

Disorderly Conduct

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A few weeks ago, *Newsweek* magazine ran a cover article with the provocative title “Is Your Baby Racist?” Under the sensational title meant to startle us, the article reported on a several fascinating new studies of racial consciousness and attitudes among children.

Among the studies was one conducted by a team led by Dr. Phyllis Katz that followed a group of children from six months to six years old, looking periodically at their reactions to people with different skin colors. Dr. Katz found that the six-month-old babies showed significant awareness of human difference: they stared significantly longer at people whose skin color was different from that of their parents.

No, this does not make babies racist, but it does point out something that should be obvious to all of us: even small children notice that people are different from one another.

And yet, we spend an awful lot of time and energy trying to teach children that everyone is the same—for years, this has been the accepted way of trying to teach them to treat everyone the same way. And then we wonder why this education isn’t working the way it’s supposed to.

Those of us committed to building a world in which the differences in humanity no longer separate us into privileged and oppressed classes are left wondering: Is there a better way to teach our children?

Fortunately, there is.

Several other studies referenced in this article looked at educational methods and the attitudes of children around race. They found, interestingly, that what worked in creating attitudes of fairness and justice across racial differences was talking directly with children about race and racism.

These studies found that we’ve just been too abstract with the concrete thinkers in our midst. Purple and blue puppets singing about everyone being the same is not readily translated in the minds of children into better attitudes towards people who are different from they are, precisely because our children are not purple or blue puppets—and they realize we’re all different.

Moreover, these studies found that pretending that racism doesn’t exist is not a way to make it not exist.

Why? Because children pick up on the racism that’s around them—and if we pretend it’s not there, the message they get is not “racism is wrong,” it’s “racism is so normal that we’re not even going to talk about it.”

I don't think it's just children who need to be offered a new and different way to talk about race and racism. I think people of all ages would benefit from a forthright discussion of difference, and that we don't do anyone, no matter their age, a favor by engaging in the topic of race from a metaphorical, abstract place.

I also think that spiritually, we need to come to a place where human difference is as valued as human similarity.

When I was working as a hospital chaplain, one of our required seminars was entitled "Pastoral Care with African-Americans." In the major trauma center for central North Carolina, we were likely to encounter many African-American patients, and the department wanted us to be effective in our work with them.

Some in my class bristled at the notion that pastoral care with African-American patients would be any different from pastoral care with European-American patients—or patients from any other racial or ethnic background. It was natural, I think, having been taught that we're all the same, to resist thinking that maybe we are more different than we've been led to believe.

So to begin, our leader for the day shared with us his theology of human difference. Since his perspective was rooted in his Trinitarian Christianity—in which Jesus is seen at once as fully human and fully divine—I had to translate it into my own words.

To pretend that humans are all different is to ignore that each of us has a spark of divinity within us, that each of us has blood coursing through our veins and a heart beating in our chest. And to pretend that humans are all the same is to ignore the very real differences that exist among us, and to downplay the beauty and wonder of human diversity.

We are all alike in some ways, and we are all different, too. To pretend one or the other paradigm explains all of humanity is dangerously naïve.

In the class, we talked about the attitudes of many Black people in the South about religion, and we talked about the ways in which power and privilege play themselves out when one walks into a hospital room as a representative of an institution.

In order to talk about these things, though, we had to face the reality of human difference in concrete terms.

We had to come to some peace with the fact that when a white man in a suit and tie walks into the hospital room of a black patient—even if he is there for her comfort and support—that patient will have a reaction based in the way our society treats the differences between them.

Later in that internship, we faced the reality of difference from the other side as well, when the one African-American member of our class was reporting on an on-call experience in which she, despite being dressed professionally and wearing a nametag that clearly read “Chaplain,” was assumed to be a janitor by a white patient.

We are all the same, and we are all different. And, no matter what we want to be the case, those differences matter, and we must talk about them.

