Convictions About Racism
In the United States of America
Essays by Horace Seldon

Community Change, Inc.
14 Beacon Street, Room 602
Boston, MA 02108
617.523.0555
www.communitychangeinc.org

Introduction

In 1968 several individuals, including Horace Seldon, created Community Change Inc. (CCI). With its mission of working against racism and for racial justice, CCI has focused on institutional manifestations of white racism. A description of CCI's programs and services may be seen at www.comunitychangeinc.org.

As founding director for CCI, Horace Seldon wrote a number of essays and articles on the many aspects of racism. Most of the essays, or commentaries, were written specifically for the CCI newsletter. In limiting almost all of the essays to 1-3 pages, the author acted on his assumption that people are more likely to read a brief article and to pass it on the others. The essays, therefore, are not intended to be comprehensive, but, instead, to start people thinking. Whether discussion the definition of racism as a "white problem," or the language that is a symptom of racism, or the similarities between basketball and affirmative action, the essays demand attention to issues.

Those on the newsletter mailing list looked forward to reading Horace's words and, over the years, CCI has received numerous requests for copies of the essays. This book is an attempt to make all of the essays available in one place. In this edition, we have included a final section of more recent articles which are not grouped by topic but are in chronological order. We hope that you enjoy these and all the articles available here.

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I. Essays on Identifying Racism

November 1974

Pluralism and Racism

A genuine concern for a culturally pluralistic society is emerging. Numerous commentators on social trends have written asserting that white ethnic groups will increasingly claim and affirm their heritage. School systems are beginning to adopt Evaluation Guidelines for Multiracial, Multicultural Education, and teachers are developing supplementary units stressing an appreciation of diversity. The "melting pot" theory is dead. We at Community Change applaud that death and are eager to move into a multiracial, multicultural world whenever it is an alternative to racism.

The melting pot theory held that America was a place where people become alike, homogenized into one conforming mass. The standards for that homogeneity were white middle class, mostly Anglo-Saxon values. When those values were acted out, the "melting pot" eliminated differences in dress, behavior, language, and traditions. The result was a homogeneity which defined societal acceptability in white terms. The melting pot became racist because people who are not white just cannot "melt" into "whiteness."

At Community Change we believe that all white ethnic groups have benefited from and contributed to the perpetuation of racism. Any failure by white ethnics to deal with their involvement in racism is an obstruction to the goal of cultural pluralism. It is not a question of whether or not white ethnics as individuals or groups "like" Black people, or Chicano, or Native American people...instead it is a question of the ways in which white ethnics have institutionalized racism, i.e., in trade unions or in urban school systems, such as Boston, where resistance to desegregation is embedded in a white ethnic controlled School Committee.

At Community Change we want to move into cultural pluralism as rapidly as possible. Our anxiety is that the movement into cultural pluralism might become a substitute for dealing with racism. For instance it would be possible in a school to initiate cultural exchange programs without changing tracking and testing systems which often place racist limitations upon Black students. A business might implement an equal opportunity employment policy intended to recruit a multiultural group of employees, but never change policies which deny access of non-white persons to decision-making positions of power. High school students might be encouraged to celebrate a Mexican festival, while the school continues to deny a bi-lingual program for its Spanish-speaking students. Or it might become fashionable to study Native American customs as if they represented a "dead" culture, and bypass responsibility for a modern-day Wounded Knee.

All of these might be done in the name of cultural pluralism, but all fail to deal with racism.

At Community Change we are committed to working "through" racism toward cultural pluralism. That means working to eliminate racist policies, practices, and values as a means of preparing for cultural pluralism. Our focus is on the elimination of racism.

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April 1983

We Have "No Problem"...Again

About twenty years ago whenever the issue of racism was mentioned in the presence of my white suburban friends there was always someone to assure us that "we don't have that problem here." Pursuing that statement usually led to another one that went something like this: "Well, there aren't many black people here"...so the logic seemed to say...of course..."no problem."

I knew then that my friends were wrong for a number of reasons. First, they assumed that the problem of racism existed only when people of color were present. The assumption "located" the problem among black people and other people of color; it failed to see that racism is rooted in white people and in white institutions whether or not there are black people present. Second, I knew that the absence of many black people was itself *part of the problem;* attitudes and practices by the majority white population limited the choice of blacks who may have wanted to live in the suburbs. Third, the "no problem" argument was an attempt to avoid responsible action; if there is "no problem" or if the problem is somewhere else, then one is absolved from doing anything. Fourth, I knew that a lot of people in the suburbs were there precisely because they wanted to avoid "urban problems," and that many of my friends equated "urban problems" with the presence of racial minority groups. To assert that "we have no problem here" was to distance themselves from the city.

That was some time ago, and while the "no problem" attitude still persists it is argued in slightly different forms now.

One of the "new" statements of the "no problem" syndrome proceeds from an assumption that there is no problem of racism unless there is some overt incident which expresses hatred and bigotry. Recently a high school principal assured me, within minutes of our introduction, that "we have no race problem here." That meant there had been no stabbing, no violence, and no racially-motivated incident in the school. Before seeing the principal I had already talked with a number of students, both black and white, and a couple of teachers; they had all told me of the presence of racism in a variety of forms in classrooms, corridors, and school activities. But the principal made it his priority to assure me that there was "no problem."

In the "no problem" view, the word "problem" is used almost exclusively to refer to an incident of bigotry; someone calls a name, a racial slur appears in graffiti, an openly discriminatory act occurs. When something like that occurs, people on the site and in the community are quick to respond, ready to condemn it, and hopefully, equipped to administer a just solution. In many instances, after that initial response everyone goes back to "business as usual" as quickly *as* possible. A collective sigh of relief goes up as everyone says, again, "we have no problem." It is the underlying, ever-present problem that is seldom addressed. Most white people don't believe it is there, they don't want to have it pointed out, are eager to leave it alone. So the enculturated, institutionalized base of the problem goes untreated. It remains the festering bed of the next incident.

There is a second interesting way in which the "no problem" argument appears. A recent experience on a college campus is an example. I was on campus to conduct discussions about racism with a number of different people. A number of faculty and administrators were concerned that I might "stir up something," and thus *create* a problem. That response embodies two contrary assumptions. *First,* it betrays a fear that a placid "no problem" setting will be disturbed. "There is no problem here, so what are you looking for...why are you here...any problem will be your crea-

tion...so be careful, and leave as quickly and quietly as possible, please." I had enough time and talked to enough people who did acknowledge the presence of a problem. The statement of "no problem" was then seen as a way of keeping that placid exterior calm. So we are not far from the second and contrary assumption behind the "don't stir up something" pleas. That second assumption is that there is "something" to be stirred up. If there were no problem, there would be no need to be concerned about "stirring up" something because the "something" to be "stirred up" would be non-existent. "Don't stir up anything" is a plea to avoid the problem. It may be founded in fear that the problem is in fact more pervasive, more difficult, more present than people want to deal with. "Bury it"..."it will go away"...but "don't disturb anybody or anything."

The "no problem" response to racism is usually heard from white people, and usually in institutional settings where there are few people of color. Since I have not yet found an institution where there is no problem, my assumption always is that we have simply to uncover it.

It doesn't take long for most people of color to say there is a problem. If the problem is not identified, and if there are no mechanisms for continually dealing with the problem, it is more likely to erupt in an ugly form at another day and time. As with most problems, it is best to identify it, respond to it and provide support for everyone in the situation while attempting to move beyond racism. To leave the sore unattended is to invite a more serious manifestation later.

People of color can tell you where the problem is, and what its effects are. White people who have been sensitized to racism can also be helpful. The important thing is to put aside fear of the problem, because it is a human problem which can be solved by people of good will.

Our culture is deeply ingrained with racism; our institutions are founded on it. As long as we move in this culture and in the institutions of this culture, *assume a problem of racism.* Don't fear it; discover it; uncover it; even stir it up if necessary. Then we can begin to deal with it. If we don't do that, then we'll soon be right back at the same old place..."we have no problem"...again!

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December 1989

No Racism Immune System!

Recently a phone conversation with a newspaper reporter led me to reflect on an incident in the Boston area in which some highly visible, educated "liberals" were caught publicly with their collective racism showing. The embarrassment became an occasion for shock, much finger pointing, and "yah-yahing." Lots of people felt better because now they had proof that "liberals are not as great as they think they are." The reporter would have liked me to add fuel to that fire.

I disappointed the reporter. She would have been happier if I had expressed great shock, surprise, and horror, and then proceeded to excoriate the "liberals" in appropriate, educated language and with a dose of street invective which would have made great copy. I did neither. Our conversation went something like this: "I don't want to comment on the specific incident," I said, "because I am unfamiliar with the exact details. All I know is what I have heard on radio and seen in the papers, and that's not always the best source of truth." (That didn't increase my stature!) On the larger, generic issues I was willing to comment: "That well-known, publicly-labeled 'liberals' might get involved in racism is not a surprise to me." (Silence on the other end!) I went on: "As a matter of fact those of us who are card-carrying liberals may have a *peculiar vulnerability* to racism. By definition we are assumed to be vigorously intolerant of racism, and this often may lead to a very subtle internalized assumption of being 'beyond racism.' When that notion gets acted out, sometimes the 'liberal' is especially vulnerable to getting caught up in doing something which is racist. Then the most common response is a combination of surprise and delight that the 'liberals' have incriminated themselves." The reporter didn't understand, and though I wanted to explore the thought a bit further with her, she was intent on terminating the conversation.

In the United States of America there is *No Racism Immune System!* No one, no group, no class of people is immune to the presence and influence of enculturated racism. (Right now, I don't want to argue whether or not people of color can be racist! As a white person, I am here addressing a conviction that no *whites*, not even "elite liberals" are immune to racism.) There was a time when I implicitly understood that highly-educated "liberals" were, *of course*, not racist. That notion went to an early death when a "liberal" law professor from a very "prestigious" university told me that there never was a civilization in Africa, and when a "liberal" teacher at an equally prestigious high school told me that Native Americans had no culture! Ignorance and racism feeding on each other *and in the* heart of liberalism!

Those of us who are often called "liberals" encounter some built-in risks which make us peculiarly susceptible to racist behavior:

1) *The fear based on assumptions that power is a negative dynamic, often blinds us to the reality of the power we have.* Recently I heard a group of white people engage in discussion of what "empowerment" *means*, and I reflected that I had never heard a group with any significant number of people of color engage in such a discussion. I have heard people of color talk about *effective actions for gaining power*, but I suspect that discussion of the *meaning* of empowerment is a peculiar temptation for "liberal" whites who often don't want to acknowledge that their use of power demonstrates a clear *behavioral* understanding of what it is.
2) *The love of ideas and verbal expression often becomes a propensity to circumlocution.* We talk issues to death. In conventions we pass resolutions which are often filled with words that do nothing, that go nowhere. The love of words may be a disease among us.

3) *Our desire to hear all sides often leads to indecision. We* want to be so "objective," there is always more data to be collected, another point of view to be explored, and sometimes, rather than decide "this" or "that," we end up straddling a fence, and our indecision becomes a form of passive racism.
4) *Our assumption that knowledge and information will answer every problem often traps us in a cognitive web.* Guts, emotion, determination and passion must accompany what the anti-racist knows, and sometimes such displays scare the "liberals" away.
5) *There is a dangerous and subtle assumption that we are more progressive, more advanced than most when it comes to many social issues.* Racism then becomes something that is "over there," in "that other group," and that "location" of the problem often leads to a failure to examine *our own culpability* for its presence.

In the United States of America there is No Racism Immune System!

No vaccination against racism.
No inoculation against racism.
No anti-racism "shots."
No pills that prevent racism.
No anti-racist corpuscles.
No racism medicine.
No insurance policy against racism.
No cleansing agent that washes racism away.
No militia armed against racism.
No legislation that guarantees protection.
No ideas that all by themselves eliminate racism.
No communication tool devoid of racist tendency.
No place where there is insulation against racism.

There is No Racism Immune System in the United States! Not even for "liberals!"

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August 1990

Assumptions (Convictions) About Racism in United States of America

Recently a friend who was writing a doctoral dissertation about racism, asked me to share some of my major assumptions about racism, how it functions, and how to work to eliminate it. My response is what you now have in hand.

Soon it became clear that what I have listed here are more accurately described as convictions to which I have come over the past twenty years. It also became clear that I'd never complete the list satisfactorily; and indeed as soon as this is done I am sure that I will think of more to add, or some more adequate way of restating what is here.

It has to start somewhere! So here is a basic list, in no particular order of priority. If it helps you to define more clearly some of your assumptions about racism, it will have served its purpose.

- That our nation is founded on a terrible contradiction which on the one hand asserts the equality of people, but on the other hand assumes the superiority of white, propertied males.
- That the above contradiction was written into the laws and many judicial decisions of the colonies before we were a nation, and then into the Constitution.
- That beliefs, values, and norms built on assumptions of white superiority have been thoroughly ingrained into the cultural milieu which governs the way most whites perceive the world, decide, and act in the world.
- That racist ways of perceiving, deciding, and acting are often determinative of policies, procedures, and practices in white-controlled institutions.
- That the intersection of separate institutions and vast systems which are controlled by white people frequently result in disparate negative effects for people of color.
- That racism occurs sometimes by intention and sometimes unintentionally.
- That racism need not be perpetuated by any conspiracy of intention, but simply becomes a result of the ways in which society, institutions, and cultural norms function.
- That racism denies to people of color equal access to goods, services, resources, and power.
- That racism is often internalized with devastating personal results for individual persons of color.
- That the necessity to cope constantly with a racist environment, creates a burden of stress for people of color and drains energy and time which might otherwise be channeled into academic and vocational goals.
- That racism must be actively countered. That racism must be addressed directly as racism, and must be named for what it is...racism.
- That it is important to learn to use the word "racism" as a descriptive word, rather than as a judgment.
- That racist assumptions of white superiority are built on and perpetuate white privilege and power.
- That racism has negative long-range impact on white people.
- That racism encourages white people to believe a lie about their superiority.
- That racism results in the under education of people of color and the mis-education of white people.
- That racism can only be fully understood by examining the dimensions of institutional and

systemic white power.

- That racism intersects with sexism, classism, anti-Semitism, and heterosexism, and its relationships to those forms of oppression must be understood in plans to eliminate any of the oppressions.
- That efforts to eradicate racism must be undertaken by whites and people of color in coalition; each group has distinctive roles to play in that combined effort.
- That efforts to overcome racism which are initiated by whites must include intentionally built-in mechanisms of feedback from people of color.
- That the systems which create racism will continue to perpetuate it unless there is an active, intentional effort to stop it
- That language is a prominent carrier of cultural values and norms, and will actively contribute to racism unless it is continually reviewed for its racist effects.
- That guilt is a common and normal response for many whites when they discover their complicity in a racist system; moving beyond guilt into responsible action for the present and future is essential for white liberation.

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November 1991

Racism: Negative Effects on Whites

Over the years I have often heard talk about how racism has impacted white people. Usually that discussion comes in the context of an assumption that, if whites can see that racism has negative effects on them as a group, that realization will motivate action to eliminate racism. I do not share that assumption; racism is a far more powerful and recalcitrant force than this assumption acknowledges, clinging stubbornly wherever it is lodged. In addition the loss of benefits, privilege, and power which accrue to whites from racism may simply be a price which not many whites are willing to pay to bring an end to racism. While few whites would admit, and may not even recognize this dynamic, it is one which I believe functions to keep some whites from active anti-racism. To measure the benefits, privilege and power which make life better for us than for people of color could, in some subliminal process of thought and feeling outweigh the negatives. Peggy McIntosh has written about those privileges with insight and persuasiveness.* Those of us who are white can balance the negative effects of racism with those privileges; there are no balancing positives to racism to tempt people of color,

While I am not sanguine that identifying the negative effects will motivate many whites to act against racism, it may still be helpful to probe thought about the subject. So here are some convictions to which I have come about how racism hurts those of us who are white. The generalizations here do not necessarily apply to all whites, they are not in any particular order, they are not expanded or explained, and I am sure that they do not represent all that I will want to include immediately after the list is finished.

Some of the negative effects of racism on whites:

- Racism has distorted reality for many whites. Teachings about history, the world, the pursuits of thought, expressions of culture, and personal relationships have for most whites been both limited and false.
- Racism has taught whites that we are members of a race which is superior, and that assumption creates false expectations and warped illusions.
- Racism, particularly during the period when Africans were enslaved, taught white men that it is all right to rape black women, and also exacerbated the devaluation of white women.
- Racism has taught whites that we are entitled to privilege as a right of birth, undercutting the assumption of achieved merit which is one of the cornerstones of democracy.
- Racism, present at the foundation of our nation, left a country built on a fundamental and terrible contradiction between a belief in equality and a belief in white superiority. That contradiction remains unresolved.
- Racism has produced in white society a mental health problem: characteristic responses among many whites are dominated by unfounded *fear* of blacks, *hatred, suspicion, guilt, shame,* and *jealousy.* These words are the language of disease.
- The cost for whites who want to move beyond racism has been a high one, measured in time, emotion, psychic energy, and sometimes money.
- Racism, as one of the root causes of poverty, costs our nation huge amounts of money,

* See *White Privilege and Male Privilege,* by Peggy McIntosh, 1988. Available from the Center for Research on Women, Wellesley College, Wellesley, MA 02181. For a more thorough analysis, see *Impacts of Racism on White Americans,* edited by Bowser and Hunt, Sage Publications, 1981.

measured in crime, unemployment and related social ills.

- Racism has set whites who are made poor in our society in competition with people of color, and has also increased the separation between classes among whites.
- Racism, infecting the minds and hearts of whites who have built the institutions of our society, has led us to create systems which do not produce goods, services, nor allow access to resources for people of color as they do for whites, resulting in injustices which plague our systemic health.
- Racism has blinded many whites who do not see nor understand when they are offensive to people of other races in thought, word, and act.
- Racism, practiced as discrimination, frequently denies to white institutions and businesses the talents and experience of people of color.
- Racism, practiced as housing discrimination, has too often created white ghettos, where white children and adults are isolated from the rich interactions which can come from living with people whose life experience by race has been different.
- Racism has created a justice system which does not deliver equal justice to whites and people of color, a system which reflects dishonor on white society. (You can expand this into most areas of our systems, i.e., health care, employment, and others.)
- Racism has taught us to incorporate into our thinking and speaking negative stereotypes that perpetuate racist ideas.
- In our relations with other nations racism has led us to actions which prejudice large segments of the world population against us, and complicate our role in the world.
- Racism has led us to ignore the teachings of native peoples about how to relate to the natural world, contributing to our environmental problems.

Here is where you can start adding your own thoughts to the beginnings above...keep it going! Above all, find some places where you can redouble your efforts to bring about anti-racist changes.

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October 1992

On The Permanence of Racism

Derrick Bell has once again moved my thoughts and my heart in a new direction which is both frightening and exciting. To appreciate the impact his latest book has had on me, it is important to review an experience centered in a question I have been asked numerous times.

The question I have heard so often is, "When do you think we will overcome racism in this country?" Over the years I have developed a guarded response which generally is something like, "My best guess is that we may overcome racism in 500 years." People have usually thought that I am resorting to hyperbole rooted in pessimism when I respond that way. "You can't mean that!" has been the tone of disbelief! "Yes, I do believe that, and that is my most hopeful prediction," I have said.

In quiet reflection after such exchanges, I have frequently found myself confronted with my real thought, the one I dared not express, because of the consequences which might be implied both for me and for others. The thought I have not dared express says, "I am not sure that we will ever overcome racism in this country." That thought trembles on the brink of the next obvious question, "Then why should we continue to work against racism, if there is no hope of overcoming it?" That is a frightening thought which threatens the essence of what I have seen my life to be about for well over twenty years. It is frightening because it leaves me, as with others who might also be tempted to give up, without hope. So I have instinctively backed away from an honest personal response to the question about the future of racism...the five hundred years "best hope" has been said with a hole in my tongue!

Now comes Derrick Bell's newest book, *Faces at the Bottom of the Well*, with a subtitle, *The Permanence of Racism.* It is the subtitle which grabs me! That is especially true when compared to the subtitle of his *And We Are Not Saved* (1987), which is, *The Elusive Quest for Racial Justice.* From "Elusive Quest" to the "Permanence of Racism" in five years is, in itself, a powerful message!

The truth is out, leapt my heart! Now at last I may dare to say that I believe we will never overcome racism! I raced through the pages of the book, hoping to find out how Derrick Bell deals with that next question which has so frightened me. What about the potential consequences of an answer which might for many undermine their anti-racist motivations? Very soon came the author's response, set forth in this proposition: "Black people will never gain full equality in this country. Even those Herculean efforts we hail as successful will produce no more than temporary 'peaks of progress,' short-lived victories that slide into irrelevance as racial patterns adapt in ways that maintain white dominance. This is a hard-to-accept fact that all history verifies. We must acknowledge it, not as a sign of submission, but as an act of ultimate defiance.

Accepting the permanence of racism is not an act of submission, but is the ultimate act of defiance!!!! I was dancing, free!

How on earth could I explain to myself or anyone else the exhilaration I felt in acknowledging the permanence of something I abhor with my whole being? For days I was almost evangelical, pushing Bell's book into the face of everyone I met, declaring a new source of energy for the continuing task of working against racism. That was what excited me; I felt a new surge of energy and determination. To understand what was happening to me, I made some initial notes. I list them here, with a few comments, hoping that for someone else out there they might ignite similar excitement.

First, accepting the permanence need not be an act of submission. An alcoholic friend reminded me that acknowledging the permanence of his condition did not diminish but rather energized his determination to resist it. A person working to prevent child abuse said it may never be eliminated, but her work would always continue. A pacifist would not give up working for peace even if convinced that war would still be used as a means of settling international disputes. Continued efforts for any particular good are not dependent upon assurances that the offensive behavior will be eliminated. Suddenly my fearful question lost its hold on my heart, and I was indeed free in a new way. As a matter of fact my fear to address the future, knowing that racism is permanent, now looks almost stupid, and I must continue to wonder why I asked the question.

Second, accepting the permanence of racism eliminates despair as an option. Despair is borne out of recurring, deferred dreams, out of hopes never fulfilled. If I no longer expect the elimination of racism, then I have no option to despair over the frustration of that goal. The dream and the hope may still remain in redefined form. They are embodied in the continuation of opposition to racism, in the defiant fist raised against the oppression.

Third, once I have accepted the permanence of racism, being engaged in the struggle against racism becomes the end. I no longer need to look for signs of the ultimate victory somewhere out there in the future. I am now free to attend fully to the present moment of the struggle. That's all that matters! No need to worry about measuring "success," though we continue to celebrate every tiny sign of victory. Just knowing that I am engaged in the struggle is all that I have to ask for.

Fourth, accepting the permanence of racism adds another dimension to the task of opposing it. That dimension stretches into an unknown future. In some peculiar way I do not yet understand, a new kind of "hope" is being born. For me the new statement of "hope" is that "flying goal" of which Protestant theologians spoke after the early 20th century shattered the hopes of ultimate progress; that goal is always "out there" ahead of me, beckoning my heart and prodding my action. Or it is that much older Jewish tradition that reminds me that though I know I may never reach the goal, there is no excuse for failing to undertake the task?

The new sense of hope is that which Garrison announced when he demanded "immediate abolition" of the system which enslaved Africans in this country. Garrison well knew that there would not be "immediate" abolition, but he shouted that slavery "ought" to be abolished immediately! In the Civil Rights Movement, the shout was for "freedom now!" No one expected freedom on the spot, immediately; that was also a statement of what "ought" to be! So it is today, when we speak of the elimination of racism; it too is a statement of what "ought" to happen. That is a kind of hope which is not subject to despair or to "giving up" or to "burning out" but, rather, gathers energy even while it gives energy to the movement.

Fifth, accepting the permanence of racism emphasizes in a drastic way the seriousness of the problem and the struggle against it. Bell's book specifically reminds me that even the best strategies, the most progressive accomplishments against racism are likely to be manipulated and become subversive of original intents. Racism has an almost diabolic way of consuming many of the mechanisms of its opposition. As those who are committed to the continuing struggle we must be always alert to that possible dynamic. At the very least it means that we must always be looking for new strategies.

So, there are my first reflections on The Permanence of Racism. Let's talk about it, not in the luxury of drawing room discussion, but within the context of the continuing struggle.

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August 1993

Why There Is No End To Racism in the U.S.A.

Having come to the reluctant acceptance of the permanence of racism and the simultaneous liberation that acceptance has brought to my involvement in the struggle against racism,* I have been asked often to indicate the reasons which lead me to the assumption of "permanence." Sometimes the questioner seems rooted in stubborn resistance, sometimes in puzzled inquiry, sometimes in defiant incredulity. The question begs both my mind and my heart for an answer.

Three large categories of what seem to me to be factual observations become the headings under which I cluster my response to the question. Here is an outline of some reasons which lead me to conclude that racism is permanent in our nation.

First there is massive ignorance about race/racism in white America. Andrew Hacker has said that every one of us could write a book about race. That is true. Almost everyone I meet regards themselves as an authority on race. That common assumption makes it doubly hard to make my point about ignorance. Yet the almost daily experience of talking with whites leads to a conviction that the lack of basic information is appalling. The ignorance of which I speak is never an excuse for inaction to end racism. In our society, ignorance is never an excuse; we are surrounded by information sources which can provide understanding beyond our ability to act on it. The will to pursue the information is frequently lacking (that's my next point!); the willingness to act on what is known lags even behind the knowledge, but the vacuum of "not-knowing" remains real.

When I consider evidence for the "ignorance," the questions and comments which have assaulted me almost daily for years flood my memory:

- A distinguished professor of law wondering why I speak of African civilization, because he knows of none such!
- Public debates about Affirmative Action by people who do not know about the history of what brought it into being.
- The worn-out question asked about black people in particular, "What do they want, anyway?"
- Why do they destroy their own neighborhoods? (Asked after every riot of the century.)
- What do Asians think about...? (Insert any topic you care to.)
- Why all the complaints about Columbus?
- Why can't Hispanic people learn to speak English?
- Don't talk to me about slavery; that was hundreds of years ago!

At this point, you can expand the illustrations to your own satisfaction. Then we could engage ourselves in a l-o-n-g discussion about whether the list is an illustration of ignorance or a more subtle form of psychological denial. The answer to that question will depend very much on the particular situation or persons involved. Still, at one level it seems to me often to be simple ignorance—there is a lot which many people do not know about race/racism in the United States. Apart from those who know but just don't want to do anything, apart from those "knowers" who

* See Seldon's essay, "On the Permanence of Racism," October 1992.

are tricked by their own psyches, I am appalled by the numbers of people whose conversation is laced with not-knowing when it comes to race/racism.

The educational job is MASSIVE, and needs addressing at every level where communication takes place in our society. Ignorance is never an excuse for inaction, but action based on ignorance will produce no good. The educational job will always leave HUGE vacuums of ignorance out of which will come actions which are not solutions, but which are barriers to change.

Second, there is no sustained national will to end racism. Underline in your thoughts the words, "sustained," "national," and "will." Dr. King said once that we are a "seven-day nation"; his reference was to attention given by media to major events representing societal problems. Something cataclysmic is featured on the front pages or at the "top" of TV news for a couple of days, recedes to the inner pages, and then disappears about seven days later. My completely unscientific observations affirm that King was just about right. The attention span given to some of our major problems is measured in column inches and sound bites; racism seems particularly prone to this treatment. The "color line" emerged as the great problem of the twentieth century; the unresolved issue now projects itself into the new century.

After the "L.A. riots" of last year, I spoke at a rally here in Boston. A "cub" reporter sought me out, hoping that I would respond to her question about what would happen because of the rally with an assurance that there would be some real changes made. My answer, born in a history she did not understand, told her that the primary good which would result was that the people who came out in the rain would feel better. That was important-I asserted, but history taught me not to expect much else from rallies. Sustaining the energy and the concern that propels people to come "out" is never easy and, unfortunately, the attempt encounters the lack of will to address racism, even among well-intentioned people.

During 1992, when we were organizing around Alternative Quincentenary efforts to de-mythologize Columbus, there were about seventy people involved in planning and actions; the "fad" of that year-long "moment" dissipated shortly after October 12th, and only a few were left to continue the on-going struggle for indigenous rights. Staying power is minimal; absent is the will to engage in the long haul!

To recognize the truth of the absence of a sustained national will to respond to racism is not defeatist; it is acknowledgment of reality, and can be the impetus to invigorated determination to continue the struggle. That determination engages the hard work to create that national will, to continue to hope in the face of hopelessness.

You can complete this beginning list too. You will have instances from your own experience illustrating the failure of a sustained, national will.

Third, the economic-political system which regulates our life in this nation is built on conserving principles, guided by controlling interests concerned to protect and extend a past which has served them well. The political system is designed to allow for change, but that change is managed by those dedicated to expansion of policies which clearly work for their benefit and profit, while believing or pretending that the system serves all people. That system has worked steadily to empower some and to impoverish others. Economic-class disparities flourish, and in that context racial divisions are created, exacerbated, and exploited. History teaches that clearly.

Racist views and policies put into practice have built a nation on the backs and labor of enslaved Africans, of dispossessed indigenous peoples, of Asian, Latino, and European immigrant groups. That is not rhetoric, but demonstrable fact. In the context of that development we built race into the social compact in such a way that closed to groups of color avenues of escape and advancement available to whites. Progressive attempts to remove the barriers for people of color are

met with resistance and strategies to undermine and subvert every gain. We need only to watch what is happening to Affirmative Action, undertaken only a few short years ago as a conservative and modest step, now attacked both because it has worked for some and has not worked for others. Similar evidence is rooted in the history of progress and regression in our nation. There is little which makes me think that the future promises more than the past when it comes to race and racism.

It is your turn now! If you agree, please add to my comments. If you disagree, say that too. If you think me wrong I hope you are right! Even better, I hope I live to see that day when you have proven me wrong, not in discussion, but in the places where ideas become reality.

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June 1993

Some Characteristics of Anti-Racism

There have been numerous times in recent years when I have become aware of the different ways in which people think about what it means to be "anti-racist." The ways in which "anti-racism" is described necessarily stem from one's view of racism, and since my view is one which is clearly not adopted by many people, I have often found myself in disagreement with what many call "anti-racism." The issue has come to my consciousness in specific ways.

Several times in the past couple of years, I have had requests from people who want me to send them a list of organizations which I would call "anti-racist." When that first request came I knew immediately that I was going to be in trouble because I would not want to include on my list a lot of organizations which clearly see themselves as "anti-racist." The same kind of difficulty comes when I am asked to suggest whether or not individuals are anti-racist in the way they live. To help clarify my own views I have started to list some of what I look for when determining what characterizes anti-racism, in either an individual or an institution. What I share here is a beginning of that process.

Probably what I look for most of all when I define anti-racism is some form of sustained action, the intent of which is to change a system or an institutional policy, practice, or procedure which has racist effects. For me this is a primary criterion for defining what constitutes anti-racism; it is also the criteria which separates me from many others. It is born out of a conviction that racism is both deeply institutionalized and widely enculturated in the systems of our national life. Unless the presence of racism in those forms is addressed at some level, there is not anti-racism. A person may be engaged in building authentic relationships with individuals of different races, may be consistent in educating people about prejudice, may be stalwart in resistance to discriminatory actions, but without action to bring about some systemic change, may not be fulfilling the needs of anti-racism. I will applaud and assist in the efforts to create authentic relationships, in the education against prejudice, and in the stance against discrimination. All of those things must be done by the anti-racist person. The other thing which is the most difficult for many people, and is frequently untouched: there is too often the failure to see or the lack of willingness to change the racism which is built into systems. It is there that the prejudice, the unauthentic personal relationships, and the discrimination find its support. Unless those support systems are changed, the full task of anti-racism is not addressed.

At Community Change, we do work to help educate people about how prejudice functions in their lives and relationships; we do stand wherever we can against discrimination, and will always do so, circumscribed only by our limited resources. We do also identify systemic issues which in some way we can probe with an intention to bring about change. Because of our conviction that we must work on that level also in our anti-racism, we, for instance, cooperate with others in gathering data to be used in a national effort to eliminate government involvement in the harassment of black, elected officials. That is an issue reaching beyond prejudiced attitudes, though certainly prejudice is involved, going beyond poor interracial relations, even beyond discriminatory acts, though both are involved, but encompassing institutional commitments to a racist status quo in which power is held by some and denied to others. Anyone familiar with the history of government agencies will understand how those institutional commitments often function to support racism.

I emphasize the importance of addressing the institutional issues, because I find white

friends in particular frequently do not do so. It is necessary for the anti-racist who works in housing to be aware of how policies which appear quite harmless may in practice have racist effects, as, for instance, a restriction on numbers of children. As a stated preference that may sound all right, but if it is discovered that such a policy will limit housing opportunities for a racial group which statistically has larger families than others, the anti-racist will become active to change that policy. Similarly, a person may be an administrator in a college with a stated commitment to "diversity." The college may sponsor multicultural events, underwrite support services for students of color, and revise curricula to include a spectrum of perspectives, but may still have a policy which limits the listing of certain courses in a catalog. If those courses are, for instance, in Black Studies, student accessibility to them is made difficult. The result clearly may be racist. The anti-racist administrator will document that effect, and move for a policy change.

Action which focuses only on individual relationships, on attitudes, even simply on discriminatory behaviors, will seldom address the institutional and systemic nature of racism. For those of us who want to be anti-racist, it is imperative that we address this larger level at which racism functions.

Another dynamic I look for in anti-racism is the extent to which a person or an organization is involved in multi-racial efforts to combat racism. This becomes more complex as the demography of our population assumes greater racial variety. I become daily more aware of the continued ways in which Native peoples, the "original" oppressed of our hemisphere, continue to experience oppression. I see a rapidly expanding presence of Asian peoples from vast areas of ocean and continents, greeted by xenophobia and racial hatred. I see people whose primary language is Spanish, from a spectrum of nations and cultures, greeted by racial and linguistic prejudice. I daily see African-American concerns of three hundred years still not addressed. I see anti-Semitism rooted in centuries of stupid stereotypes. As I witness the complexity of intra and inter-group relationships, it becomes clear that we must work in every way possible to unite all these groups with progressive whites in coalitions to create a new and more just common life. This is hard work, requiring a combination of patience, action, clarity of vision, eagerness to listen, willingness to risk new roles and relationships, and sheer determination to persevere in the face of harsh reality.

I also look for a clear focus on racism, always in the context of a larger picture. The picture analogy is helpful to me; I think of a huge canvas which depicts all the forms of racism and other oppressions. That is an immense canvas which circles the earth. The patterns which various oppressions take, the dynamics which characterize them, and often the people victimized by them have much in common. All these forms of oppression need to be resisted, all need to be diminished, all need attention, BUT no one person, no single organization can give attention to all forms of oppression. Somewhere I learned that power comes from focused energy. So, I need to focus my attention, to focus my resources, to focus my energy in order to maximize any power I have. I have to choose some place to focus, while at the same time keeping the whole picture in my eye. So I look at the canvas, and say this is where I will focus my attention for me, and for Community Change that focus is on racism...but we must never forget that racism is part of a web of interconnected forces, all of which we must resist. Keep the whole in mind but focus on a place where you can gain enough knowledge, enough power to have some effect. Sounds like a version of "think globally, act locally!" The anti-racist needs to nurture an awareness of the interconneedness of all oppressions, yet for the purposes of gaining effectiveness needs a clear focus for action.

Tomorrow I'll probably want to add to this beginning, or maybe to start all over! Let's keep

the discussion going.

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October 1994

A Question for Sal…"American <u>First</u>?"

He was a young man of Italian descent, a student in my class at Boston College. The class is gathered around the topic: *The History and Development of Racism*, and features a great deal of discussion between students as we look together at the broad sweep of racism in our history. Sal had been a vigorous discussant in that group, and it is clear from his level of participation that a lot was churning in his head and heart. So I was not surprised when he requested a chance to talk about his most recent paper.

Sal's paper was titled AMERICA FIRST and it was, in part, an expression of his thought process through the semester, tracing what was happening in a turbulent time for him. Sal had come into the course without any strong sense of what it meant to be of Italian descent. As he heard other students articulating a vibrant meaning of their ethnic or racial background, Sal had begun to explore his Italian roots, and what he found was exciting to him. He began to say, "I'm Italian American," but that designation did not feel comfortable on his lips, so he confronted himself in his paper to find out just what he did think and feel about his identity.

AMERICA FIRST! was the answer to Sal's search! So that was the first title for his paper; still there was something wrong. AMERICA FIRST sounded a bit too much like an assertion that everything about his country had to be seen as superior to all other groups, and that was not what Sal meant. We talked about that and soon he decided that what he really wanted to say was AMERICAN FIRST! He wanted to put that "American" part of his identity at the core of expressing who he is. For Sal being an American was more important than being of Italian descent.

We talked at some length, and Sal explained that he did not want to deny the importance of his Italian heritage, that he had indeed come to a rising, new sense of pride in that part of his identity, and he felt good about that. He did not want in any way to diminish that new-found importance, nor did he want to seem to say to anyone else that their heritage was not important. But Sal was wrestling with another critical question.

For Sal the question burning within him asked, "in the midst of all this emphasis on ancestral heritage, where does the sense of unity come from for all of us who live together in the one nation?" Sal was afraid that we might lose something of vital meaning as we strive to build a nation, if we emphasize too much our differences of background. So, for him, acknowledging the importance of being Italian had to be subservient to being AMERICAN. Hence, AMERICAN *FIRST*! He wanted to argue in class that we all adopt that same view and begin to probe together to find what was common in being AMERICAN.

The question Sal raised is an important one. Here we are all together in the same land and, regardless of how we got here, how recently or how long ago we came, here we are, and we must work together to build a common-wealth, a nation. Isn't it tragic, he reasoned, that we seem to find our unity only when we are at war, or in competition in the Olympics. For Sal the positive lesson to learn from the Olympics is the sense of pride he felt every time an AMERICAN did well in that competition. "That person is an AMERICAN, and that is great!" Sal affirmed. Why can't we seek that kind of unity in all phases of our common life? Put the AMERICAN part of our background first, he was saying, and then acknowledge any other heritage we want to, but being AMERICAN was of FIRST importance.

