

Black Lives Matter

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T. S. Eliot wrote, “Home is where one starts from. As we grow older the world becomes stranger, the pattern more complicated of dead and living. Not the intense moment isolated, with no before and after, but a lifetime burning in every moment.”

It matters where we start from. We all begin somewhere, most of us with our parents and birth family. There is a vast body of knowledge based on this, in developmental psychology and psychotherapy. We look to our beginnings to understand our lives – who, what, and where we are today is inseparably connected with where we began.

I can see how that is true for me – now, even more than in years past, when I have a more mature understanding of myself. My parents’ character, their upbringings, their hopes and ideals, their flaws and failures, all combined as a basis for my developing self, my emerging character.

But today, as we celebrate the heroism of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., I want to take us back to the beginning of our American family. Let’s take a fresh look at that distant home, some five hundred years in the past, in hope of finding a new understanding of how we got the way we are, especially in regard to race relations.

There really are two home stories to consider here. The first is well-known and often told. It is the story of the 400,000 English immigrants who arrived in the 1600’s, and from other European countries over the following centuries. America had become a powerful symbol for Europeans: it represented freedom and opportunity, a chance to make a new start in life, unencumbered by the feudal systems of exploitation and oppression that had come to dominate the old world.

As the fever for freedom and opportunity spread, huge numbers of people continued to make the immigrant dream their own. There were 4.5 million Irish and 5 million Germans, among others during the mid-1800’s. At the turn of the twentieth century, America received more than 20 million immigrants from central, eastern, and southern Europe – including over 600,000 Italians and 2 million Jews.

You know the basic story. America is a nation of immigrants, plucky folk who risked everything for the chance to make a better life in a new world. Later immigrants found themselves in a land far different from the one they'd left – and also much transformed from the America of earlier centuries as exploration and development created a nation and culture that would have been unimaginable in those hardscrabble early years.

Sound familiar? Sure. This story is the birth of the American dream, the roots of a can-do people with the guts, grit, and determination to carve a new nation out of what they believed to be a wilderness. They built a nation of canals, railroads, farms, cities, and industry, growing from a ragtag bunch of subsistence colonies into the most powerful nation on earth.

But there was another story of immigration going on at the same time, another story of birth and beginnings, a very different home and a very different starting point. It is the story of Africans rounded up, captured, and imprisoned without cause. The story of the middle passage, of the 9.5 to 12 million souls chained in the holds of ships where a quarter of them would die from starvation and disease. Ships carrying them from their ancestral homes to be sold into slavery to owners indifferent to their humanity.

These slaves, these African-Americans did not arrive of their own volition or interest. They weren't building a new world or a better way of life. They were treated like beasts of burden, bought and sold, starved and beaten at the whims of their owners.

The institution of slavery that thrived for 250 years was followed by another hundred years of Jim Crow America – with both laws and customs that reinforced their inferior status.

These slaves, former slaves, and their descendents lived essentially without hope. They were witness to but not participants in the American dream. And if you think it can be dispiriting to miss out on the fruits of the American dream, can you imagine what it would be like to be completely barred from even thinking of making a better life?

The one thing that most embodied white culture was that you could expect that your actions could lead to an outcome you desired. The one thing most

characteristic of black culture was that you had no hope of being able to do anything that would lead to a better life.

This is why black lives matter. Sure, all lives matter, but black lives have been systematically devalued in our culture for 400 years. I saw one glaring example of how we often miss this point in a recent facebook post. It consisted of two pictures side by side. On the left was a photo of the twin towers after the attack on 9/11, smoke billowing skyward, with the words, "Never forget." On the right was a photo of a Black man hanging dead from a tree, with a group of white men standing around looking satisfied. The caption here was, "Get over it."

It's almost impossible for white Americans to really understand this Black perspective. I mean, we've all been in situations where our options were limited or constrained in ways that made us feel frustrated or stymied, but always in the context that those constraints weren't right or fair or just. Can you imagine living with your options permanently foreclosed, your actions nullified before they began? How many of your ancestors were lynched? How many of your relatives have been stopped and frisked, or whisked off to jail for a minor infraction?

What of the millions of Black Americans who were forced to accept living with a "can't do" attitude in a "can do" society? We have produced a Black subculture of people for whom the American dream is not a dream, for whom, as Langston Hughes, the great African-American poet of the Harlem Renaissance, wrote:

Let America be America again.
let it be the dream it used to be.
Let it be the pioneer on the plain
Seeking a home where he himself is free.

(America never was America to me.)

Let America be the dream the dreamers dreamed –
Let it be that great strong land of love
Where never kings connive nor tyrants scheme

That any man be crushed by one above.

(It never was America to me.)

O, let my land be a land where Liberty
Is crowned with no false patriotic wreath,
But opportunity is real, and life is free,
Equality is in the air we breathe.

(There's never been equality for me,
Nor freedom in this "homeland of the free.")

Building a nation on the backs of the enslaved has its costs. There are costs to those oppressed, costs we often overlook as we pursue our Yankee dream. These costs are real, deep and dark, but even in admitting them we overlook the costs to ourselves, to the souls of those who hold the power.

You see, there's a dark side to that "can do" attitude, to being able to assume that, when you do something, you can be reasonably sure of getting the results you want. We can get ensnared in doing things to get things. Life becomes an endless cycle of actions linked to outcomes with no possibility of relief.

