



RACIAL RECONCILIATION: Creating Our Future Together As A People

• A STETSONROLLINS MONOGRAPH •
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First in a series of three articles

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The successful engagement of human differences.

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Slow down...we're in a hurry.

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Race is once again on the front pages of our newspapers and television news shows:

- Gov. Charlie Christ and the Florida Legislature formally apologize for slavery.
- Sen. Barack Obama appeals for an end to the “racial stalemate,” following the Rev. Jeremiah Wright’s controversial remarks.
- Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice describes slavery as a “birth defect.”
- The recent Race Relations Progress Report from Jacksonville Community Council Inc. identifies significant “unacceptable disparities between white and black residents” in Jacksonville.
- The Jacksonville Journey mobilizes 140 leaders to find solutions to violence — much of it impacting our black neighborhoods.

There’s a lot at stake for Jacksonville in the difficult discussion about race:

- Our aspiration to become a first-tier city.
- A unique opportunity for racial reconciliation and community-building that heals the wounds of a racist past, building our image as a progressive Southern city.
- Undue human suffering from Third World conditions in neighborhoods whose residents’ skin is darkest.
- Our future economic viability, given the racial gaps in education and economics.

A basic understanding of the nature, scope and depth of race and racism is crucial to frank dialogue that avoids divisiveness, leads to racial reconciliation and creates a critical mass of citizens committed to solving these problems.

What is race?

Few people understand that race does not exist, while racism clearly does.

Race was created as a science of racial classification. The concept was first detailed in 1684 by Frenchman Francois Bernier, and then codified in 1775 by German scholar Johan Friedrich Blumenbach in his book, *The Natural Varieties of Mankind*, which first described five so-called “racial” groupings:

- Caucasian:** (the white race).
- Mongolian:** (the yellow race).
- Malayan:** (the brown race).
- American:** (the red race).
- Ethiopian:** (the black race).

Racial classifications suggested that there are divisions within the human species created by nature and passed on from generation to generation. These groupings were based on skin color, hair texture, cranial size and facial features (nose, lips, shape of eyes). They formed scientifically identifiable separate subspecies of the larger human race.

The reality is different.

I am an African-American. My brown skin is an adaptation by ancestors to climatic conditions in pre-historic Africa, where dark skin developed over millennia. The chemical melanin darkened skin as a protection from skin cancer, and to balance the body's need for vitamin D and folic acid. My hair is kinky to allow more air to move through to my sweat glands. My wide nose evolved to allow for better aeration of the body in a hot climate.

Some Asian peoples have narrow eyes that evolved as a protection against snow blindness. Europeans developed with long, thick hair to cover their bodies in cold climates.

Skin color and other physical differences simply represent climatic adaptations over time within the human species. There are no scientifically separate racial groups or subspecies. Race is a social construct that has allowed us to develop ideas that we call racism. We are, in fact, one species.

What is racism?

Racism is imbedded in all aspects of our culture — our psychological makeup, our intimate relationships, our workplace relationships and our social structures.

With notable exceptions, whites remain at the top of our institutions and people of color at lower levels; whites in superior situations with privileges less available to people of color. This arrangement is profoundly deep, and it’s called structural or institutionalized racism.

But the persistence of these racial disparities is not due to the existence of race. It is due to racism — deeply ingrained beliefs, carried in all of us, concerning the color of our skin and associated physical characteristics.

These beliefs, and the institutional arrangements they sustain, are based on skin color and related physical characteristics.

While black-white relations in Jacksonville are at the core, it’s important to be inclusive of all human differences in our thinking. Focusing on racism provides a lens through which to view all human differences.

(continued...)

Where does racism come from?

Classification of people by “race” developed as European imperialism and colonialism dominated the world, expanding into Africa, Asia, the Americas, Polynesia and Australia.

Caucasians as a group were deemed by Blumenbach and other 17th- and 18th-century scientists as the most intelligent race and of highest morality. Blacks were labeled least intelligent and least moral. Other racial groups fell in between. The standard of beauty was based on European notions, with dark-skinned people stereotyped as ugly, dirty and stupid.

Theories developed, for example, that blacks as a race were more akin to monkeys than to humans. These notions are known as “white supremacy,” or “white superiority,” the concept that Europeans, their art, their religions, their social, economic and political structures are superior to those of the other races, which were labeled primitive or uncivilized.

With these twists, the science of racial classification became insidious, relegating people who were not white to lower levels of humanity.

The notion that white was inherently better than black, brown, yellow or red became a deeply ingrained way of thinking.

“White superiority” came to impact all institutions and societies, and the beliefs of the people living in them. To a greater or lesser extent, we have all ingested the spin that colonialist groups put on those they oppressed. This is a significant aspect of the cultural conditioning we have inherited.

This broad definition suggests that while racial prejudice exists, and American whites do have power and privilege to oppress blacks and other people of color, skin color preferences affect all in the culture. The “racial stalemate” referred to by Obama is a grand collusion between whites, blacks and other people of color that sustains the status quo.

The head of a large corporation in New York City told me recently that his efforts to promote blacks and other people of color were being held back by two things: bias on the part of white senior executives; and a lack of assertiveness and self-esteem on the part of many African-American, Latino and Asian managers.

Colorism vs. racism

Many of us who work these issues have become cautious in using the term “racism.” We use the term “colorism” because the disparities are not based on race, which doesn’t exist, they’re based on skin color and associated physical characteristics.

This definition suggests we have a shared responsibility to tackle the issues that stem from racism...or colorism.

Many African-Americans have heard this collusion put this way:

If you’re white, you’re right;
If you’re brown, stick around;
If you’re black, get back.

Bryant Rollins is a former editor with The New York Times and political columnist with The Boston Globe. He was active in the civil rights movement. Rollins and his life partner Shirley Stetson are Jacksonville-based consultants on organizational effectiveness and management development. They specialize in diversity, race relations and human differences.

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Definition of Racism

Racism is a system of beliefs deeply imbedded in society that:

- Overvalues whites and their institutions — sees them as inherently better than others.
- Undervalues blacks and other people of color, and their institutions - sees them as naturally less than others.

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