Sal was obviously teaching himself; his questions and his answers were leading him into new explorations, explorations which were challenging him about the very role of his life in building a society. That was exciting and my job was simply to raise some other questions for him,

to assist his own challenging spirit.

I knew that one question Sal was going to have to face was the extent to which he could ask others in our class to share his emphasis on AMERICAN FIRST. I wanted to affirm the search for commonness, and I tried to do that, but at the same time to suggest that everyone might not share his conviction that the answer was in AMERICAN FIRST. I was either not very clear or precise in raising the question, or Sal was so absorbed in the excitement of his own "discovery" that he could not hear my questions. So, I suggested that he try out his new theory in the next class session, to see what response it would get.

During the next class session I was eager to hear what would happen in the discussion group where I was sure Sal would raise his concern. I got into the room as Sal was posing his question; he did it well, articulating an invitation to everyone to join him in an emphasis on the fact that we all exist in "America" and, therefore, ought to be primarily concerned with being "American," of finding together what that means as we build an "American" nation. It was a strong pleading, clearly motivated to seek what was good for all. Sal's whole being was in his words, articulated with passion and hope. I waited to hear the response.

A young, African American man, leaning and listening, was ready with his reply. "That's all very nice...I agree with what you want to achieve...I want to get to that sense of common unity too...but being "American" does not "do it" for me...You've got to recognize what the "American" business means to me...I can't "buy into""" that!...We've read that history together, and being "American" to me means enslavement, and segregation, and discrimination...It doesn't mean to me what it means to you...That's true of our history, and it is true of our lives today. I'm not treated the same as you are treated in lots of situations <u>today</u> so don't expect me to claim to be "American" <u>FIRST</u>...I can't do it!"

It was calmly but forcefully stated, and then affirmed by yet another African American student. There was continuing exchange for a few minutes, during which a part of our history came very much alive once again.

Frederick Douglass and his 1852 Fourth of July Oration were there in that classroom! After acknowledging the greatness of the occasion and the importance of the Declaration of Independence for those assembled to celebrate it, Douglass asked,

> What have I, or those I represent, to do with your national independence? Are the great principles of political freedom and of natural justice embodied in that Declaration of Independence extended to us? And am I, therefore, called upon to bring our humble offering to the national altar, and to confess the benefits and express devout gratitude for the blessings resulting from your independence to us?...I say it with a sad sense of the disparity between us. I am not included within the pale of this glorious anniversary! Your high independence only reveals the immeasurable distance between us. The blessings in which you, this day, rejoice, are not enjoyed in common. The rich inheritance of justice, liberty, prosperity, and independence, bequeathed by your fathers, is shared by you, not by me...This Fourth of July is yours, not mine.

Sal, we cannot expect many African Americans, or many others who have lived lives limited by prejudice, discrimination, and racism, and who continue to confront limited opportunities, to be quick to claim an identity as "American" with the fervor you feel.

I yearn too for the sense of common identity you seek, but that toward which we build must

be built by all of us together. Maybe you and I need to listen to the present-day Frederick Douglasses and invite a dialogue in which that new identity and unity will truly belong to and emerge from the whole. I'm ready for that move, Sal, and I think you are too. Let's begin by continuing the dialogue you started in class.

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II. Essays on Historical Perspectives

December 1986

"Left-Over" From the Sixties

Early in the decade it was said that those of us who were active during the '60's and still continue the same activities today, are "left-overs," "hangers-on," out of touch with present reality, to be pitied more than scorned, because our efforts were futile.

All of that critique was negative stuff to absorb, and then along came Clarence Pendleton to call us "new racists!" Racism does take new forms today, but let's not put all the old activists into a useless category. We don't need any "new" racists, because we've still got plenty of the "old" ones hanging on and around! So I quickly dispensed with that bit of demagoguery.

As far as being called a "left-over" from the sixties, I've decided to claim that title gladly! It reminds me that some very good things did happen in the sixties, and some of those things still need to happen today. It reminds me that we need some "sixties-left-overs" precisely because there is still a lot of racism also "left-over."

The racism that is "left-over" is not only "left-over" from the 1960's, but from the 1860's, the 1760's, and the 1660's at least. So you see the genesis of my thought is much more antique than the name-callers realized. The agenda that is "left-over" for this nation is an historic one. Racism is "left- over" because we've never yet really dealt with it as a nation and as a people.

Racism is "left-over" from the 1960's. There were advances in voting rights, but "left-over" racism means that those advances must be vigorously guarded or they are quickly eroded by administrative or legislative acts. There were advances in employment for people of color, but "left-over" racism has found ways to subvert those advances and to keep a defined place at the top of most everything for whites only. There were advances in access to education, but "left-over" racism means that today decreasing percentages of students of color on our campuses are subjected to verbal, physical, and psychic abuse. There were advances in the sixties in some parts of the criminal justice system, but "left-over" racism today reinstitutes a death penalty which, by virtue of the way the whole system functions, is bound to be discriminatory toward people of color particularly and poor people generally. Myrdal's warning that race was this nation's primary problem predated the sixties, but it remains to remind us that there is a great "left-over" agenda indicating an inability or unwillingness to dig at the roots of the problem: racism.

Racism is "left-over" from the 1860's. Racism was "left-over" in large doses by the failure of the nation to enforce the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments which came so rapidly after the Civil War. Racism was "left-over" when President after President in those late decades of the last century treated the problem primarily as a political one rather than as a moral one, and proceeded with caution rather than conviction. Racism was "left-over" when "states' rights" was given priority over the right of newly freed citizens. "Left-over" racism occurred when we invented new post-Reconstruction ways to control the formerly enslaved Africans. It happened too when we decided as a nation first to exploit and then later to exclude Asian people. The nation had an opportunity to "Reconstruct" the dream, but it fell flat on its collective white face. Racism was "left-over."

Racism is "left-over" from the 1760's. Racism was a "left-over" after the founding of our nation. It was "left-over" when references to it were deleted from the Declaration of Independence. It was "left-over" when our founders postponed an end of the slave trade in the wording of the Constitution, and also defined the enslaved Africans as each one "three-fifths" of a person. Washington, Jefferson, Madison, and other great leaders of the time knew that we were postponing something which would finally come back to haunt us, but they chose to "leave it over." The 18th

century also gave birth to "scientific" studies called phrenology and physiognomy, classifying people by facial angles and skull measurements; even when investigators denied any racial applications for their findings, they were frequently used in the new colonies to buttress assumptions of white superiority. The "left-overs" from those studies became a racist legacy in anthropology for years, and still live in many hearts and minds today.

Racism is "left-over" from the 1660's. By this time in our history slavery was rapidly becoming institutionalized; indentured servanthood was being replaced by a more permanent "arrangement." We had decided that enslaving native peoples was not going to work, so we proceeded on a course of driving them from their land, alternated with various forms of cultural genocide. Africans were better candidates for slavery, so on their backs we built a nation, and the economy of both North and South became dependent upon the "peculiar institution." There were people in the fledgling land who knew then that we were wrong-headed morally and economically, but as a new people we nurtured the evil thing, and racism grew as a cancer in the body politic. It was "left-over."

The "left-overs" are abundant. Every time in our history when we have failed to deal with racism, it has been "left-over." "Left-over" for the next generation to take care of; "left-over" for some laissez-faire doctrine to work out; "left-over" on the assumption that human beneficence would simply allow the ugly monster to wither away and die of its own accord.

Racism does not die by itself. Untreated it will flourish and grow. It will always be "left-over" until the day when we make sure that there is nothing there to be "left-over!"

Because racism is "left-over" from the past, it is good to have some "left-over" and new anti-racist activists on the scene. For one, I am "left-over" from the sixties, and proud! I'm going to keep reminding myself and others that until we determine to uproot racism in some massive and foundational ways, it will continue to be "left-over."

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March 1990

The Roots and Fruits of White Fear

Fear has been asserted by many over the years as a dominant dynamic in race relations. It is a truism to say that people often fear what or who they do not know. An attempt to overcome that fear of the unknown is one rationale behind the myriad of programs which are organized to bring people together across racial lines, engaging them in discussion, play and other common pursuits. Getting to know the other person or group is often an important way to overcome the fear which accompanies "not knowing."

There is also evidence that getting to know the personal and group differences does not always eliminate fear; sometimes the process of "getting to know" results in confirming previously held stereotypes; then separation and fear deepen. Whatever the outcome, the experience underlines the fact that fear is a strong motivating factor in racism.

Once several years ago I was reading a book in which a black writer commented that white fear of blacks was the fundamental dynamic of racism. That seemed to me to be an extreme emphasis, and my first impulse was to discard that idea, chalk it up to some sort of oversensitivity. Still, the suggestion began to "burn" in my mind! I knew this writer and had profound respect for his ideas, informed by a life experience dedicated to combating racism. So, I phoned him. Did he really mean to say quite that baldly that fear was at the very roots of racism, that it was in fact the fundamental dynamic?

My question must have sounded rather stupid. This was a writer whose profession demanded that he use language very carefully, that he craft every sentence to say precisely what he meant here I was asking if he really meant what he said!

The answer was an equally clear and concise restatement of his claim. My incredulity seemed to be the only thing in question. A patient phone discussion pushed my thoughts to contemplate my friend's comment, a process continued even now, as I explore the depth of white fear toward people and communities of color.

In Boston, during the late fall and early winter of '89 we saw an incredible example of the fear dynamic. A white suburban couple in their car after leaving a Boston hospital, were robbed, then forced to drive the car to an area close to a predominantly black area, where they were both shot, the pregnant woman fatally, her husband wounded in the stomach. The assailant was said to be a black man. Most of the nation knows that eventually it became clear that the husband himself, now a suicide, is the alleged murderer. Aside from what investigation may eventually prove, the "fear-full" response of much of the city and its metropolitan area is a demonstration of the power of the dynamic of fear.

Hysteria is a word which might easily characterize much of the response to the allegation that this white suburban couple had been attacked in the city by a black male. Government officials, police, electronic and print media responded in shock, horror, and outrage. In offices, on subway cars, in coffee shops, theater lines, wherever people met, it was the subject of conversation for weeks. There was for the most part a quick acceptance of the allegation that a black man had perpetrated the heinous act. The fear that both produced and was generated by the accusation moved through the air with electric speed and power. The instant, area-wide fear expressed toward the black community in general, set my heart wondering.

In a reflective mood, I remember some of the roots of racial fear on the parts of whites, with evidence from my personal experience and from history:

– The fear reflected in the eyes of those white "hate stares" during demonstrations of the

Civil Rights Movement.

- The fear which characterized much of the white response to Malcolm X, and to the Black Panthers, both of whom explicitly said they would not initiate violence, but would respond to violence with violence.
- The fear which the 'Slack Power" emphasis sent into the hearts of much of white America
- The fear of having blacks and other people of color move into a "white" neighborhood, expressed in terms of concern for personal safety and/or property values
- The fear of school desegregation programs
- The fear that Affirmative Action might mean a "lowering of standards" as people of color come into the workplace
- The fear of interracial marriages, which in the early part of this century was characterized by the comment among whites, "you wouldn't want your daughter to marry one," which was somehow supposed to terminate any discussion about integration.
- Underlying the white concern about the "black table" in the cafeteria of every college I have visited, is a basic fear that someone might be doing something in secret which cannot be controlled by whites.
- The fear which many black people report seeing in the eyes of whites they pass on crowded streets, or who close the windows in cars next to them
- The consistent fear expressed among suburban whites of going into the "inner city" for meetings; I have seen numerous meetings moved from sites scheduled in the city, because suburban people "just won't come."
- The fear of insurrection by enslaved Africans during antebellum days, dominated by slave codes, night patrols, drivers, overseers, supervision of black gatherings for worship, and other organized intimidation

Much of the above is a recollection of things from my personal experience, but the dynamics behind each of those have an origin which can be specifically traced in our national history. The references to the period of slavery and the fear of insurrection are known to anyone who has done a serious study of that "peculiar institution." Less known probably are the roots of the suburban suspicion of the city.

In his book, *Toward the Final Solution: A History of European Racism,* George L. Mosse traces some of the origins of notions which are contributory to the suburban-urban fear dynamic. Arising from the Pietism of the eighteenth century, sometimes intersecting with ideas from the Enlightenment, was a glorification of the peasant and of rural life. The natural world was thought to symbolize the emotions; plants and animals exemplified legends and myths, and symbols were often related to nature, all of which was seen as the work of God. The rural life, in affinity with the seasonal rhythms of nature gradually became viewed as the more desirable environment for human development. A corollary argument led to a deepening suspicion of city life and thus the city. The historical line from the eighteenth century finds its outcome in today's generalized fear of the city. Too often that fear is accompanied by assumptions that areas outside of the urban centers are superior places for living and raising a family.

The evidence is easy to see; the fruits of fear are too clear. Tracing some of the roots in the history of our nation helps to illuminate the depth of the enculturated fear that is almost a part of the air we breathe. It helps to explain the extraordinary and immediate mass response to the Stuart case here in Boston. Moving through and beyond that massive cultural dose of fear is the next, harder step. Analysis is the easy step; next come the steps each must take toward community

relationships liberated from the bonds of fear.

Perhaps one first step is simply to acknowledge that the fear is there, that it dominates entirely too much of our life and responses to events. Next comes the determination to be free from the forces which create fear and the resulting divisions in our society. That will be a GIANT step, for all humankind.

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January 1992

Notes from a Mis-Educated White Man

I am an educated man.

I went twelve years to school and graduated from high school.

I am an educated man.

I went to college for two years, before going to World War II.

I am an educated man.

I went to college for three years, and graduated, after World War II.

I am an educated man.

I went to graduate school for four years, and graduated.

I am an educated man.

In all that "education" I was told little about African Americans, most of it wrong.

In all that "education" no one ever asked me to read a book by an African American author.

The most I learned about enslaved African people during those years was that they were "happy," passive, and loved their masters (à la Samuel Eliot Morrison.)

I was not taught that our national economy was built on the backs of enslaved African men and women.

I was not taught that the religion I loved condoned and, at times, inspired the enslavement of blacks.

I was not told that it was absurd and arrogant for the Pope and the Kings of Spain and Portugal to assume that they had the right to divide the world between the two countries.

I was not told that many years before Columbus African people had come to this hemisphere.

I was not taught that the coming of Columbus to these shores was the beginning of genocide for Arawaks, other native peoples, and slavery for African people in this hemisphere.

I was not taught that for thousands of years before Columbus there were flourishing societies, with elaborate ways of relating, governing, living, and surviving in this hemisphere.

No one explained to me the existence and growth in Europe of anti-black attitudes, prior to the explorations into this part of the world.

No one described to me how those old European attitudes got translated into the decisions to enslave African people here.

No one told me of the heroic and steady resistance by African people to their enslavement.

No one told me of the ways in which countless laws in our colonies denied the value of African lives.

No one told me that most of our admired Founding Fathers believed African people to be inferior to whites.

I was not taught that the original Constitution of the United States had written into it assumptions of white superiority.

I was not taught that most white Abolitionists believed in white superiority.

I was not taught about the continuing discrimination practiced legally against African people for three centuries, continued in more subtle forms today.

I was not taught about the amazing tenacity with which African peoples struggled to maintain their culture in spite of enslavement.

I was not taught about the ways in which "my" government was involved in the willful neglect of black health, for instance, in the Tuskegee syphilis experiment, nor how that neglect

continues today in policies which watch black infants die at a rate far greater than whites.

I was not taught that the unemployment rate of blacks has for years been almost double that of whites, and no one seems much concerned to correct that institutionalized discrepancy.

No one told me about the campaigns of some branches of "my" government to undermine black leadership, instanced by the FBI's conspiracy against Dr. King, or by alleged, continued harassment of black elected officials today.

No one in all those years of "education" told me about the persistent ways in which many of the systems of my society arc infected with both personal prejudice and institutional "tilts" which deny African Americans equal access to goods, services, and resources.

No one explained how subtle but pervasive anti-Black prejudice often drains the energies of African American people into simply coping, thus diminishing their abilities to perform in the academic or professional world.

No one told me that I, as a white male, had some obligation and ought to take a role in amending the wrongs of the past, and in creating a present/future which is more racially just.

No one told me that ofttimes what is "wrong" is not in the Black community, or in Black individuals, but in the heads, hearts, and habits of white people.

No one told me of the differences between prejudice, discrimination, and systemic racism, nor did they explain how those differences affect the ways I work for racial justice.

Am I an educated man?

I am trying to become such; every correction of the untruths suggested above, every empty space filled, has had to come from personal effort, from reading, from observing, from conversation with trusted friends. The educational systems methodically mis-educated me! That process of mis-education applies equally to my ignorance about other groups of people of color, and indeed of many white ethnic groups other than my own. Correcting that will be an on-going process for the rest of my life; at the cost of time, energy and emotion I cannot measure.

So I have watched through the years as the emphasis on African American history has expanded in our schools and other institutions, and I give thanks for it. African-American History Month is just one opportunity to educate people more fully, more honestly. That is a good "think" for us all.

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July 1992

Where Will You Be in '93?

1992 approached with announcements from official bodies of plans to celebrate the Quincentennial of the date when Columbus set foot on an island in the Caribbean. It was clear that the year would be crowded with expensive, lavishly-orchestrated events. In true entrepreneurial spirit, corporate entities and ad agencies began using themes of "discovery" to sell their products.

Then came the counter-campaigns. Indigenous groups united in anger, naming the beginning of genocide and racism in our hemisphere as the true legacy of Columbus, and announcing that they would use the occasion to celebrate 500 years of resistance to oppression. Activists from a spectrum of groups joined in coalitions, progressive cartoonists portrayed the political truth, historians set the record straight, and individuals joined the cry for an Alternative Quincentenary.

Four months into the year came the Rodney King trial, the verdict, and the uprisings of protest. Our phones rang and our doors opened to people who had found new motivation to respond to such blatant racism. Many were asking questions such as "What can I do? How can I get involved? Where should I begin? What group shall I work with?"

Responding to the questions of what to do is not as easy as one would like it to be. The levels of acquaintance with the issues among the newly-motivated are different, the place for each person to begin is not nearly as clear as you might think, and the depth of the motivation is often muddy. So I try to reply with sensitivity both to the questioner and to the questions. Finding the time and energy to adequately respond leaves me frequently feeling frustrated, wondering how to better use the opportunity.

One of the nagging questions I find beating in my heart when approached by someone who wonders what to "do" is, "Where will you be in '93?" Usually I stifle the question before it becomes audible, because it is my job to encourage motivation, to help find the place for people to become involved. Still, the question lingers...

Where will you be in '93? or in 2003? Or, for that matter, in 2013? I ask out of the experience of watching people come to the issues, stay briefly, then disappear from the movement. I ask it not in arrogance, and I always address it to myself first. "Where will I be...? Where will we be...? Where will you be in '93?"

My question is rooted in a conviction about the intransigence of the problems of social injustice. What began in our hemisphere in 1492 is deeply enculturated, institutionalized, and systematized in this nation, particularly in white heads and hearts. It is not going to fade quickly. There are no "fixes" for an immediate tomorrow. There are no easy answers about what to "do" absent a dedication to the long haul from the questioner.

So, where will you be in 1993? Experience leads me to an expectation that many of those who crowd to be involved in 1992 Alternative Quincentenary actions will be absent from the scene in '93. The issues that dominate the concerns of native peoples will still be with us. James Bay, Leonard Peltier, re-naming Columbus Day, issues of land rights, public stereotyping of native peoples, desecrations of native burial grounds, curriculum revisions about Indians, revision of traditional historical lies about native Peoples - all will need constant attention way beyond 1992. The need for folks to organize, mobilize and become active will continue. Where will you (I) be when called for action then?

In a recent conversation with a native person whom I greatly respect, he said he has lots of ideas about what to do to continue the momentum of 1992. His fear also is that most people active now may not be active next year. That fear is not born of unfounded cynicism, but in the reality of

how few of us have been involved in the struggles of native peoples in the past. The sudden attention of' '92 is welcome, but the challenge now is to maintain the momentum.

The issues rooted in racism today will be with us. Increased hate crimes, the failure of our major systems to deliver health care, jobs, education, housing, and justice for people of color, the challenges to bilingual and multi-cultural education, the harassment of black officials, the attacks on the modest programs of affirmative action -- these and more point us to concerns about racism.

In a talk recently with one fine young man who approached me about what he could do, I outlined a number of places for him to take action. He seemed interested, and as he left my office he asked me to give him a call. "No," I said, "You call me. I want to know how motivated you really are. If after our talk today, you are not even ready to take the initiative of a phone call, then I'm sure not going to follow-up. When you're ready, I'm ready. The next move is up to you!"

That might have been harsh, perhaps even arrogant, and possibly dead wrong. Still, it puts the issue clearly on the line. The challenge of' '92 is about our staying power. Where will we be in '93?

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April 1993

Self-Interest for White Anti-Racists

Recently in a class I teach at Boston College, I observed a young African American woman speak firmly and eloquently about her anger in the face of racism; in that context she challenged white students to be angry also. One of the women asked, "What should I do, as a white?" The answer was quick: "I can't tell you what you should do...I'm not white...but do something!" A continuing exchange was punctuated by a plea for the white students to become active against racism, to do something, and to do it because racism simply is not right. "It is not just; can't you see that! Do something," was the urgent theme.

As I watched the young whites in the class struggle to find how to become active anti-racists, I felt also their need to discover a motivation, something that would move them to act.

Reflecting on that exchange took my thoughts to another time, when I worked with other whites to identify a motive for anti-racist involvement.

About twenty-five years ago when I first became fully active in the anti-racist movement, a common discussion among whites centered in sharing our motivations for working against racism. I often stated my motivation in terms of wanting to see "justice." Most others said this was too vague and ethereal; it never seemed that to me, since I could see the practical effects of injustice every day. Still, I understood the discomfort which others felt, and wanted to respond to what most of my colleagues articulated as a concern rooted in white self-interest.

Much of the concern to identify the self-interest which might motivate white anti-racists comes from a desire to avoid the paternalism which so often accompanies a concern to "help" people of color. I wanted to avoid that also, and was as eager as others not to fall into the trap of simply appearing to be a kind of white savior, working to release people of color from their state. So we began to look for reasons why anti-racism would benefit whites, and would therefore be in our self-interest.

Most of my friends thought that white self-interest would provide a more authentic motivation than "helping" or seeking "justice." Yet I was never completely at home with the self-interest focus. It seemed just as logical for me to say that continuing racism was as much in my "white" interest as being anti-racist. In the short run of history, racism works very much for my advantage as a white male. From that point of view it could be argued that my self-interest would be better invested in keeping things as they are.

The long run would more easily entertain arguments about the self-interest of white people. Still, the idea of white self-interest as the primary motivation for anti-racism did not go down well! My motivation was, and still is, rooted in a concern for justice. It still does not seem ethereal or vague to me. It takes little to whip up a lot of motivating anger around that concern.

Today I work at Community Change, with a consciously-articulated focus on the need for white people and white-controlled institutions to change significantly the racism which prevails. Racism is unjust; it is simply wrong, and wrong because of what it does to people. With that articulated point of view, I know clearly what has troubled me about rooting anti-racist motivations in what is called white self-interest.

History helps me to understand the dangers in anti-racism which focuses on the negative effects of racism on whites, and subsequently on the benefits of anti-racism for whites. I caution against making white self-interest a primary focus of anti-racism.

Thomas Jefferson illustrates the reason for my caution. He was confused when it came to his feelings about both the institution of slavery and those whom it enslaved. He declared all

"men" to be created equal, yet he believed whites to be superior to African people. He knew that to enslave another person was wrong, but he was a slave-holder. Confronting this terrible contradiction in his own head and heart, he wrote about what was wrong with slavery. In his writing he expressed his concern for his self-interest as a white man, and showed less concern about what enslavement did to the enslaved Africans.

Jefferson was mainly concerned about the fact that white children would see their slave-holding parents and neighbors doing something which was manifestly wrong, and, witnessing this daily exercise in tyranny, they would be "stamped by it with odious peculiarities." He went on to express a concern that white morals would be depraved, leading then to the destruction of "industry" among whites. He "trembled" when he thought of God's justice, knowing that "his justice will not sleep forever." That "trembling" was in the context of Jefferson's fear of slave rebellion, which he knew would bring death to whites and destruction to the white system of slavery. As a white, there was much articulated self-interest in Jefferson, but that self-interest did not lead him to end a racist system. Then there were white abolitionists; memory of them stirs me with respect and admiration. Yet when they were motivated by white self-interest they were weakest and least effective. Some wanted to end slavery as a way to rid the nation of the slaves. Thus they supported the Colonization movement which proposed to send freed, former slaves out of the country. The concern was not rooted in the system of enslavement and its affect on Africans. Rather, the Colonizationists were convinced that the two races were not equal and could never get along; therefore, it was best to release and remove the Africans. Clearly a motivation of white self-interest; just as clearly, racist. Other white Abolitionists simply wanted to get rid of a bad system, which in the long run was not economically viable and was poisoning the nation. White interest surely, but hard to call anti-racist!

Among the religious people, white self-interest led to two dominant stances in regard to slavery. Some religious leaders were eager to convert enslaved people to Christianity, insuring the slave owners that the new state of baptism would make their slaves more docile and obedient "servants." That would increase the number of people on the role of church-members, each a kind of "notch in the belt" of soul savers! Clearly that was a matter of white self-interest! There was no need to worry that the new state of "grace" would change the status of the enslaved converts. They would remain slaves! The interest of white owners was served! Other white religious Abolitionists urged Christian slave owners to free their slaves, and wanted churches to take a stand against slavery because in each case it would remove the stain of an immoral system from the perpetrators of the system. Neither guilt nor taint was good, so get rid of both. Again, the concern was for the slave-owner rather than the enslaved, a matter of white self-interest; also, fundamentally racist in view and effect.

Forrest Wood's lengthy discussion of the role of many churches led him to conclude: "Eternal truths notwithstanding, when it came to matters involving racial issues, Christianity's readiness to accommodate secular interests was second to none. The only truth that was eternal was the truth of self-interest."[*]

So history teaches me to be cautious whenever anyone puts a primary motivation for anti-racism into the context of white self-interest. It is much too easy for that white self-interest to undermine anti-racism. White self-interest often belies a naive view of the insidious propensity of racism to leave white self-interest mired in white self-interest. White self-interest too often becomes stalled in concern for whites, and may never move beyond that. When that happens, racism gets its way.

[*] Wood, Forest G., *The Arrogance of Faith,* Knopf, 1990, page 338.

Others may argue that my concern for justice is not a solid grounding for anti-racism, fraught with its perils for the actual work. Help me to be aware of those, and I'll try to keep you "honest" about white self-interest.

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December 1993

Heroes of Democracy in the Twentieth Century

In the waning years of the twentieth century it is time to recognize the significance of the Civil Rights Movement as a major contribution to democracy. It was Vincent Harding whom I first heard say that the Civil Rights Movement was about democracy. In the on-going process of building a democracy, that Movement which dominated so much of the middle part of our century has played a crucial role.

There cannot be democracy in a society which does not value all its peoples; that I heard recently from Mel King, a highly respected African American here in Boston. That is one of those self-evident truths, which sometimes I do not "see" until someone like Mel King brings it to my attention.

From that truth a quick look at our history makes it clear that the nation which was established by the Constitution of the United States of America was not a democracy. Our nation was founded on a contradiction which asserted equality and at the same time established a social contract in which African people were enslaved, in which Native peoples were regarded as savage barriers to development, into which women were not invited, and which protected the rights of those who owned property over those who did not. Until that fundamental contradiction is resolved and the reality of life in our homes, on our streets, and in the institutions of society values all people, we will not be a democracy. The Civil Rights Movement insisted that Black people were to be valued and respected as full and equal citizens. To claim and win that for any group of people is a "movement" toward democracy.

The Civil Rights Movement emerged from the wounded and proud hearts of Black Americans, and they confronted our nation with a truth which demanded action, nudging us closer to equality and democracy. The recognized leaders of the Civil Rights Movement rode the shoulders of many who in previous years struggled, labored, and risked both in quiet dignity and shouted protest to call us to account.

To begin to name those heroes of the twentieth century would inevitably leave out many; any list would focus only on the recognized "leaders" and I do not want to do that. There were thousands of others giving life to the "movement;" while they may be lost in the footnotes of history, it is they who were the movement. I want to acknowledge my debt to them all.

The movement reaches far back into the beginnings of the century. It is an evolving consciousness among Black people reflecting an ever-growing anger with the "lot" assigned to them in American life, followed closely by a determination to effect change, backboned by the dignity of racial pride. The early years of the century made clear that separation and unequal treatment was to be the style of the "democracy" Blacks would experience. Came the First World War and an expanded consciousness of a world-wide connection with Black and other peoples of color, and with it the conviction that in a world now supposedly "safe for democracy," this nation was no longer "safe for hypocrisy."

The awakening consciousness was fanned by the Black Renaissance, led by a remarkable chorus of Black writers, musicians, and performing artists whose lives spoke the prophetic words of truth about justice, equality, and democracy. Political activism called upon the national powers to do justly, while at the same time exhorting the Black community to save itself. Gradually there emerged the great mass which became the Civil Rights Movement, led across the land by giants of determination, persistence, and moral power.

Backsliding there has been surely, and it will continue in the face of a reluctant majority of

the nation, sometimes supported by, often manipulated by powerful forces of the status quo. On the eve of the new century we move with a vision of the democracy we want to build; that vision is shared by countless numbers of people representing oppressed groups of varied description, building on and working from the base of the Civil Rights Movement. If we still want that democracy we have looked for, we must regain the spirit, the conviction, the moral courage of the Civil Rights Movement. There can be no higher calling or mission for our nation.

A few weeks ago at a conference of The Black Educational Movement in Boston, I listened to reflections from people who had given leadership to the events which brought the desegregation of the Boston schools. It was a re-counting of a local movement towards democracy; many of the stories told reminded me of the consistent courage which characterized those efforts. One statement took on special meaning for me, and becomes the focus of this essay. Elma Lewis, a respected, even revered Black leader of Boston, commented on her conviction that when the history of this century is written it will be finally said that Black people were its heroes. Her thought settled into my being, and linked with Vincent Harding and Mel King becomes this expression of gratitude for the heroes of democracy in this century.

Those are easy words to write; the task now is to make gratitude vibrant in the works of every day.

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January 1995

Speak Now Against the Day

For a Christmas gift a son and his wife sent me a book which has quickly become a treasure. *Speak Now Against the Day* by John Egerton bears a subtitle*: The Generation Before the Civil Rights Movement in the South.* It is the story of men and women of the South who spoke and worked against the development of segregation as a way of life which they knew to be destroying both the South and the idea of equality. This is a story that has not been told before in detail from the perspective Egerton brings. For me it brings a call to action directed very much to our present time. The context for that call comes from Egerton's use of the words of William Faulkner, in 1955:

We speak now against the day when our Southern people who will resist to the last these inevitable changes in social relations, when they have been forced to accept what they at one time might have accepted with dignity and good will, say, "Why didn't someone tell us this before? Tell us this in time!"

Faulkner was speaking at a meeting of the Southern Historical Association in Memphis, at a dinner where Benjamin Mays was also a featured speaker. It was the year after the Supreme Court decision pointed a clear way toward the end of segregation. The South had almost unanimously rejected that decision; most leaders from every segment of that society spoke against the decision and spent creative energy devising ways to avoid its implementation. With assurance that the execution of the Court order was impossible, that it would never be effected, the South dug in for long-term resistance. This meeting was called to discuss both the decision and the resistance. In that context Faulkner warned against the repetition of mistakes of the past: "We accept insult and contumely and the risk of violence because we will not sit quietly by and see our native land, the South, not just Mississippi but all the South, wreck and ruin itself twice in less than a hundred years over the Negro question." Then he went on to call for "speaking against the day."

If resistance continued Faulkner knew that the day would come when people of the South would realize the 1954 decision had provided them an opportunity to reconstruct their society; they would recognize the error of resistance and would then look to their neighbors with the question, "Why didn't someone tell us this before?"

Faulkner called for people to "speak against that day," and to speak against the day of resistance. Those who know Faulkner better than I are often very critical of his own failure to use the enormous prestige he enjoyed to "speak out" as vigorously as they wish he had. Without engaging that argument I want to take into my own heart the call from Faulkner:

Speak Now Against the Day!

That is the call which comes from Faulkner, through John Egerton, now to me and to you.

Speak Now Against the Day when politicians direct the anger of middle class voters downward toward welfare recipients, those with the least power to defend themselves.

Speak Now Against the Day in which crime invokes more punishment and prisons than prevention.

Speak Now Against the Day when frustration seeks scapegoats in new immigrants who are not white, have little money, and whose first language is not English.

Speak Now Against the Day when wealth is encouraged to prosper while poverty is blamed on those who are poor.

Speak Now Against the Day when an increasingly white suburban population avoids involvement with urban life, and responsibility for urban development.

Speak Now Against the Day when "Far Righteous" religious leaders distort the Christian faith to engineer their personal, political, often racist visions.

Speak Now Against the Day when young Black men are to be found more frequently behind prison bars than college desks.

Speak Now Against the Day when artists are denied the support which encourages their creative contributions to the progressive movement of society.

Speak Now Against the Day when the President fails to extend clemency to Leonard Peltier, allowing him to languish in prison convicted of a crime still not proved.

Speak Now Against the Day when many join the insane clamor which asks that the state kill in order to prove that killing is wrong.

Speak Now Against the Day when our nation *rests* easily with a disproportionately high infant death rate among Black babies.

Speak Now Against the Day when too many accept the decades-old pattern which maintains an unemployment rate for people of color at least twice as high as it is among whites.

That is a good call to attention! Let's not let the hour pass quickly to a day when we suddenly wake up to see how we have missed the opportunity to speak for what we know to be right, and good, and just. The time may not recognize the hour, but, we must. Let's make sure that no one can ever say to us, "Why didn't you tell us what was happening?"

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III. Essays on Racism and Language

August 1980

On Being Color Blind in 1980

I felt as if I had stepped into a time machine and been thrust backward at least twenty years! It was early morning, in late July 1980, and I was walking across the Boston public gardens when a black woman friend greeted me, and pushed a local paper into my hands. "How do you respond to this?" she said, and continued, "I feel negative about it!"

The article to which she referred me served as the time machine. I didn't want to believe what I read, but there it was-1960 re-visited! The article was about a new advertising campaign to be launched "to spread the message of racial tolerance" in the city. The campaign was announced by two leading spokespersons for the Boston Covenant Committee, originators of last fall's Covenant for Peace and Harmony, an effort which secured over 250,000 signatures on a petition for harmony and understanding. The advertising campaign is a follow-up on the Covenant signing, and pictures in the newspaper showed large posters saying, "All children are born color blind. Let's keep them that way."

The "color blind" posture which is called for is what took me back to the early sixties at least. That is before the "black is beautiful" movement, before the affirmation of racial identities by many people of color. Shadows of the past enveloped me and I heard all the familiar words of yesteryear. "I don't see color; I see only people."—"I see all people as humans; that's all."—"I don't see you as black; I see you as a person." I hadn't heard anyone talking like that for a long time, and my shocked sensitivities sent me reeling into the past.

I'm sorry, but I cannot cooperate with that effort to encourage a return to the "color blind syndrome." I cannot because the reality with which I deal every day is very different in 1980. I cannot cooperate for at least two reasons.

First, I cannot say to my friends who are people of color, that the affirmation of their color is now unimportant. I remember a young black mother telling of the day when her daughter went to school in her first Afro, announcing as she left the house, "I am black and beautiful," and I still thrill with the sense of pride with which that mother told of the incident. Her daughter had never gone out of the house saying that and feeling like that before! It was an important day for that whole family! Pride in color was and still is to that family an important concern. I cannot now say to my friends that I am not going to see that color which they have affirmed so strongly.

I remember a black man in a workshop group responding to a white man who had just told him that he only wanted to see him as a human being, not as a black man. With intensity and conviction the black man said something like this: "Of course I am a human being, and I want you to see me as such but, if you really want to see me as the full human being I am, I want you to see me as a black. My blackness is an essential part of my humanness and, if you forget that or will not see that, then you are not seeing me as the full person I am." I cannot say to that man or any other person of color that I want to be color blind, or want them to be color blind, or want their children to be color blind. Among the people of color whom I know the vast majority have struggled to proclaim respect for their color, have labored and fought to claim the dignity of their color. Now I cannot turn my back on all of that recent history and say, "Let's be color blind."

Second, I cannot say to my friends who are white that color is no longer important. Whenever I have encountered the "color-blind" emphasis among white people, it has very frequently been a way of denying race and subsequently, of denying racism. If one doesn't have to think about color (race), one doesn't have to think about racism, because obviously if there is no color (race), then there can be no racism. If there is no color there can be only individual acts of

wrong-doing, of prejudice; there can be no systematic, historic conscious or unconscious, constant oppression because of color. If we don't have to think about, talk about, and deal with race, then we won't have to think about, talk about and deal with racism! And there are lots of white people in particular who would prefer it that way!

I cannot cooperate because it is important that I and others of my friends are white. I want to affirm whiteness, value it, and call for respect for that too! My whiteness is an important part of who I am. It helps me to understand the history of my people in this country. It puts me in touch with a history and a present fact of white privilege gained at the expense of people of color. Unless I can get in touch with that, feel it, and understand it, then I'll never be able to move beyond it. Unless I can understand that the dominant values, beliefs, and life styles of this country are white, and how that relates to people of color, I will not understand my present situation at all! Unless I can understand that the major institutions and systems of this country have been and are white-controlled, white-dominated and know how that impacts people of color, I can never know how to move out of oppressive modes of community life.