Sociologist Allan Johnson, in his book *Privilege, Power and Difference*, writes that “talking openly about power and privilege isn’t easy, which is why people rarely do. The reason for this,” he continues, “seems to be a fear of anything that might make dominant groups uncomfortable or ‘pit groups against each other,’ even though groups are *already* pitted against one another by the structures of privilege that organize society as a whole. The fear keeps us from looking at what’s going on and makes it impossible to do anything about the reality that lies deeper down.”

When I put this sermon on the calendar, our nation’s eyes and ears were focused on Cambridge, Massachusetts, where a slight, 59 year-old professor who walks with the aid of a cane was arrested and charged with disorderly conduct in the foyer of his own home.

Of course, you know more details than these. The professor was the well-known African-American scholar Henry Louis Gates, Jr., known around Harvard Yard as “Skip.” He was arrested after becoming quite upset with a white police officer, Sergeant James Crowley, who had been sent to investigate the report from a neighbor of a possible burglary in process. Dr. Gates had just returned home from an overseas trip to find his front door stuck shut—and he had just managed to get in when the police showed up and demanded identification from him.

It’s a complicated story—and I have tried to re-tell it with sensitivity to all perspectives. But it’s impossible in our society to separate this story from the racial backgrounds of the people involved.

Why? Because, despite the fact that we tell ourselves over and over again that race doesn’t matter, it does. A white professor would not likely have had the police called on him; a white professor wouldn’t have had a deeply-ingrained suspicion of the police; a white professor might have been given the benefit of the doubt by the officer responding.

Education professor Shelly Tochluk, in her book *Witnessing Whiteness: First Steps Toward an Anti-Racist Practice and Culture*, writes of the importance of frankly naming and confronting the problems with our society, and then going on to demonstrate that we can create something better.

We must, she warns us, get over our fear of talking about race and racism. We must open our eyes to really see the world around us, and our ears to hear how others see that world differently than we do. We must understand that in the 21st-century United States, a culture exists that privileges whiteness

and Northern European ways of being, and that values behaviors that perpetuate the systems already in place.

In the end, Tochluk suggests eight values that those of us seeking to dismantle white privilege should use to define the way we operate in the world. They are:

1. **Multiplicity:** Each of us is capable of any of a number of reactions and of following any number of pathways in our lives, and that we are complex and imperfect beings. Nothing is purely good or purely bad—we each have both within us.
2. **Interconnection:** We do not exist as individuals in isolation from one another—our existence is dependent on being part of groups and communities and in relationship to those around us. As Tochluk writes, “we can give up *individualism* without sacrificing our sense of *individuality*.”
3. **Passion:** Our heart and body have as much to teach us as our head, and that we need to pay attention to the things that stir us emotionally and spiritually.
4. **Obligation:** We need to feel an obligation to others, and to society at large. We *must* choose to confront privilege, we *must* choose to name racism, we *must* support one another in doing this work.
5. **Vigilance:** We must recognize that it is part of the system for white people to turn away from talking about race—it is a necessary part of how racism perpetuates itself. Thus, we must stay vigilant—so that we don’t fall into patterns of complacency and comfort, so that we stop beating ourselves up when we make mistakes (and we will), and so that we can keep each other awake and aware.
6. **Accountability:** It is impossible for white people to do the work of anti-racism alone—those of us who are white must develop relationships of accountability in which our work is measured and in some ways directed by people of color.
7. **Historical Memory:** The way our society is structured today has roots in our history, as does the way we see what is there and what is possible. We are educated, however, to ignore the threads of racism in that history. We must learn the history of race and racism in order to confront it in the present and dismantle it in the future.
8. **Reconciliation:** Racism hurts us all. It tears us apart, it breaks our wholeness, it wounds our souls. It will not be destroyed by “forgiving and forgetting.” Thus, a deeper process is necessary to bring us into right relationship with ourselves and with those who are different from us—the process of reconciliation. We need to work on healing the wounds—new and old—that exist in our society.

Shelley Tochluk writes these things for White educators, but all of us—no matter our racial background—can work on making these eight values an integral part of how we live.

It will be harder for those of us who are White: we have been taught to resist all of these things. We have been taught that they are not necessary.

We have been taught that we are all the same—and this is only a piece of the story.

For we are all different, too, and this is a beautiful—and difficult—thing.