two different environments, me to one part of the city and them to the other. We lived where we lived and didn't interact much with each other if at all because of the physical distance between us.

When we did come together at the workplace, we shared stories and jokes with each other, but many of them were based on life in our separate Americas. At the time, there was considerable strife across the United States, with Blacks separating themselves into two groups: the Martin Luther King Jr. nonviolent group and the Malcolm X and Elija Muhammad aggressive group not to mention the social activist Black Panthers. I recall one seminal moment during the Olympic Games in Mexico City in 1968 when two black athletes won the gold and bronze medals and were standing on the dais waiting to receive their medals. The Star-Spangled Banner was played and as if it were a reflex action, both black athletes raised their right arms with clenched fists in defiance and support for Black causes.

This awakened a certain anger and shock among many in the White community and, looking back, was a watershed moment for America's race relations. Nothing 'traditional' was safe anymore. Now even the Olympic Games had become political. As with today and the protests by NFL athletes, Americans were confronted with the fact that nothing was off limits anymore. Now even our national sports were fair game for racial politics. The summer of 1968 only increased tensions with the anti-Vietnam War protests and the confrontation between police and demonstrators at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago. From that point onwards, it seems that we could not have a meaningful racial conversation in the U.S. People were split into two camps, camps that were not necessarily 100% White or 100% Black but were either <u>for</u> the status quo or <u>against</u> it.

Negroes became Blacks or Afro-Americans or African-Americans. The language of race had changed and so had the players. The first Black Congresswoman, Shirley Chisholm was elected to the House of Representatives. Martin Luther King Jr. had been assassinated. Riots had broken out. Calls for swift law and order were heard around the country and members of the Black and White community were understandably worried about their safety. George Wallace, an avowed segregationist, came in third in the presidential contest, and fortunately lost. White separatist groups like the Ku Klux Klan were still powerful forces, particularly in the south and spawned spinoff groups that migrated to other states as well.

America still accepted Blacks in the entertainment industry and in the field of sports, but rarely did one see a Black executive in a prominent American company or in government. The color line still held firm but was under attack by civil rights legislation passed in the mid-to-late 60s which insured that there was no systemic or institutionalized racism in the body of American law. This is not to say that it completely eradicated discrimination. It didn't. It only gave aggrieved parties a process by which they could make their case under the law.

These days, much is being made of systemic racism. Many would have you believe that we have made little or no progress since the passage of the 13th amendment in 1865 which abolished slavery. Many in the Black community feel as if their cries for equality and equal opportunity have not been heard, and that the White power structure is to blame. Movements like Black Lives Matter are calling for the defunding of police forces around the country, claiming that there is institutionalized police brutality against Black Americans perpetrated by these police forces and condoned by the White ruling class. This is causing a major rift and has led, in some cases, to the burning and looting of businesses and attacks on police officers as well as innocent civilians who do not share BLM's beliefs in systemic racism.

Like the riots of 1968, the violent protests of 2020 are doing little or nothing to encourage a dialogue between the races. They are only serving to move us farther apart. How then, are we to find a middle ground, a place of neutrality where we can even begin to speak about that which separates White from Black? It would seem that there is no such place as Eric Holder said in 2009. We have been cowardly. For whatever reason, we have not taken up the challenge left to us by the likes of Frederick Douglass, Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, and even Louis Farrakhan. Fears and anger in the Black community had been stoked by so-called race hustlers like the Reverends Al Sharpton and Jesse Jackson who have seized on every opportunity to feather their own nests by proclaiming that Blacks are being systematically abused at the hands of the White power structure.

Their claims are, unfortunately, being supported by the occasional murders of Black youth by White police officers which have led to the ascendancy of groups like Black Lives Matter, which was organized after the Travon Martin killing back in 2012.

One would have thought that after winning so many congressional seats in the interim years from the late sixties on up, that the Black Congressional Caucus which is comprised of 55 Congressmen and women would take up the challenge of discussing America's racial problem, but they have not to any meaningful degree. Neither has the NAACP nor the Southern Christian Leadership Conference which was established in 1957. During the eight years of the Barack Obama administration precious little was done to bring these forces together to talk about solutions that would ameliorate or mitigate the growing problems between the White and Black communities. It was a colossal missed opportunity and one that has now morphed into a full-blown crisis.

During the 70s, I lived overseas in a largely White society in Europe, so, for me, I was not confronted with the need to personally work on this issue of racial division. But moving back to the United States in the 80s I was and in 1987-89 I lived in the Eastern Caribbean on the twin island Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, where I was a distinct minority, part of only 0.5% of the White population. Unlike the United States, Trinidad had been under British rule until the mid-60s and later confronted its own racial or ethnic divisions where the majority of the population had been equally split between descendants of African-Americans and descendants of indentured or contract laborers from India.

As a White man in a largely colored country, I realized what many in my own country, in the Black community, had done for generations... largely kept their mouths shut and lived a somewhat segregated or quiet life. Unlike the United States, however, Trinidad had fewer racial and ethnic problems because it had always been an evenly split society. It had always mixed together as races/ethnic groups and given birth to several successive generations of multiracial or multi-ethnic children. In short, everybody had a little bit of everybody else in their DNA. That made it difficult to criticize the 'other' groups. It also made it easier to subordinate racial differences and concentrate on issues that would benefit the entire country instead of one ethnic or racial group.

I learned much from my minority experience. I will never forget the kindness that was shown to me by people different from myself and even those who supported different political ideologies than those I hold dear. It seemed that dialogue was the only acceptable way forward, and that violence was universally seen as counterproductive and destructive to the social fabric. I wish that this was a lesson we all in the United States could learn without having to experience the violence first.

How to talk about racism without being racist.