If I deny that there is color, it is to enter a false world. There is color difference, and it is beautiful! There is nothing wrong with differences in color; it is only what we think, believe, and do about that difference that might be wrong. The difference itself is beautiful, exciting, to be affirmed, respected (never merely tolerated), and encouraged as a positive attribute of life! Vive la difference! Don't deny it! Don't blind yourself to it; see it, celebrate it!

My hunch is that most people of color will not buy this ad campaign to become "color-blind." My concern is that lots of white people might flock to its banner. It sounds so "good" if you like the sounds of yesterday and lots of people do! It sounds so "liberal," so "human," so "nice;" it unclutters a lot of things and tidies up things. Go for it!

Not me, thank you! I cannot cooperate with this one! To be "color-blind" requires me to deny color which is important to me and to hundreds of my friends. To be "color-blind" requires me to ignore a history and a present fact of prejudice, discrimination and racism built on assumptions that white people are superior to people of color. To be ignorant of racism is to assure that we cannot move beyond it. I cannot buy that, any of it! I cannot step into that time machine. I cannot go back to the early sixties. For all that is wrong with 1980, give me the present reality! So says one white man!

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October 1981

Let's Eliminate "Minorities"

When I publish my dictionary, I will leave out the word "minorities." That will not be a popular thing to do, for there are lots of people who like the word and will undoubtedly continue to use it. When I do eliminate the word from my dictionary, I will be in a clear "minority."

I have no say as to what goes into any dictionary, and I don't anticipate requests for advice from any publishers, but I can control my own vocabulary usage. I will no longer use the word "minorities" to refer to racial groups in this country. There are several reasons.

First, there are a number of my friends who are offended by a word which has an accumulated meaning which is tainted with images and concepts of inferiority. Here are some examples of that prejudice:

In logic the "minor" premise is the lesser or secondary one.

In sports we designate as "minor" leagues those which are deemed not as good as the "majors;" to call a player a "minor leaguer" is to diminish that player's status.

When we name periods of life, we reserve the term "minor" to apply to those who have not attained a legal age, who are assumed not to be as responsible as persons over the designated age. Minors are still legally treated as children. Add to that the history of ways in which society stripped black people of their adulthood, particularly referring to black men as "boys," and there is a powerful image of deprivation.

In playing cards the "minor" suit is the one which has lesser scoring possibility.

In numbers the "minority" is less than half, the smaller number, and in a society where bigness is valued, that which is smaller is often de-valued.

In music the word is more neutral; even there, however, a "minor" note which is simply a half tone between whole tones might carry for some a meaning of being "half' and therefore not "complete."

The accumulated weight given to the word leaves "minority" heavily burdened with negatives. It is doubtful that many people can apply-the word "minority" to racial groups in this country and be free from those deeply enculturated assumptions which accompany the word. The word is often heard as offensive by those whom it labels. Since I don't like to offend people, there goes that word!

A second reason for eliminating the word "minorities" from my vocabulary is that its meaning has diminished as more and more people claim to be "minorities." There was a time when the word was used almost exclusively to refer to groups which were either small in number and/or oppressed groups; in everyday use here in the United States of America, that most often meant racial groups. After the attention given to "racial minorities" in the Civil Rights movement and in Congressional debates, more and more people began to claim the status of "minorities." Gay people were defined as "minorities" both because of their numbers and their oppression. Women cannot claim to be a "minority" by numbers, but certainly by their oppression they qualify. Handicapped persons, older citizens, and white ethnic groups began to claim "minority" status, and all have a just claim to that word in some sense. Stretching the word to the logical conclusion of its meaning everyone becomes a minority of some sort, and then the word begins to lose meaning. It loses meaning especially as it becomes applied to any group which is oppressed, because it seems to imply that all oppressions are the same.

All groups have not suffered oppression in the same way; racial groups have been espe-

cially singled out for harsh forms of oppression in this country:

- Not all “minorities” have been enslaved and lynched as have blacks. Not all “minorities” have had land and rights stolen from them as have Native Americans.
- Not all “minorities” have been the object of fluctuating immigration and border rules as have Chinese and Mexican people.
- Not all “minorities” have been born as citizens, as have Puerto Ricans, migrated to the mainland and then been treated as foreigners.
- Not all “minorities” have been put behind fences as Japanese Americans were during World War II.
- Not all “minorities” have been subjected to the consistent and long-standing discrimination of anti-Semitism.

There are distinctions which are blurred when we begin to refer to all groups as “minorities” in the same way in which we refer to racial “minorities.” Since I think it crucial to keep those distinctions clear, there goes that word in reference to racial groups!

A third reason for eliminating the word “minority” when referring to racial groups comes from an expanding world view. The groups to which we in the United States of America have traditionally referred as “racial minorities” clearly represent a majority in the world. Those of us who are white are the numerical minority. Designating people of color as “minorities” obscures this fact. To forget that people of color are a majority in the world and that whites are the minority is to operate in the context of a myth which we can no longer afford. The term “minority” when applied to racial groups in this country contributes to a misunderstanding because it encourages a way of thinking which denies the world reality. The reality is a world made up largely of people of color.

So I have eliminated the word “minority” in referring to racial groups. If you have read carefully you have already understood what I will substitute. I will refer to racial “minorities” as people of color. (And that is not the same as the old term, “colored people!”) I will do so because it more accurately designates what I mean, it avoids a word loaded with negative connotations, it refers to a wide range of racial groups, it includes recognition of the uniqueness of racial groups, and it avoids the illusion that whites are the majority of people in the world.

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June 1992

Diversity Diversion

In the last three or four years there has been a rapid growth in stated concerns for issues of "diversity" in many areas of society. Partly in response to demographic projections for the early twenty-first century there is an almost hectic move to "diversify" Boards and staffs of innumerable organizations. In the corporate world, in higher education, and among social service agencies "diversity initiatives" have spawned a growing number of trainers who guide the "diversifying" process, and prepare both individuals and the organizational climate for "diversity."

My response to the "diversity" emphasis is much like that which was mine when the "multicultural" emphasis first became the rage a few years back. I want to affirm both, but also to point out that both very frequently fail to deal with racism. Racism in my little corner of the world still is the foundational issue. The problem with "diversity" is that it may not, and often does not touch the underlying problem, the root of racism. I want to explore some of the ways that an emphasis on "diversity" too often works to "divert" attention away from racism.

The idea of "diversity" is itself based on a puzzling view of human life. I have always assumed that all people are "diverse," that any two people are in fact quite different. This conviction is based on assumptions about the uniqueness of human personality; "no one else is like you," I was always taught. With that assumption in mind, I see "diversity" everywhere when even two or three people gather. That phenomenon is obviously not what the "diversity initiative" is about. That initiative is focused on "difference" which is identifiable by appearance, as in race or color, sometimes physical impairments, or by stated conditions, such as sexual orientation. Then I begin to get a clue as to how "diversity" is determined. The intent is to bring together people who bring to any combined effort a richness of "difference" which has too often been ignored and frequently avoided. That goal is one which I enthusiastically affirm, a promise of a creative and exciting future.

"Diversity" is basically an idea which is measured against an often unstated norm, which becomes clear as I hear people talk about the subject. It is common for me to receive phone calls or in-person inquiries from people who seek help in "diversifying" an aspect of an organization in which they have some measure of decision-making influence. In my experience the people making those inquiries are almost always speaking about organizations which are predominantly white. I have never had a person of color call to ask about "diversifying" an organization composed mostly of people of color. That is an interesting phenomenon, rooted in an assumption about who is "diverse." Obviously it is not white people who are regarded by these inquirers as "diverse." The unstated assumption is that the organization will become "diverse" only when some "diverse" people are added! That is a rather perverse idea, because it does not credit whites with any uniqueness at all. Even more seriously, it is based on an assumption that "difference," "diversity" is measured against a white norm. Therein lies a potential problem...the norm is white. (Or the norm is male, middle class, heterosexual, "abled," etc; here I want to focus on the issue of race.) On the rock of that white norm many a "diversity" program can be scuttled.

That the norm remains white could be the source of much unintentional, hard-to-identify racism. In subtle ways that norm works to undermine the intention to become "diverse." The people who are "different," who "diverge" from the norm are the "diverse" ones. Sometimes a subtle assumption works to affirm those who constitute the norm as being in some ways superior that is in fact the practical function of a norm. The norm establishes what is "normal," and it is

often tough to divorce that idea of "normal" from an idea of what is best.

There is a danger that "diversity" may become an unintentional "diversion" from facing the subtle working of racism. When whiteness is the norm there is a racist assumption at the ground level of every program, every attempt to "diversify." So the racism works at a subliminal level like carpenter ants, weakening the whole structure. A few examples may give an indication of how this dynamic sometimes occurs.

A social service agency, with a predominantly white staff, engages its staff in "diversity" training, with one of its stated objectives being to make the staff more alert to the possibilities of racism affecting its delivery of services to an increasingly, racially diverse clientele. The agency is proud to point to the in-creased sensitivities it engenders among the staff. While the training sessions are proceeding, over the course of several months, three staff changes are made, with a net gain of two whites on staff. Hardly the way to "diversify!" The failure to implement a change in staff undercuts the most obvious way that the agency could reach its stated "diversity" objective. Attention in the meantime has been "diverted" to the "diversity" training.

A business is concerned that there are unintentional racist effects in the way it conducts itself, and so it undertakes a strong affirmative action program. The result is a rapid diversification of its personnel by race, and the corporation soon develops a reputation for seriousness in its "diversity" program, and it enjoys calling public attention to that record. It proclaims "diversity" as one of its priority objectives. That becomes a cover for the fact that most of its employees of color are at low-level entry wages, with insecure positions, and there is no plan implemented to change that pattern. The newly "diverse" staff does not reach the levels where major decisions are made. So the same old pattern of determining decisions, of setting policies, continues because the same decision-makers are still guiding the process. The employment figures show increased "diversity," but nothing very substantial has changed, and the racist effects of policies about which the company was concerned in the first place are likely to continue.

A school does a reasonably good job of "diversifying" its teaching staff but control over its curriculum does not allow for anything but "cosmetic" changes, and the instructional methodology is not questioned. The complexion of the staff is more "diverse," but little else has changed. An increasing number of students of color, whose primary language is not English, find little help in a curriculum which does not change, in theories of learning which do not reflect a sensitivity to the new population, and it soon becomes clear that the newly "diversified" faculty will not demonstrate any substantially improved ability to educate linguistic minorities. The appearance of "diversity" obscures the more basic problem.

Diversity initiatives need not work this way, and sometimes do actually bring about significant changes in what may have been the patterns of racism. I have seen that happen also, and when it does it is a moment for celebration. Enthusiasm for those moments is tempered by another reality which often sees simply one more way of "diverting" America's attention from the problems of racism.

When that happens I like to call it the "Perversity of Diversity."

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August 1993

Managing (Controlling) "Diversity"

Proliferation is an appropriate word to describe what is happening in many sectors of society under the heading of "managing diversity." Most weeks bring to my desk a new announcement about another group that is offering to do "diversity training." Inquiries come from corporate and community organizations indicating that they are eager to become more "diverse." The announcements and the inquiries include something about how to "manage" diversity.

In another essay I have indicated why I find the "diversity" idea itself too often to be a "diversion" from dealing with the issues of racism.* For me, while the intent of "diversity" emphases and some of the outcomes are both to be encouraged, the practice of "diversifying" does not frequently enough concern practitioners with issues of power and decision-making and control: the "guts" of racism.

So I look at the implications of "managing" diversity.

"Managing" has everything to do with control. Control has everything to do with decision-making and power. The manager, by definition, has some sort of, some ultimate degree of control and power over the process s/he "manages." Even the most enlightened manager, who seeks to encourage the "managed" to exercise a large degree of power, retains the final word. That is the essence, and an appropriate characteristic of managing.

You might guess where my concern takes me next. Most managers I see around me are white, and the "higher" the level of management the whiter it gets. Exceptions prove the rule. Unless I see some moves to change the "complexion" of top management, I do not look for substantive change in the institution or organization which claims to want to "manage" diversity.

"Managing" means controlling, shaping, manipulating direction, making sure that whatever (or whomever) is "managed" moves in the direction the "manager" wants to move. Let the person or the "it" which is managed move too far in a direction the manager does not like, and you will soon see what the characteristic of power is. "Managing" then may be just another way of "controlling" a recognizably and inevitably "diversifying" workforce and population. Anyone who has studied the history of white America carefully will know that danger. One place to look for evidence which gives rise to my concern is to examine the history of white America as it has invaded the land, the culture, the religion, the economy, and the way of life of native peoples. Explicitly, implicitly, guided by expediency and euphemism, we have consistently practiced what amounts to near-genocide. In relationship to African Americans, our nation has "managed" diversity for the good of whites; it has discovered it cannot "manage" strong anti-racism, so it eliminates those who lead movements toward genuine freedom, equality and justice. Immigrants of color, mostly Asian and Latino have been "managed" to provide a labor force when we need it, excluded when we do not. We have consistently "managed" policies, practices, and people to implement the whims of white supremacy.

'Diversity Diversion, June 1992

Some will argue that my view is much too cynical; so it may be. I argue that unless the danger I see is recognized as a possibility, there is little hope that we will build into the "management" of diversity a reality which will be the major kind of change which is necessary.

What is the way to avoid the consequence I fear? I am not sure. I know it will be difficult. I

* See Seldon's essay "Diversity Diversion," June 1992.

know that there will be stumbling efforts along the way. But let's not kid ourselves. Anything less than a radical re-thinking of "managing diversity" will result in a euphemism for a phenomenon which is another way of "controlling" people, keeping the lid on restlessness about racism, making sure that nothing changes very much. Let's inject racism as an understanding of power relationships into the discussion. "Managing diversity" as I see it now being practiced does not often do that.

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August 1983

Oh!...Incidentally

Oh! Incidentally... You've heard that or said something like it many times. You may have been talking with someone and the conversation suddenly called to your mind another concern about which you had forgotten. You mention it, while you are thinking of it..."Oh, incidentally...that reminds me...I just remembered..."

What you were reminded of was obviously not foremost in your thoughts, not a major concern, something relegated to a subsidiary notion, obviously not a priority matter, but something you just happened to think of..."incidentally."

Most of us would agree that, when acts of bigotry and violence are perpetrated, they ought to be viewed *as a* major social concern, matters of high priority, to which immediate attention should be given. Yet often the beating, the mugging, the stabbing, the robbery, the break-in, the name- calling, the assault is characterized as an "incident." So we soon find ourselves referring to a series of racial "incidents." We can sit in the cool comfort of a cozy chair and talk about "incidents" abstractly.

When we begin to talk about "racial incidents" as a substitute for naming them as what they are, they become trivialized, de-personalized, and both compassion and passion are removed from our response. Maybe that's why we use words such as "racial incidents;" it sounds a lot better than "racial mugging," "racial stabbing," "racial attack." The abstraction reduces the hurts, the anger, and the shame. It also reduces the sense of urgency, that there is something of first importance to be addressed right now, right here!

I'm not referring to the difficulty of determining whether or not a stabbing or an assault for instance, *is* racially motivated. I focus rather on how we refer to violent behaviors after it has been determined that race is involved. Categorizing such violence as "incidents" may be an attempt to take the sting out of wounds we wish were not there. But they are there; racism exists, and naming its evidence as "incidents" will not make them disappear. The way of health is to name what happened correctly..."stabbing," "beating"...You may call them "incidents;"be around to remind you that they are not incidental!

It may be that the use of the term "racial incident" arises from the fact that society generally does not view things racial as of first importance. If so then the use of "racial incident" is a way of saying "it's not important"..."if we think of it tomorrow...incidentally...we may do something about it..." You may lapse into that relaxed state too easily; I'll be around to remind you that racism is not incidental.

Look at that word "incident" for a moment. An incident, according to some of the dictionaries I have consulted, is a "natural happening, especially of a subordinate or subsidiary feature"...it is a "subordinate action or event," an "accidental occurrence," a "slight matter," "something incidental to another." Deriving from "incident" is "incidental," defined as "casual, hence minor" or "a chance or undesigned feature." Then we can add "co-incidence," "coincidentally," and with each derivative we are removed farther and farther from the event to which we refer. The heat of the beating, the mugging, the assault is removed, and the passionate anger is removed from our response. Dispassionate reviews are necessary, and I am not calling for blind passion in our response, but our capacity to emote is sometimes dulled by the way we talk about racial "incidents." At times it may be necessary to "distance" ourselves from the pain of violence; I hope we will never allow ourselves to become "distanced" from the anger which demands that violence be stopped.

Acts of violence are not “incidents.” Let’s not think about them, or feel about them, or talk about them “incidentally.”

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October 1986

A "Converted" Racist?

Recently, I saw an editorial in the Boston Globe (September 21, 1986), in which there was comment on a suggestion which Andrew Young evidently made about choosing a new United States Ambassador to South Africa. The editorial says, "A converted racist would be the ideal person to deal with the bigots in Pretoria."

That idea has some appeal; Herman Talmadge, former Governor and US Senator from Georgia, evidently was Young's choice. Certainly a white person going to South Africa and speaking to white leaders might have a special impact. That suggestion is still very debatable, and were Ito dwell on it, there are several arguments I would want to consider.

As I read the editorial I found myself focusing more on the concept of a "converted" racist. I am doubtful that there is such a person! The assumption that a person can change from being a racist into being a "non-racist," and is therefore "converted" from the previous condition to a new one, is a concept which does not match my personal experience or observations.

The analogy with alcoholism is one that more adequately expresses what I think happens in the personal dynamics of racism. The alcoholic who is aware of his/her condition is one who knows very precisely that they are not free from the problem ever, and that they must be constantly on guard to beat down its temptations. It seems clear to me that some similar dynamic occurs in whites who are racist. (Here I am writing as a white about my experience, and don't want to engage the debate about the color of racism!)

As one who has worked hard for about twenty years on the racism within myself, in others, and in society, I would be very skeptical abut trusting the judgment of anyone who is designated as a "converted" racist. That statement betrays an understanding of the nature of racism which does not recognize that racism, like alcoholism, is not easily sloughed off. It does not recognize either the way in which racism is enculturated so that it almost infects the air we breathe, or the way in which institutional forms of racism sometimes involve white people in its perpetuation unknowingly or even against their will.

The alcoholic knows that alcohol will always be a problem in his/her life, that one is never free from it and must always be on guard against its active emergence into life. So also the person who comes to know what racism is must be aware that it is a presence against which always to be on guard.

I do not intend to imply that my personal experience is either a model for whites or is comparable to what most whites go through. Still, I am convinced that it has enough validity to be shared here. Out of that personal experience I think of myself in a manner which is quite different from that implied in the "converted" racist concept. Rather, I am an intensely anti-racist person and also recognize my continuing tie to racism. So I would call myself a "racist anti-racist." That calls for an explanation of ways in which that is different from being a "converted" racist.

In becoming "anti-racist" I have learned a great deal about how racism functions, and I know that its myths and lies are pervasive in the values, behaviors, norms, and standards of the society in which I have grown up. As a product of that society, it is not surprising that I have had to "un-learn" a great deal; I probably will never be sure that I have "unlearned" it all. As one who continues to live in that same society, I see it evolving in ways which sometimes simply replace old lies with new ones, or with new ways of stating the old ones. I must be continually on the alert to prevent myself from being swept up into these new expressions of racism. The roots of racism are still there and I must be sure that I constantly nurture my anti-racism. It is an on-going struggle,

for life! Racism is an ugly presence which may surface itself at any moment and, like the alcoholic, I must deal with it *as a* daily threat in my life.

In becoming "anti-racist" I have also come to understand that I am connected to institutions and systems which continue to function in racist ways. Those institutions are primarily white controlled, and I am enmeshed in them, my life is entwined with them irrevocably, unless I go to the moon, and I can't do that without the help of NASA! So, even if I were to become personally "clean" of racism, I will still die with connections into the systemic nature of white society. In that sense I remain racist.

So I will call myself an "anti-racist racist" (let's put the emphasis where it belongs!), and that has implications for me which I am afraid the "converted" racist might not see. I need constant help from my friends, both white and people of color, to help keep me honest to my anti-racism; I need to be constantly analyzing my connections to institutions, I need to be watching alertly for any signs that the old lies might find a foothold in my life again. I can never be sure that I am "converted" to some new way that completely submerges the old. I know that I am dealing with a personal and cultural force that is a powerful presence. I must constantly be alert to its temptations and manifestations.

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September 1989

Whispering About Racism

As I have come to see the depth and breadth of racism in our society, I have often found myself reaching for analogies which help me to understand how to break the tenacious grip by which racism holds us in bondage. So I begin to wonder what is a first step for breaking out of bonds. I search for other analogies.

In my personal life the analogy which is most helpful for understanding a first step toward the elimination of racism is in the ways I have seen people respond to the illness of cancer. That racism is a cancer in our society has been clear to me for years. That being so, I then began to look for similarities in the way I have heard persons think and talk about the two diseases, seeking clues which may lead to health. One early lesson to be learned is that a necessary step is to "name" the problem; that includes a willingness to say the word, "racism," and to talk openly about it. The pattern I most frequently observe is one in which people do not want to recognize the problem of racism, or to even speak the word "racism." Such avoidance is symptomatic of the problem; it is a failure to take the first step toward health. An antidote for the condition is found in the way many people have learned to think and talk about cancer.

Reflection about the way in which people today speak of cancer in contrast to a few years ago reveals a developing psychic health in the way we name, talk about, and subsequently treat the disease.

When I was a youngster there was a general reluctance to talk about cancer openly. I recall hearing my parents and other adults talking very cautiously about how a neighbor was "very sick." The tone of voice, the facial expressions conveyed an ultimate seriousness that I understood, though nothing had been communicated about the illness itself. The whispering told me that the subject was something we ought not to talk about. Fear and impotence was a clear message; there was nothing anyone could do. Gradually those subdued conversations were emboldened ever so slightly by the occasional still-whispered question, "is it terminal?" That was an attempt to discover exactly how "very sick" someone might be, without saying the dreaded word, "cancer." Often the answer to the question came only by a sadly affirmative nod. Everyone knew what the nod meant, but the careful avoidance of saying a person had cancer put the whole matter in a context of something so powerful that any victim was doomed.

I can remember how astonished I was when I first heard those pioneers who dared to say right out loud in public that "so-and-so" had cancer! A sacred taboo had been violated, but it seemed sensible to me. Then I heard for the first time a person say of his own condition, "I have cancer," and it was clear that a new attitude toward the illness was born. I soon acknowledged the positive nature of that openness. At least now we could talk about what was happening, how we felt, and what to do. Tithe situation still meant an acceptance of fatality, to that also we could respond in a more healthy way. Today it is common to engage in discussion of cancer and its effects on the patient and loved ones. The "naming" of the disease, the facing of its presence, the direct address of its effects, reflect a maturity of response which is an instance of greater social "health" in dealing with what is still a terrible condition.

As a society our response to cancer puts us way ahead of our position in response to racism. That is true at both the level of diagnosis and of naming the problem. If we move toward using the word "racism" openly instead of whispering it we will be better off. Naming the disease is an important step in coping with it. Facing it as racism, acknowledging its effects in ourselves, our institutions, our social norms, will be movement toward health.

Here are some suggestions of ways which may be helpful in gaining an increased ability to use the word, "racism," to name the problems as "racism" in a realistic way so that it no longer has to be whispered, but can be spoken about openly, and solutions then be sought.

First, recognize that the word "racist," when applied to individuals does not refer only to the most blatant, openly active bigot. Unfortunately, the word "racist" conjures for many people the image of someone who expresses prejudice in a series of overt actions, including name-calling, physical assault, and open announcements of their assumed superiority. Such a person is a bigot, one who holds extreme notions of superiority, and of course no one, except possibly the bigot, wants to be called by that name. Most of us are not extreme bigots, and some scholars have indicated that probably no more than 10% of the adult population is. So if one thinks of the word "racist" as meaning only that extreme form of bigoted person, few will want to hear the word, and its sound will raise automatic defenses. Use the word differently, as indicating persons who are imbued at any level with assumptions of racial superiority or who act in ways that have racist effects, and many more of us can use the word without defensiveness.

Second, try to unload the word "racism" of as much of its emotional content as possible; try using it descriptively, as a word which points to and describes a particular situation. It will not be easy to say "racism" without an emotional overload, but it can be done. When one begins to think and talk in this way, seeking solutions proceeds with less emotional heat and hopefully with more light.

Third, try using the word "racist" applied to yourself or others without necessarily implying that you or the other is a "bad" person. Certainly, racist behavior is not "good," but it is possible to think of oneself as "racist" in some degree without assuming that one is a "bad" person. Many years of exposure to racist norms and ideas have had an effect on me, and I can, therefore, readily acknowledge racism in myself but I will stoutly maintain that I am not a bad person. The word, if used descriptively, tells something about me but does not condemn me as a kind of human trash.

Fourth, try using the word in the same way when you describe our society. To say that the United States is a racist society does not necessarily imply that the whole nation is rotten. It simply describes a history and a present fact which mars the nation's fabric fundamentally. Not to acknowledge that history and the presence of racism today is to participate in a lie. It would be an equal lie to imply that because of racism there is nothing good about our society.

Those are very simple suggestions to make, harder to integrate into a way of thinking about racism. The next time you hear people talking openly about cancer, remember there was a time when we only "whispered" the dreaded name. Now we can approach it openly and honestly and with a greater hope. The same may be true of how we think and talk about racism. Let's not "whisper" the notion; let's say it right out loud where everyone can hear and see it and respond to it openly. That will lead us to a more healthy milieu for solutions.

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June 1990

The "New" Racism ???????

Every once in a while I read about a phenomenon which is described as the "new" racism. That sends my thoughts racing, trying to figure out what is "new" about the action being described. Soon my thoughts go in two contrary directions: one direction tells me that there is no such thing as a "new" racism, and the other acknowledges that maybe there is.

My first thoughts are skeptical about any "new" form of racism, because my reading of history indicates so many forms that have already been given to racism that it is hard to imagine that there can be anything "new." If people think there is a "new" form of racism, that may be a measure of what they do not know about the old forms.

Then my thoughts go in the other direction, affirming the possibility of some "new" forms of racism. The very fact that our society has been so creative and innovative in perpetuating racism, leads me to expect some "new" forms today.

These two sets of contradictory thoughts, led me to list some of the major forms which racism has taken; not surprisingly, it went for several pages of penciled notes. What follows here is a categorizing of things which appeared on my list. There is no particular order, and it certainly isn't exhaustive; every glance at it reminds me of other forms of racism which ought to be added. Read it and then judge if there is anything "new" about racism today.

- Racism has consistently offended the personhood of people of color: name-stripping, slurs, jokes, stares, destroying self-respect, creating expectations of limited ability.
- There has been physical violence in many forms: rape, castration, beatings, lynchings, bombing churches and homes and organizations, shoving dung into the mouths of children, stoning buses in which children ride.
- Psychological violence to people of color has resulted in internalized oppression taking many devastating forms—words such as "sudden-death syndrome," "survivor guilt," and "post-traumatic stress" remind us of these phenomena.
- We passed laws to define an "inferior" place for people of color: colonial laws and judicial systems did it before we were a nation; we wrote it into our original founding Constitution, and created legal precedents to give it continuing credence.
- The denial of the right to vote has been another form racism has taken. Once the right was granted, we subverted it through literacy tests, "grandfather clauses," poll taxes, gerrymandering, controlling places of polling, and other manipulative devices.
- Our criminal justice system is tilted against people of color and all poor people from the arrest, arraignment, bail, charges, defense, jury selection, all the way through the system and, most notably, to the death penalty.
- We created testing procedures in education and job recruitment loaded with cultural and racial bias.
- We developed segregated facilities early in our history and then, when "separate but equal" became the law, we found ways to make sure "separate" was not "equal."
- Our art and cultural standards of beauty have been defined by European, white standards, which eliminated people of color and the contributions of their cultures from serious consideration.
- The movement and mobility of people of color has been regulated to meet govern-

mental or corporate interests—note the frequent relocation of Native peoples, and the 1942 internment of Japanese Americans.

- Immigration laws and policies have been passed, annulled, revoked, and subverted to the disadvantage of people of color to suit the labor needs of white employers and white laborers.
- For decades unemployment figures have been approximately twice as high among people of color as among whites. Slavery, sharecropperism, denial of job opportunities, low wages, "last hired, first fired," are all words which point to forms of racism manipulating labor.
- Restricting interracial marriage has been a form of racism.
- N. Medical experimentation has been a sordid part of our racist history, remember the Tuskegee experiment?
- In education we have developed both formal and informal tracking systems which have served to channel a disproportionate number of students of color away from higher education.
- Spying, phone tapping, room bugging, infiltration into organizations of color have been ways to co-op, undermine, and divide communities of color for racist ends.
- Complex systems intersecting housing, job opportunities, tax structures, transportation, and school aid formulas have often created options more limited for people of color than for whites.
- Our maps have projected a northern hemisphere (largely white) of distorted largeness as compared to the southern hemisphere populated mostly by people of color.
- Pseudo-sciences such as phrenology and physiognomy have given support to racist views.
- Sociological studies, psychological theories, understandings of how people learn have been developed without accounting for different methods, styles, and norms among people of color.
- Systems of communication in radio, TV, movies perpetuate stereotypes and lies about people of color.

So that's a partial list to begin with...I've run out of steam! It displays a remarkable ability on the part of our dominant white society to create almost innumerable forms of racism. Maybe that should make us alert for the "new" racism.

So...What is new?

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August 1990

On Being a Non-Entity

Frequently I hear someone refer to a person or a group of people as being "nonwhite," and it usually leads me to plead that we identify people by what they are rather than by what they are not. I don't want to be called a "non-female," for instance; I have spent a lot of time and energy coming to a positive sense of what it means to be a white male, and want that identity to be for everyone an important part of who I am.

Generally people don't go around talking about "non-females." The "non" word is usually used in relation to race, and, while it is sometimes heard in "non-black," it is most commonly heard in the term "nonwhite." It may be worth some examination as to why that term is offensive and inappropriate to many as well as inaccurate for all.

"Nonwhite" is obviously less than fully accurate; it tells us almost nothing about the person or group to whom the word is applied. Is the person Black, Asian, Native American, or some mixture of colors? The term tells me nothing except what the person is not; beyond that I am left to speculate and choose from a number of possibilities. It communicates little and leaves me with many questions. Who is this person? All I know is that she/he is one among many groups of color, who compose most of the world population. Identity remains obscure.

"Nonwhite" is a term which fails to identify who this person of color is, and therefore runs the risk of failing to acknowledge an identity which may have been won at great price. Just as I have spent time and energy coming to a positive sense of what it means to be both male and white (two oppressor classifications), most individual Blacks in this country, certainly as a group, have won a positive identity through great struggle. To use the term "nonwhite" is to ignore and to minimize the importance of that struggle. It is almost as if the speaker were to say, "It doesn't really matter how hard you have worked to come to a sense of who you are, to me you are simply not white."

"Nonwhite" is offensive to many because it implies a standard by which people are being judged or measured, and clearly the standard is white. Anyone who is not white is just "non," as if nothing! Very few people who use the word would mean that or would even want to imply it, but that is the value and meaning which is carried by the word. Why not identify the person or group by who they are?

So much for now from this non-African, non-Asian, non-South American, non-Greek, non-Irish, non-female, nonentity, who has written this on a "non-typewriter."

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March 1991

Those Who Are Made Poor

> To work with the urban poor to fashion a vision of wholeness of human life against the realities of economic, racial and social injustice; to hold that vision and its responsibilities before the churches of the U.C.C. and the people of Metropolitan Boston; and to work with the urban poor towards the fulfillment of that vision.
>
> — Excerpted from Purpose Statement, City Mission Society, written for the 175th Anniversary of the City Mission Society, Boston, Massachusetts, March 1991

For some years I have taught a course at Boston College on the History and Development of Racism, and that experience has helped me to see the importance of the language we use to identify groups of people. For instance, in that course I've discovered it important to change the word by which I designate African people who have usually been called "slaves." I have replaced that term with "the enslaved" or "the enslaved Africans." The latter term does not characterize the people, but rather communicates what was done to the African people. It has been a good consciousness-raiser for students, reminding them that slavery was something done to people, rather than a description of the enslaved.

In a similar way I would like to see us at City Mission Society re-think the way we designate the people who are the focus of our concern. My consciousness about this was heightened recently when I heard William Sloane Coffin refer to the way Archbishop Romero spoke of "poor" people among whom he served. The Archbishop used a phrase which in his Spanish language translates "those who are made poor."

To refer to people as "the poor" seems to characterize them; it vaguely points to assumptions in the speaker's or hearer's mind about who "the poor" are. "Those who are made poor" raises to consciousness a whole set of circumstances which create the condition of poverty.

"Those who are made poor" reminds me that the status of poverty is something done to people, a state into which society thrusts them and too often keeps them. It reminds me that in a nation of affluence there is no way to justify that any person should be in poverty.

"Those who are made poor" reminds me that I am the beneficiary of a personal, family, and societal history that has insured me against poverty. There is nothing about me as a human being which would or should indicate that I am where I am rather than be in poverty. My position has nothing to do with my humanity; it is the result of the way my society is organized. The position of those whom some call "the poor" has nothing to do with their humanity; it is the result of the way society is organized.

The vision that we share in CMS is "against the realities of economic, racial and social injustice." That vision reminds me that society does not have to be organized in a way in which some are "made poor."

Every single time I say "those who are made poor" I am reminded of the realities of injustice; I am reminded of the vision toward which we work and move. Changing the word is the easy part; the tough struggle comes as we encounter those hard realities of the world.

Changing the word will be a constant consciousness-raiser for me and hopefully for others who will listen. Out of the raised awareness that poverty is an injustice to be addressed, I'm hopeful for a prod that will keep me in the long struggle, dissatisfied with anything less than the vision. ❖

IV. Essays on Responsibility

December 1983

Guilt, Shame, and Responsibility

Recently I saw an old article written by a white man who had gone through an experience in which he had found relief from the sense of guilt he felt because of racism. For him relief from guilt came from a direct experience in which a black person forgave him. His life since then has led him to significant change and involvement in the struggle against racism. Other white people have had similar experiences, often within the context of a religious setting. Those experiences, when accompanied by active change in lives, are valid, and I do not want to argue with them. However, I do have quarrels with some people who assume that these experiences dictate the way all whites must find relief from guilt. I have heard it declared as the route which whites must take. That route for the remedy for white guilt also defines a role for blacks; whites have had a historic propensity to define roles for blacks, and we have had enough of that.

I have two other objections to the insistence that whites must seek forgiveness from black people for their involvement in racism. First, it places the burden for the whole matter back on black people, asking them to take the role of savior. The oppressor takes a foot off the back of the oppressed and says, "What I have done is terrible...I feel guilty...now forgive me!" Second, this approach misses the fact that demographically there are not enough black people to do the forgiving for the many more whites, and most black people have better things to do than run around forgiving whites.

Guilt is a common human response which many white people experience when they are confronted with the facts of how white racism exploits people of color. Guilt is felt, guilt is given verbal expression, and when it is "acted out," it takes numerous forms. Guilt can warp responses, or it can give direction to them. Guilt can motivate action or it can become a substitute for action. Guilt can contribute to understanding, or it can cloud realities between people. Guilt can manipulate or it can be manipulated.

Most often when I hear white people talk about guilt in relationship to race relations and racism, there is an attempt to deny it. "I don't feel guilt"..."don't blame me for slavery"..."I never owned slaves" ...Or sometimes the expression of guilt by one white person is met with an "Oh, you shouldn't feel guilty; that will do no one any good!" In each case there is an attempt to deny the feeling of guilt.

1. Since the issue of guilt does come to the fore frequently, here are several observations about guilt which I hope will be helpful.

2. Guilt is a predictable human reaction when one sees another person or group oppressed. It is probably a peculiarly human reaction; not to feel guilt under such circumstances would be a measure of inhumanity. One who is incapable of feeling or expressing guilt may be on less healthy psychological ground than the one who does feel and express guilt. So let's not deny the guilt feelings when they come; guilt is a real human emotion.

3. Guilt is a feeling which we can acknowledge, work through, and then move beyond, to take a positive action to correct the situation about which we feel guilty. A major danger is that we become flagellants, delighting in the wringing of hands and endless verbalization of remorse. Then guilt becomes a swamp of inaction. The trick is to avoid getting trapped in guilt, but rather to use that emotion to generate activity which counteracts racism. Doing this is much harder than saying it, but the goal is to move beyond guilt over the past into responsible action for the present.

4. Religious expressions have often led people into guilt feelings, and some will argue

that religion has created more guilt than it has alleviated. Religion at its best provides a way for many people to deal with guilt, and from that perspective guilt should hold no horror at all. The Christian churches and their members should have no fear of guilt. In its theology and forms the church has ways of responding to guilt, for leading people through guilt to positive action. Some of the words which remind us of those forms are: confession, forgiveness, repentance, new witness. Similarly Judaism and other forms of religious expression have ways of acknowledging guilt and responding to it, with positive results in the lives of adherents to the particular faith.

5. People often argue that they cannot feel guilty about the past, for things that happened before they were born, or for events in which they were not actors. This is usually the argument that white folks make when they say, "Don't blame me...I didn't own slaves!" Yet those same people are quick to invoke an opposite emotion and to express pride over things in the nation's past to which they did not contribute. No one I know who so proudly celebrated our Bicentennial fought in the Revolutionary War or helped to write the Constitution! Every Fourth of July we glow in the pride of our history, and shout about events to which we did not contribute! Maybe the complainer did not own slaves, but slavery was a national system, and it is an appropriate response to feel some sense of guilt about slavery, if one is a part of the dominant society. Similarly in the present, one may not contribute directly to housing discrimination, but still feel a sense of shame for a society in which housing discrimination functions to make it measurably more difficult for a person of color to obtain housing than for a white person.