You may wonder why I would suggest that we might consider relief from this cycle of actions and outcomes. Isn't that what life is, after all? Well, it is for us because we're trapped in that cycle. It's a trap because it's linked to an endless chain of desires and accomplishments that can block us from developing a deeper emotional maturity.

We're all born as need factories. We need food, we need nurture, we need protection, we need care. As those needs are satisfied, we discover more sophisticated needs to satisfy. We need careers, we need comfort, we need accomplishments of many kinds. We need to balance the budget. But, caught in those needs and the actions to satisfy them, we often overlook the possibility of a different developmental arc, that there are things in life more deeply fulfilling than satisfying our wants and needs.

You see, when you can assume that the measure of your actions is whether or not they produce the results you desire, there's a tendency to become trapped in that cycle of need, action, and outcome that has no clearly defined end point. This can give rise to feelings of meaninglessness and boredom when we've don't have anything to do. This cycle can tend to trivialize the meaning of our lives into the feeling that we are only what we can do and accomplish, rather than having any intrinsic sense of self worth.

In her book, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk*, Sharon Welch points out the down side to this. She points out that, she says, "Our moral and political imagination is shaped by an ethic of control, a construction of agency, responsibility, and goodness which assumes that it is possible to guarantee the efficacy of one's actions." She raises the question, "How do we discern . . . when those 'socially shared patterns' are themselves immoral, finely textured masks for perpetuating power, alienation, and control? To see the fundamental flaws in shared systems of values and behaviors requires difference, a thorough engagement with other communities, with other systems of knowing and acting."

She continues, pointing out that, "the problem is that what counts as 'responsible action' for the Euro-American middle class is predicated on an intrinsically immoral balance of power. We can assume that to be responsible means that one can ensure that the aim of one's action will be carried out. This understanding of responsible action leads to a striking paralysis of will when faced with complex problems."

Last week, I compared this addiction to effective action to the idea that when all you've got is a hammer, everything tends to look like a nail. When we define our responsible actions as those that achieve their intended results, we tend to approach problems with force. We actually believe in force because force works. Force makes things happen. So we look to the police to maintain order with the threat of force. We look to our military to enforce our global interests with the threat and the use of force. This inherent, though often invisible, preference for force is, as Welch says, "predicated on an intrinsically immoral balance of power." We get our way by being stronger than anyone else, which is to say that we prefer that intrinsically immoral balance of power over any other, more relational

approaches that could have been founded in understanding and respect rather than domination and control.

The difference I propose as a starting point comes from the perspective of the oppressed, those for whom it is and has been impossible to assume that their actions can lead to meaningful outcomes – from the enslaved, the powerless, and the oppressed among us.

A deep look at the African-American experience reveals that people who are deprived of a sense of agency, of being able to produce the results they long for through any kind of direct action can find other ways of finding dignity and fulfillment. Sharon Welsh describes this as the contrast between an ethic of control and an ethic of risk.

An ethic of risk is not based on specific achievable outcomes. It is rooted in a redefinition of what constitutes freedom, success or responsible action. Deprived of dignity and agency by the dominant culture, it “provides narratives of engaged goodness” without “heroic pretensions of certain triumph but a life-affirming refusal to submit to cynicism, alienation, and despair. . . .” We find “an ethic of celebration, a proud declaration that African American life cannot be reduced to victimization and oppression.”

This ethic is rooted in a fierce dedication to community, to accountability, and to deep respect for one another. When one is forced to accept that one’s actions are so constrained as to be devoid of hope, hope can still be found in the deepening of community, in love and connection.

The songs our choir sung this morning, songs rooted deep in the African-American experience, express longing for the release and relief of death and heavenly reward. This may seem like escapism from our dominant white perspective, but from the Black experience, it was and is critically important to find ways for communities to feel positive and hopeful with one another, and to share those positive and hopeful feelings openly and without judgment. This gives the potential of a deeper emotional maturity than an ethic of control offers.

Being able to assume that one’s actions will lead to their desired result is the very essence of white privilege. We grow intoxicated with effectiveness and blind to the fact that that effectiveness has its costs, that every winner creates a loser in our

system. When some of us wonder why America doesn't try some more positive, respectful approaches to international relations, the answer is here. Our way of looking at problems is intrinsically linked to violence. Sure, we could have saved money by feeding, clothing, and educating every person in Iraq, but that would have seemed foolish from the perspective of our ethic of control. Generosity and respect are empowering, not controlling.

And this brings us back to the costs of white privilege. It can prevent us from achieving the very good we desire in the world. And it can block us from the very real emotional maturity that gives rise to the greatest gifts in life, gifts not based on success or achievement but on deep, compassionate, trusting human relationships.

There was a time when I was puzzled that Jesus' gospel seemed to privilege the poor and the powerless. "Blessed are the poor, the meek, the merciful," and "It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of Heaven." The philosopher Nietzsche examined this trend and called the Judeo-Christian tradition a religion for the weak, a faith for losers.

But when we open our eyes to the costs of privilege, we realize that our very effectiveness and success can distract us from deeper relationships, values and experience. The poor and oppressed, lacking access to power, are forced to look in the only direction available to them: into their own hearts and the hearts of those with whom they are in community. And this, my friends, is the very gateway to the Kingdom of Heaven.

Black lives matter. They deserve respect more than fear. They deserve empowerment more than punishment. But they matter for another reason as well. Black lives can teach us where the American Dream has gone wrong and show us a way forward.

I hope we can find it together.

May it be so.