



RACIAL RECONCILIATION: Reconciling The Races Must Be Shared By All Of Us To Be Effective

· · · A STETSONROLLINS MONOGRAPH · · ·
Second 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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Racism has been a defining issue in the United States from the beginning, woven into its fabric, structures and institutions.

The broad definition for racism in last week's column suggests that racism is a grand collusion between whites and people of color to sustain the racial status quo. Sen. Barack Obama has called this a "racial stalemate."

I believe that racial reconciliation is a shared responsibility among us all.

This is because racism is more than biased whites in power who oppress blacks and other people of color. More broadly, racism, or colorism as some of us prefer to call it, is the commonly held belief in which blacks and other people of color, their communities, institutions and art forms are undervalued, while whites (people of European heritage), their communities, their institutions and their art forms are overvalued.

The idea that white or light skin is inherently better than brown or dark skin is a belief we all have taken in, through cultural conditioning, at some level. It is that pervasive in our culture.

Why do we continue to have such gross color-based disparities in Jacksonville?

There are two ways in which we collude to sustain the status quo: "White Privilege" and "Internalized Racism."

White privilege, as described by Peggy McIntosh in her widely acclaimed paper of the same title, involves the advantage that whites have in remaining oblivious to, or denying, the depth and scope of racism.

Many whites in Jacksonville are unaware of the depth of racial discrimination experienced by people of color, and of the hidden rage.

Impact on the victims

Internalized racism is the well-documented dynamic among blacks and other people of color in internalizing, or swallowing, the belief that lighter is better than darker...developing self-limiting attitudes and behaviors common in African-American life and, to an extent, among many Hispanic-Americans, Asian-Americans and other people of color.

Thomas Jefferson, author of the declaration that established our independence, once described his slaves this way: "In reason they are much inferior to whites."

Abraham Lincoln wrote: "There must be a position of superior and inferior and I as much as any other man am in favor of having the superior position assigned to the white race."

Racism has also been a significant part of Jacksonville's history, with slavery being legal here from 1821 to 1865.

The decimation of the Seminole nation on the Trail of Tears in the 1830s, and the fact that Jacksonville is named to honor President Andrew Jackson, author of the Indian Removal Act of 1830 which produced the Trail of Tears, further imbeds racism in the foundations of this city.

That Gov. Charlie Crist and the Florida Legislature recently apologized to African-Americans for slavery speaks volumes about how a racist past continues to influence our present.

Devaluation of a people because of skin color continues today as we continue to allow and accept conditions in many communities of color that would create outrage in white communities.

Imagine the outrage:

- If the murder rate in Ortega or Ponte Vedra reached the level of the murder rate in some communities of color;
- If one in 15 white youths between the ages of 18-25 was in prison;
- If 17.5 of every 1,000 white infants died before their first birthday;
- If whites' per capita income was 46 percent that of blacks.

The city would be in a crisis mode. Funding would be no problem. Leaders of the faith community, of nonprofits, of philanthropic organizations, of the business community and of government would suddenly mobilize.

Why haven't those conditions generated across-the-board outrage, and the political will to act, when some communities suffer the horrors of what one Jacksonville Community Council Inc. report called "Third World conditions?"

Focusing on racism provides a lens through which to view all human differences.

The nature of prejudice

This is not about guilt or blame, but about personal responsibility. Surveys suggest that most Americans want to see this problem solved. To do so, it is necessary to understand prejudice, the psychological process through which racism, and color-based thinking, is perpetuated.

Prejudice is the all-too human tendency to prejudge another human being in advance of really knowing him or her.

(continued...)

A classic example of these four dynamics in action is the genocide perpetrated against Jews during the Holocaust, and the slaying of 9 million people, 6 million of them Jews. Adolph Hitler convinced a willing German public to make gross judgments about Jews based on anti-Semitic stereotypes present in the culture.

Prejudice activates stereotypes that carry negative judgments about people who are “different.” Prejudicial thinking leads to behaviors we call “Isms” — racism, sexism, anti-Semitism, homophobia, ableism, ageism, classism, etc.

Prejudices operate in all directions.

The virulent words of the Rev. Jeremiah Wright expressed prejudices held by many blacks against whites. We all carry prejudices. Taking personal responsibility for recognizing them and working through them is the responsibility of each of us.

Power of the unconscious

My life partner, Shirley Stetson, and I have identified a fifth dynamic of prejudice, one that makes all the “Isms” even more insidious.

Clinical psychologists suggest that the human brain functions approximately 80-90 percent in our subconscious or unconscious minds.

This means that the prejudices are deeply buried under our consciousness. We simply are not fully aware of our prejudices.

There are many examples of how this works.

Here is one from the business world - a study by researchers at the University of Chicago and MIT in 2006.

Researchers sent thousands of fictitious resumes to large corporations. The resumes were all the same in terms of education, qualifications, experience.

The only differences were the names assigned to the fictitious applicants. Some sounded black (LaToya, Lakisha, Jamal); some sounded white (Brendan, Emily, Daniel).

The white-sounding resumes were twice as likely to be invited for a job interview as the black-sounding ones...in spite of their equal qualifications and experience.

If they're typical, many of the recruiters were supposed to be actively seeking qualified people of color. Their decisions came out of a largely unconscious reaction to names. The recruiters were both white and people of color. All discriminated against names that sounded black.

Color-based thinking is pervasive. As Bill Cosby and Alvin Poussaint suggest in their book *Come on People*, we all bear a responsibility for addressing the disparities that flow from it.

Next week: What's next - A growing consensus about how to address racism.

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What is prejudice?

The definition was developed in the 1940s by a team of psychologists led by Kenneth and Mamie Clark of New York City, along with the NAACP and the Anti-Defamation League.

Prejudice is defined by four main elements:

The reality of human differences: Color, gender, sexual identity, age, abilities, religion.

Our capacity for human judgment: We as a species have the ability to make conscious judgments about the world around us.

Power: The authority to enforce beliefs.

Free-floating stereotypes: The availability of preconceptions and assumptions that come from our cultural conditioning.

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