6. There is a corporate nature of life which often finds us in situations where we carry out a responsibility assumed by someone else or some other group with whom we are identified. I am part of a corporate group which is obliged to make a regular mortgage payment, necessary because forebears fifty years ago borrowed money with which to erect the building we still enjoy. Most of us who now are responsible for raising and paying the mortgage were not around when the obligation was incurred. If we were to go to the bank and announce that we were not going to make more payments because "we did not incur the debt," we would be told clearly and forcefully (with law behind the statement) that the corporate nature of our relationship to the original debtors does indeed make us responsible for their past decisions.

7. Another aspect of the corporate nature of life carries extra-legal obligations for national, religious, racial, and other groups. The Old Testament knew of that corporate nature when it spoke of grandparents eating sour grapes and setting "on edge" the children's teeth. The history of racism, the constant oppression of people of color is a part of that corporate life which white people in the United States share. Though not personally responsible for that past, we bear a part of the corporate responsibility. If society's "teeth are on edge" because of the past sourness, we are wiser to acknowledge the responsibility and to do something about it than to shrug it off with an "I never owned slaves...don't blame me!"

8. Some have noted a distinction made in Japanese culture between shame and guilt which may be instructive for us. Shame, felt as a societal phenomenon in Japanese culture, does not carry with it the intense form of personal guilt which is often associated with guilt in the United States. This is not to assume that patterns in Japan can easily be transferred to the United States of America. Other peoples have developed different ways of responding to the sense of guilt; maybe we can learn from them. In this nation we often appropriate guilt in a personal way..."I am guilty"..."I am diminished" "I am not what I ought to be." Guilt of that sort is not something many want to accept, especially when dealing with corporate and societal forms of racism. It is easier to push it away, and say, "I am not guilty." Perhaps we can learn from other cultures a more healthy way of assuming responsibility without personal incrimination.

There is obviously much more to be said about guilt and racism. Each of the above observations might be a first sentence of a separate article. Maybe this will start the discussion for you and your friends. If you feel guilt at some point, don't be surprised; please don't become captive to your guilt. If you don't feel guilty, then please don't start feeling guilty because you don't feel guilty! There is enough genuine guilt around without creating more.

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February 1991

The Death Penalty, Honor and Dignity

You killed! Killing is wrong. You've got to pay. You've got to die!

Getting even is what it's about—call it vengeance, vindictiveness, retribution, or any "pretty" name you want. Refute all the other "reasons" suggested by death penalty advocates, and the emotional core remains: "Killers must pay with their lives."

Who will "pay?"

The poor will pay. The death penalty is classist!

Blacks will pay. The death penalty is racist!

Those who thought a while ago that racism was no longer an issue for activists, simply never knew the enculturated and intransigent nature of the beast. The institutionalized power of racism which we experience in the latter part of this century motivates a conviction that the future of anti-racism will require more of us than we have given in the past. More will surely be required to eliminate from the land the blatant form racism takes in the death penalty.

Since 1976, about 44% of those executed in the U.S. have been either Black or Latino. History teaches that this disproportionate application of the death penalty will continue.

It is clear that the death penalty is meted out much more frequently to those whose victims were white: since 1976, about 85% of those who were executed were convicted of killing whites, while about 15% were convicted of killing people of color. Clearly the system values white lives more than others.

The death penalty is one of racism's more blatant forms of injustice and immorality. Recently my own motivation to eliminate the death penalty has been enriched by an argument which personalizes the issue in the light of my own sense of honor and dignity.

At a regional conference hosted by the Massachusetts Citizens Against the Death Penalty two years ago, I heard Henry Schwarzchild of the ACLU, long known as a death penalty abolitionist, share a thought which has become for me a motivating factor in the struggle. He recited briefly his movement through the many arguments which leave the death penalty indefensible as a matter of public policy. Putting all those arguments aside, Schwarzchild had come to one position which is now his chief motivation to continue working for the abolition of the death penalty.

The source of the motivation comes from some words of Hamlet, in an exchange with Polonius. Knowing that Hamlet's uncle, the present king, has killed Hamlet's father, the two have just contracted with some actors to perform the play by which Hamlet plans to "catch the conscience of the king." Hamlet has talked with the players and, satisfied that they will do the job well, tells Polonius to make final arrangements with them. Polonius responds: "My lord, I will use them according to their desert." Now look carefully at Hamlet's immediate reply:

"God's bodkins, man, much better, use every man after his desert, and who should 'save whipping? Use them after your own honour and dignity: the less they deserve, the more merit is in your bounty..."

Henry Schwarzchild said, and I join his thought: I do not want to live in a land where people are treated out of anything save a sense of honor and dignity.

I do not want a land where people are sent to the death penalty because they cannot afford the costs of an adequate legal defense.

I do not want a land where people are sentenced to death in a pattern which clearly shows black lives are held in lesser value than white lives.

I do not want a land where any penalty is invoked in the arbitrary and capricious manner of

the death penalty, more like a lottery than a system of justice.

I do not want a land where far too often innocent people are convicted and sent to death in a final, irrevocable act.

I do want a land where people are treated always with a sense of honor and dignity, where I, and the state in my name, treat every single person out of a sense of honor and dignity.

If your desire is anything like mine, you will be active to keep your state from adding its name to the list of the 37 which now adopt the absurd position that to keep people from killing we must kill.

Those of us who live in Massachusetts are in a position to send a positive signal out across the land, indicating that we will not allow our Commonwealth to kill again.

We will not allow the state to increase racism and classism by killing poor white and black people.

In Massachusetts there is an increasingly strong coalition of more than 40 anti-death penalty organizations and some 6,000 people, led by the Massachusetts Citizens Against the Death Penalty. Stay in touch with them, get active with them, and help keep the death penalty out of Massachusetts. That will be a cause of celebration for the whole national movement.

Let's not treat people, even when guilty of crime, out of a sense of what some think they deserve; let's treat them out of our sense of honor and dignity. That sense of honor and dignity ought never to include killing; never can it countenance the racism and classism implicit in the application of the death penalty.

This struggle will take time, energy, money. It is a struggle for our sense of honor and dignity as a people.

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December 1991

Racism: Past Failures, Present Responsibilities

Often I have heard discussions about the legacy of the period in the history of our nation when African people were enslaved. In those discussions I find few white people who evidence much of a concept of the ways in which the grandchildren and great grandchildren of those who were enslaved may still bear the scars of that terrible institution. Some seem unwilling to even hear about that legacy. It may be too threatening, taking them too close to a reality of the past which is easier to dismiss than to accept. Whatever the motive for the denial, the argument is frequently made that what was done in the past is not something for which those of us who live in the present have any responsibility. When it revolves around "slavery," the argument usually given is, "I never owned slaves...don't hold me accountable for that!"

Of course it is true that today there is no one alive who is accountable for the period of enslavement in our history. Valid as that point of view may be, it becomes too quickly a way to deny any responsibility for the consequences of enslavement. A response that I and others have often made is to remind friends that while we cannot be held accountable for what others did in the past, we must accept responsibility for what we do in the present. That response raises for me another dimension of the discussion which I want to explore here.

To say that we who live in the 1990's are not responsible for the actions of our forebears, or to argue that the past has little lasting effect in the present, is a denial of the fundamentally corporate nature of life. Just as we are bound together in the present, so are we in the present bound to those who have lived before us, sometimes bound to act in accordance with or as a legacy of their actions. To understand that intimate relation of past and present helps me at least to struggle with my responsibilities as a person who lives in a present which is in some ways defined by the past.

Here are some of the ways in which we are bonded to the past:

1. Theologically, there is a tradition which acknowledges that the "sins of the fathers set the children's' teeth on edge." Many can identify some ways in their own lives in which that understanding makes sense. The genocide of native peoples in this land is a very present instance of my teeth "set on edge," a sour taste in the mouth. I am not accountable for what past generations have done to native people, but the patterns they set in motion are a part of the present which I would like to change.

2. The national debt is clearly an example of the ways in which our present is circumscribed by decisions we have not made, but were often made long before we were in positions of influence. We try to ignore it, but it threatens our national economic health.

3. Some of us are beneficiaries of funds accumulated by forebears whose decisions and actions still provide us with money which expands our options today. Conversely, some find options limited because those who went before either did not or could not save.

4. Often treaties made in another day are still binding upon us in the present. That we sometimes trample them, instanced often in our treatment of Native Americans, is a testimony to their force upon us.

5. I have belonged to churches where previous mortgages, contracted for reasons I thought were not very good, still bound our members in the present. Bank officials simply would not buy any argument that we disagreed with the reasons for the mortgage, and therefore should not be held accountable to pay. In such a case the past climbs into my pocketbook, very present indeed.

6. The Constitution is a document which I did not write, but its principles affect me daily. Judicial decisions of decades ago frequently define what I can and cannot do. The Constitution can

be changed and judicial decisions can be overturned, but until changed they are binding upon me, reaching from the past into my present.

7. Any psychiatrist will remind us that the past represented by many who have been dose to us, forms and sometimes deforms the reality in which we presently live.

8. National pride based in our heritage illustrates our bondedness to the past. I am very proud of the American Revolution, bringing a new form of freedom to the world, but I had nothing to do with it. I am daily grateful for that bonding.

9. The Declaration of Independence was not of my writing, and I was not around even to be consulted when it was written. I certainly cannot claim any responsibility for it, but I live every day grateful for its proclamation of self-evident truths, including the equality of all persons, and unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.* I look upon it still as a kind of "mission statement" for our nation, one which some generation will see fulfilled. From Jefferson, to my colleagues, to those next generations the corporate nature of our bonding is self-evident.

So the illustrations pile up, showing the connections of the present with the past. What was someone else's present, we think of as "past;" yet the way they lived, the decisions they made affect us, sometimes blessing our lives, sometimes invading them with an unwelcome reality. The point is clear: we are inextricably bound to the past.

The past lives in us in myriad ways. We must learn from it, must appropriate the good it brings to us, must correct the evil it bequeaths us. The body politic today is an extension of what it was yesteryear, warp and woof woven together in a pattern of beauty or ugliness. To deny the corporate nature of life is to miss an important truth. Let's not forget that as we work together to discard the racism of the past and to provide a present that will build a future without racism.

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* I know well the terrible contradiction in Jefferson's life, which shows clearly that behaviorally he did not exhibit a belief in the equality which he espoused. I will not excuse that failure, but do still want to acknowledge a profound sense of gratitude for the principle he held out for us to strive towards.

December 1993

The Danger of Becoming a WANNABUT

There have been numerous occasions in my work on issues related to racism when I have seen creativity stifled by someone who says, "but," "but," "but."...It usually comes in response to a suggestion about what a person or group might do programmatically to counter the effects of racism. If I am in a group where I know there are people who do not want to see anything done, I obviously expect a lot of "buts." These will come from people whose basic attitude is "we don't want to." I expect them to reject, oppose or erect barriers after every suggestion. While disappointed that they feel that way, I expect and accept their "buts." BUT...It is very disappointing when I hear the "buts" coming consistently from those who at the same time insist that they want to take action.

It happened again just the other day, when a group of people was responding to the request by one white man who had asked for help in thinking through what his business might do to reach out in a creative way to engage people of color in its vocational field. In the group with him there were seven others, two of whom were African Americans, and several of whom worked in the same professional field though not in his firm. There was in the collective group a good deal of experience and wisdom to provide helpful suggestions for our friend.

The conversation began with a statement by the one who was seeking help indicating that people in his business were eager to "reach out to identify, recruit and train people of color for the firm, which was almost all white." "I want to," he said, suggesting a goal he had in mind. "My colleagues want to. All top managers agree. We all want to do this; we just don't know how."

With such an open mind, such an expression of agreement as to the stated objective, this sounded like a piece of cake! Several of those present began in an almost brainstorming fashion to make practical, concrete suggestions about what our friend could do. From the moment we started with those suggestions, the conversation became one which I have heard so many other times that it blurs in my mind; memory becomes one of a composite of all those times when "buts" got in the way of action:

"I want to do that, but...that won't work for us."
"I want to, but...we don't do things that way."
"I wannabut...there is no budget."
"I wannabut...I've never done that before."
"I wannabut...our clients won't like it."
"I wannabut...that'll never fly in our business."

At this point you can create your own list of the "buts." They are scattered over the landscape of many organizations with whom I have sat over the years. They lie with all the good intentions which pave the road to nowhere. The disappointment for me is to see the frustration of the stated purpose of the person who says this or that is what they want to do. There is a dangerous attitude which creeps into many heads and hearts and prevents them from moving in the direction they say they want to move. Becoming a WANNABUT can frustrate the very one who "wants to." In my work I have too often seen that attitude frustrate attempts to develop creative ways to respond to the racism present in a given situation or in our society.

There is always the danger of becoming a WANNABUT! As I say that to others, I must also say it to myself every week at least, probably every day, someone suggests something that I might do, or that we might initiate at Community Change, as we develop anti-racism programs.

Many times I feel that "BUT" trembling on my lips, and I have to call it back into my throat before it blocks the possibility of something new and exciting happening:

I WANNABUT...I tried that six years ago, and believe me it won't work!

I WANNABUT...you don't have any idea how tough that is.

I WANNABUT...the opposition to that kind of thing is much stronger than you have any idea about.

I WANNABUT...no one is going to help us find the money.

I WANNABUT...who is going to do the work?

I WANNABUT...I WANNABUT...I WANNABUT.

Many times when I have said I WANNABUT, I'm quite sure that my "but" was well-founded in experience; many times the suggestion did come from someone naive about realities I have encountered. Many times the "but" was a reasonable response that I might make again should the same situation occur once more.

Then I begin to caution myself about the DANGER OF BECOMING A WANNABUT! I wonder how many great ideas I have stymied by a quick "But?" I wonder how many creative people I have discouraged with my "but-ing?" I could probably fill a trash can with the "buts" I have strewn along the way.

So, I remind myself several times a day to go easy on the "buts" which discourage and try to adopt a "but" attitude which opens up new possibilities.

Here's a different kind of "but," which I say to myself when someone comes to me with an idea about combating racism:

"When we tried that six years ago it didn't work, BUT maybe it should be tried again." "That's a tough thing to do, BUT let's see if we can do it better this time."

"A lot of people won't like it, BUT it needs to be done, so let's see if there is a new approach."

"No one has been willing to fund that before, BUT maybe there is someone new out there who is willing to."

"I don't know who will do that, BUT can you help find someone?"

The first set of WANNABUTS is rooted in a fundamental attitude which accents the negative restraints; the second set turns the negative into an exploration of new possibilities. When I meet the WANNABUT in myself or in others, I block that first kind of "but," and try to practice the second kind. A WANNABUT can too quickly end discussions which might result in progress if allowed to continue. Becoming a WANNABUT can discourage creativity as we reach for ways to implement programs which contribute to racial justice.

WANNABUT-TING is most dangerous in well-intentioned whites, whose proneness to that behavior often becomes a way of avoiding action which may result in some amazing changes. The prospect of those changes may be a veiled threat to many whites, who, at some subliminal level, might be frightened for fear of losing control, influence, and power when change comes. So, in ways which others can describe better than I, the behavior which says "IWANNA" satisfies that part of the person which knows what is right, while the quickly added "BUT" protects that in the person which is rooted in fear of change. When that dynamic occurs in the context of seeking to be anti-racist, there is an ever-present danger of BECOMING A WANNABUT.

Please help me avoid BECOMING A WANNABUT, and I'll pledge to help keep you from the same danger.

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February 1995

Preachin' to the Choir

Recently I was talking about racism with some people in a corporate setting, and was pleased by a spirited discussion and many comments which affirmed that my contribution had been helpful. In the midst of the verbal evaluation and many accolades, there was one man who claimed that all that I said was good, acceptable, even "great," but that I was "talking to the Choir!" Since we were already over the time allotted for our session, my response was limited to a few words, and then I called for an end to the "choir rehearsal!"

It was not the first time I had heard such comments, and I suppose we have all been in groups where the same sentiment has been expressed. Translated, the phrase has always meant to me, "you're talking to the already converted...we understand things just as you do, so why tell us...there are other people who need to hear your message more than we do." This time, though, I found myself wanting to reflect on the meaning of this comment. My reflections took several directions.

Immediately it is clear that the comment that we are "preachin' to the choir" is an affirmation of the group shout about whom the statement is made. There is an implicit assumption that the "choir" is made up of those who are the most committed to the goals of the subject under discussion. So it is a way of telling everyone that they are "okay," and, of course, reminding everyone that the person saying that is on the "right" side! Since there was no time left for me to check to find if others felt the same way, I cannot tell if there was any consensus that I was speaking to the "wrong" audience. Yet it was clear that this one person thought that. My hunch is that had I opened his comment for response from others, there would have been a number who would not have agreed with him. If that were the case, it is still clear that the man was at least affirming his own "purity," his own conviction that he at least did not need to hear the good things I had said. That is the obvious effect of what was said. Mark that as the first point of reflection.

Incidentally, and before I move on, if all the "choirs" I have spoken to about anti-racism were full of committed activists in the struggle, I'd feel a lot more confident about the end of racism than I do.

A less obvious effect of the comment about the "choir" is that it may be a way, intentionally or not, of deflecting responsibility for acting on what has been said. "Take this word somewhere else, there is some other audience that needs to hear it, and let them take it to heart. We here are doing all right; direct yourself to some other group, because that is where we need to see more responsible action." "We are the choir." "We've heard it all." "We're good people."..."We don't need to hear this any more." "Take the good message somewhere else; we are the 'good guys'." The effect of the remark is to deflect what has been said, turn it aside, and aim it in some other direction...

There may be truth in the claim that "somebody" else needs to hear this and do more about it, but it always concerns me a bit. The analogy to the "good guys" being the choir, calls to mind my experience on a denominational staff for nine years. In that capacity I moved among some five hundred churches regularly. I recall stories of choir masters who had run off with someone else's spouse, of choir members who had cheated at business, of at least one church secretary and choir member who ran a "call girl" operation from the church office...and you could add your own similar stories, applicable not only to "choirs" but to those who "perform" in other settings as well.

The point is quickly made...the people who have heard the message a thousand times may still not act in accord with it. Who would claim that he/she has not stumbled more than once? Let's

not turn the responsibility for action to someone else, to some other group. Let's be wary of anyone who talks too quickly about the problem residing somewhere else.

Comes a more disquieting possibility of the effect of the comment that I should have been addressing some other group than the "choir." The comment may have the effect of diminishing what has been said, even while it comes from one who affirms the message. It may be an effective way of discounting the ideas expressed, assuring those assembled that they don't have to take them very seriously. If the comment had come from someone who claimed my remarks were stupid, I could easily accept it as an honest disagreement, but coming as it did from an affirming listener, I am puzzled, and must assess at least the possibility of this "diminishing" effect. For now I don't want to dwell any longer on this phase of my reflections, but will dismiss this argument as brusquely as it may have dismissed mine.

More seriously my reflections reminded me of my own need to he constantly supported by those whose experience and views are similar. I do need to be often with the "choir," to talk with, though not to "preach to" people who are of similar mind. I need to be with them in part to sharpen my thought, to be challenged by others who share my objectives. "Reshape," "refuel" are words which describe that need. The "choir" can help me prepare for times when those with whom I speak are not of similar mind, have never been near the "choir." I need to use those times I am with the "choir" so that we can prepare each other to go out to the places where there is no "choir" and to speak more persuasively, to act more strategically.

So, bring on the "choirs," and let's determine together to "talk" and listen carefully to each other, and try to find what we can apply to ourselves, to our situations, to our group, to our heads, hearts and habits.

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July 1995

Balancing Patience/Impatience

In the early 70's a Black, male friend exiled from South Africa, spoke angrily with me about his impatience for change; he wanted change YESTERDAY!

In the early 70's a Black man from South Africa spoke with me about the need for patience. His first son had just been born. Contemplating life for the future, my friend said, "The struggle for freedom will be my son's struggle. It will be his son's struggle and his son's struggle, and his son's struggle." The sober comment anticipated generations of resolve. It was a testimony to the patience necessary to long-range commitment.

Those two "conversations" were with the same man. He was able to combine within himself both that intense impatience and that deliberate patience. I'm still trying in 1995 to reach that same ability to balance the two emotions in myself.

Right now, in the political climate of 1995, with the RIGHT and the FAR RIGHTEOUS stealing the nation from under me, my struggle is to keep my impatience from tripping my patience. Even as I say that I also want to recognize that patience needs often to be prodded by impatience. There is a danger when either one gets in the way of the other.

My impatience right now is rooted in anger and fear. I am angry as I see the needs of common people being trampled by those whose bottom-line motive too often comes from greed. I am furious when I see religious belief in the worthiness of every person distorted into justifications for excluding any person from rights or resources. I am afraid of what the future may hold for the already oppressed people of our land. I fear what that oppression may demand of me.

I am angry.

I am fearful.

I am very IMPATIENT! I want change YESTERDAY!

My impatience leads me sometimes into an arrogance when not everyone shares my feeling of urgency. I sometimes simply cannot stand those who want to delay action, because they recognize a need for a depth of thought I am not willing to give. I sometimes become intolerant of those who do not want to join me in addressing institutional issues, when they know that in their lives it is of prime importance to engage introspection, dialogue, and personal relationships. That intolerance, that arrogance, that allegiance to what I feel to be of central importance, can turn me into an ally no one wants or needs and it can BLIND ME.

The danger is that I may not see that others who work for racial justice in different ways from mine are also to be valued in the struggle. It can lead me to discount the importance of what they do, because they are not doing what I do! It can close my eyes to seeing my own need to balance my intense clamor for action mat with the patient, hard work of introspection and dialogue. It can diminish the support I offer when someone is struggling with an issue which does not seem as crucial to me as it is to them. In sum my impatience births an arrogance of spirit in me which may hurt some other who works also in the movement toward justice for all. When I find myself so impatient that I act in that way to others, then it is time for me to seek patience.

There is always a "BUT"...and here it is: BLEE...I don't want to become so patient that I become tolerant of any temporary or continuing injustice, not even for a decade, a year, a day, a minute! I want to be IMPATIENT, and if I discover myself too easily accepting a situation which needs change then I need to be booted out of my complacency. Too frequently as a white male, the product of unearned privilege, my tendency to be patient and wait for change is rooted in the fact that the injustice doesn't personally affect my life...it is easy to be patient over someone else's

pain. I need to guard myself from that consequence of patience. If being impatient leads me too often to an intolerance of inaction, then being patient too often leads me to a tolerance of an intolerable condition that I refuse to stand in myself or in any other.

I say to myself almost every day: “keep checking for the balance between patience and impatience.”

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V. Essays on Racism on Campus

October 1985

A Higher Education About Racism

In recent years I have talked with people from over thirty colleges, mostly in the New England area. These people include students, administrators, and faculty whose points of view in regard to racism differ considerably. From what I have experienced, seen, or heard about, here I will share anecdotal data which will illustrate some of the forms racism takes in those college settings.

A black male student on what would generally be called a "prestigious" campus described his three-year experience on that campus in words something like this: "Racism is very subtle here. I haven't experienced any blatant form of racism, but I encounter it almost everywhere I turn; it is all-pervasive. The sum total of all that subtle racism is blatant."

Here are some instances of racism, both subtle and blatant:

A black woman student enters a classroom on the first day of classes in a new semester. The class is small and she is the only person of color enrolled. The professor speaks to her quietly, saying that he is not accustomed to having minority students in his classes and he hopes that he will not say anything to offend her at any time. Then the class begins and the professor spends a considerable amount of time going over the syllabus and describing the course requirements. At several points during this process he turns to the black student and pointedly asks, "Do you understand?" She wants to take the course, but at this point she feels like hiding or running away.

In the lobby of a graduate school there is a bulletin board, and one section of that board has been used as a place where people can post pictures under which they invite others to write captions, often evoking humorous responses. Reading the responses provides a pleasant pause in the daily round of academic pursuits. Someone posted on the board a picture of a KKK rally, and invited people to give it a caption. The first comment to appear was a boldly written, "This isn't funny!" Both that comment and the picture were quickly removed and the issue was dropped.

A woman student who was proud of her Native American heritage but whose physical appearance does not fit the stereotype, told me that whenever she rolls a scarf into a small band and wears it to keep her hair in place, she gets stares and comments which indicate that the stereotype is not dead. What she wears is not remotely like an Indian head band, but it evokes a behavior toward her which is different from the way she is treated when she does not wear the scarf.

A white male professor announces what I assume to be an honest hope that the student body at the college where he teaches might be more racially diverse than it is at present. In almost the next sentence he says, "There is not a single urban high school in the northeastern part of the United States which can graduate a student qualified to attend our college." This professor also sits on the Admissions committee which in part functions to set up a budget and a plan for recruiting prospective students.

A white student who frequently associates with the few black students on her campus is walking across the college quadrangle in company with four black students. The words, "Nigger lover!" are yelled at her several times from an anonymous dormitory window.

An Academic Dean meets with me and three professors. We make plans for a faculty meeting which is to be devoted to a discussion of issues of curriculum and race. We even set the date on which the Dean will call for the faculty meeting to discuss this topic. The Dean is preoccupied with insuring a process which will make it appear as though our decision really rose out of the faculty itself He engages in a discussion in which it is agreed that someone will bring up this matter at the next faculty meeting, that a committee will be appointed to look into the matter, that a

report would be made to a subsequent faculty meeting, and then finally a decision to do that for which we had already set a date! After our meeting ended, the process outlined began. With many convoluted manipulations the plan finally fades away and is lost in the ether of words and process. Nothing ever happens.

Both male and female athletes, black and white, from six different sports, report that they have seen or experienced discriminatory practices on the part of coaches in the athletic department of their college. Black players do not get the playing times they feel they deserve, systems for ranking people through challenge matches are manipulated, and positions on teams are often not awarded on the basis of ability. The reports are consistent enough to indicate that there should be some response at least to the perceptions expressed. When these complaints are brought to the attention of college officials, they dismiss them as unfounded because "the Director of Athletics is such a nice man".

In a class examining recent United States history, the name of Dr. Martin Luther King comes up and someone makes a critical remark about him. All heads turn immediately to the one black student in the class, begging for a response.

Two black women students in Boston get on a subway car and take seats beside each other in the front section of the car, where all seats are then occupied. The section at the back of the car has several vacant seats. A middle-aged white woman gets on at the next stop; she is carrying numerous bundles, is obviously hurried and harried, and eager for a seat. She stands over the two black women, looks down at them and says, "I need a seat. Don't you know you folks are supposed to be up back?"

A white woman student has become friendly with a black male student at a Boston area college. They go on a date together at an apartment in downtown Boston. The evening slips away quickly and, when they leave the apartment, the subway is no longer running to their campus. They don't have enough money for a cab, so they decide to hitch-hike, assuming that the many students returning to campus will include someone willing to offer a ride. Cars go by; none stop. Then a car full of several white students goes slowly past them; one student leans out of the car window and yells at the girl, "You'll never get a ride as long as you're with that thing!"

No one of these anecdotes is fiction! Each has happened in the 1980's! No one of them is to be dismissed lightly, because each one hurts. Collectively they are just the tip of a frigid iceberg. There are still lots of places where one can get a "higher education" about/in racism.

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April 1986

Learning about Racism from Students

For several years I have taught an undergraduate course at Boston College, titled The History and Development of Racism in the United States of America. Teaching is always a mutual exchange, so it is no surprise that each semester students teach me about racism. The lessons are seldom new, but each time they come with a freshness defined by the particular personalities of the persons involved in the class. Here are some of the things I have learned, each of which carries for me the images of particular students, and are therefore recalled with the affection I feel for them, my mentors.

Each semester I am reminded that many white students are products of homogeneous white environments and their understanding of racism and of racial dynamics is very limited. When students of color begin telling of personal encounters with racism on an every-day basis, many whites are shocked into a new sensitivity which opens to them an ugly world they have not seen before. That ugly world has a history, and so we begin to trace the origins of racism in our national life. That history reveals a nation founded on two contradictory convictions, one of equality, and the other affirming white superiority. Students begin for the first time to understand the complex dimensions of our national problem. Problems encountered today are rooted in a history which lives in us.

White students, with a new sensitivity, begin to report an awareness of racial prejudice and discrimination taking place all around them. They tell me that it is "like having blinders suddenly removed from my eyes,"..."it is not facts being drilled into my head to be memorized; it is human beings, it's our world, and it's life." Much of this new awareness reveals a social reality which becomes particularly tough when students begin to see the results of racism in their own beliefs, attitudes, and actions.

White students very often find themselves in danger of being trapped in guilt. Seeing what whites have done and continue to do to people of color, both personally and through institutions, guilt becomes a common response. Feelings of guilt cause some white students to become fearful of expressing themselves in class. So we have to work together to accept a kind of societal guilt without personalizing it, and to move beyond guilt over the past to a sense of responsibility for the present. That is often a painful period for white students, but it is a period which poses the student on the threshold of liberation and growth.

Students of color find it very hard to believe that some of the white students have no idea of how present, pervasive, and harsh racism is. When their own experience of racism is so continuous, it is hard at first to accept at face value that many whites simply have no idea about the reality of racism today. Privately, students of color often express their conviction that some of the white students are not being truthful.

Across this gulf of "knowing" and "not-knowing", there is need for a lot of patient and empathic listening, on the part of both whites and people of color.

Most students I encounter in this class are open and eager to learn. They discover negative racist feelings within themselves, and they plead for help in "un-learning" those feelings. Students see T.V. programs and commercials from a perspective which critiques them for racial stereotypes. Campus life and relationships offer new opportunities for exploring issues of racism. Laughing at racist jokes is no longer fun for them, and they begin to experiment with the most effective ways of countering their friends who still engage in those jokes. They report lengthy discussions with roommates after each of our weekly classes and after semester "break" comes

serious reflection on how to deal with racist attitudes they may now recognize in their parents and best friends at home. A frequent question is, "How can I share my new insight and concerns without judging my parents or losing a life-long friend?"

Each semester I am taught once again that racist behavior may be intentional or it may be unintentional. It is tough for students of color to accept as unintentional those things which are so hurtful to them. We read a history which shows us a massive amount of racist laws passed, racist judicial decisions announced, racist constitutional provisions enacted, all of which were clearly intended. In that light it is easy to assume that present acts are also intentionally racist. For white students, who may not know of the racist effect of their actions, it is hard to realize that sometimes their actions produce an effect contrary to what they intend. When they discover that dynamic, we then explore the power they have to change their actions. What is needed next is the will to make those changes. Students discover themselves at decision points which are similar to those experienced by many other people in the past; history teaches us the reality that only a few in each class will make the harder decisions necessary to change. In those few I rejoice and from them I gain strength.

Students do not easily see the institutional dimensions of racism. That is also true of most people whom I know. Becoming aware of the one-on-one dynamics of personal encounters between people of different races is relatively easy, but the institutional aspects are harder to see. Many simply do not think in institutional terms, do not have understandings which equip them to see the ways in which institutional policies, procedures, and practices may have racist effects. Without this understanding the picture of racism will always be incomplete, so we have to begin to provide some of the tools for this new exploration. I am reminded once again of the importance of educating people to identify the impact of individual institutions, and of the intersection of systems of institutions which may be racist.

What students have taught me most of all is not something I can summarize as a "learning" or an insight into racism, or even as an understanding. Mainly what they teach me is an attitude toward the future. They give me that great gift of hope...

- A student who describes how he has confronted a bank teller who uses racist language, gives me hope.
- A student who says that every evening after our class is filled with discussions with her roommates, gives me hope.
- A student, who seeks supervision in a field placement in a civil rights organization, gives me hope.
- A student who says, "I have begun to change my behaviors, convictions, and outlook on life and people," gives me hope.
- A student who writes, "I have a long way to go in overcoming my prejudices...my goal this semester is to accept people for what they are, not for what I think they should be ..." gives me hope.
- A student, who goes to graduate school and returns to seek help with a major paper on institutional forms of racism, gives me hope.

Hope in this long struggle against racism is the essence of sustaining power. What a magnificent gift I am given each semester! I share that gift now, with you.

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April 1987

Colleges: Stop Recruiting Minority Students

Several friends were discussing with me the many recent "incidents" which news media have reported as a resurgence of racism on predominantly white campuses. All the discussants are people who are familiar with the experience of students of color on such campuses. None of them was surprised by the reports in the media. All agreed that such "incidents" are not a "resurgence of racism", but rather the evidence of an on-going phenomenon which every student of color knows to be a part of the daily struggle in a white environment. These are simply stark instances which command public attention; even if it could be proved that not one of them happened, the reality of enculturated racism is still present.

One of the concerns in our discussion was the trend in recent years which records a decreasing percentage of students of color at many colleges and universities. Inevitably, some of those who were present began to suggest how colleges could recruit more students of color. That part of the discussion was interrupted by a black person who said he finds it increasingly difficult to justify recommending to any young black friend that he/she go to a predominantly white institution of higher education. Black colleges, he claimed, show a much better record of educating black students. In the traditionally black colleges retention rates are better, graduation is surer, and performance after graduation is better by measurable standards.* So why, he asked, should he urge a black student to go to a predominantly white school? When he raised this question, my friend was not trying to be a "wise guy;" he was asking a question which for him is a very real moral dilemma.

My assumption is that the question my friend poses is one which might apply for any student of color, not simply blacks. Why should we urge anyone to go into an environment which may condone a hostile or unfriendly atmosphere, and to struggle for the survival of self-respect for four years in that environment? The question becomes especially pertinent when consideration is given to alternatives present in traditionally black colleges.

Let's declare a moratorium on the recruitment of students of color in-predominantly white colleges and universities! Let those institutions give primary attention to bringing about some foundational changes which will assure that they will be more hospitable places in which students of color can learn, without the debilitating and constant struggle against blatant or subtle forms of racism. Until those changes are institutionalized, annual recruitment budgets could be set aside, and then when the college is ready, a vigorous recruitment effort could begin. The moratorium would in effect say: "Don't recruit more students of color until certain conditions of change are met."

Here are some of the changes which might be required before the moratorium is lifted:

- Demonstrate that racism and racial prejudice is a serious offense, and that racist behavior will not be tolerated, but will be punished. Put into use enforcement mechanisms that work.
- Secure good representation of persons of color on the Board of Trustees.
- Recruit faculty of color, and provide all necessary supports that move them toward tenure.
- Recruit administrators of color in major positions.
- Integrate into the curriculum multi-racial, multi-cultural concerns.
- Provide training of faculty and of staff (security forces, resident staff, others) in the skills of

* See *The Traditionally Black Institutions of Higher Education*, from the National Center of Education Statistics, March 1985, and read *Blacks in College*, by Jacqueline Fleming, Bass, 1984.

authentic multi-racial relationships.

- Introduce into the curriculum courses which examine the history and present-day functioning of racism in our society. (This is different from what is commonly called "prejudice reduction.")
- Revise admissions standards to include criteria which are as predictive of academic performance for students of color as present criteria are for white students.*
- Put into place support mechanisms which will signify an institutional intent to retain students for graduation.

Some will say that the suggestion of a moratorium is unrealistic and it is naive to expect any such stance will be adopted by any college or university. Well, I don't expect the moratorium to get serious consideration in many college presidents' offices; it will not be on the agenda for the next meeting of the trustees at your favorite college! Still, it is a good idea. It reminds us of the need for a sense of urgency about the changes suggested, a sense I find missing when the issue of racism is raised in predominantly white settings. So, while the moratorium may never happen, it "ought" to happen! At the very least the idea may get the donkey's attention!

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* See *The Use of Nontraditional Predictors for Admission to the University of Maryland,* College Park, by William E. Sedlacek, Counseling Center, University of Maryland.

VI. Essays: Open Letters to White Males

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January 1991

An Open Letter to White Males - January 1991

Long ago a Black Puerto Rican man said to me that the organizations and institutions which are run by whites will go on just as they are with little change so long as the decision makers continue to believe, perceive, decide, and act as they have always believed, perceived, decided, and acted. That conversation illumined for me an important connection between individual and institutional change.

Since it is most often white males, like me, who are in positions of organizational decision-making, we are going to have to decide whether or not we want to contribute to or block the implementation of change. As we move into the twenty-first century, if there are not significant changes in the way our institutions operate, many will eventually become anomalies, outmoded, and left behind in the flux of increasing diversity. That diversity, molded in the population of the future, makes change both certain and necessary. The demographic diversity may come faster than change will be accelerated, but the choice about the speed of change is partly up to us. A "train" is coming down the track; our major decision is whether to board it or to watch it go by.

The changes that will be needed are both institutional and personal. There are some changes coming in me and in the institutions where I have a voice. I can control to a large extent my own openness to change; for the institutions it will be more difficult. Institutions can last a long time without change, but like white or male-only clubs, they eventually become extinct. More motivating than the threat of extinction, beckoning us somewhere "beyond" the change is an enriched life for individuals and for our institutions. The remarkably diverse century into which we are moving will require me to change my ways of perceiving, believing, deciding, and acting. As I and other perceivers, believers, deciders, and actors work together, we will develop new institutions the nature of which we cannot even envision today.

Recently I had an experience which "signified" for me some of the blocks to the changes which I believe will come. I was working with an African-American woman in a series of workshop sessions for a staff which had identified some internal problems as race-related. At one point I presented a theory about a particular form of communications, which participants were asked to practice in a skill-building exercise. After I had presented the theory, a black man said, "I'm not sure I understand all of that, and the parts that I understand, I'm not sure I agree with; it's not my way of puttin' information out there." Nevertheless, he was willing to participate, and he proceeded to do so, quite helpfully.