Language is important. It's important not for the obvious reasons (that we should be able to understand each other), but for our social contract with one another. Let me explain. As a diplomat working overseas, I would return to the United States every 18 months for what we call 'home leave,' for a month or longer. My agency would bring me back to Washington DC for a couple weeks, to engage with me about my experiences at my post, and to educate me about new policies. I recall one year I was, along with my colleagues, required to take a *diversity* course. This was a full-day course conducted by a specialist in ethnic and racial issues.

That day came and we all filed into a large classroom. Most of us were in our late 30s to late 40s. We took our seats and waited for our instructor to arrive. She soon did, a very statuesque Black woman who reminded me of the late Black poet, Maya Angelou. She introduced herself and began to explain why we were all here and what we would be doing. I do not recall why the subject came up, but I do recall raising my hand and asking her how she would describe herself, because I was confused as to what to call her. Was she a Black? An African-American? Or just what? I do recall she raised herself up to her full height and a smile came to her face, and she said, "You may call me a person of color."

This was rather new for most of us, so I asked her, "Because I am White does this make me a person of no color or non-color?" She must not have had this question before, because it did stump her temporarily. She then said, "You must decide for yourself what you wish to be called." I then said, "How about just an American man? I don't want to deal in racial descriptors nor do I want to be pigeonholed. It's okay that the U.S. Census wants to know, but I would have preferred to be judged not by the color of my skin but the content of my character." At this point, she chuckled. She said, "You do know your Martin Luther King Jr. don't you?" I replied that I did and that I thought we would all be better off if we didn't have to be described as one thing or the other.

She used this as a segue to get into the diversity training, and afterwards, she took me aside and said, "You did me a favor. You broke the ice so that we could all relax a little bit and feel comfortable speaking about this very important issue." Well, I don't mind admitting that I thought I might flunk this test of diversity, but in fact I received high marks for it. That brings me to the subject of what we call each other and how it affects the dialogue. Why, for example, can Blacks be called people of color instead of *colored people*? Why, do we even have to refer to each other by color coding? Why is it acceptable these days to talk about 'Black people and Brown people'? Is that not racist to simply boil down our differences by a color appellation?

Do we talk about Indians (or as they're now called Native Americans) as *Reds* or Asians as *Yellows*? No, we do not. It seems as though there has been an attempt to combine races and ethnicities together as one group. So-called Brown people are thought to be those who are ethnically Hispanic but who are still actually racially White or Caucasian. Those calling them 'Brown,' I believe are doing so in the hopes of lumping them together into one group of aggrieved victims of White oppression - a clear attempt at identity politicking.

So, what we call each other <u>is</u> important to the discussion, because it serves to identify where we stand on the victimhood spectrum. While it may not be important for me, it is, obviously important, for those who are insinuating certain people are victims in our society. This whole discussion of racism has become like a huge ball of twine, where racism has become a catchall for prejudice, bias, and discrimination. We must unravel this ball of twine and start talking about racism as it pertains to races and discrimination and bias and prejudice as they apply to ethnic groups or other groups that are either gender-based or other identity-based.

If we can do that we will have made some progress. It won't be enough, but it will be a start. Calling someone a racist or applying that label to them is one of the worst things we can do to another human being. It is like dumping a bucket full of indelible ink over a person's head, something that cannot wash off but must only wear off over a long period of time, perhaps never in their lifetime.

Once we've agreed on the terminology, maybe we can agree on a few other important things like: should White America pay Black America reparations for actions taken before the 13th amendment was passed (or Indians for appropriating their land); how to move forward with educating our children on the actual state of racism in America; what role colonialism played in creating racial disparity in the United States; and do we really have to destroy all remnants of our history and change our language to suit 13% of our population?

America is only 244 years old. We have learned much and made many mistakes. We have also made amends for many of these mistakes and have learned much about national, cultural and tribal instincts. We are still the great melting pot, but there are certain ingredients in this pot that have refused to assimilate and become part of a greater American 'stew' that has the unmistakable taste of freedom and personal liberty. That was the hope of our founding fathers that we could be many and one at the same time; that we could learn to live together and respect each other without immediately fearing or disliking each other. As it relates to the races, we can make and have made many laws that guard against systemic racism, but we cannot force each other to like one another. I realize that that is a difficult reality for many 'woke' persons on the Left to digest, but it is a truism. That is the great challenge of learning to live together.

First we must respect one another under the law. Then, we must learn what we can about each other's experiences to understand the impact those experiences have had on people in other racial communities. Then, and only then, can we begin the process of acceptance of one another on a cultural and personal level. The laws of our land are important, because they ensure a process by which every person can have his or her grievance heard and adjudicated. But equally important is a willingness on the part of all parties to come together in the spirit of comity to learn what makes us both unique and similar.

Millions of immigrants came to this country seeking personal freedom and a fresh start when it came to their national, ethnic or religious backgrounds. After a period of initial isolation the assimilation process took over and they were willing to subordinate their foreign identities and trade them in for a new American identity that was based on our Bill of Rights and Constitution and not on their race, religion, or ethnic background. That was America's promise to all. If we are serious about keeping that promise alive, then we must avoid tribalism and identity politics. We are the sum substance of not only our racial or ethnic backgrounds, but are also the result of our experiences and our wisdom. It is time that we put aside color and creed and perceived or real differences and most importantly, victimhood, and focus on our collective identity as Americans.

I do not want to see Eric Holder's comments become the mantra for the next half-century's race relations in America. We must find the courage to speak out and speak up about our racial differences and aspirations before it is too late. We must also find the courage to speak honestly and truthfully about the facts about America's racial attitudes before it is too late. To give in to trumped-up fear and the false narratives of rampant police brutality and pervasive systemic racism will only retard our progress towards finding acceptable solutions, not insure it.

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