After the session was over, I had to do some searching in my head and heart. I had used a theory with which I felt comfortable; it came from a context of a white, male, and middle class view about how to communicate. I still think the theory is a good one, and it has proved helpful to many people of different races and cultures. Nonetheless I now found myself asking why I had implicitly assumed that the way of communicating on which it is based is necessarily the best or most helpful one for all people. Clearly, my black friend had not found it so. He grew up in an environment of street survival for the early part of his life, and had learned a whole different way of communicating, of "'puttin' information out." How can I assume that his way is inferior to mine? Might it not be possible, if he and I were to be on the same staff together, that I might profit much from learning his way of communicating? Projecting myself into an imagined staff relationship with him over a period of time, it is probable that he and I might develop some new ways of communicating which neither of us can articulate now because we don't know what they will be. Given a staff of people of greater diversity than the two of us represent, many different ways of

believing, perceiving, deciding, and acting would evolve out of a willingness to learn from each other and to let develop what as a group or staff we found most helpful. It might mean that at different times and in varied situations we would exercise very different styles of making decisions or relating around staff responsibilities.

The kind of change I am suggesting here will be threatening to some, because it will necessitate new learning and in some cases whole new ways of doing things. If we begin with an assumption that all people from all cultures have something to contribute to our multicultural style, then what emerges on the "other side" of change will be more productive than what we know now. The process of getting to that new place will be difficult at times, but learning to believe, decide, perceive, and act in new ways adaptive to a multicultural world can be exciting and fun. Learning is always stimulating; by its nature "to learn" implies growth and growth is better than stagnation.

What can I learn from this experience about the future of working in an increasingly multicultural setting? First I need to understand the huge cultural gap represented in the theory I had presented, which originated in a white, male, middle-class way of dealing with information exchange between people, and the way in which the young black male had learned to "put information out" from his long experience of street survival. Across that gap, there was no reason for me to assume that the way I had learned to exchange information was better than or more helpful than his way. Second, I need to begin to listen to the "other" person's way, and as we work together over the months, some new and very different ways of "sharing information" may emerge.

When we enter into collegial relationships with a spectrum of people whose patterns of perceiving, believing, deciding, and acting are defined in part by significant cultural differences, it is my prediction that some very new ways of doing any of these things will emerge. The same will be true of learning theories by which educators plan, of ways of managing, of doing research, indeed of practically any human endeavor. The possibility of change will be constant, and that brings both threat and excitement.

The "blocks" to changes are several, but are primarily in the heads and hearts and habits of the decision-makers. Since that group is primarily white males, I address this letter to my friends in that category.

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July 1991

An Open Letter to White Males - July 1991

Recently I had a brief phone conversation which exposed a stereotype about how the "old boys club" works. The background for understanding this experience clusters around a proposal which we at Community Change had submitted to a foundation, seeking funding for a specific project. The proposal had been submitted many weeks ago, and, since we had been told that it was unlikely to be funded, I had put it out of my everyday consciousness. Suddenly the phone rang, and on the other end was a man whose name identified him as a primary decision-maker for the foundation to which we had made application. So I dove for the file with a copy of our proposal, ready to answer questions about it. What happened then was the surprise!

The first question which came was, "What was your background before you came to Community Change?" I was so astounded, that at first I could hardly remember who I was! Somewhere my alter ego was screaming, "What the...does that have to do with the proposal?" I was tempted to tell the inquisitor that his question was irrelevant and inappropriate, but I succumbed to the hope that maybe the "club" would give us some money, and I obediently answered the dumb question.

While I was still reeling from that question, came the next one: "When did I first meet you?"...followed quickly by "Who were you with when we met?" At first I could not remember, so my questioner proceeded to assure me that he thought it was at the home of a man who was a well-known executive for a prestigious social service agency. Since I had never been in that home, I could not affirm his memory, but did finally share my recollection that we had first met years ago, in the funder's office, in regard to yet another proposal.

Then there was the second part of that question, about who I was with when we first met. (Obviously my questioner wanted to connect me to the person in whose home he thought we had met!) The best I could do was to identify the person who accompanied me when we had talked about that other proposal.

Then came the question, "How long haw you been at Community Change?" The answer was quick. "Twenty-three years," I said, waiting now for some questions about the proposal. Indeed there was one question about the sources of our income, an unnecessary question, since the financial statement submitted with the proposal already answered that one! At least he was getting "warm," so I prepared to clarify any questions about why we wanted the money, and how it would be used.

Almost as abruptly as the phone had interrupted me, the interview was ended, with a casual, "We'll see what the Board says." My receiver now back on its caddy, I sat in semi-shock, wondering if what I had heard was a nightmare.

"What is your background?"

"Where did I first meet you?"

"Who were you with when we first met?"

Those three questions were the "guts" of this man's inquiry about our proposal, and must have become at least a part of the basis on which he was to make a recommendation to his Board about whether or not to fund our request!

This is an almost perfect example of the stereotypical white male club in operation! There it is right out in plain view for all to see; nothing hidden about it. We can hope that kind of thinking does not prevail often, but unfortunately it probably does. While in this case the consequences

could have affected only the outcome of a modest grant request, that style of making decisions, when projected into other places where major decisions are being made, is frightening.

It is frightening to imagine how the thinking illustrated in this instance might affect the patterns of decision-making in institutions Those patterns become a part of the way institutions function, and an institution governed by white males who think, act and decide as my caller did easily become racist, sexist, and classist. Project the style depicted in this experience into a situation where someone is hired or promoted on the basis of judgments about "background" and who knows who, when, under what circumstances, and the consequences become serious for those who do not "fit" the mold. Ultimately there is also the threat that institutions governed by these standards will become outmoded and obsolete, left behind in the changing tides of demographic shifts.

Even more frightening for me is to recognize that the man who called me probably has no sense that his inquiries were so irrational. When such behavior becomes simply "the way things are done," without thought of the consequences or affects either for the persons involved or for the institutions, my uneasiness gives way to fear for the future. The patterns of the stereotypical, white, male club need changing if the future is going to look different from the past.

White males of the world, we can do lots better.

Let's change the stereotype; we can do that by changing our ways of thinking, perceiving, deciding, and behaving.

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October 1991

An Open Letter to White Males - October 1991

During a panel at a recent conference I heard an African American woman direct an important question. She directed it specifically to white males, and that is what prompted me to think about some response. Since she is a person for whom I have great affection, I am also eager to respond. Sharing some thoughts may prompt further discussion. The question asked was, "How do white males 'move over' and then deal with their sense of loss of control?" While the context of my friend's question cannot be fully available right now, she was wondering about how to get white males who are in positions of power to move out of the way so that others can take control.

Imagine a man in a position of decision-maker, exercising a considerable amount of control in an organization or institution. Assume next that he has come to see that it is important for him to enable a process by which others, white women, men and women of color, will increasingly become involved in making decisions which, up until that moment, have been primarily his domain. Our hypothetical white male understands that such a goal is desirable, and that the operation he currently supervises will be enriched when others become involved in the decision-making process. He is intellectually at least, committed to the idea that he must "move over." The question asks, "how" do white men do that?

My friend's question has two parts to it: first, the question of "how," and then the question about dealing with the sense of loss which comes after one has "moved over." The two are so connected in the one act of "moving over" that it is hard to treat them separately. Here are some "opening thoughts" on both parts of the question.

How Might White Males "Move Over?"

1. A first step is to practice listening, especially to those who are not white males. The claim that we white men do not attend as closely to women, to people of color, as to our white male colleagues finds easy evidence. "Listen" and you will hear the stories abundantly amplified. Before we start defending our behavior, before .we start assuring ourselves and everyone else that we do listen, we will be better off if we simply start at the point of criticism, and listen. That requires setting aside our defenses, and hearing with our heads and our hearts both what is being said about our behavior, and how it causes pain for those who are not white males.

The "listening" will include observing our own behavior, watching exchanges which other men have with those who are not white and male, asking for feedback about ourselves. That includes understanding how we as white males may have been taught through much of our lives to behave in ways which are built on assumptions that white and male intelligence, wisdom, and experience is superior. All of this "listening" will not be easy, but if we want to function in an enriched and more productive way with colleagues who are not white and male, it is an important step to take.

2. We need to learn to accept roles which are not principal roles, up-front roles, roles with high visibility. This will mean accepting roles in which we sometimes simply do the "legwork," the gathering of data, the calling of meetings, the detail preparation which facilitates someone else doing the thinking, directing, and performing in the more visible roles. It will mean that we will make ourselves available to women, women's groups, groups run by people of color, offering simply to serve them and help make things happen for them. One key to making this work is to find a goal which is commonly shared, important both to ourselves and to the others for whom we do the work. The reward, the sense of achievement then comes from seeing the common objective

accomplished, rather than from any sense of personal acclaim.

3. We will need to think through for ourselves distinctions between "moving over" and "stepping down." A brief exchange with two white women elicited both the assurance that the first does not necessarily mean the second, and the comment that they might very well be the same, and both are necessary. Their comments raise some important questions for our hearts to ponder:

Is it possible for us to "move over," or "step aside," without "stepping down? Is it perhaps necessary at times for us to intend a "stepping down?"

A "yes" is my immediate answer to both of the above questions. In actual behavior my "answer" may be quite different; the route from head to habit may be full of emotional and status pitfalls, for which my training and experience as a white male have not prepared me. The months and years ahead will hold my real answer.

4. We will need to distinguish between the question originally posed in the panel, "how" do we move over, and the question of "why" we should do so. This takes us into an exploration of the connections between the "how" and the "why." If we can identify some of the reasons "why" we should move over, and some of the benefits of that action, it may help us deal with any sense of loss which may attend the "moving over." While that distinction is probably important, exploring the "why" is not the focus of these brief notes. Still, delineating the reasons why it is important to "move over" will be an essential step; hopefully, if we can be clear about motives there will be greater congruity between intent and action.

5. Perhaps the most important need is to confront a history which traps us into assumptions that to be "in control" is a major part of our identity. Here I take my friend's question to a different level of contemplation. "Moving over" and "losing control" were the focus of her question. Now I want to suggest that the loss of control is not the major threat to white men. The greater fear rests in the threat which "losing control" presents to the image and identity of white men. The fear of losing control may operate at a subliminal level to threaten the identity of what it means to be a white male:

In our history, written mostly by white men, we have been defined as those who are in control. History very clearly tells us that white men of property are in control; losing control therefore may threaten both our self-image and identity at a very powerful subconscious level. The record of white male control is vividly present in our world, described particularly by white women and by most people of color, as they experience us. A couple of instances will remind you of how that works.

For instance, a black friend of mine manages a clothing store, and often has people coming in to sell a new line of goods. When a white salesman comes into the store, asking to see the manager, he is greeted by my friend, who identifies himself as the manager. Often unable to accept the fact that he is addressing someone other than a clerk, the salesman will ask who is in charge, that's who he wants to see, he'll say. He is quite unable to accept the fact that he is talking already to that person! In much the same way a white parent seeks to see the coach of her son's football team, and cannot believe it is the black man to whom she is introduced; clumsily she asks to see the "head coach." Those anecdotes are current, and represent a still-common phenomenon, one that "innocent" whites often want to deny, but cannot easily shake off. James Baldwin, writing to his nephew, in *The Fire Next Time*, speaks to this issue of white male identity. Referring to white people, he says: "They are trapped in a history which they do not understand; and until they understand it, they cannot be released from it. They have had to believe for many years and for innumerable reasons, that black men are inferior to white men. Many of them, indeed know better, but, as you will discover, people find it very difficult to act on what they know."

To act is to be committed, and to be committed is to be in danger. In this case, the danger, in the minds of most white Americans, is the loss of their identity…Any upheaval in the universe is terrifying because it so profoundly attacks one's sense of one's own reality. Well, the black man has functioned in the white man's world as a fixed star, as an immovable pillar: and as he moves out of his place, heaven and earth are shaken to their foundations.

"Moving over," "losing control," for many white men becomes a threat to their sense of who they are. To see a woman, or a person of color take the "place" of control and power, may be a threat which becomes a block to any attempt to "move over." Baldwin's insight provides a clue for rescuing white men who are willing to "understand" the history of white, male supremacy. History creates much of our present, surely, but we do not have to let the history trap us into its falsehoods. So a step toward liberation for many white males is to enter into and "understand" the history which has formed our nation, and many of us as individual persons, but then to repudiate its lies and distortions. We can understand how history has created "places" for whites, for males, for people of color, but we can also learn how the places and roles limit all of us. At that point then we need to say a loud "no" to history's pretension to define our roles.

Baldwin comes to our aid again! We need not be trapped by the past. It is important to acknowledge that history does live in us, and does in many ways shape our present reality. It is also important to assert that history does not rule us nor completely define us today. We can release ourselves from it, once we understand it, and decide to will a different way of relating to male colleagues, to women, and to people of color.

So there are some thoughts in response to my friend's question, asked during the panel presentation. They are at least a starting point. Pick it up wherever this leaves you, and let's continue the discussion.

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January 1992

An Open Letter to White Males - January 1992

Frequently over the years I have been in conversation with other white men who share a commitment to bringing about change in the status quo which supports racism. One of the issues of concern is how best to motivate white men to want to work for change. That discussion elicits a sharing of our own motivations. At that point I usually find myself in a somewhat different "place" than most of the others with whom I speak. The discussion often comes to a quick consensus that the best (and the implication seems often to be, the "only") way to motivate white men is through an appeal to their self-interest. When that conversation ends, I usually end up clear about my own motivation, challenged by everyone else, and with a two-pronged approach to the process. In this brief essay I want to explore some of those issues, and invite more extended thought from others.

I begin with the part that seems to trouble many of my most respected white friends...my personal motivation, which I claim to be rooted in an imperative to seek justice. In my life that imperative is grounded in a spirituality which I used to express in theological terms now difficult for me to use with integrity. The words to express the motivation are not the same as they used to be, but they point to specific events in my life which are daily, powerful influences toward justice. An old pamphlet in the early days of school desegregation spoke of "simple justice;" that is really what I live for in the struggle against racism. I HATE injustice, and I seek the power to intervene wherever I see it. If government and other institutions, governed by white men, pretend to "represent" me, then they had better be just!

All of that "justice" troubles many, and probably turns some away. It is old-fashioned "liberalism" warmed over. Like a twice-baked soufflé, it is not appetizing to many. The appeal to "simple justice" has had a bum rap, and many do not trust it. So those who speak with me will most commonly say, "We need to appeal to the self-interest of white men to work for change...that is the surest way to gain a sustained commitment." With that there is sometimes an insistence that I must see my motivations in those self-interest terms or somehow it is not quite valid. The conviction expresses confidence that only if one is motivated because there is an identifiable advantage for himself can he be trusted.

It is a kind of self-evident truth that at some level people are moved by that which affects them. There is both theory and practical evidence to support the appeal to self-interest, and I do not argue that. I do want to argue that the appeal to self-interest has its own slippery slope, raising a doubt for me about it as the only motivating power.

I am aware that my life would be more fulfilled if there was no racism or other form of oppression in society. There are clear ways in which the long-run of life propels an interest in anti-racism simply because things will be better for me. After consistent, full-time work in the struggle for years, my life is clearly more focused, more fulfilled and enriched in ways which I would never give up. The benefits are clear every night when my pillowed head reviews the day and gives thanks for the richness I have known. My work in the struggle, meager as its results have been, has clearly brought to me a liberation from many things to which I was previously in servitude. There is not a single moment of doubt about the clarity of that self-interest.

BUT...

There is evidence for arguing that self-interest is a risky motivation by itself It would be easy for me to argue that in many ways the status quo works just fine for me as a white male. I can demonstrate in my own life that there has been a significant cost in time, energy, and money for

engaging in the struggle against racism; it has been my choice to accept that cost, I do not regret it, and when measured over against the cost of not engaging in the struggle, I would make the same choice again today, as I make that choice everyday. That could become an argument for my self-interest motivation. On the other hand, there are benefits for me which make it very easy to live in the world without change. I would not need to even resist change, but simply not abet it, and the system would go right on providing those benefits. Measuring some of the costs of engaging in the struggle for change might easily lead back into that comfortable place provided for me simply because I am white, male, and middle class. I have seen many white men in a variety of institutional settings, in family, marital and other relationships, for whom the temptation of the status quo overcomes an initial appeal to change, because their self-interest lies in preserving things as they are. It may have been that the self-interest in changing was not clearly enough articulated for them, and that becomes an argument for making that self-interest more compelling.

The matter boils down to a fundamental distrust of long-lasting white motivation for change; that in turn comes from a frightening conviction of the power of racism in the heads, hearts, and habits of whites. I am left with an uncomfortable feeling that the self-interest approach leaves many white men on a very slippery slope indeed. So I want to buoy that motivation with an appeal to justice also. Friends will then point out that my concern for justice is in the long-run a matter of self-interest. That is true, but I shall strenuously resist attempts to turn a concern for justice into simple "self-interest."

All of this just proves that I am "old-fashioned!" I am that, and proud! I'll continue to work for justice, and want to join other white men, no matter what their personal motivation, who will do the same. A prophet once called for justice to roll down like a mighty stream. I'm for that. How about you?

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VII. Essays on Affirmative Action

April 1985

A Context for Understanding the Current Attack on Affirmative Action

We have heard a number of calls in recent months to rethink and to redefine Affirmative Action. They have come from a variety of sources, including editorial writers, political leaders, government agency heads, professors, economists, and corporate executives. Whites and people of color, men and women have joined a small but vocal chorus.

The questions about Affirmative Action come while political conservatism sweeps across the nation, and that observation leads me to speculate about a larger historical context for what is happening. That larger context seeks to understand present trends in regard to race relations as representing a movement similar to what happened during the Post-Reconstruction period of the last century. Many have drawn the parallels between the two centuries in the late years of each. The 1980s are similar to the 1880s, each characterized by a retrenchment from moves which had been made toward equality of the races in mid-century. It will be well to look at what happened in the last century to see what might be in store for us if the present trends continue.

Joel Williamson has characterized what happened to race relations in the South during the period after Emancipation and through the present.[*] He has collected a great deal of data to support his finding that Southerners could be divided into roughly three groups, each representing a distinctively different "mentality" in regard to race relations. The smallest number of people was those whom Williamson groups under what he calls the Liberal mentality. These were the people who were most hopeful about the future, who believed that the newly freed Negro people, if given proper support, could become productive citizens in a unified South. Liberalism believed "that the capacity of Negroes to absorb white culture in America had not yet been fairly tested, and it refused to close them out brusquely and across the board somewhere far below the white man."[†]

At the other end of Williamson's spectrum was the group whom he calls Radicals. This group "envisioned a 'new' Negro, freed from the necessarily very tight bonds of slavery and retrogressing rapidly toward his natural state of savagery and bestiality."[‡] This group claimed that there was no place for the Negro in the future of this society, and in fact looked forward to the disappearance of the black race. Out of this mentality sprang waves of direct violence and brutality.

In the middle, between the Liberals and Radicals, stood the group who espoused the Conservative mentality on race. These were clear in a belief that Negroes were inferior but, as distinguished from the Radical racists, Conservatives were willing to allow a place for Negroes, so long as it was clearly an inferior place, and that the place was defined and controlled by whites. As long as the Negro populace stayed in that defined place it was assumed that things would be all right and the South would persevere.

While the Liberal mentality never gained a great following, there was a time, particularly from 1897 to 1907, when the Radical racists gained ascendancy, but eventually the Conservatives won out and became dominant. By the second decade of the twentieth century the Conservative mentality gave firm and clear direction to the South.

Certainly the three views of the race issue which Williamson applies to the South might

[*] Williamson, Joel, *The Crucible of Race Relations: Black-White Relations in the American South Since Emancipation*, Oxford University Press, 1984.
[†] Ibid., page 5, Introduction.
[‡] Ibid., page 6, Introduction.

also categorize Northern attitudes. While Williamson focuses on the South, he acknowledges that something very similar was also happening in the North; the North was simply later than the South in discovering its prejudices. The thin veneer of Northern liberalism cracked under pressure and it gave way with little struggle to the Conservative mentality.

As the Radical and Conservative mentalities struggled for the mind of the nation in those closing years of the nineteenth century, the Supreme Court decision in Plessy vs. Ferguson (1896) gave impetus to the Conservative point of view. That decision said that it was constitutionally all right for the state to provide separate railway carriages for whites and blacks. In its decision the Court said that laws permitting or even requiring the separation of the races "where they are liable to be brought into contact do not necessarily imply the inferiority of either race to the other." Thus issued the famous "separate but equal" doctrine of law. The Court was careful to say that there is a fallacy in the argument which assumes that the "enforced separation of the two races stamps the colored race with a badge of inferiority." "If this be so," the court said, "it is solely because the colored race chooses to put that construction upon it."

The Court denial aside, we know that it was the white mentality which gave birth to the concept of black inferiority; it was no mere construction of the colored mind! The history of the nation clearly proves a foundation in the assumption of white superiority. Embarrassed by that history and its discontinuity with lip service to egalitarian principles, now the Court saw a way to affirm equality while defining a clear place for the former enslaved people, separated from white society.

Society seized upon the idea quickly. "Separate but equal" became the mode for the first part of the twentieth century. It was easy for the dominant whites to claim and pretend that the separate facilities, the separate schools, the separate services were equal. It also became clear that the ability of dominant whites to designate a place or the place for the minority groups of society was in itself a denial of those principles of American faith which assert that a person's place is a matter of achievement and not of fixed definition by any group or person. The nation and the Supreme Court learned that separate is not equal. That learning was announced in the Brown decision in 1954, when the Court made it clear that separate is inherently unequal. The Court also understood the power dimensions of our society; so long as access to power (money, control, and status) is unequal, then separate institutions and services will not be equal.

In our century Affirmative Action has been one thrust which came out of the Civil Rights Movement and the new Reconstruction efforts to rebuild a society based on equality. Affirmative Action has been a method of providing members of groups who have been victims of discrimination at least some better opportunity to gain access to education and jobs, a simple one-step attempt to redress the injustices of over three hundred years.

There has been much debate about whether or not Affirmative Action has worked for the protected groups it has defined. Richard B. Freeman, an economist from Harvard University and the National Bureau of Economic Research, concludes that "Affirmative Action and equal employment opportunity have helped the nation reduce discrimination in the job market and improve the economic position of minorities and women.[*] He concedes that Affirmative Action has not been a panacea and that huge problems remain. Freeman quotes the findings of Jonathan Leonard in some of the most conclusive statistical studies which have been done to measure the effectiveness of Affirmative Action.[†] Leonard has charted changes in the relative earnings and occu-

[*] Freeman, Richard B., "Affirmative Action: Good, Bad, or Irrelevant?" *New Perspectives*, Fall 1984, page 26.

[†] Ibid., page 25 Leonard's study analyzes employment patterns in 68,000 establishments. "Splitting Blacks: Affirmative Action and Earnings Inequality Within and Across Races," Working Paper No. 1327, National Bureau of

pational attainment of full-time black and female workers relative to white male workers, and the ratios of the same groups in professional managerial occupations from 1964 to 1982. These studies show conclusive evidence which, with other data, lead Freeman to say that Affirmative Action has "raised employment for protected groups" . . . has "raised the overall employment and employment in better occupations for protected groups," and has "raised the demand for labor in companies subject to Affirmative Action pressure, and thus contributed to the economic progress of minorities and women."* Freeman and Leonard point us to some hard facts which show that Affirmative Action has worked.

Theodore Cross, in his most recent study, discusses the contention that Blacks have actually suffered as a result of Affirmative Action policies. He says,

> This thesis goes against all evidence. Wherever we do find gains by blacks, there is a close connection between these gains and the presence of strong affirmative action. For example, during the late 1970s, Census figures show that black men in managerial positions dramatically increased from 2.8 to 6.9 percent of the total, a 146 percent increase. Clearly this is due in part to the fact that affirmative action had been particularly strong in business school admissions and in admissions to management posts in large corporations. Gains in these fields were much less dramatic during the 1960s (1.6 percent to 2.8 percent), a period usually characterized as the pre-affirmative action era.†

Cross goes on to assert that the increase during the 1970s of blacks in government posts, in higher education and in some cases in police forces, is attributable to affirmative action policies. Progress in the blue collar trades, traditionally closed to minority persons is directly attributable to affirmative action pressures. The number of black judges, Cross reminds us, tripled during the years 1977-1980 as a consequence of expressly race-conscious judicial appointments. Cross also points us to a Labor Department Study during the Reagan administration, which examined hiring practices at 77,098 businesses between 1974 and 1980, and found that minority employment grew by 20.1 percent in companies covered by affirmative action requirements, but only 12.3 percent in companies with no government contracts or other special hiring obligations.‡

These statistics do show progress. That progress came because we adopted Affirmative Action policies knowing that equality was not going to be made simply by declarations of openness or equal opportunity; race prejudice and racism are recalcitrant and will not give in to the ebb and flow of a simple open market. The problem we face is so deeply embedded, so systematically woven into the fabric of economic, political, and social life, that it demands more than just nondiscrimination. We must act affirmatively to overcome the separations. That is what history taught us and that is the reason for the progression from plans of nondiscrimination to affirmative action.

There are some parallels to be drawn between the gains under Affirmative Action in this century and similar gains during the Reconstruction period of the last century. In each case there was some progress made toward the ideal of actual equality of access to power and resources in society; in each case there were people who were pleased at whatever progress they saw, and there

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Economic Research, April 1984.

* Ibid.

† Cross, Theodore, *The Black Power Imperative: Racial Inequality and Politics of Nonviolence*, Faulkner, New York, 1984, page 488.

‡ Ibid., page 492.

were some who were pleased but unsatisfied, and others who saw what happened and were threatened.

In our day those who are not happy with what they see in Affirmative Action join the conservative mentality of the time and seek to undermine the effort. They claim that Affirmative Action does not work as intended, that it puts an onerous burden of stigma on the protected groups. The studies suggested above indicate that Affirmative Action has worked, and certainly few of the so-called protected groups are voicing a concern that they are stigmatized! That construction of stigma seems to be placed upon the situation primarily by white males!

Perhaps it is the effectiveness of Affirmative Action which troubles those of the conservative mentality who want to shoot it down. Certainly they would not be concerned about Affirmative Action if it were not working at all? The expressed concern for what they call equality does not ring with much authority, since the racially conservative mentality has a poor track record on that issue historically.

The conservative mentality is in reality frightened because Affirmative Action is working, has worked too well, and blacks and other people of color are too frequently moving out of their places. Even the thought that they might have a better opportunity to escape their assigned place is a threat to the conservative mentality. So the strategy calls for getting rid of Affirmative Action, or to redefine it. The nation is supposed to be committed to equality; therefore, any anti-Affirmative Action strategy must not fly too blatantly in the face of that concept. So we hear talk about equality, but it is an equality which carefully protects the place of those in power. That means assuring that people of color stay in their places. Enter again, separate but equal!

We must not fall into that trap again! Separate is not equal! Separate is not equal because access to power, resources, money, control is not equal in this nation. Those who make the major policy decisions which affect large numbers of people are white, and they make those decisions in the long run with a white bias. Those who control the major sources of financial revenue are white, and the distribution of those resources is made to stabilize the existing relations of economic power.

If the current move to redefine Affirmative Action is successful, one of the results will be to move our society back into the separate but equal mode of the early part of the century. In this case separate will mean that the conservative mentality will define the place for people of color in education and employment. That place will be one that constricts access to power. In higher education that will mean a declining enrollment of people of color, and restrictions of students of color to vocationally-oriented schools, and community colleges which are not close to the center of power. In employment the place will be defined largely as service jobs: people of color will serve hamburgers, sweep streets, wait on others in stores, banks, restaurants and airplanes, drive the cabs and serve the drinks. Employment will be largely limited to low-level entry jobs with limited upward mobility or access to power. As we move rapidly into automated production many jobs in some of those categories will become insecure, and the prospects of even an increased ratio of unemployment among people of color looms! Blacks and other people of color will be kept separate and in their place. For many that will mean no place at all!

The rush to redefine Affirmative Action may in fact take us back to separate but equal. History has taught us that is a false choice. Separate places are not equal and will not be equal until there is a foundational change in the relationships of power. Separate but equal is a strategy designed precisely to avoid such change. History warns us that we may be headed backwards. We must maintain the forward momentum of Affirmative Action!

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January 1991

A Parable: Basketball and Affirmative Action

The game was a close one, being played with intensity between well-matched teams, likely to go into overtime. The winners would then be at the top of their college league, at least until another game. Five thousand seats screamed with passionate joy or dismay at every play. Players moved up and down the court, banging under the boards, tangling on the floor. The referees called foul, and were deluged with the crowd's disapproval or acclaim, depending on whether the call went against the home team or the visitors.

The woman next to me, obviously a real fan, followed every move on the court with exquisite knowledge of players, rules, and referees. Quickly realizing that I knew little, she turned to me during a time-out right after a particularly close play had been called a foul against one of our players. With rapid tongue and hands she explained, "This is really bad...sure that was a close play...it could have been called either way...but why do they call all of 'em against our team!. Don't the other guys do anything wrong!...Give us a break!" Then she screamed something like that in the direction of the floor. All around us the chorus was the same; a noisy demand that the calls were going unfairly to the advantage of the visiting team.

I learned a lot about basketball that evening, especially about the crowd's response to foul calls. I learned that the crowd seemed to be looking primarily for fairness from the referees. With the exception of a few rabid fans, most accepted the fairness of a call when it was against an obvious foul even by a home team member. The great majority of calls were not easy ones to make, and could have gone for or against either team. The crowd knew that, and watched to see if the referees were going to balance those close calls between the two teams. If too many of those close calls went against the home team, the crowd would explode, clearly expecting that fairness demanded some of those calls go against the visitors. When the referees began to call fouls in a way which balanced the cumulative effect of all the calls, the crowd became quieter, accepting that fairness was prevailing. That seemed to be the key...as long as there was some fair balance given in those close judgment calls it was okay.

Long after the game was recorded in the standings of the league, I thought about how the crowd expectations for fairness might instruct me in thinking about fairness and Affirmative Action.

In a basketball game spectators watch the entire game, except for those few who come in late or leave early. The whole game lasts a couple of hours, and actual playing time in a regulation game is only forty-eight minutes. The spectators see it all unfold before their eyes; it is easy to make a judgment whether calls are being made fairly or unfairly, and the test for fairness seems to be that fouls are balanced between the two teams.

While it is relatively easy to see fairness develop in a short game, making a judgment about the fairness of Affirmative Action requires a view from a historical perspective. The game in this case is centuries long, and the people involved at any given point see only a short period of action. Few spectators have a historical perspective, and therefore make judgments from a very time-limited view.

A historical view sees certain groups of people affected in negative ways, not simply as individuals, but as members of a group:

- Denied access to goods, services, resources, and power.
- Psychologically diminished as members of the group.
- Limited by enculturated and institutionalized prejudice.

— Objects of both intentional and unintentional disempowerment.

Fairness demands action to affirmatively ensure that history becomes balanced, that the calls do not go for too long against any group. Because we see only that part of history in which we participate, some of us see Affirmative Action as simply preference of the moment; it's like seeing only a few minutes of the basketball game.

Compare viewing a basketball game to that historical view of Affirmative Action. The regulation game lasts for forty-eight minutes and most spectators see the whole thing. The game of history in the United States is over three hundred years; dating it from the time when the institution of slavery was in place, the game is about three hundred and forty years old.

Affirmative Action as public policy is hardly thirty years old, and that span of time is less than one-tenth of the years of our national history. One of the goals of Affirmative Action is to create a climate of fairness in which some of the calls will balance the preference given to white, propertied males since even before the Constitution, and to make opportunities possible for groups which have been left out. The time so far given to that effort has been brief. Compared to watching the forty-eight minute basketball game, it is like being a spectator for less than four minutes. If during four minutes of a basketball game we saw a lot of calls being made in favor of one team over another, we would get upset at the unfairness of the system. It might take a whole quarter of the game before we were satisfied that calls were being fairly balanced. A full quarter of our national history would necessitate at least one hundred years of Affirmative Action, in order to redress the balance.

Most of us do not have that historical view of Affirmative Action; that vision can be corrected. We can expand that view. To do so it is necessary to understand history, to take a long view of what is happening before our eyes, to understand that Affirmative Action is a part of the balancing which is necessary to implement fairness.

Fairness in the basketball game is not simply to balance the calls between individual players; it is the intent to balance the calls between the teams on which the individuals play. Fairness adjusted between individual players would satisfy only a part of the quest for justice. It does nothing for the tough calls between teams.

So, when I hear people, usually white males, complain that Affirmative Action has outlived its usefulness, that all the adjustments that fairness requires have been made, I remember that basketball game. Then I look at the persistent history of discrimination against people simply because they have been members of groups (minorities, women, gays, the disabled), and I know that it may take a lot longer than a few minutes of history to balance things fairly.

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VIII. Essays on Prescriptions for Change

November 1980

Antidote for Dread Diseases Fatal for Advocates of Racial Justice

Recently, I have noted two dreadful diseases which have attacked with devastating regularity a number of people who have said they want to work toward the elimination of racism from themselves, their institutions, and society. In every case these diseases result in an inability to act, and the victims enter into a kind of catatonic posture, unable to move. With a hope to alleviate the causes and release the victims from these dread diseases, I have conducted a completely scientific and highly verifiable study.

The two diseases are called DONTKNOW and CANTDO. I will describe them so that if you ever feel yourself succumbing to them, you can run for the antidote quickly!

DONTKNOW attacked some good friends of mine the other day. These are highly-educated people, who, for several months, have been gathered in a group which has a stated intention to mount a concerted attack on institutional racism in their city. They are mostly white males; among the group of twenty-five or so people, they hold at least forty degrees. They are highly trained people, who can marshal informed arguments on a wide variety of subjects and issues. Ask them about anything and you will hear knowledge spout forth. If your question is in a field where they have little direct knowledge, they do know how to go about gaining the information they need so that in a short time they will be prepared to respond to your question intelligently. These are well-educated people with a high degree of knowledge.

Given the composition of this group, you can imagine my dismay to hear them say that, when it comes to institutional racism, they just DONTKNOW what to do about it!!! DONTKNOW strikes; the group is in disarray and, in sadness, they disband. Fortunately, the DONTKNOW syndrome does not seem to affect their ability to perform in other areas of their professional lives. They DONTKNOW what to do only when it comes to institutional racism.

Then there is CANTDO. It is equally dangerous in its consequences, devastating to the work of racial justice. CANTDO went to work among some other people I know who are all members of the same institution. If I were to describe the institution and the positions these people hold in it, you would agree that they are in places of power and influence, that, in fact, they are prime decision-makers. They were wondering what they could do to implement a stated commitment to work against racism. It was exciting because these were people who really could move things within their sphere of influence! But then a terrible thing happened, and it was the CANTDO germ!

You have already guessed the result. These friends, all white males, decided that they really couldn't do anything! They had no influence! They were devoid of power! Their institutional muscles were nothing but flabby fat! In desperation I poured out suggestions of a wide variety of things they might do, but, to my amazement, my friends were completely impotent. Job descriptions of their positions notwithstanding, they really had no power to act! CANTDO had taken over! Again, the disease does not seem to have affected their ability to continue to perform impressively in other areas of concern which have nothing to do with racism.

Now these two diseases bear watching, because they can immobilize people who have the best of intentions. DONTKNOW seems to attack most those who are highly educated; there is some indication that the more degrees one has received the more one must be on guard against DONTKNOW. CANTDO, as you might have surmised, seems to root and flourish most readily among people who are in high positions in the organizational chart.

When people who are highly educated are also in positions of great influence and combine

both knowledge and power, there is a frightening susceptibility among them to a combination of DONTKNOW and CANTDO!!! When the two diseases strike the same people, the prognosis is seldom good for racism.

I noted in the two situations I described that most of the people who suffered the attack of DONTKNOW and CANTDO were white males. This does not mean that others need not worry about the diseases, but controlled observations do indicate a higher degree of susceptibility among white males. That susceptibility may not be generic in white males; there is some indication that the cause of the susceptibility of white males to DONTKNOW and CANTDO is simply environmental, due to the fact that white males generally have received more degrees and have found their way to positions of influence more frequently than other categories of human beings. There is evidence to indicate that white males who are highly educated and in positions of influence had better be on guard against DONTKNOW and CANTDO!

Fortunately there is an antidote which, if taken upon the appearance of the very first symptoms, may overcome the affects of DONTKNOW and CANTDO. The antidote is the same generally for both diseases, though in some cases dosage may vary. If you feel yourself being overtaken by an attack of either DONTKNOW or CANTDO, please rush immediately to make contact with some of the victims of institutional racism. Don't be put off by the fact that some of the victims may not be highly educated; they will KNOW what you could do! As a matter of fact, you might go out on the street and just ask some of the victims, found most often among Black Americans, Native Americans, Hispanic, or Asian Americans. They have a remarkable ability to KNOW what others don't know about racism, how it functions, and how to dismantle it! In most cases, careful listening will help overcome DONTKNOW.

The same antidote is often helpful in cases of CANTDO. Contact with victims of racism is what is needed. Again, don't be put off by the fact that they may not carry cards which list their names and organizational positions. They will help you with the CANTDO's, because often you will find them doing a lot of things you might either replicate or complement at your level of influence. Try it; it might work! It is better than giving in to the dreaded disease.

The key is to act at the very first symptoms of the diseases. If either progresses too long, it becomes predictably fatal to anti-racism intentions. These diseases are powerful, so beware! I know personally their treacherous nature, and must constantly be on guard. So the advice I offer is directed to myself also. The very first time you hear yourself say, "I don't know what to do about racism," check it out; you are susceptible to DONTKNOW! The very first time you hear yourself say, "I can't do anything about racism," check it out; you may be invaded by the dread disease of CANTDO! Move quickly or you may be "a-goner" to the cause of racial justice.

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November 1981

To Friends at the YWCA

[Editor's note: In 1970, the YWCA of the USA adopted as its "One Imperative" the elimination of racism "wherever it exists" and "by any means necessary." Community Change was present when the Imperative was adopted and later trained national staff and board members. Each local YWCA was charged with implementing the Imperative in its work. To some individuals, however, the phrase "by any means necessary" seemed to go too far. Did the YWCA leadership really mean that members should participate in any activity opposed to racism—including violence? The following essay is a response to those concerns.]

For several years I have heard discussion about the phrase in the YWCA One Imperative which states an intention to eliminate racism "by any means necessary." That phrase often gets a reaction which seems to rise out of a fearful vision of YW members across the country plotting incendiary and revolutionary activity. "Any means necessary" seems to imply a "no holds barred" permit for illicit action which chills the blood of traditional "Y" people. As one who has been close to the YWCA at many levels as it has developed its Imperative, and yet as one who speaks from "outside," I offer some comments on this storm-centered phrase, "by any means necessary."

I like the phrase. I get a bit frightened that sometimes "any means necessary" becomes an excuse for people to talk about it rather than do something to implement the Imperative. Parlor discussions about meanings and definitions often become exercises which are substituted for more concrete action. In some cases the phrase may even become an excuse for people to "drop out" of the effort to eliminate racism, because they claim a disagreement with the intent of that phrase. Whenever we lose any of that collective power I am concerned.

What is the thrust of the phrase, "by any means necessary?" What is the practical importance of the phrase? Here is one person's view.

First, I like the phrase "by any means necessary" because it has led me to look at the means of combating racism which the YWCA has used historically. In doing so I have found a wide range of possibilities which have characterized the YWCA efforts. Here are some of the means which the YWCA has used to combat racism in the past.

The YWCA has:

- Established orphanages and homes for black children.
- Organized branches in areas to serve black people.
- Integrated Associations and staffs.
- Organized interracial conferences.
- Provided recreational services to segregated troops.
- Demanded equal treatment of attendees at conferences.
- Taken stands on public policy issues.
- Provided programs to influence public opinions against lynchings and violence.
- Monitored court trials to assure justice.
- Conducted internal audits of interracial practices.
- Testified at legislative hearings.
- Published and distributed articles and pamphlets.
- Worked for outlawing fraternities and sororities with discriminatory clauses.

- Affirmed support for non-violent civil rights movements.
- Desegregated its own public dining facilities.
- Established study programs.
- Supported voter registration programs.
- Investigated the racial justice impact of its investments.
- Supported boycotts.
- Utilized its purchasing power to support minority firms.
- Adopted Affirmative Action plans.
- Worked toward curriculum changes.

Reading the "by any means necessary" phrase in the light of that YWCA history gives substance to a discussion about what "means" we can expect the YWCA to use today as it addresses racism. There is a firm tradition of a wide variety of "means," all of which fall safely within the range of legal and democratic action. I like the sense of being rooted in history, and this particular bit of history ought to give some clues for what to do in the present.

Second, I like the phrase "by any means necessary" because it prods me to look for new ways to combat this systemic social cancer called racism. "By any means necessary" stretches my imagination and leads toward the possibility of greater creativity in response to racism. I look at what has been done in the past, I identify the function of racism in the present, and then with "any means necessary" in mind and heart, I begin to look for new answers. New approaches, new "means" are always important to discover, and, if the phrase "by any means necessary" sets me searching for them, that is a plus.

Third, I like the phrase "by any means necessary" because it agitates me. It makes me uncomfortable. It prods me to be discontent with whatever I am doing. It makes me dissatisfied with any amount of progress short of the complete elimination of racism. There is a temptation to "settle in" too quickly with small signs of progress. Small victories may be all that I will see in my lifetime, and I am convinced that fundamental social change comes from a long series of "small victories." However, contentment with minor changes is dangerous if it becomes a stance toward the future. The post-reconstruction periods of both the 19th and our present century are reminders that gains can be quickly swept aside until all that remains is the illusion of progress. When I am tempted to contentment with minor changes, the Imperative reminds me that the goal is still out there ahead of us somewhere in time. "By any means necessary" agitates me and makes me uncomfortable, and if I am uncomfortable enough, I am more likely to change. "By any means necessary" moves me forward toward the final goal: the elimination of racism.

So to the YWCA a "thank you" for that phrase "by any means necessary." Keep it there, and wave it at me often.

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January 1986

Diagnostic Tools for Work Against Racism

Blatant racism continues to grow in strength during this twentieth century Post-Reconstruction period. The KKK conducts training for a race war, unhindered by our government. Four hundred whites in Philadelphia chant "We want them out," when they see blacks moving into "their" neighborhood. In a Boston subway, two black college women are told by a white passenger that they should sit in the back. Cambodian children are accosted by whites who push dog shit into their faces. A police department attorney in a hearing about excessive force used by a white officer toward a Chinese man is allowed to use openly racist stereotypes and innuendo. Anti-Semitic acts are reported on college campuses and in neighborhoods. And in an affluent Boston suburb a black woman is confronted by police after leaving a boutique where she has done nothing more harmful than look at clothing.

While overt brands of racism are on the upsurge, "legitimated" by the politically conservative climate, I want to focus here on a more subtle racism, one germane to centers of white liberal strength. My observations grow out of extensive anti-racist work in more than forty school systems, thirty colleges and universities, sixty religious groups, fifty private social service agencies, community groups, government agencies, and work in a variety of Boston-based coalitions. Most of these groups are predominantly white in both participants and leadership. Here are patterns of behavior which characterize how those groups fall short of stated intentions to work against racism. They are offered both as critique and as diagnostic tools.

1) There is a frequent inability to see that there is a problem internal to white structures, and/or to recognize that the problem is fundamental rather than a temporary aberration. Despite all the discussion about racism, and even while mouthing a recognition of the need for white institutions to change, most white leaders do not have a gut understanding that there is a very basic problem at hand. Any acknowledged problem is seen simply as something that "went a bit wrong along the way," able to be corrected with a couple of workshops, seminars, or personal confrontations. This becomes a wonderful way to avoid the problem and thus contributes to the racism at whatever level it exists.

2) There is a reluctance to see the institutional and systemic nature of racism. It is much easier to think of racism as a phenomenon which affects personal relationships and one-to-one working situations instead of moving to an examination of institutional policies, decision-making, staffing, programming, and all the complex factors of systemic interaction. Again, it is easy for those of us who are middle-class whites to intellectually agree on the definition of an institutional problem. Efforts to act on those problems are usually only sporadic at best. By conforming to the present arrangements of our own institutions, we allow the racist forces to perpetuate themselves.

3) Another problem is the failure to address racism *directly*. Often in recent years when I have asked leaders of white social change groups what their anti-racism program is, I've been told it comes under some category other than racism. It may come under human rights or equity or race relations or, lately, economic justice. I can probably argue as persuasively as any of these leaders the case for a connection of racism to any of these issues. Still, I want to insist that in most cases subsuming racism under any other programmatic category usually becomes a way of burying it. A focus on racism is a focus on racism is a focus on racism! Anything else becomes another chapter in a long history of devices white people in the US have adopted to avoid dealing with racism. My conviction is to say over and over again that we must address racism directly.

4) The budget seldom reflects a major concern with work against racism. Budget is the

bottom line. Budget reflects the real priorities; it is a fact of institutional life that most things cost money. Time, energy, and people talents often can lead to significant results with little money, but don't let that divert you from the less pleasant fact that funding is necessary for most substantial programmatic efforts. Recently someone came to me asking for ideas on how to implement a program to attack racism, a priority now adopted by her school. The budget she had to work with for one year was less than $500. I proceeded to work hard with her to look at things that could be done without money, but it doesn't take long under those circumstances to realize that a real institutional commitment was not there. Commitment is measured in two places—in the hearts of the people, and in the budget. We'd better get those two into a congruent relationship.

5) Another consistent pattern is the failure to *act*. We like to talk about racism. It is a fascinating parlor discussion, even good at coffee breaks on the job. We hold endless discussions about whether or not being "color blind" is an appropriate stance, whether or not now is the right time for our institution to address racism, how we should name what we're doing, how to define the problem. I happen to think that all these discussions are crucial, but very often the discussion blocks action, or discussion becomes the action. Uninformed discussion is also a danger, but the more serious danger for most white institutions is that the discussion so often goes nowhere near action. We must begin to do something about racism.

6) Another typical pattern is to look for places other than in our own institution where we think people ought to bring about anti-racist change. It is, for instance, easier to organize support for anti-apartheid actions than for attention to racism here in the USA. Don't for one second think that I would urge those college students rallying against apartheid to stop what they're doing. But try to get the same numbers to commit the same time and energy to changing campus practices and policies which are also racist, and you'll see what I mean. Very few people are willing to make commitments to long-range "backyard" change. Right now we have an opportunity to channel, but not divert, some of the anti-apartheid energy toward action against racism here at home as well.

My observations have been cast in negative language—inability, reluctance, failure to address, seldom reflects, and failure to act. Those negatives can be turned into positive more easily than one might think. To my white friends I say, let's get working together on the positives.

[This article originally appeared in *Peace Work*, a New England peace and social justice newsletter published by the American Friends Service Committee, Cambridge, Mass.]

January 1988

Working Against Racism

[Editor's Note: This is from a series of articles written for *PACE*, a journal for Roman Catholic educators. The third article in the series is specific to the Roman Catholic Church and, therefore, is not included here.]

What needs to be changed?

As was pointed out in the November *PACE*, racism is not a high-priority issue among white people generally—even among *PACE* subscribers. If you are a white person, living in a predominantly white community, moving in religious and other environments that are predominantly white, the issue of racism may seldom come to your attention. Television invades your living room with news of some racist incident, an occasional homily may remind you that racism is still alive and well, and once in a great while something may happen or someone in your immediate presence may say or do something that reveals racial prejudice, and for a short time you have to think about it.

Generally speaking, in a white setting racism may be viewed as something that happens someplace else or that existed at some distant time in the past. If you are in such a white setting, you may hear people say, "I never owned slaves," "I never hurt anyone," and so on. Such statements help to form a basic attitude in your environment, one that dismisses the subject of racism quickly. For most white people, racism has no important impact on their daily lives. That is not a criticism of white readers and their white surroundings; it is simply a statement of fact.

Why, then, should *PACE* readers be asked to examine a subject that may be of such little immediate interest? For me, the answer is a simple one; I hope not a simplistic one. Three statements summarize it:

1) God loves all persons and groups.

2) Justice is one way of showing love.

3) Racism is a phenomenon that frustrates justice for many individuals and groups.

It follows rather quickly from these statements that for the Christian, there is no choice but to work for the elimination of racism in any and all of its forms. This article is the first of three offering suggestions for carrying out this obligation. It begins the series by distinguishing different levels of racism in order to choose the appropriate strategy to cope with each. The second article will propose changes that white people can make to eliminate racism; the third will discuss what the institutional Church might change to the same end.

Let us plunge into the life of the world where racism is a fact of individual and group relationships to try to develop some clarity about what the phenomenon is; how it functions; and where, when, and how we might work for its elimination.

What follows are five brief descriptions of hypothetical situations in which language is used and/or action is taken. Following each description is a discussion section. Individuals, classes, or parish groups could consider each situation with this question in mind: Is that an example of racism?

<u>Situation 1</u>

Description

You are riding in a car driven by an acquaintance who is not a close friend. The operator of

a car in front of you makes a sudden right turn, crossing your line of traffic without any directional signal. Your driver slams on the brakes and comes to an abrupt stop, just missing the turning car, and screams, "A woman driver!"

Discussion

Score one for yourself if you agree that this is not an example of racism! It is clearly an example of sexism of a personal, attitudinal nature. The driver of your car has some ideas and feelings about women and the way they drive; those judgments are stereotypically applied to all women, and thus anger is directed here not just toward the one woman who has violated a good driving code but toward women drivers generally.

What your driver says and feels is not based on race in any sense and is therefore not an instance of racism per se. It is stupid, irrational, and sexist—but not racist. Surprisingly, though, people often lump all forms of prejudice and oppression under the one category, racism. You may need to clarify this early in your discussion. For any feeling, thought, or action to be racist, it must be based on some perception of race.

Situation 2

Description

A white family—husband, wife, and two children—are relaxing in their suburban backyard. The house next door is up for sale, and they have seen prospective buyers come to look at it. A black couple has just left the property after spending considerable time there, and it appears that they might be interested in buying. Contemplating who their new neighbors might be, the wife turns to the husband and says, "I sure don't want any niggers living next door!"

Discussion

Clearly this is an example of a prejudice based on race. (This is easy so far!) In our logical minds, we know that the idea of making judgments based on race is one that does not make sense. But unfortunately, in the mind and heart of the speaker in this instance, some powerful ideas and feelings are operating.

Presumably the speaker knows nothing about the people she has seen except the visibly identifiable color of their skin. On that basis alone, she has made a pre-judgment about the desirability of knowing the observed couple. That is enough for her; she has already decided that she does not want them or anyone like them as neighbors. Skin color here becomes the operative definition of who the observed couple is. This is an example of personal racial prejudice, or pre-judgment.

Situation 3

Description

A white couple whose home is for sale is conferring with the real estate agent who has been showing their house to prospective buyers. An offer that is within the owners' desirable price range has been made by a black couple. The husband in the white couple makes it clear to the real estate agent that they have decided not to sell to blacks, and in fact says to the agent, "We will not consider any offer from blacks."

Discussion

Clearly again, racial prejudice is expressed, but there is an additional element. The couple has acted on their prejudice to deny to any black person or persons an opportunity to bid on the house. Added to the prejudice is a discriminatory action. It goes beyond the simple expression of racial prejudice, which could hurt the black couple if communicated to them, but whose impact would be limited to a psychological level. The discriminatory act additionally denies to the black couple something they want and for which they are prepared to pay the price being sought.

This is an example of racial discrimination, as distinct from prejudice. Prejudice is a matter of thought, feeling, and belief. It becomes discrimination when the prejudice is acted upon in a manner that denies to persons in the group against which the prejudice is held something desirable to them. Since the discriminatory act is here based on race as defined by skin color, it is racial discrimination, a form of racism.

Situation 4

Description

Developers have recently opened for rental a large number of housing units in a metropolitan area's urban center, where the lack of housing is a major crisis. The developers have decided that in this market they can be selective about tenants, seeking only people to whom they want to rent. They have decided that one way to limit the prospective clientele is to restrict rentals to people who have no children. That becomes a clear and openly stated policy. The developers have been renting for about six months, and in every case where a family with children has expressed interest, they have made their policy of no children clear.

A local Hispanic agency has now challenged the developers, claiming that the policy is discriminatory. A large number of Hispanic people in the area are in need of housing; among them, a very high percentage are families with children. The developers' policy automatically cuts out a disproportionate number of Hispanic families and black families as well. The policy is therefore discriminatory, the Hispanic agency claims.

Discussion

This situation is a bit more complicated than the first three. Several questions need to be answered: Does the policy really have anything to do with race? In enacting the policy, did the developers intend to keep blacks and Hispanics out? Does the policy, in fact, have the effect of keeping blacks and Hispanics from the housing?

A court case like this can keep lawyers busy and rich for years! Some lawyers will gather statistics to show conclusively that a very high percentage of black and Hispanic families are barred from this housing by the policy, and that, in contrast, a much lower percentage of white families in the area are limited. They will argue that the policy itself, aside from any intention to discriminate, does in fact discriminate.

Other lawyers will argue that, in order to claim discrimination, it must be proved that discrimination against black and Hispanic families is intended. Still others may claim that the policy discriminates against all families with children, but not on the basis of race.

Intention to discriminate is very difficult to prove. To do so in a court of law, one must have specific evidence of that intention in the written or spoken words and expressed opinions of the creators of the policy. If, for instance, one could produce a witness who claims to have heard a developer of the property say that he did not want blacks or Hispanics renting his property, pre-

sumably that would help to establish intent to discriminate.

The problem with insisting that one must prove intent to discriminate is that, historically, people have many times set in operation management policies that cover the discriminatory intent. In this case the policy functions very neatly to keep at least many blacks and Hispanics out of the housing units. The effect of the policy is the same as if the intent were there. In a sense, the intent is irrelevant; the result is what matters.

The particular case on which this situation is based is in the courts at this writing, and we will let the courts decide the issue for themselves. For our discussion this example points us to another form that racism sometimes takes. In the above situation, an institutional policy does the racist work, whether the racism is intentional or not. The concept of institutional racism is a complex one and needs much greater explication than is possible here.

Situation 5

Description

Several hundred small cities and towns surround an urban center; the population of this metropolitan area is three million. The whole area has grown in population over the past twenty years, with a significant increase in the percentage of people of color. Most of the increase in the number of people of color has been in the urban center, while the suburban towns have shown little change in the percentage of residents who are people of color.

A study of the metropolitan area shows three significant patterns developing:

- Housing opportunities for people of color have not opened up in the suburbs.
- The number of manufacturing and engineering jobs has increased in the suburbs; the urban center has shown an increase in service-related jobs, which generally pay less.
- Transportation systems are designed primarily to get people from the suburbs to jobs and entertainment in the city; they do not function to get large numbers of people from the city to jobs in the suburbs.

The converging effect of these three major patterns results in a limitation of job and housing choices for people of color, in contrast to the choices available to whites.

Discussion

Now it is really getting harder to see how racism functions! In this situation we observe three massive systems intersecting with a result that is racist because the combined effect of these systems limits choices for people of color.

Situation 4 illustrates how institutional racism might function through a policy decision. But situation 5 necessitates an understanding of how institutions function in systems, which in turn have cumulative effects on the institutions of society.

The distinction can be illustrated readily by thinking about schools. One particular school is an institution, but that single institution is also part of a school system, made up of many schools. That particular school system is also part of a complex of other educational systems, including colleges, universities, and other huge categories of units with an educational purpose.

In situation 5, we see the three immense systems of employment, housing, and transportation—each of which is composed of many institutions. These systems function both independently and interdependently to serve people (sometimes we might wonder about the extent to which these systems actually serve, but that surely is their intention.) This illustration shows how racism may function through systems and the interaction of systems.

Clarity About Action

Gaining clarity about the different ways in which racism functions becomes especially important when adopting plans for action. It is important to be clear about what you are trying to change. You probably are trying to change or eliminate one of the following:

- a personal prejudice
- a discriminatory act or pattern of acts
- an institutional policy, procedure, or practice
- an injustice at a systemic level

The goal that is chosen—the object of change—will determine strategies, the choice of resources to use, and which groups of people will need to work together to achieve the goal.

Here is a simple illustration of how the choice of a goal affects decisions about action. If you are a teacher in a school and have determined that you want to work to create a classroom environment in which prejudices can be confronted and overcome, you know immediately that you have a great deal of control over the situation. You are the person who is responsible for what happens in that learning setting. You will need to gather material resources -- books, films, class exercises, and so on. You will profit from consulting other trusted teachers and parents. But in the final analysis you can act pretty much on your own as you work toward your objective.

If, however, you decide to try to eliminate what you feel is a discriminatory behavior that you have observed in the principal's office, your strategic choices become very different. You have to be very accurate about keeping records. You will need to work closely with other people. At some point you will probably have to work through some legal or quasi-judicial agency to process your complaint. With this goal in mind you will move into very different strategies than you would have if your goal had been to affect classroom environment.

Should you subsequently decide to work to change a school board policy that you believe has a racist effect, or should you want to change certification procedures for teachers at the state level, once again you move into realms where strategic choices are very different. In these actions you will need to coalesce with others, you will be dependent upon group functions, and you will need to come to grips with issues of institutional and systemic power.

Most people that I have known over the years who have been concerned about racism choose to work on bringing about change at the personal, attitudinal, and behavioral level. Such efforts are always to be applauded and supported. However, the analysis I have suggested here leads to a conviction that, if we do not also work at the level of institutional and systemic change, institutions and systems will operate as they always have—namely, in patterns that are racist more often than not.

No plan or conspiracy has to exist in order for institutions and systems to be racist, though, of course, such plans may be made when extreme bigots get together. Most of us are not in touch with such persons on a daily basis. Simply stated, if those of us who are white continue to believe, perceive, analyze, and act the way we always have, then the result will be racism in the institutions we control or influence. To change those patterns requires intentional plans, implemented consistently over a long period of time. The knowledge of how to bring about change is available to us; the major question is one of will. Do we really want to see change?

For those of us who are Christian, the question of will is not confined to a statement of what we want. We are not here to fulfill our wills alone; we must also ask what God's will is for all

people whom God has created. Let us pray to seek congruence between what we want to see happen and what God wills.

Who Needs to Change?

For those of us who are white, once we have come to recognize the presence of racism in our midst in its many forms, that inevitable moment comes when we must decide whether or not to make those personal and institutional changes that are necessary if we are to become active in the struggle against racism.

Most often when whites decide to work against racism, they concentrate on ways in which black society, black people, or other people of color might change. That happened in 1968 after the Kerner Commission reported that white institutions were deeply implicated in the creation of what it called two separate, unequal societies. Unfortunately, most of the programmatic efforts that followed upon that report were designed to bring about changes in communities of color, with little done to suggest how white people and white-controlled institutions might change. What we need now is a major commission that begins where Kerner left off — with the assumption that much of the cause of racism lies among whites—and then proceeds to make recommendations for white change.

On the conviction that no such commission will be appointed, I will proceed to make my own suggestions, based on more than twenty years of focusing on what whites can do to work for the elimination of racism. Some things need to be done to bring about change in white persons, and some things need to aim at changes in institutions that are controlled by white people.

Gaining a New View of History and the World

Most of us who are white have been taught a distorted view of history and of the world; we need to make a conscious effort to compensate for that mis-education.

The history we have been taught and the view of the world we have learned have been from a European, American, and white perspective. Only recently have there been modest attempts to include a wider perspective.

A simple test about the histories of nations and peoples on the African continent, of native peoples in North America, of Hispanics in Central and North America, or of Asians who migrated to the United States would illustrate how little most of us who are white really know. Even educated white people often express incredibly ignorant views. Consider, for instance, the law professor who said to me that there never were any civilizations in Africa, or the high school teacher in a prestigious Boston school who asserted that there is no such thing as culture among native peoples!

Again, the contributions of people of color to our own national history are largely unknown among whites *because* they were not included in what we were taught as children. The title of Bill Cosby's film, *Black History: Lost, Stolen, or Strayed?* conveys the point. The contributions of blacks and other people of color were simply ignored in the history books; as a result, we have widespread ignorance of those contributions. Even the traditional geographical projection of the continents has been challenged as white and European based. The old Mercator Map expanded the image of the size of land masses in the Northern Hemisphere which was inhabited mostly by white people. The more recently developed Peter's Projection Map, which more accurately reflects the size of land masses, shows us a very different view, with greater size emphasis on areas occupied

mostly by people of color. New geographic perspectives and history taught from a multiracial point of view will give us a whole new picture of what the world is like.

Compensating for the distorted view of history and geography that we grew up with will take some effort on the part of whites. We will have to read many new things and reinterpret much of history; we may even have to learn a new language. We will have to seek out the resources from which we can learn: individuals, museums, ethnic centers, magazines, newspapers, TV shows, every communication medium known. The effort must be a conscious, deliberate one, and with it will come a new world of excitement as learning opens our minds and hearts to new possibilities of understanding.

To prepare ourselves to assimilate new information, we will need a new sensitivity to accept and receive the new insights, perspectives, and learnings. Habits of the mind will probably need to change, and they will change as new information is absorbed. We will need to constantly check out the ways in which our willingness to receive the new information can be sharpened. That will not always be easy, but it is sure to be an exciting learning venture.

Overcoming Lies

Most of us who are white have been exposed to generations of lies about people of color; these lies have conveyed to us, in both blatant and subtle ways that people of color are inferior. We need to consciously overcome these lies.

The major communication systems of this century, radio, movie, and television have been filled with lies about people of color. The Cosby film referred to previously, which pieces together clips from old movies, newsreels, and TV shows, is a quick history of how those lies were propelled into the culture. The dominant message of those lies is that blacks are nothing, people from whom no good should be expected. I saw the old movies as a child, you probably saw them, and many of today's college students tell me that they saw the questionable old TV shows in their own childhood on Saturday morning TV reruns.

Unfortunately, today's movies and TV shows sometimes repeat the same lies and often add new stereotypes. For many whites, those stereotypes generally are accepted and unchallenged features of the belief system that shapes their view of people who are not white. Every stereotype, every lie, has a demonstrable history, and many of these damaging notions were in the hearts and minds of the founders of our nation, built into the laws and structures of our society. These lies continue to be a part of the cultural air we breathe today.

Obviously, stereotypes about lazy, crap-shooting, lying, cheating, stealing, good-for-nothing blacks (expand or adapt the list for any group you choose) hurt those persons about whom the lies are taught. But at this point, I hope you will consider how those racial lies also affect those of us who are white. We ought to be concerned enough to purge any trace of those lies from our hearts and minds because they are poison and dangerous to our health.

Examining Assumptions of White Superiority

Equally dangerous to us as moral beings are the subtle ways in which we have been led to believe that whites are superior to blacks and others of color. We need to examine how we have been convinced that the needs and the priorities of whites are more important than those of people of color.

Here I am not concerned with the blatant and overt forms that this sense of superiority

takes, for instance as expressed by members of the Ku Klux Klan or allied groups. Most whites have not succumbed to that sort of stupidity or bigotry. Consider instead the ways in which assumptions of white superiority may be operative at many institutional levels of our society.

Consider, for example, the public reaction to unemployment statistics. Pick any year out of the last thirty, and look up the unemployment statistics for the nation, your state, and your city; get the statistics broken down by race. You will find a consistent pattern in which unemployment figures among blacks are almost always twice as great or more as unemployment figures among whites; furthermore, the disparity between black and white youth is much greater.

Now imagine those figures reversed over a period of years. Imagine white unemployment being twice that of blacks, or simply imagine unemployment across the board being at the level that it has frequently been for blacks. Let your imagination suggest what the public response to such facts might be. Floods of protest would result. Political rhetoric would demand immediate change. A lot of citizens would be in the streets protesting if whites were unemployed at the rate of blacks. We would not stand for it!

The reality, however, is that only sporadically is there anything like a public outcry, then usually from black leaders. White society as a whole shows little concern that blacks are consistently suffering unemployment at a level twice that of whites. Often the statistics are not reported by race, and the disparity between races is hidden and thus easily ignored. The inequality is accepted as a fact of life; it is simply the way things work. The failure by society as a whole to respond with anger is an illustration of an assumption that black unemployment is less of a concern and less of a problem than white unemployment. The implicit, unstated assumption is that blacks are less important than whites. You and I as individuals may not believe that; we may in fact find that assumption abhorrent. But the facts speak loudly about our society's values. Other statistics in numerous areas of social and economic life indicate a similar assumption of white superiority. Statistics on health care services, infant mortality, school dropouts, and the death penalty, for example, indicate that blacks suffer disproportionately high negative effects as compared to whites in the delivery of health services, the distribution of high-quality education, and the adjudication of justice.

Again, individual whites may find that fact repulsive, but the consistency with which these statistics pile up over the years indicates that society as a whole simply is not motivated to change these dynamics of inequality. If whites were as poorly served as blacks in cases such as these, we would be close to insurrection. The prevailing attitude seems to be that it is okay to tolerate vastly unequal treatment of racial groups in our society. Until we can turn that attitude around, the gap between the stated belief in racial equality and the societal behavior of inequality favors the continuance of the implicit assumption of white superiority. Measured by this standard, blacks, black life, black prosperity, and black rights simply are not valued as highly as whites, white life, white prosperity, and white rights.

Much work lies ahead for those of us who are white and who want to change the way we believe, understand, perceive, and act so as to diminish the racism in our personal lives. But the implications for institutional change as well are enormous.

Working for Institutional Change

We need to work at changing those institutions that have had such a racist effect on our personal lives.

The communications media, which have and sometimes still do perpetuate racist stereo-

types, lies, and misinformation, are white-controlled. Likewise, the institutions that produce and distribute goods, services, and resources in this nation are white-controlled. Whites control the finances; whites manage; whites make the decisions. Very few exceptions disturb this picture of white control. Those of us who are white must think long and hard about the ways in which we can use the power we have in those institutions to bring about the changes that will at least minimize racist effects.

Where shall we begin to work for institutional change? The answer is easier to say than to do. Begin in the institutions where you are. If you are in a business, begin there. If you are in a government agency, begin there. If you teach, begin in your school or college. If you are not employed in a particular institution, consider the ways in which you consume services, and identify the ways in which you may have some influence in those situations. Few of us are without influence or power of some sort in some institution.

The one institution that readers of *PACE* share membership in is the Church. Because of its belief in the inherent dignity of all persons, that institution ought to be better than others in regard to racism. Experience teaches us that, in fact, the Church is neither better nor worse than other institutions when measured in terms of racism. The Church does, however, provide us with a common place in which we can carry on our work against racism.

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June 1989

Multicultural/Diversity Emphases...Not Enough!!!!!

Many places I turn today I see, hear, and read about an emphasis on multicultural studies, intercultural relationships, and managing diversity. Both my head and my files bulge with the concepts those words represent. Most of what I have heard, read, and seen has been good; I applaud those who engage multicultural and diversity issues as major foci for the emerging century.

BUT multicultural/diversity emphases are not enough! Not enough if we are to address the serious national problem of racism. There is one focus for learning about racism and how to combat it: that focus is racism...racism...racism! That focus will not be popular. No encounter with that reality will be easy, or comfortable. Still, I shall continue to say that racism is the only focus for dealing with racism; that must be done directly, and not by a circuitous routes, for they usually turn out to be roads of avoidance. A direct focus on racism may be threatening, but, like the surgeon's knife or the psychiatrist's probing, is necessary for a society in need of restored health. Racism was/is present in the foundations of our society, and will not be removed by anything less than addressing it directly.

A study of racism probes the reasons for the problems which make multicultural diversity studies necessary. Multicultural relationships would not be difficult for so many people were it not for racism. Studies of the contributions of races of people of color would not have to be encouraged if they had not been excluded by racist assumptions that all good proceeded only from Europe. Norms of what is beautiful in human form or art were dictated by racist aesthetics which ignored cultures which were "different." The same ethnocentric, racist judgments prevailed in regard to language, sexual relationships, music, governance, and most every aspect of life; our nation was founded on a view which assumed the "rightness of whiteness," and anything different was regarded as deviant and/or inferior. It is demonstrable that racism is a major root of the problem we face as we respond to an increasingly diverse population trend.

As one who has chosen to keep the focus on racism, I am often suspicious that the multicultural diversity emphasis is popular precisely because it frequently avoids the issue of racism. A school can put great emphasis into a multicultural celebration of differences, but fail to alter an informal system which "tracks" students by race either toward college or not. Managing diversity can be a legitimate pride for a Human Resources team in a corporate setting, but an Asian employee may still suffer isolation from colleagues who have not resolved attitudes they learned about "Japs," and which they apply to all Asians. A college may feature Native American studies, but a young Native woman enrolled at that college may experienced prejudiced treatment when she wears a band on her head which reminds people of her culture. In a hospital emergency room where personnel have been taught to respect diversity, tough racist stereotypes may quickly emerge as a Black male attendant works with a white woman on a rape case in which the rapist has been identified as Black. In a state agency with a clear intent to diversify in employment practices, an Hispanic employee who wants to transfer to a department which offers a better chance at promotion, may encounter strong resistance rooted in convictions about his "inferior" language.

The point is made: multicultural diversity introduced into a setting which is racist will not work, unless at some point the racism is acknowledged and responded to as racism. Institutional settings are predominantly white, and those often present a psychological minefield for employees of color. Most white managers and other employees are oblivious to, and are not eager to hear about such facts. Until they come to understand how racism functions in our society and its in-

stitutions, most will remain unable to respond in any corrective way. It is not enough to address multicultural diversity and not address racism. In order to understand and eliminate racism, there must be an emphasis on the study of racism, because racism is racism!

To study racism means to trace history particularly in England, because the United States was intentionally founded as a white, Anglo nation. That history lives in our present. Such a study will discover ideas, values, beliefs, customs, ways of perceiving, and doing which are based on racism. To understand racism means to know the consequences of a national foundation built on a terrible contradiction between a thrilling belief in equality and a degrading belief in white superiority. It is to discover that literature, art forms, history, philosophy, religion, medicine, and most of the disciplines which are supposed to serve humankind, are infused with a racism which means they cannot possibly serve all people justly. A study of racism will lead one to know that institutions which are the carriers of culture communicate racism along with all the goodness they represent. It is to understand that the media are racist, and that, when the medium becomes the message, both are racist in their effect. It is to know that the interaction of institutions and systems in social planning often are shaped by assumptions of white superiority which are buried and appear only in unintentionally racist effects.

To study racism as it impacts the white psyche will reveal manifestations in attitudes and behaviors, each alternately affecting the other. It will reveal that ways of thinking, of formulating problems and solutions, of putting thought into word and feeling into act are fused with racism. It will lead one to understand that how people relate across racial lines is frequently shaped by racism, that expectations, often molded by racism, are powerful determinants of encounters between people and ideas. A focus on racism will illustrate that all people suffer from its cancerous nature. People of color are its targets, but white people are damaged because it also diminishes their humanity. The slow disease undermines the foundations of a society all must share.

An emphasis on the multicultural and diversity aspects of our society is important and, when done in a context which addresses cultural and institutional racism, can be a powerful tool for change. Seldom, however, have I heard the word or concept of racism used in written or spoken descriptions of multicultural education, training or concerns for diversity.

So here is a call for keeping the focus where it must be if we want to address the causative problem. Let's learn to identify, and detect racism wherever it is, and then let's turn to the task of becoming anti-racist individuals, anti-racist institutions, and an anti-racist society.

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May 1992

Doing the Right Thing

Over the years there have been attempts to get athletic teams to change names which are often offensive to Native Americans. That movement has gained new momentum in the last year, responsive to the advent of the tomahawk chop, the appearance of fans in fake Indian headdress, painted faces and behavior which mimics stereotypes of native people. Press reports of "savage" offenses on the field have characterized teams which carry names such as Braves, Redskins, Indians, and Chiefs.

During this year when people are involved in alternative ways of viewing the official celebrations of the 1492 Quincentenary, there is an increased awareness of the ways in which native peoples experience the names of these teams and the accompanying antics of their fans. Rick Reilly, in *Sports Illustrated*, has described the offense by asking us to imagine a team called the Chicago Jews defeating the Astros, while their fans wave yarmulkes and chant "Have Nagila." This simply would not happen, and if it did would occasion a prompt, massive and proper response demanding both the name and the offensive practice to change.

The demands for change in regard to Redskins, Braves, Indians, Sachems, etc., are getting responses which encourage hope that some people in decision-making positions are hearing the message of hurt, and are willing to assist thoughtful change. Recently, the *Oregonian* has adopted a policy indicating that it will no longer use those offensive names in its sports reporting. The Redskins will be reported as the Washington team, or it will be said that Atlanta and Cleveland have agreed to exchange players in an inter-league deal. Now the radio station WTOP, in Washington, has indicated that it will be guided by a similar policy which will apply in reporting and all phases of the station's work.

While the leadership of such pioneers for change among publishers and production managers is encouraging, there is less optimism that either fans or team owners will move quickly to follow suit. The allegiance of fans is so strong, and the frenzy of team loyalty so gripping that it is clear that fans will not give up favored images easily. For the same reasons players will find it hard to relinquish the identifications with symbols they have come to love; for instance, a few years ago, when Dartmouth College was insisting that the Indian was not an official college symbol, some of their hockey players had the symbol tattooed on their butts, surely resistance brought to an illogical end!

When team owners are told that the names of their teams are offensive to Native Americans, the typical response is similar to one we have heard many other times. The use of the names is not intended to offend, they will say, but ought rather to be seen as complimentary. The association with highly regarded sports, the identification with a winning spirit, the engagement with clean, managed competition, ought to be seen as a positive connection, they reason. Indeed, some have even indicated that the use of names such as Redskins is an attempt to accent the positive attributes of native groups. Unfortunately, the positive attributes are lost on many native people. Fans who invent "the chop" are unconcerned about the negative stereotypes their actions feed. Even a moment of rational thought would observe that a winning spirit, dedication, and team pride seem to work just as well with teams named for stockings and identical siblings; the offensive stereotypes are simply obsolete and unnecessary.

A common response to those who claim the names to be offensive is to appeal to intent. "We meant no harm to anyone...our intentions are good..." That usually gets translated into, "No one should be offended because we meant no offense." That's somewhat like telling the person

you have just bumped into and knocked down a flight of stairs accidentally that he should not be upset that his arm is broken. You may not have intended that the arm be broken, but it is broken. Knowing that you did not intend that result will make the hurt person at least feel better about you, but his arm is still in a cast, and will have limited use for a time.

Owners and namers of sports teams have an opportunity to address the feelings of those who are offended, both by apologizing, indicating that they did not mean to offend, and by proving that they do not want to offend, by changing the offending name. Simply expecting an acknowledgement of good intent to satisfy the feelings of those offended will not work. The hurt is there, remains, and will be exacerbated every time the name is read in papers, or heard from announcers. The wound is salted every time some fan holds up a sign with an Indian slogan, or when the crowd joins in unthinking chants.

To ask for this change is not to ask for much. It is a simple case of politeness. The request assumes that there are few who want to offend whole groups of people. It assumes that once a person is told that a name is offensive, respect for the offended will prompt change. He has already said that he has no intention to offend; the next step is logical and quite simple...stop using the offensive name.

The change in names and an explanation of the reason will become an opportunity to educate the general public which can learn just as quickly to do a harmless "wave" and have fun with it, as to do the "chop," accompanied by a grotesque imitation of a native chant.

This is one of the easiest changes that can be requested. It will not hurt nor deprive anyone. So let's ask our local papers, our schools, our sports executives and owners to do the right thing right now.

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April 1993

From Awareness to Action

A frustrated student, a question suffused with anguish: "What are you trying to do to me, anyway?"—My head and heart were engaged one more time with a young white male struggling with his growing awareness of racism. Our conversation was tense, at times confrontive, and ultimately rich.

My young friend was becoming aware of racism at several levels, and the one which troubled him was a new awareness that he was not immune, that racist notions and feelings had found their way into his thoughts, his feelings. The information presented in our class, through readings, lectures, discussions with other students, had backed him into a corner where he had to face himself. He was not happy with what he saw, wanting to explore more, scared to do so, and his frustration burst out at me, the messenger whom he felt as accuser. "What are you trying to do to me?"

My immediate response was, "I'm trying to get you to get off your seat to become an active anti-racist!" I hope that in the context of our relationship, I didn't sound as cold and unforgiving as that sentence now hangs on the page! "Do something; don't just wallow in your new awareness. If you feel deeply, now is the time to do something with that feeling...move...act your way to new status."

As I think back to that encounter I have to look deeply into my own being, searching for why I responded to that student as I did. It doesn't take me long. Almost daily I encounter people who are aware, but when I suggest actions in which they might become involved, they decline. I am grateful for awareness, but disillusioned by stubborn resistance to action. I can identify a number of reasons, rooted in the nature of racism, explaining why it is so hard for many whites to become active anti-racists, but I also know that to become active demands sometimes a simple resolution to do it. Thus the "aware no-doers" frustrate my strongest hope.

Not often enough does awareness lead to action! If all the people who have become more aware would become more active, we could make some real changes happen. If all the people who tell me of their increased awareness would join in the many actions to combat racism, we could make a difference. If all the people engaged in awareness training would do something with their awareness, we could make some things in our society turn around. Awareness training without action is *Vanity Fair*. Introspection becomes a reflection in a mirror which reveals an inner self, but too frequently ends up with images looking at each other, nothing more. "Look at us; see how aware we are!" Awareness is a new suit, pleasing to see. "Don't we look good?...My, we are fine...We are clothed in a new awareness...We look good, must be good!"

Comes the call to actively oppose racism. The response is, too often, a deafening silence. In different places, for different people, the opportunities for becoming active differ. I must never allow myself the judgment that assumes that others are not active just because I don't see their actions.

Still, my experience points to the difficulty of moving from awareness to action for many, many people.

At Community Change, the call for active involvement means: join us in working with the English Plus Coalition to resist English Only racism...join us in monitoring government wrong-doing in the harassment of black officials...join us in supportive efforts around the concerns of native peoples...join in creative ways to counter attacks on policies of affirmative action...join us in building multi-racial coalitions to build a new future...join us in action...join us. From the call

to action I look up and there are many of the aware ones, still proudly preening their insight. Awareness becomes a study in introspection, without movement beyond. That kind of awareness happens much too often. Awareness without action is moribund, fruitless.

So, there is my frustration laid bare! Rooted in an insatiable hope to see some changes in my receding lifetime, I cannot bear any training, any meeting, or any gathering that does not have an action focus. I am impatient with mere awareness; unless it is going to do something, all the awareness in the world will not help. People need to expand awareness constantly, but they also need to move, to do something.

As I said to my young friend, “I want to see you get off whatever you are sitting on so comfortably, and become active!”

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IX. Miscellaneous Essays

June 1995

Ode to Angry White Men

I am an angry man!
I am an angry white man!
I yearn for another, earlier day in my years!
I pledge to work for a return to the good old days!

Then I was in clear control. If not in control myself, I knew who was and how to reach him. I knew how to cajole the favor of any man who could help me to gain my end. I knew how to win my goal. I knew who to club with to notch my quota of desired ends.

In those days I had no concern about competing with anyone who was obviously not as qualified as I.

In those days I could stalk my prize position or possession without fear of competition except from those others who knew the game and played it by the same rules. If I played the right way, things would come to me sooner or later.

I never had to enter my name for a job sought also by a woman; if one of them was brazen enough to compete, I was assured that she was no competition for me.

I never had to compete with or see my friends compete with the grandsons and great grandsons of slaves.

In those days my son never had to doubt his place in the admissions scramble to my college.

In those good old days I could freely dismiss any woman in my company who became pregnant. It didn't look good to have large-bellied women serving customers. Train someone in a job and I expect them to stay on it for a long time—without maternity leaves.

In the days of my control, I could fire an old man quicker than his hair turned gray.

I never had to make concessions for someone who moved in a wheel chair.

In the good old days I didn't have to put up with homosexual men and women around me or in my workplace.

In the good old days the only language rights I knew were English and I didn't have to deal with some foreign store clerk who couldn't understand me.

I never had to worry about testing procedures that helped determine who was "in" and who was "out."

In those good old days I knew where I stood, and who stood with me. I knew my place and everyone else knew his place. In the bosom of the club I was secure, and my role was sealed with the bonds of power.

I didn't have to worry about charges of discrimination. I set the standards; I didn't need anyone to tell me who I could or could not associate with.

I didn't need to consider my speech and thoughts; I could say what I thought, in the language of my choice, and no one complained.

In the good old days, my buddies and I could joke about sexy women and even they knew it was just in fun.

Damn, those were good days! I was in control! I didn't have to be concerned about many things that occupy my time and confuse my head now.

Damn, those were good days! ❖

X. New Additions

The following essays have been written since 1996 and are not organized by subject.

December 1996

Justice Harlan and Race

For years and in many different situations I have heard appeals to Justice Harlan's one-person dissent in the Plessy vs. Ferguson decision of 1896, in which he articulated the idea that the Constitution, and therefore the law of the land is "color blind." His "color-blind" thesis has been given as a reason for numerous present-day views. Some have claimed that his words define a fundamental notion of what our democracy means, forgetting that, far from stating the position of the nation, his was a lonely dissent; the other Justices did not agree with him, therefore we can hardly appeal to him as stating how the Court viewed the law. Yet some will still claim that it is clear that the Constitution is "color blind." The Plessy decision does not say that. The "color- blind" notion has been used as a focus for political and legislative decisions, and by many has been used as a reason for refusing to recognize "color" at all. My hunch is that more arguments about the nature of democracy have been built on this dissent than on many majority decisions of the Court.

Finally I've decided to look again at the Plessy decision and at the full text of Justice Harlan's words in particular. There are at least two interesting implications in his words, neither of which I have heard expressed often. First his notion that racial pride is acceptable, and then secondly his acknowledgment that the dominant race can continue to be dominant even though the law is "color-blind." Here I want to begin an exploration of these two themes which are clearly stated in Harlan's dissenting opinion.

In the context of two sentences in which Harlan says that the Constitution does not "permit any public authority to know the race of those entitled to be protected in the enjoyment of (civil) rights," he asserts that "every true man has pride of race and under appropriate circumstance, when the rights of others his equals before the law, are not to be affected it is his privilege to express such pride and to take such action based upon it as to him seems proper." Clearly for Justice Harlan "color-blind" does not ignore the fact of color. He specifically indicates that being truly human includes pride of race. The large numbers of people whom I have heard insisting that "color-blindness" means that we do not need to see color or to acknowledge its importance can find no grounds for that position in these words from Justice Harlan. The people whom I have heard take that "color-blind" position are not usually speaking from a legal perspective, but are saying that on a practical, daily basis they do not want to acknowledge the color of a person. Color does not seem important to them, and they would prefer to ignore it, because it is not and should not be a significant factor in relationships. My own response has been to acknowledge a similar goal for the future, but to insist that in our day to ignore color is to do so at peril for our nation. That argument will continue at another level, but right now I want simply to say that those who advocate a "color-blind" approach to race today, and who frequently appeal to Harlan for the roots of that view, will not find support for that view in these words of the Justice. In fact he encourages race pride, and that cannot come without recognition of race.

The second idea I want to explore is Justice Harlan's honest recognition that, while "in the eye of the law, there is in this country no superior, dominant, ruling class of citizens," there in fact is such a class. His words say it well: "The white race deems itself to be the dominant race in this country. And so it is, in prestige, in achievements, in education, in wealth, and in power. So, I doubt not that it will continue to be for all time, if it remains true to its great heritage and holds fast to the principles of constitutional liberty."

To my non-legal mind, these words which point to the fact of a dominant white race, as-

suring that it can remain dominant "for all time," can be interpreted in several ways. Is this once again the same contradiction which haunted the Constitutional framers, asserting both equality and superiority? Is this simply a separation of "law" from "practice," of "belief' and "act"? Is the Justice just plain confused? Or is he remarkably honest?

Harlan reaches for a vision of "color-blind" but cannot find it in reality. That is in part a legacy of the contradiction on which our nation was founded. The framers of the Constitution were for the most part trapped in convictions about equality, yet also convinced of their superiority as white, as male, as privileged property owners. Justice Harlan is in the same trap. He wants a law and a Constitution which is "color-blind," but he also assures the white race that it can remain dominant. In a sense it is as if he "winks" at his colleagues on the Court, and my hunch is that they must have seen the wink and taken solace in it.

Harlan's "wink" presages the era of "separate and unequal." I do not want to measure the motivation of the good Justice. I don't know how we can determine whether or not he intended his "wink" to provide a way out of a tough legal situation for his colleagues and our society, but it seems to have been one step toward affecting a new possibility. Now the Court could say, and the nation could adopt a legal stance of "separate and equal" treatment for the two races then involved, but here was an assurance that in actuality there was no need to fear an end of white dominance. The next decades proved Justice Harlan to be right.

So our nation entered the 20th century with a variation of the old contradiction. The majority of the Court said that the law affirms policies which recognize "equality with separateness." The lone-dissenter, Harlan, states strongly that the "destinies of the two races in this country are indissolubly linked together," that the Court must reject the notion that "colored citizens are so inferior and degraded that they cannot be allowed to sit in public coaches occupied by white citizens."

BUT THEN HARLAN 'WINKS." Don't worry, the white race can still dominate!

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March 1997

Shoulders of the Past for the Future

She is helping to coordinate plans which a local college is projecting for a summer gathering of people who were involved in the Civil Rights Movement of this century. The intent evidently is to engage some of these "veterans" in dialogue with younger people for whom the Civil Rights Movement is history, sometimes seeming quite ancient and irrelevant. She has asked me for some help in thinking about who ought to be invited to participate. Reflections of this sort are significant as we move toward a new century; casting the future in recollections of the past can become a kind of "Sankofa" experience for all of us concerned with racial justice.

Here I offer a hope that any gatherings such as these inter-generational dialogues will be cast in a historical context which reaches far back beyond the Civil Rights Movement. No movement at any time has ever come full-blown or cut-to-order, just appearing on the scene seemingly out of nowhere! Always there is a history which gave birth to the Movement; always we stand, and walk, and run on the shoulders of those who have preceded us. In recognizing that history there is also the danger that we get so trapped in the past that we stunt creativity for the future. Acknowledging that danger, I want here to simply trace an outline of some of the context of the Civil Rights Movement which I hope will be addressed by my conference-planning friends.

When did the Civil Rights Movement begin? Reach back much earlier in the century to understand its roots, review the controversies that developed so richly between the followers of Washington and DuBois, giving life to the consciousness of a people struggling to define a new role in the land of captivity, raising in the collective will a demand for freedom and rights. Follow the sons of Africa into World War I, and meet with them for the first time African peoples from THE Continent. Feel the stretch of hearts realizing a destiny connected forever to dark-skinned peoples of the world. Come home with them to a land "fit for democracy and hypocrisy," prepared to hear a Langston Hughes say it clearly that "America was never America" for him, but to swear allegiance to a dream that "it will be." Hear those other voices from the Harlem Renaissance, from pen, in verse, song, and drama nurturing a generation of self-assured, confident people who knew even then that "Black was Beautiful." Let your heart listen to the soul-full music emerging from those years as a counter-point to the oppressive mainstream of a white America whose own soul was touched at a depth it did not dare to understand. Do not forget ever Marcus Garvey, challenging a nation within a nation to new paths to fulfillment.

When did the Civil Rights Movement begin? Do not let the context stop in the early part of this century. Move back to name again the "shoulders" of another time. Remember the thousands who moved in and through and defined the struggles of Reconstruction and whose determination to overcome was fueled by its destruction. Their names fill books. Bethune and Wells-Barnett are names that lead us back even farther in that other century. Walk the talk with Sojourner Truth, run and risk with Harriet, dream and plan and conspire with Turner, and Prosser, and Vesey; let their willingness to die fire the heart of every century to follow. Stand with Garrison and Sumner, and follow once again the changes which moved John Brown from educator to revolutionary. Read again the words of Frederick Douglass, telling us that July 4th was no day for him to celebrate! Do not ever forget the un-named men and women and children who endured and found dozens of ways to rebel at the same time they nourished a spirit that could not be bound by any chains.

When did the Civil Rights Movement begin? Find the body of David Walker where he predicted it would be, dead on the streets of Boston. Some would say a fitting end for one who

could write that provocative *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World*, perhaps the first African American call for a trans-African vision. Read those words again and you will hear the thought-seeds of our Movement. Those thought-seeds are in a thousand places: words put into the double-meanings of spirituals, words written by those who could not, should not write, words spoken by those forbidden to speak. Words, in fact, which become THE WORD for all movements of liberation.

When did the Civil Rights Movement begin? With the first African woman who suffocated her new-born rather than see it enslaved? With the enslaved man who simply broke his hoe and could not work the full day? With the first African who threw himself overboard in an unguarded fleet moment? With the quiet mocking of "massa" in the quarters of the enslaved? With the exploding rage of some unknown whipped man or woman who struck back at life-peril? The Civil Rights Movement began in each case and thousands of others; the shoulders are many, and they are of men and of women and of children sometimes broad, sometimes slender...always strong.

There is a hint of what I mean by putting the Civil Rights Movement into its historical context. The context is wider and deeper obviously beyond these suggestions, but we will not understand that Movement until it is seen, rehearsed, and felt in that context. What I have begun here is a process of putting the Civil Rights Movement into a limited context which focuses on the Black liberation struggle. That focus is appropriate for the Civil Rights Movement, because it was a Black-led movement, growing out of a specific racial group. To utilize learnings from that movement for the future must include an expansion to include the liberation struggles of other racial groups. Some of those struggles will also mean a historical context of centuries, including the history of "Indian" nations in this hemisphere, and the ancestors of Latino and Chicano peoples also indigenous to these shores. It must include the struggles of people of Asia who came later to this place. It must name the names of those heroes who have written the history of many liberation movements. Time, space, and my limited knowledge leave me inadequate to that task. Before they look to that future, I hope those who are planning this summer's conference will take a moment to look back, to see where we as a collective have been, to learn the lessons which are taught by the age more than by the day, and to seek nourishment for the Spirit, and hope to sustain weary hearts in this dry land.

Those Shoulders of the Past are for the Future, and the next century will lead us into a movement which will encompass all of the oppressed racial groups, forming an alliance which will be a Vocal Majority, determined, and committed in common action to the pursuits of life, liberty, and happiness for all the peoples of the world.

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December 1998

The De-Radicalization of Anti-Racism

The title and the probing ideas come from Amy Elizabeth Ansell's *New Right, New Racism: Race and Reaction in the United States and Britain*. My explorations follow her lead only as it opens vistas onto what is happening in the United States, since that is where I live and observe. In a detailed and precise way, Ansell outlines the emergence of "new racism" with the advent of "new right" politics during our most recent decades. Her germinal thoughts begin to take root in my heart and mind demanding from me an initial counting of learnings which can be applied to a present situation in which the anti-racism I have known becomes a fragment of past analyses and a figment of present policy imagination.

In the late '60s and early '70s when I first became familiar with the anti-racism of that time, it was clear that any analysis of the social construction of race in the United States had to include not only a recognition of the role of race prejudice, but also a hard look at the functions of power in the equation Prejudice + Power = Racism. It became a mantra of the anti-racism movement. Today that extended mantra probably becomes Prejudice + Power + Privilege = Racism. Variations on those words prevailed; there was talk about a "white problem," about "white power," and words like dominance, supremacy, and hegemony were common. The central theme was constant. When the analysis was applied to the way racism functions in the United States it was clear to most anti-racists that the categories of power and privilege were "white."

The uses and abuses of white power, settled by custom, law, and practice in the major institutions of the nation, combined with the enculturated prejudices of several hundred years, became a primary focus of anti-racism. Most of my colleagues viewed anti-racism as a movement which necessarily had to focus on the social and political structures of white power. Most of us also applauded any effort to probe the attitudes, prejudices, and psyches which eventuate in behaviors and practices of discrimination and exclusion. While engaging in those probes, we also knew it was of prime significance to raise the issues of institutional forms which gave power to racism. For some of us, any effort which failed to connect to those forms of racism simply was not a full expression of anti-racism. The anti-racism which made those connections was radical in the sense that it attacked the root problems of racism.

Puzzled to understand what is happening/has happened to anti-racism in these days of right-wing pretensions to power, and then comes Amy Elizabeth Ansell's remarkable work. The central idea I want to appropriate from her book is encompassed in what she calls the "de-radicalization of anti-racism." What follows builds from the idea that dynamics set into motion by the "new right" and "new racism" have led too often to a diversion of anti-racism away from the points of its strength. The "new racism" of the "new right" becomes what Ansell calls a form of "anti-anti-racism." The germinal thought comes from Ansell; much that is presented here probably originated with her also, but at this point I will not attempt to designate ideas which are hers and those which are mine. I hope only to encourage participation in further dialogue among those who want to be anti-racist in the new century. Let my heart-mind journey begin an exploration of the "de-radicalization of anti-racism"; maybe there will be some directional signs for the future.

First, here is a simple list of what seem to be some of the subtle shifts which the "new right's" "new racism" has brought to the political debates and dynamics in the United States. These subtle shifts become defining differences for anti-racism:

Anti-Racism	New Right Anti-Anti-Racism
Emphasis on outcome/results	Insistence on proving intent
Centrality of group rights	There are only individual rights
Color-consciousness is OK	Color-consciousness divides & is racist
Integration is a goal	Separate & equal is a goal
Planned economy	World-wide market economy
Power relationships define racism	Racism = race prejudice
Prevention & rehabilitation is response to crime	Punishment is response to crime
Role of government utilized to alleviate disparities, inequalities	Role of government becomes benign neglect
Inequality increased by social structures	Inequality comes from differing individual abilities
Affirmative Action attempts to include those excluded by past/present discrimination	"Preferences" to overcome discrimination are discriminatory
Inequality is rooted in contradictions of our founding; believing in both equality and white, male superiority	Inequalities measure the failure of our nation to live out its creed of equality
Multi-lingual abilities are a national asset, to be encouraged	English is the official national language
Immigration of new citizens is essential to define our identity as a nation of immigrants	Immigration limited for technically skilled and/or English speaking whites
The rights of indigenous people must be legally acknowledged, and politically implemented	Indigenous people become assimilated

The above list invites you to add to it from your own understanding and experience. There is no attempt to prioritize or to even explain why I have worded things as I have; again you are invited to change whatever begs your welcome advice. Rather, I want here to trace some of the strands which seem to dominate the way the "new right" has manipulated the agenda of anti-racism.

The "new racism" of the "new right" as described by Ansell has become what she calls "anti-anti-racism." Here is the purpose to convince all who will hear that what has been known as "anti-racism" is in fact the face of racism, and must be exposed and resisted. Eager to avoid the brand of "racist," the right has pinned that label on anti-racists. The right has claimed the egalitarian purpose and language of anti-racism for itself, and in so doing has put anti-racism on the defensive. Thus the right becomes what Ansell calls "anti-anti-racism." Anti-racism has to explain to a confused public what has happened in a now upside-down world of race relations. The ground has shifted, and anti-racism stumbles with the old definitions shaking under its feet.

Ansell makes clear that the anti-anti-racism of the New Right escapes the brand of "racist" by insisting that it is concerned with its own identity and rights rather than any degradation of people of color. The New Right is not against blacks, but is for whites and their rights; we can remember David Duke saying almost those words. Its concern is simply to implement the egalitarian ideals which insist on the rights for all individuals. Here the New Right is itself on shaky

ground, because its common insistence that there are no group rights but only rights for individuals becomes confused as it claims to be for "white" rights. Still the claim is heard as one FOR rights of whites rather than AGAINST anyone. Being FOR their own rights, they quickly reject any charge of being racist. Rather, they point fingers at the "anti-racists," those who talk about and encourage cooperative efforts among several "racial" identities. Those discussions which recognize the differences, and engage in mutual critique and attempt to understand somehow become, in the view of the New Right, inherently racist. In public debate the New Right identifies the "real racists" as the anti-racists of yesterday.

Shaking the brand of "racist," the New Right finds a receptive audience when it insists that its only concern is with "self-definition" rather than a critique of other groups. If troubled by the increase in immigrants who are not white, and often with limited English skills, the right proclaims it is concerned only with defining who "Americans" are. Those "Americans" then will decide who are not "Americans," what they must do if they are to become "American," and who and how many will be included in that definition. Here the debate includes advocates of English Only, and the undermining of bilingual education, ethnic studies and multicultural education generally. The "we-they" syndrome is there, but by claiming only a concern for the "we Americans" category, the New Right cleanses itself from the charge of "racist." This may be an example of what Ansell calls a "differentialist racism" replacing a "discriminatory racism." The New Right can say they have no intention of discriminating; they simply want to be "themselves," different from the "others." They have been told for years that "difference is simply difference," that encouraging "difference" is all right. Now that they emphasize the difference they see and feel, who can criticize them as being racist? The real racists are the anti-racists of yesterday, those who insist on racial definitions which the New Right says are discriminatory.

Individualism becomes a central stone in the New Right edifice of anti-anti-racism. The idea that there are only individual rights rings a common understanding in the hearts of many. The courts increasingly affirm that injustices of discrimination will be recognized only as it an be proved that the discrimination has been against a specific individual. With so much of our gay life defined by individualism, the argument finds common assent. Eschewing any ability to see groups, the right sees only individual people, a view which limits and delays significantly any attempt to overcome systemic forms of discrimination. Add to the accent on individuals the court orders that mandate ability to prove intent to discriminate, and the New Right erects an almost insurmountable defense against the injustices its view allows. The judicial decisions of another era which made corporations into legal individuals illustrate both the hypocrisy of that view and its ability to obfuscate the plain and simple fact that our history is full of instances when we have treated individuals as members of groups. The most obvious examples being when we enslaved African peoples, not on a one-by-one basis, but as a group, and when we continue to treat Native Americans as groups of people, or indeed, when for a time we said "Irish need not apply," not considering individuals but seeing only the group. But individualism reigns and in the New Right mentality it defines how inequities and inequalities are to be assessed. The New Right becomes a protector of individuals, defending against discrimination and injustice for each person. The New Right tells the world that any attempt to approach injustice as a group problem will manifest the very injustice decried; the offenders, the "racists," are the anti-racists of yesterday.

Those are some of the ways the New Right's New Racism works. While we all refine this analysis and add to it, and need to spend time pointing out the fallacies in the way the New Right frames issues, here I want to begin to assess some of the ways in which the anti-racism I have known has too frequently become "de-radicalized" by the way it responds to the New Right. Here

again is a beginning list for consideration, without any priorities assigned.

1. Too often we have been diverted from a focus on the increasing disparities of our society to defend against the ways in which a modest, conservative program of Affirmative Action, still in its infancy, has been charged with utilizing "quotas" to secure "preferences" for the undeserving. Lack of information becomes misinformation becomes disinformation. Straws are erected to be put down, language and purpose are confused, and programs of Affirmative Action are wrenched from the history which makes sense of them. Those who know Affirmative Action best and often seek creative measures to mend Affirmative Action, are blocked by cries to end it.

2. Calls to be color-blind evoke a vague ideal so far from our present reality that it is a foggy myth. Rooted in the words of Justice Harlan, color-blind refers to a legal and constitutional doctrine announced in his sole dissenting vote in the historic Plessy vs. Ferguson decision. The context of his color-blind Constitutional doctrine included his claim that "Every true man has pride of race, and under appropriate circumstance, when the rights of others, his equals before the law, are not to be affected, it is his privilege to express such pride and to take such action based upon it as to him seems proper." Color-blind for Harlan does not ignore the fact or importance of color, and those who insist that we not see color can find no grounds for that position in Justice Harlan. After recognizing the importance of color, Harlan goes on to assure his colleagues on the Court and all else that his dissenting opinion refers to how the law sees race, and then acknowledges a different reality in society: "The white race deems itself to be the dominant race in this country. And so it is, in prestige, in achievements, in education, in wealth, and in power. So, I doubt not that it will continue to be for all time, if it remains true to its great heritage and holds fast to the principles of constitutional liberty." He is indicating to the comfort of his friends that color-blindness would not change the dominance of white control in the real world. A rush to color-blindness today will too quickly affirm the status quo, just as it did for Harlan.

3. Diversity has become the very soft edge of anti-racism. Growing from assumptions which define white people as the norm, and all others as "diverse", that concept is always in danger of itself being racist. Especially popular in white corporate circles, "diversity" can be recognized as a positive way of getting a variety of people to the table, but is fraught with limitations and failures to challenge the status quo about what happens and who makes it happen around the table.

4. Massive public confusion clouds much of present discussions of race, in part because of the many ways in which the language of egalitarianism has been stolen by the New Right. Civil Rights become Civil "Wrongs", anti- Affirmative Action initiatives become calls for equal opportunity, and the alternative to welfare becomes individual responsibility. Dr. King's call for a judgment based on content of character is torn from the context of his life and used to distort the meaning of his work. Public confusion is general, and anti-racists are engaged in long discussions to clarify the distortions, effectively diverted from the anti-racism tasks at hand.

5. Multicultural educators have had to offer defenses against charges of political correctness, identity politics, and ethnic centrism presented in the context of an intention to maintain control of education where it has always been, in the minds of white men who are certain that all worthy experience and wisdom comes from their history.

6. A popular clamoring for studies of "Whiteness" may be a very important wedge for anti-racism, or it may be itself a terrible diversion from the real issues of anti-racism. Shifting the focus from the effect of racism to its cause in the white psyches and white structures may put us in the precise place where Thomas Jefferson was when his most articulated argument against African enslavement was the fact that it wounded the children of slave owners! Jefferson abhorred the institution which enslaved African people, but his concentration on what it did to whites, freed

neither himself, his children, nor Africans from its bonds. There is a necessary and important focus on introspection in "Whiteness" studies, but history needs to remind us that such explorations may become navel-gazing diversions from attention to the outcomes of the oppressive forces of "Whiteness."

7. Calls to abolish race as a category are tempting because they correctly call for elimination of a concept which has no meaning except in the social constructions of white history. A more radical call than color-blindness, here is an exciting future. While we move toward the day when we can forget race altogether, there is a danger that once again we will find ourselves discussing and debating definitions while the social structures which functionally implement racism will continue in power far above, or maybe below the debate.

Those who know me will also know that my next question is: What shall we do? This is an invitation to You.

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January 2000

Peculiar Institutions…Yesterday/Today

From the beginnings of this nation there was a gradual growth of an economic dependence upon a supply of free labor. That long need was supplied finally in the development of a system of enslavement, not confined to, but primarily involving African peoples. Historical forces built on prejudices and ignorance about Africans, and rationalized their victimization as a despised and inferior people.

The system which enforced enslavement became recognized as an institution, and gained the name of a "peculiar institution." One of the meanings of peculiar especially illumines the system which enslaved Africans. That meaning comes from an understanding of parishes which developed in Colonial times, and was applied to either churches or territories in some parts of the nation. Peculiar became a word which designated a particular parish or territory which existed and functioned outside of some of the patterns which governed most parishes in a given jurisdiction. Prelates, often given the title of ordinary, were assigned to and given jurisdiction over all parishes of a certain area, but some parishes within that area were exempt from ordinary jurisdiction. Such parishes were often called peculiar institutions. The exemptions applied to those institutions often became a way of protecting those affected institutions from regulations regarded as unfriendly or unwanted.

The concept of a protected institution sheltered from regulations which might hinder it became an attractive idea for slaveholders and traders who were eager to surround their peculiar pecuniary institution with protections which would ensure its continuation and growth. The practice of designating peculiar institutions became a convenient rationale for the protections necessary for the rapidly developing institution of slavery. Built on prejudices legitimated by religious institutions, the naming of peculiar institutions became part of a polity designed to protect slavery from jurisdictional encroachments of federal or other opposed forces. Over years Congress protected slavery in the coastal slave trade, legitimated slavery in the District of Columbia, authorized seizing fugitive slaves in the North, and admitted new slave states, while the courts allowed these protections of the peculiar institution.

One of the protections erected to isolate the peculiar institution from eroding outside forces was the doctrine of states rights. Always present in any political discussion, from the founding of the nation and into any future, there was/is the tension between definitions of what is best for society as a whole, for the nation as a whole, or for individual states, and ultimately for separate locales within them. One of the outcomes of that discussion in the beginnings of the nation was the idea that states had a right to determine how life within each state should be organized on the basis of what was the perceived good for that state, regardless of what was decided in any other place. States, in this view, had the right to disregard, nullify, defy the imposition of any law, regulation, or court decision imposed from outside the jurisdiction of the state. One of the clear reasons for promulgating this doctrine was the protection it afforded to slaveholders and slave traders in states where the peculiar institution dominated life.

That doctrine of states rights is much alive today, represented most powerfully in the judicial decisions which reserve an increasing role for state courts. For those who remember the history of states rights applied to the protection of the peculiar institution, there is always a reasonable suspicion that the arguments from states rights will protect racism today. Just as Charles Sumner's famous Freedom National speech once reminded its 1852 audience that slavery was a sectional issue, but freedom was a national issue, so it is time today to remind the whole people

that, while some issues are indeed proper to leave for states to resolve, *there are still issues of freedom and equality which are national issues*. Human rights define good due to each human being, and no one in any section of any nation should be denied the fulfillment of those rights. For those who would erect policies, procedures, and implement practices which deny those rights to another there should be no exemption from restriction. For those who would erect powerful institutions, there should be no peculiar protection from regulations designed to implement the practice of freedom and equality.

Another of the protections erected to preserve the peculiar institution, was in the work of the American Colonization Society, short-lived in the early 19th century, perhaps alive in a different way today. The American Colonization Society came on the scene in 1816, was quickly identified by many African people as rooted in fundamentally racist beliefs about black people. While many of its advocates claimed to work to bring an end to African enslavement, most felt that free Africans ought to be relocated in Africa, in Cuba, or some other remote part of this continent, separate from the areas frequented by whites. Colonization aptly named the intent of this movement. It is dangerous to generalize the motives and programs of the American Colonization Society, because its adherents differed in both belief and programs. Colonizationists sometimes believed that enslavement was a good system and should be maintained, sometimes that it was a good system, but economically not sustainable and should be eventually terminated, sometimes that is was an acceptable system for a time, but based on false assumptions of inequality, and therefore ought to be ended, and sometimes variations of these views. Whatever happened to the institution of slavery itself, the remaining white cultural institution needed to be protected from infestations of inferiority. The underlying assumptions and beliefs of colonizationists were based in racist beliefs of white superiority and black inferiority which meant that there should be a radical separation of the races. If free, Africans ought to be free to live somewhere, not in the white back yards! The enslaved Africans, and free Africans, were and would be seen as creators of a pathetic pathology, always inferior.

It may be that the 20th century version of colonization is welfare or welfare reform, rooted too often in a pathology which assumes that there is a class of people who by virtue of their lack of individual responsibility, are simply not worthy. That pathology, implemented by public officials, and sometimes solicited from sociologists, like a crooked mirror in a carnival, casts a distorted picture of people who are made poor by a system which cannot believe in full employment. Accepting that the poor will always be with us, too many are content knowing that they are alive, perhaps barely, so long as we can keep them off our streets and out of mind. The even more callous elitist and racists will actively work to keep the poor in a political and social space defined for them, safely separate from the class of very special, peculiar, white people of caliber.

After the peculiar institution was officially brought to an end, there had to be ways to provide continuing protections rooted in the fear of black skinned people, deemed to be criminal in some fundamental way. Assumptions about blackness and criminality were clear in the very early contacts of 16th century fair-skinned Englishmen and dark Africans, and those assumptions were brought into the hearts, minds, and the structures of Colonial America, a self-conscious Anglo creation. Came Emancipation, and with post-Reconstruction the development of a prison system, strangely exempted from the Constitutional Amendment which eliminated involuntary servitude except as punishment for crime "whereof the party shall have been duly convicted." Violations of any of the Black Codes, or alleged violations could lead quickly to imprisonment. From prison, the newly freed person could then be hired out for labor. The prison system was financed, and a new kind of enslavement prospered. Now almost two centuries later, prison has become the primary

means of control and the place for a generation of black and brown youth. Prisons have become a business, a major growth industry with some states building prisons to house at a fee prisoners from other states, and engaging contract labor to corporations seeking workers without wages. Cast aside is the concern of previous years that incarceration might be not only a means of punishment, but a time for education and training which would use confinement as a way to prepare for a better life beyond prison. Prison becomes only a place of punishment, a collective control, and a convenient center for the economy. The imprisoned become a commodity. While the poor and black and brown accumulate a record that confirms their criminality, wealth accumulates for the wealthy, and a prison system, immune from regulations designed to protect humanness, becomes a safely guarded peculiar institution.

With a legal end to African enslavement, our nation embarked on a new journey into industrialization, created a new peculiar institution requiring protection. Some called it the free market economy. Corporate babies became giants, partly because they were surrounded with exemptions from ordinary jurisdictions, and protections against undesired regulations. The welfare of the corporations demanded certain protections, and a post-Reconstruction Supreme Court provided help in an 1886 decision that regarded corporations as individuals. So corporations, which by nature are a collection of persons, became legally, individuals, cannot be taxed differently than individuals, and are granted the protection of persons under the 1st and 14th amendments. From the view of the street it can be easily maintained that this is pure legal obfuscation, making a group into an individual person. Turn that coin over, and our history is full of instances when we have treated individuals as member of groups. The most obvious example is the 19th century peculiar institution, when we enslaved African peoples, not on a one-by-one basis, but as a group, or indeed as we said "Irish need not apply," not considering individuals, but seeing only a group. The free market becomes a peculiar institution, invested with a God-like sanctity, roaming the world with too little concern for large groups of people whose industry is rewarded with leftovers from whatever abundance there is. This modern peculiar institution has the exponentially increasing international power to regulate as/when/where it wants to, and to manipulate exemptions which protect it from unfriendly restrictions.

The new peculiar institutions yield economic progress for the wealthy, the near-wealthy, and the scrambling-to-be-wealthy, who share what they regard as very special interests.

The new peculiar institutions secure social status to those whose already secure position assumes their superior diligence and character.

The new peculiar institutions provide political power for purchase to those who benefit from economic progress.

In a very peculiar way, those who are of darker skin hue seem to gather at the bottom of most measures of education, wealth, and status. That gathering continues as a rebuke which gives the lie to our most-claimed inheritance of equality and freedom!

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March 2001

Free...And...Freed

> If free people of color in New England had anticipated enacting their freedom as an entitlement, under the same terms as whites enacted theirs, they soon learned that whites' understanding of antislavery and Revolutionary rhetoric was quite different from their own. As whites' eighteenth-century observation that servitude made slaves servile hardened into their nineteenth-century conviction that all people of color were inherently servile —freed slaves perhaps, but free people, never — people of color struggled to adapt their expectations of citizenship to the grim truth of mounting hostility, ridicule, and escalating efforts to control and even eliminate their presence.
>
> Joanne Pope Melish, *Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and Race in New England, 1780-1860*

It would be a disservice to this exciting book to pretend that the above quote is a summary of the well-documented analysis of its stated subject, but it does provide me with a basis from which to reflect on ways in which Melish illumines some of the dynamics of racism in the world which I daily face. In particular I want to invite an exploration of presumed white entitlements and the converse subordination of members of the black race.

Freed slaves perhaps...but free people, never. So slightly different, those two words, freed and free, hold a key to an understanding of magnitudinal difference which white New Englanders assigned to themselves and to Africans among them during the post-Revolution and early American national years. Those differences became a basis for assigning to the two races qualities and deficiencies which were assumed to be innate. Those attributions cling today to assumed racial distinctions which dominant with prejudices, in too many personal relationships, media reports, government and corporate policies, practices, and procedures. The Melish analysis brings the history on which she focuses into our streets and the places where major decisions give form to our still infant century. Look at the vastly different meanings history gives to those two words, free and freed.

The word free becomes freeborn, indicating a status which defines a part of what it is to be a living human being. One need do nothing to affirm that status; it comes with birth, and with it comes entitlement to certain inalienable rights. A free person is one who was born free. Such a person comes into the world free, one who does not have to earn or prove a right to those entitlements.

The word freed clearly indicates a status which did not come simply by birth. That one letter d added to free, carried for many colonial people a heavy burden of meaning. The weight of that word, freed, implied an understood status which was gained, given, earned; the freed person is one who has a new status added to that unfreeborn beginning. Such a one can become suspect by the freeborn, from whose status of privilege, it is necessary to insist that the freed one must prove worthiness of a new status. The very suspicion that the freed person may not be worthy opens a floodgate of dammed-up, sometimes obvious, sometimes covert prejudices. Those prejudices find an easy home in a catalog of pathologies, which describe what is believed to be an inferior and sometimes innate condition. Conversely, the attribution of innate entitlement grants automatic privilege to those assumed to be superior. In colonial New England those distinctions

defined race, with whites obviously assigned the superior, entitled piece of privilege.

Those historical distinctions drawn by Melish are much alive today. Let's look at some of the past/present manifestations of that history.

1. *The freed person was once not free.* In that not free, enslaved condition there was control over the person. The newly freed, no longer controlled by slavery, needed a new form of control. So, the former slave codes became Black codes, carefully defining the behavior which was, or mostly was not acceptable, circumscribing the place for the former slaves. Add the KKK, born out of Confederate destroyed dreams, and the South had a violent medium for enforcing the new place for the now freed black people. A more formal and government-structured means of control was developed in a prison system.

2. *The freed person has a propensity to crime*. Assumptions about blackness and criminality were clear in the very early contacts of 16th century fair-skinned Englishmen and dark Africans, and those assumptions were brought into the hearts, minds, and the structures of Colonial America, a self-conscious Anglo creation. Came Emancipation, and with post-Reconstruction the development of a prison system. Violations of any of the Black Codes, or alleged violations could lead quickly to imprisonment. From prison, the newly freed person could then be hired out for labor. The prison system was financed, and a new kind of enslavement prospered. Now almost four centuries later, prison has become the primary means of control and the place for a generation of black youth. Prisons have become a business, a major growth industry, with some states building prisons to house at fee prisoners from other states, and engaging contract labor to corporations seeking workers without wages.

3. *The freed person was once fully dependent upon the owner*. Defenders of the peculiar institution were quick to point out that slavery was a form of welfare state which provided for blacks who obviously could not survive without the beneficence of the owners. When Emancipation came many of the freeborn who were sure that the newly freed were a breed of creature which would eventually wither into extinction without the wise governance of the former owners. History taught us that dependence is part of the engrained character of the former enslaved. They cannot live apart from the benevolent oversight of the owner. The legacy of that lie is found today in sometimes disguised, well-intentioned paternalism of whites who want so badly to help the urban black dweller. While it is important to encourage the use of energy, time, and skill in attention to the problems of the time, it is equally important to caution against a much-too-easy paternalism.

4. *The freed person is not disciplined, cannot be expected to discipline himself or herself.* There is a need to discipline from the outside. That idea was a key debate when it came to decisions about recruiting black men into the armies of the Revolution and the Civil War. Testimonies of the history of those military encounters prove the opposite of that lie, but lies have a way of resurrecting themselves in new ways. Look carefully into enough corporate settings where there is an effort to diversify employees and you will find too many instances of supervisors who still cling to this false notion applied as a stereotype to any person of color.

5. *The freed person is servile, both by nature and custom, a servant*. That assumption became the basis for the idea that black folk were created to do the mudsill work necessary to maintain the work structures of society. Thus, the institution of slavery. Measure the distance from that idea used in the defense of slavery to your nearest university or corporate headquarters janitorial staff, or mail room, check out the people who collect the trash in your community, if it gets collected. While there is no intent to disparage the importance of that work, it is notable that too frequently people of color are trapped there with little opportunity for other choices. The

distance in time from the mudsill work of slavery is centuries; the difference in the work is much the same as the difference between freeborn and freed.

6. *The freed person is not one from whom we can expect good academic performance*. In the history of African enslavement in this hemisphere that notion was born in several constituencies of thoughtless prejudice, sometimes strangely called Enlightenment. That prejudice was fed also by a fear that learning would lead to a demand for freedom. Today in Massachusetts, our Commissioner of Education will feel quite at home with the assumption of inherent intellectual inferiority. He has declared that there is a gap between student performances on the MCAS tests between students in Wellesley (or presumably any other white suburb) and Boston. That gap he has indicated is partly due to what happens outside of the school day. We won't see Boston become like the Wellesley schools, he moans, and that becomes an expectation which any good educator knows too frequently predicts and affects actual performance. Any such assumption creates a stereotype threat which ought to be a disqualification for anyone in the position of Commissioner of Education.

The policy crises of our society are many. The moral crisis is one.

David Walker, a free black in Boston, one hundred and seventy two years ago awakened the coloured people of the world. To his brothers and sisters he said, we are not brutes. It was an awakening call; we are men, he said. Clearly seeing and naming the evil of enslavement.

L. Maria Child, a white abolitionist in Boston, six years after Walker, warned a reluctant audience of the inevitable consequence of placing power in the hands of avarice. She spoke specifically of Queen Elizabeth's obfuscation of her complicity with the slave trade and then made clear the moral necessity of ending enslavement.

No obfuscation there! No circumlocution! Why can we not appeal with the same moral clarity known to Walker and Child, to many who joined in the movement to abolish enslavement of human beings from Africa? This Appeal is for Moral Clarity!

Denial will be an almost universal response to my assertion that the policy crises cited are examples of a moral crisis. Look again, and see clearly the immorality that threads the whole. It is a demeaning of human value. The confusion which comes from a view of the complex relation of power and systems and institutions and policies and procedures and practices become too often the circumlocution and obfuscation of our day! See what weaves its ugly way through the mess. People are not brutes! People are not things! Not commodities to be bought and sold! Not psyches to be manipulated and controlled! Not blips on a screen! People are not markets! Not mistakes to be deleted, or pasted, or copied, or inserted here and there at will! People are not stereotypes of the worst characteristics we can identify or invent! People are not pawns on the chessboard of kings and queens and knights and bishops of power.

It is so easy to say: People are People! It is so hard to treat each person as a person. Acknowledged, the difficulty does not call for further complication. Discussion and analysis of the complexities too easily become obfuscations blinding the eye, mesmerizing the brain, numbing the heart. The analysis becomes paralysis! We do not see, we do not hear, we do not speak. Child was right: the world seems like an Office of Circumlocution, designed to keep us from feeling or doing anything real.

We are not in places or positions of prominence, but we are PEOPLE, and therein lies the real POWER. Some may not acknowledge it; we can assert it. Some may fear it; we will cheer it. Some will not see it; we will remove the blinders. Some may not hear it; we will sound the truth which refuses deafness. Some may not speak it; we will say it in many tongues.

People are People! When they tell us that we are complicit in our own dehumanization, we can refuse to let that add to our inertia. We can move. The energy is for us to claim. The ideas that give us license are available around the world. We can be strong in unity. Against the places and positions we can show united power. The power we know is rooted in our humanity. We are people, not to be used, but respected. That is our right as human beings, women, children, men.

We will be seen! The vision is moral!

We will be heard! The word is truth!

We will act! The deed is right!

We will claim our places as people of worth!

We will take our positions as people who make history!

We will be people of moral power!

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May 2001

Poverty Is No Puzzle

Three recent events reported on a news station have encouraged me to venture into a field of discussion which has usually frightened me, always puzzled.

First, I heard of someone who has just recently paid twenty million dollars to take a ride of several days duration in a space ship. Astounding!

Second, I heard an interview in which a number of people were asked to respond to the question: What causes poverty?

Third, is the annual Walk for Hunger, which I believe is going on as I write.

My head-heart is unsettled, and requires me to put down some thoughts about poverty, which of course, means I must say something about economics. My fright at entering into that discussion is considerable, since many will rush to prove that I indeed know nothing about the subject. My ignorance is encouraged by something I understood Dorothy Parker to have once said, "If all the economists in the world were laid end to end they would not reach a conclusion." I'll probably not reach a conclusion either, but here I go!

Immediately I want to avoid a couple of pitfalls. I do not want to argue that the guy who spent some of his millions in space should give it to relieve poverty. He probably has a few more twenty millions under his pillow, but it is unlikely he will do what I would like. Giving some of those millions would be a capital idea, but it would not end poverty even if a thousand of similarly affluent people were to add twenty million to the anti-poverty coffer.

Nor do I want to discourage the many who get blisters on the Walk for Hunger. Walking will certainly have physical benefit for the walkers, and knowing that money has gone to some of the less fortunate of society will be a kind of spiritual benefit; it will make the walkers feel good, and that is fine. But I do hope that the hoofers will recognize that the effort they endorse by their feet will not end poverty even if it were repeated every day for ten years. If that is a disturbing comment, more troubling will be my invitation for the walkers to consider that their effort may even contribute to the status quo of continued poverty. Large numbers of people convinced that their individual acts of beneficent walking will end poverty, diverts the focus from the systemic problem which creates the basis for poverty. Feeding the belief that by individual acts an immense systemic problem will be corrected becomes a kind of drug that shelters them from seeing reality. If large numbers of people continue to think that they are bringing an end to poverty without disturbing the fundamental economic system in which we live, the space tourists who have millions to waste will applaud.

The question raised in the interview was, "What causes poverty?" or something very close to that. The answers for the most part came from people who were convinced that those whom they called poor are so mainly because of their own failures. I will not recount the tired reasons we have all heard for many years. I would rather change the question a bit, and hopefully raise the possibility that there may be some different answer

The changed question: Why/How is it that some people are made poor? That is the way Bishop Romero thought about the poor; he used a Spanish phrase which translates into those who are made poor, and that is a HUGELY different question. In a time and place when there is so much affluence floating in space, why are some people made poor?

Before I move to the made poor idea, I want to acknowledge that some of the reasons given by interview respondents to the question of what causes poverty are true. There are lots of individuals whose life styles account for or contribute to their status of poverty. That truth aside

for the day, I want to think about the changed question; that question refuses to place the blame on the individuals who are poor, but changes the focus to consider the conditions, assumptions, practices which make them poor. It assumes that neither the largesse of multiple million-dollar donors, nor the actions of thousands of individual walkers is the way out of poverty.

Poverty, as a condition that traps many more people than is necessary into a life constrained by economic limitations and hardships, cannot be understood without reference to the economic system which is the context within which people become poor. Here are some descriptions of dynamics which insure that some will be made poor.

- The system is based on an implicit assumption that some must win and some must lose. In the midst of historic affluence it is assumed that there is not enough money to be shared so that none need lose.
- The winners gain resources unavailable to those who lose; the accumulation of resources enhances the probability of further winnings for those who win.
- The resources gained include money, those things which money can buy, community status, influence, and power. There is a consistent effort to convince everyone that the achievement of this status is based on hard work and merit.
- The cumulative effect of gathered resources makes future winning more certain for those who have, and provides insurance against any set-backs becoming disastrous for them.
- For those who lose, the lack of resources increases the probability of further loss; with herculean effort those who are made poor, might be able to barely make ends meet. There is a consistent campaign to convince everyone that those who do not win are those who by poor habit, lack of hard work, and slothful character do not merit achievement. They are simply losers.
- Those who “have not” encounter lessened opportunity and increased obstacles to success, with little to provide a safety net against ultimate disaster.

The Cumulative Effect

The bold outline of the dynamics described above can be followed to illustrate a cumulative web of connections which functions to create a powerful system which cements both wealth and poverty into positions which allow a few to travel in space while the many have no space. It also leaves a vast majority in the middle, walking to express their decent discontent with the fact of poverty, and hopefully a developing disdain for conspicuous affluence.

Finally, the millionaires will probably continue their space rides though I shall continue to find them appalling!

The Walkers for Hunger will continue their walking, and that is good, but I hope there may be an increased realization that they must also join in a cloud of protest which insists on changes in the fundamental system which creates and allows poverty to exist in the midst of plenty.

The question ”What causes poverty?” hopefully will receive more and more answers which refuse to criticize those who are victimized, but will focus on the system which victimizes many while rewarding some on a basis which is not always merit.

What causes poverty is no puzzle. The puzzle is why we let it happen.

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January 2002

This Inconvenient Hero Rises (Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.)

Now that he is safely dead
Let us praise him
build monuments to his glory
sing hosannas to his name.
Dead men make
such convenient heroes: They
cannot rise
to challenge the images
we would fashion from their lives
And besides,
it is easier to build monuments
than to make a better world.
So, now that he is safely dead
we, with eased consciences
will teach our children
that he was a great man...knowing
that the cause for which he lived
is still a cause
and the dream for which he died
is still a dream,
a dead man's dream.

— Carl Wendell Himes, Jr.

Whatever image we may fashion from his life, this "inconvenient hero" rises to challenge us now in the year of imperial presidency.

His rising wakens "inconvenient" others whose words join his. He rises with words that tell the truths we would deny.

He rises with words that no nation can long exist on two priorities of butter and bullets.

He rises with words that warn of the "inevitable consequences of power in the hands of avarice."

He rises with words to remind us that garbage collectors of every Memphis, of every age, are human beings, deserving respect.

He rises with words that caution reformers that "fear of losing everything intimidates them to ask for too little."

He rises with words of a God who will not be mocked, to call upon white America to cease its oppressive ways or suffer judgment of the ages.

He rises with words to scorn a late century which accepted a new category of people called the working poor.

He rises with words that echo the truth that there are no poor people, only those who are made poor.

He rises with words to remind us that the check for past services by African Americans is overdue more than two hundred years.

He rises with words which "speak against the day" that claims superiority for one people over all.

He rises with words that tell us that violence begets violence; it always has, it always will.
He rises with words that tell us that vengeance begets vengeance; it always has, it always will.
He rises with words that tell us that wars are “no more won than are earthquakes.”
He rises with a reminder that when deciding what to do, cowardice asks, “Is it politic?” Vanity asks, “Is it popular?” And conscience asks, “Is it right?"
He rises with words to challenge the morality that plants miles of mines instead of yards for play.
He rises with words that name the lies of moral pygmies who say it is worth it to sacrifice the lives of Iraqi children to punish corrupt politicians.
He rises with words which claim every person behind every border as brother, sister, mother, father, child and friend.
He rises with words that “startle like a trump of coming judgment.” He rises with words like a “fire bell in the night.”

(Among those who rise here with Dr. King, are Maria Child, Elizabeth Heyrick, Bishop Tutu, Bishop Romero, William Faulkner, Jeannette Rankin, Frederick Douglass, David Walker and Thomas Jefferson.)

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February 2002

A Reflection on Collective Memory

A few days ago I went to the Museum of Our National Heritage in Concord, Massachusetts, to hear a lecture by Dr. David W. Blight, author of *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory.* With me was Bernadette, supervisor of my work as historical interpreter on Boston's Black Heritage Trail. With others of our staff, we are both grateful for the work of David Blight, and we went to Concord eager to learn more from him, and to show support for him.

There were about ninety people in the lecture hall at this site which celebrates the beginning of the American Revolution. When Bernadette entered the room, the percentage of people of color present experienced an exponential rise; she was the only one. My hunch is that most of the people came from the surrounding towns, Concord, Lexington, Bedford, Acton, and though each of these is a community, there was little sense of a community in the room. People came in, mostly in pairs, took seats, and sat quietly speaking with the persons with whom they came, awaiting the lecture. That is, after all, why they were there.

The introduction was a dry, dull, impersonal recitation of credentials, which for David Blight are considerable. The lecture was an insightful and wise recounting of the argument developed in the book, namely that after the Civil War there were forces at work in the nation to create a collective memory of what the war was about, what its significance is for our history and understanding today. While it is a wonderful study, and one I wish all to read, here I do not want to focus on the content of the book, but rather on the idea of and experience of collective memory.

As he began the lecture, David appropriately addressed the question, "Is there such a thing as collective memory"? The book depends on an affirmative answer to the question, so the lecture included an appropriately brief claim to that effect. That question raised as it was, in the context of that gathering in Concord, becomes the focus of this reflection on the experience of that day.

Bernadette and I had another place where we also wanted to be, so we left during the question period, and headed for Roxbury. Sighting Memory is the title of an exhibition in Roxbury at the Museum of the National Center of Afro-American Artists. The photographs are by Dr. Reginald L. Jackson; the poetry by Dr. Dwadwo Opoku-Agyemang. The combined work of these two is based on a study of caves in the north part of Ghana, used in another century as hiding places for those who were escaping the clutches of slave traders. A subtitle of the showing calls it "an exhibition of poetry and photographs dedicated to those who resisted.

There were about the same number of people at the Roxbury museum that late afternoon as there were in Concord. A little after our arrival a white couple came in and that made the total of white folk present about twelve, while the rest were people of color, largely people of African descent. They too came from several surrounding communities in the Boston area, including Roxbury, Dorchester, and Jamaica Plain, at least. But here there was a distinct feel of one community; greetings exploded as friends saw each other, introductions gave a feeling that everyone knew everyone, with a kind of knowing that does not depend on acquaintance.

On that early evening, Dr. Jackson engaged the gathered folk in discussion, aided by leading comments from Professor Anani Dzideyeno, from Brown University. The group was quickly engaged in a vibrant remembering focused often on the past but always on the present implications of that remembered history. There was no need there to even raise the question about the existence of collective memory. Had the question been raised, my guess is that it would have been greeted as irrelevant, and the questioner's sanity doubted. The discussion here seemed to

almost say that there was only collective memory. That, of course, cannot be true, but it represents a feeling level I experienced for the umpteenth time in that same community. The discussion in that community was rooted in a common experience of the world, grounded in a common history, a common memory. No need to ask about collective memory; there it was!

Questions for further reflection:

— What is the source of this collective memory as experienced at the museum session in Roxbury?

— Is there a similar collective experience shared by those who were gathered at the museum in Concord, maybe buried somewhere in the denial of the "emancipationist vision?"

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July 2003

America's Greatest Danger

America's greatest danger is not Al Qaeda!
America's greatest danger is not terrorism!
America's greatest danger is not an "axis of evil" nations!
America's greatest danger is not oppressive dictatorial regimes abroad!

America's greatest danger is in the intersection of three forces at its historical heart, best described by the words Affluence, Avarice, and Arrogance. These forces, if allowed to flourish in continuing power, will lead to some distant dissolution or downfall.

We are probably the most affluent of people in the history of the world. Rising on a land rich in natural resources, populated by waves and generations of variously gifted people, in a mostly hospitable climate, Americans have gathered to ourselves a spectacular accumulation of things designed to provide contentment, ease, security, and happiness.

Traveling to most any other part of the world, listening to the astonished comments of those who visit us from many other parts of the world, or learning from a deprived person on a street corner, will quickly remind us of immense affluence ready for many at our finger tips. Affluence is so much a part of who we are as a people that we do not see it, unless there is a threat to its continuance.

Affluence is a characteristic of what are sometimes called the developed nations. Development means accumulation, and that comes for us in the context of an economy which assumes that growth is necessary for its existence. Growth is a demand of most any measure of economic success, culminating in a perpetually expanding demand for new markets, products, methods, things which it is assumed will bring enrichment. Thus, the systemic demand for growth feeds the desire for more, more, more, which too often dominates personal goals. The combination of the systemic demand and the personal desire is power, incorporated and privatized.

The system is avaricious, both fed by and encouraging personal desire. The combination was there when our nation was born in 1787, in that case aligned with prejudice, to rationalize slavery. The effects of that original sin are a continuing plague; the signs of what affluence and avarice can do to erode a higher national self are the present danger that threatens.

We are a great nation, no question there. But greatness defined by affluence and avarice can lead so easily, almost inevitably, to arrogance. Gratitude for who we are has become gloating over what we have. Graceful acceptance of what we have has become self-congratulation, too often inflated with an unbearable pressure. The burst is predictable.

Pride has become a prejudiced assumption that we are entitled, not only to our affluent life, but to be admired by all other peoples and nations. Everyone must want what we have, what we want, and all must be committed to achievement in the same way we have achieved. Ultimate arrogance accepts no critique from those outside the temples of its power, and will not tolerate self-criticism from within. It is an offensive posture which succumbs easily to that absolute power which corrupts absolutely.

Shouting "We're No. 1" for a favorite hockey team may be fun. When that same "Number 1" becomes a national psyche it is no longer harmless fun. When that national psyche becomes empowered by political persuasion, the first level of danger should be sounded. When that national psyche is projected into the world as a model of global superiority, there is predictable

trouble ahead. Some will rush to duplicate the model, with a denied wish that life had offered another choice. More will accept the model only because they are forced to, knowing they will work for another day when they can deny its power. Some will live with submerged hatred for the model. Others will openly hate, deride, and determine to undermine its source. None of these is a healthy alternative for those who ride in the seats of assumed superiority.

Strike the highest alert code!

AFFLUENCE, AVARICE, ARROGANCE combined become our greatest national danger.

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August 2003

Founding Fathers, Intentions & Values

It is common to hear appeals to the intent and values of the founders of our nation in attempts to give support to opinions and political positions. On this very morning I have heard news reports about the current dispute over the placing of a monument to the Ten Commandments adjacent to a court. People on either side of the debate were sure that the founding fathers would support the position each held. Each was sure that the values of the fathers were clearly those which he held, and that the intentions of the fathers were supportive.

The difficulty of determining the intentions of any person from the 17th and 18th century has always seemed to me to be at best a process of measured probability, rather than certainty. Indeed, there are often times when I am not fully certain of my own intentions. I am generally aware of the various dynamics of my psyche, but part of that very awareness teaches me that examining intent enters a complex mass of ideas, experiences, and feelings. Defining intent can trick my most earnest attempts to know even the truth which is within me. How on earth can I be sure of the intent of even my neighbor? Multiply that uncertainty by a couple hundred and the problem of determining intent of the founding fathers becomes obvious.

Clamoring to show the intent of some of our founders has led to searches of documents and other written words, records of speeches, reflections by their friends, any evidence which is specific, with a "concrete" character. Here I will speculate from fact to what I believe is a reasonable conclusion.

It is a fact that of the first seven Presidents of the United States, five of them owned slaves. From that fact I proceed to an assumption that ownership of slaves for those men was intentional. The evolution of the enslavement of Africans in this country followed a very slippery slope from indenture to a gradual enslavement. The gradual nature of that evolution has been argued as an unthinking decision, and it is easy to see the truth which may be in that theory. Here I will argue that the system of enslavement was in fact built on a remarkable series of intentioned decisions.

Pretending for a moment to have been one of those five Presidents who owned slaves as a long-term investment, here are some of the decisions which it seems probable that I would have had to make:

- I would have had to make a decision that owning slaves would be profitable for me. That would have included an assessment of my own ability to pay for any slaves, and a careful judgment weighing the cost, the predictability of increased income, and whether or not I could actually afford such an expenditure. This assessment would have included observation of others who were slave owners, reflection on their experiences, and a judgment about the economic viability of the system as a whole.
- Having decided that owning slaves would be a profitable venture, I would then have had to decide how I was to procure slaves. I would have to decide either to go to a slave auction or place where slaves were for sale, or send someone as my agent. If I were to send an agent to act for me, I would have to decide on which person to choose, and would have to enter into some decisive agreement about the value of his time, and recompense for which I would be responsible.
- I would need also to have made decisions about how to transport my newly acquired slaves to whatever place I wanted them to work.
- I would need to make decisions providing for the housing, feeding, and clothing of the slaves.

— I would need to decide how I or some other employed person would make clear to the slaves the jobs they were to perform, the rules which would govern the way their time was spent.
— I would need to either supervise the work of the slaves, or employ someone to oversee the work, to make sure that the end production would be profitable for me.
— I would need to provide for at least minimal attention to the health of my slaves, to insure that production was consistent and uninterrupted.
— I would have to decide how I, or someone I might employ, would make sure that recalcitrant slaves were admonished by words or physical punishment.
— I would need to keep, or pay someone to keep financial records, to be sure that the slave production, over against cost, was annually profitable.
— I would need to enter into agreements with other slaveholders, stipulating methods which would govern, proscribe, and limit the movement of slaves from one site to another. This might also include the creation and payment of patrols of men who would make sure that movement among slaves was ordered and orderly.
— I would need to make decisions about the purchase and sale of slaves, how, when, and why to engage in trading, and with whom to enter into agreements to assist the process.
— I would need to be politically engaged with other slaveholders in my vicinity, to make sure that the system itself was protected against internal rebellion or external assault.

The above list could be expanded considerably, to indicate the multiple decisions I would have had to make to engage in the enterprise of slaveholding. If I were to continue that engagement over enough time to make sure it was profitable, these decisions would have had to be repeated numerous times. To assume that these decisions were made without intent would rob these founders of the most modest abilities of thought. It is clear that these five Presidents not only owned slaves, but *intended* to own slaves; to assume no intention is ludicrous.

Not all of the five Presidents mentioned were present at the founding of our nation and its Constitution in 1787. It is reasonable to count them as founding fathers, because giving stability to the new nation required time to make its base solid. These five men contributed to that solid foundation.

The Constitutional Convention made intentional decisions about slaveholding. While never referring to slavery or slaves directly, the members of that Convention clearly said that slaves were to be counted as 3/5 of a person each, that action about the slave trade would be postponed for at least twenty years, and that slaveholders had a right to reclaim any slaves who might run away. How those decisions were made and then recorded without using the words slavery, slaves, slave trade, or slaveholding remains a remarkable political sophistry. That was a carefully debated and finely worded document, clearly expressing the intent of those who were present. The intent to leave the issues of slaveholding unresolved, led to a compromise which effectively gave support to the institution. Those five of the first seven Presidents found in the new Constitution much to affirm their intended slaveholding.

What were the values which spawned these intentions? Two of the values were announced by the antislavery John Laurens, son of Henry Laurens, President of the Continental Congress, and one of South Carolina's largest slave owners. John, serving as an aide to General George Washington, argued in the Carolina legislature for the emancipation of slaves and their inclusion in the Continental armed forces. After his arguments failed, he indicated that his voice of reason was drowned by the howling of a triple-headed monster in which prejudice, avarice and pusillanimity

were united. Leaving aside the pusillanimity (timidity), the values of avarice and prejudice remain pointed in Lauren's judgment of the action of the state legislators.

— Avarice means that slaveholders were profiting and wanted to have more money.
— Prejudice means that the slaveholders exercised a belief held by most of the new Americans, namely, that Africans were inferior and therefore justifiably enslaved.

There is little need to argue about the value which claimed white people to be superior to black Africans; there is abundant documentation of the linguistic legerdemain of the founders of our nation as they justified enslaving Africans. Giving birth to a new nation in a struggle against colonial slavery by Great Britain, most of our founders were in denial which left them blind to the contradictory fact that they were enslaving Africans. That same contradiction, that same denial, present at the birth of the nation, continues to confound the dream of one nation, "with liberty and justice for all." The value which gave precedence to white life over black remains in the psyche of much of the nation, and is engrained in its socio-economic and political structures. It is mostly unseen, unrecognized, an unresolved contradiction, buried in the same denial.

Avarice as a dominant value guided much of the early decisions of our founders. Slavery was based on avarice, and avarice demanded its continuance. Slavery has been named as the original sin of our nation, and the avarice which motivated it remains an active ingredient of our national value system.

Making money of itself is a positive value; without money none of our fathers could have lived long. To value living in reasonable comfort, secure against the vicissitudes of life is both honorable and necessary to the pursuit of happiness. Beyond that reasonable expectation, the slaveholding system fed a human propensity to want more and more, and to seek the more at the expense of others, by the unrecompensed, free labor of others. Prejudice provided the rationale for *who* should be the enslaved.

Avarice and prejudice fit nicely the intentional slaveholding system; gaining wealth by misusing others became a dominant value on which our nation was founded. It became also our nation's cardinal sin.

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A Moral Rip-Off

Attacks on affirmative action citing its implementation as reverse racism, and claims that school desegregation orders have resulted in discrimination against whites have dominated much of our news in recent weeks. Rooted often in an interpretation of the 4th amendment's protection against being deprived of "life, liberty, or property without due process of law," which many will justify legally, those claims are a moral rip-off! They tear the fourteenth amendment from the historical context which provides its meaning.

The 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments to the United States Constitution were passed, ratified, and adopted in the remarkable span of five years: 1865, 1868 and 1870. Considering how difficult it is to amend our Constitution, that five-year period stands alone in our history, exemplifying the unique force of both law and public opinion. When we consider appeals to those amendments, and in particular to the fourteenth amendment, it is well for us to review the context which gave it meaning and birth.

The context was Reconstruction, that short-lived period when the nation was trying to re-construct itself after a bloody Civil War, which was itself the larger context. The context was the Abolition Movement of the nineteenth century, which challenged the nation to right the historic wrongs of African enslavement. The context was Lincoln's brilliant political rooting of the nation's purpose in his Gettysburg Address.

Reconstruction was an amazingly complex political period for our nation. Out of that turbulence came those three amendments, every one of them specifically and intentionally aimed at rectifying the history of enslavement, and anti-black bias toward people of African descent. During Reconstruction, a newly emerging Chinese presence, mostly on our west coast, also necessitated protections for them against prejudice and discrimination.

The Civil War was the largest context. It remains as the bloodiest, and in human life, the most costly of our wars. Much debate has focused on defining the major reason for that war, but in recent years most historians have concluded that it was in fact a war over African enslavement. Anyone still unconvinced of that will certainly have to see that the institution of slavery was at least central. Apart from that context the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments do not exist.

Abolition sentiment, born in early roots of the 1700s, developed a movement in the 1800s, giving political and moral impetus to the changes which were intended to be implemented by the three post-war amendments. Each of those amendments, and each part of the fourteenth amendment, was enacted specifically to insure new opportunities for life and liberty for black people and to provide protections for other people of color.

President Lincoln, long upset that the Constitution did not mention the word slave or slavery, that "the thing is hid away, in the constitution, just as an afflicted man hides away a wen or a cancer, which he dare not cut out at once, lest he bleed to death...", struggled in his mind and soul, and in the political fields of compromise. Then at Gettysburg he did that remarkable thing; he gave our nation a new birth. His "fourscore and seven years ago," spoken in 1863, took us past the Constitution, back to the Declaration of Independence. He claimed that it was then, in 1776, that "our fathers brought forth upon this continent a new nation, conceived in Liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal." Defined by a political scientist, of course the Declaration was not the founding of a nation. In 1776 we were such a loosely knit confederation of colonies that there was no power to raise or finance an army; there was no nation. The nation was founded through action begun at the later Constitutional Convention. In a deft stroke of genius, Lincoln ignores the offending document, and claims our best heritage in the Declaration of Independence. He says that our nation is about "equality", and in the context of his life, in the context

of our nation in 1863, in the context of Gettysburg's battlefield cemetery, in the context of the subsequent 14th amendment, that amendment is about due process for people of African descent.

Some of the people who are the manipulators today want us to return to the Constitution which "hid away" the cancer infecting our nation. There are some among them who would like to return to the three-fifths clause of the Constitution, which boldly made clear the supremacist assumption that white people are superior, and ought to retain for themselves the superior places in social life and systemic institutional life. The denials will be loud; our response must be louder! The denials will be couched in co-opted language of human rights; our response must expose the lies!

Let the context be clear! As we assail the cries of reverse discrimination, of whites being deprived of the protection of law, let's put the origins of that law in context. That context was clearly the concern to address a couple centuries of race-based preference for white people which placed in power a system designed to intentionally keep African people in a subservient place. That place was defined by powerful whites, sanctioned by supremacist ideology and religious faith.

The three Reconstruction amendments were adopted to extend to black people the privileges of citizenship which whites had denied to them from the founding of the nation. That concern was and ought still to be our motive today, as we point to the continuing struggle of all people of color to claim their birthright as human beings, those very rights so persuasively sounded in our Declaration of Independence. Doing so does not imply that we want to be unaware of occasions when there may be discrimination against whites, but let's not allow anyone or any group, and any gang twist the intent of historic movements which have won tiny victories in the struggle for liberty for black people. Let's not let the whines of white people divert us from the present inequities of a system which refuses to recognize, see, or address the "wen or cancer" of racism.

Do you want the Constitution, with its historical context destroyed, so that the new racists of today can manipulate it for their ends? The context of the subject amendments is also the context of our present day. Those amendments cry for extension into a future which will fulfill the promise they held for the liberation struggle of oppressed people of color.

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Executions and Personal Responsibility

I sat at a coffee table eating my evening meal, turned on the TV to see what was happening in the world outside my living room. What was happening, according to the newscaster was what he called the "Gulf War", into which our nation had been so carefully manipulated. Now I was treated to the view of bombs being launched from both ground and air against an unseen "enemy", with assurance that the bombs were not aimed at people, but "installations".

The anchor man launched a slick one right into my heart! My God, what has happened to me? How can I sit here in comfort, devouring nutrition, calmly accepting the bombing of another nation, its land, its property, its people! Have I become so accustomed to violence that I can sit here de-sensitized to the disguise under which violence invades my room! I do not like what is being done to me, and will not accept it!

My grandson invited me to play video games on a computer. I watched as he was challenged to mouse-move and click in rapid succession to blow up virtual buildings and simulated people, one after the other. The game measured his ability to demolish, and totaled his achievement with a score which he was challenged to make better in the next game. When I complained that I did not like the violence he explained that these were not real people, and that usually it was "bad guys" or "monsters" who were being destroyed. He was satisfied that the violence he was being urged to simulate was OK, nothing about which to be alarmed; it was all something happening on a computer screen, and just plain fun. I made clear my own view, indicated that I did not want to play with him, and that when he comes to my house he was not to bring those computer games. Quirky grandpa!

The practice of violence in meaningless computer games prepares a whole new generation to sit before the TV news without ever experiencing the "wake-up" I had, so completely de-sensitized that they are immune to a peace-conscience.

Then I read *Death in the Dark; Midnight Executions in America*, in which John D. Bressler presents historical and present evidence of the ways in which implementation of the death penalty has been effected in numerous ways to distance us from both the gruesome act of killing another human, and from any sense of personal responsibility for executions. It is a piece of the same fabric which trains me to enjoy food while I watch distant bombings, and which teaches my grandson that violence is a way to solve problems and score points that prove he is smart and quick, and immune to the hurt caused for himself or others.

Since a great deal of my life right now is concentrated on keeping my state from reinstituting capital punishment, I want to focus on what Bressler has taught me about the ways in which the increasing resort to executions becomes a way of further insulating our people from any sense of personal responsibility for acts of violence committed in the name of state or nation.

Here are some of the ways in which implementation of the death penalty and the actual executions often become ways of distancing us from personal responsibility for what the state does in our name:

The execution itself is sanitized with careful attention to prevent witnesses from seeing body twitches or facial distortion and disfigurement by placing a hood over the head of the condemned. Lethal injection substitutes for hanging, shooting, electrocution, an attempt to convince the public that this method of execution somehow makes the act itself more justifiable. The attempt to make the act more "humane" reduces the sense of personal responsibility for what is fundamentally inhumane.

The midnight hours are favored times for executions, giving less prominence, with few des-

ignated viewers, and in some cases news coverage limited by regulations, all designs to remove the event from view, hidden from the light of day. If we don't see it, don't hear much about it, we don't have the conscience jarred, and personal responsibility sleeps.

Prosecutors can and have argued to persuade members of a jury that they need not be concerned that they are assigning a person to death by finding for the death penalty. There will be appeals, it is said; the jury decision will be reviewed, may be overturned, and the jury's verdict is only a first step in which others will also share responsibility. The intent is to ameliorate any hesitancy jury members may feel for condemning someone to execution.

Governors have found they can sidestep personal responsibility by appealing to public opinion which demands they act for death, or they can defer to a judicial or jury decision. In at least one case a governor has transferred the responsibility for signing the death warrant to the sentencing judge. The system allows for these elected leaders to be creative in finding ways to distance themselves from the horrible responsibility of causing someone to die.

Legislators and prison wardens have found ways to absolve executioners from personal responsibility: there is a blank in one of the guns, two people activate different injection machines, or the executioners are shielded behind a one-way mirror —no one will know who is the one who "killed" the condemned person. Anonymity of executioners is carefully protected by law and custom. Each can assume that it was someone else who actually did the killing; the responsibility is shifted to some unknown soul.

Since there is clear evidence both from the past and in present practice that systems have been put into place to protect against any sense of personal responsibility for executions, the obvious question follows: If the act is righteous and good why the reluctance to claim responsibility for the execution itself? While that question begs for an answer, there is the larger, more obvious question about why we even have a death penalty. Let's get rid of the death penalty, and then we can concentrate on the responsibilities of and for life.

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May 1998

Controlling the Death of Others: A Memorial Day Reflection

The e-mail message conveyed a sense that Jonathan was fearful that his final paper of the semester would not be acceptable because it was not an academic study of the death penalty. He had given it to me at the end of our class, and now e-mailed a note to explain the reason for the style and content of his final paper.

Our class was concerned with Contemporary Issues of Race/Racism, and Jonathan had chosen to work with others who wanted to investigate arguments about the death penalty, and had done so enthusiastically. He had been a good contributor to our learning in class, participating well in two class presentations, always raising important questions, and commenting in relevant ways. He had openly shared his struggle with the issues involved, and we all knew that he had not come to any conclusion about what he thought and felt. I expected a fine paper, supported by research carefully noted in the style which academics like. Jonathan's paper included no listing of sources studied, no footnotes, no endnotes, not citations from authorities which I knew he had been reading. His e-mail was an attempt to explain this lack, probably motivated in part by fear of a recriminating grade, and, I believe, an honest sharing of his struggle.

Jonathan's explanation of his non-academic paper referred to a point in one class when, after expressing his inability to decide whether to be for or against the death penalty, he had been asked, "What does your gut tell you?" Although a philosophy major, that Pascalian question had never been posed for him in his college career. Subsequently when the moment came for him to begin writing his final paper he found himself with two piles of papers and books, one telling him that he should favor the death penalty, the other that he should oppose it. Lingering above the two piles was the question posed for his heart, and it beckoned him with undeniable strength. Keeping in mind all the material studied, Jonathan had to look within himself for resolution. His heart asked that next question, "What do you think and feel about human life?"

Poured into this non-academic paper was twenty years of reflection on some styles in Jonathan's life which he was examining in the context of a decision about the life/death dimensions of capital punishment. He had to engage the arguments pro and con the death penalty; he had to understand the statistics and to measure their reliability, but finally was driven within himself to discover the essence of his view of life itself. He is still not sure where he will come out on the question of the death penalty, but the questions he must answer are now framed in a different and ultimate way.

A profound experience came for Jonathan in a simple exchange of maybe a total of twenty words, with Cardinal Law, at an Ehrmann Awards event sponsored by the Massachusetts Citizens Against the Death Penalty. Jonathan, with other students from our class, made it a point to meet and greet the Cardinal, who was there to receive the major award of the evening. He told the Cardinal that he was not sure yet where we stood on the issue. The profound simplicity of the Cardinal's response will remain with Jonathan for his lifetime: "Violence begets violence. Violence begets violence! That may be all that it is necessary to say!"

At the international level there has been a reminder of this basic fact of life from Gandhi, as we witness the nation which he freed from colonialism now choosing to deny his truth as it enters proudly, insanely into the contest of controlling death by nuclear power. When the United States destroyed Hiroshima with an atomic bomb, Gandhi said, "The moral to be legitimately drawn from the supreme tragedy of the bomb is that it will not be destroyed by counter-bombs even as violence cannot be by counter-violence. Mankind has to get out of violence only through non-violence. Hatred

can be overcome only by love. Counter-hatred only increases the surface as well as the depth of hatred."

The words of the Cardinal, the words of Gandhi are simple words. They go right into the heart of the questions posed, both by nuclear threats of international deterrence in the name of any state, and by death penalty threats to individual life in the name of the state. It is impossible to prove that killing is wrong, by killing. It is also an immoral lie. Dear Jonathan, if I and you can get that fact into our hearts, there is hope.

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XI. Appendix

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