What's Your Dream?

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It's been a long journey for me. In climbing the mountain of racial understanding, I seem to move from plateau to plateau. And every time I reach a new plateau, a new understanding, it feels like I've reached the mountaintop.

It's amazing how resilient I can be. I've got what it takes to convince myself that every time I learn a new perspective, I've finally got everything figured out, once and for all. Even though I've been climbing a stairway paved with stones of understanding, each one both moving beyond while building upon the last, each new truth always seems to replace the old. And so every step along the way, with every new insight, I seem always to be ready and willing to speak from the perspective of someone who has it all figured out.

The first time I had I all figured out, back in my teens, the mountaintop upon which I took my stand was the knowledge that race was not my problem. Race just wasn't an issue for me – I had no prejudices. Growing up in the 1950's in Central New York, I don't think I ever saw a black person anywhere but on television until I was fourteen years old. Race was a problem in the South that had nothing to do with my life.

My first encounter with an African-American was on the high school wrestling team. My opponent from the inner city school was black. The only thing I remember wondering about was if his skin would feel different. It didn't. You see: no problem! At least, there was no problem for me.

But that didn't keep me from being an advocate for civil rights my whole life – protesting, singing, and sitting in. But I found the militarism of Black Power to be challenging. All that anger gave me my first taste of why there might be a reason to fear. And when we fear something, we've got a problem.

But then years of affirmative action and the rise of a black middle class seemed to prove that things could improve and that we could all live together in a Bill Cosby world where it didn't matter what color your obstetrician was.

I found myself feeling that the horrors of slavery and segregation were long past and that we should all just get over it, face the future together, do the best we can, and move on, already!

But that was before I went on a field trip to the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center, also known as the Underground Railroad museum.

I was shocked. I felt I'd known about slavery – you know, I thought that it had been pretty bad in some places, but many if not most were treated well and anyway, it was so long ago. I knew that segregation, discrimination and oppression had followed, but Brown vs. the Board of Education was over 50 years ago, and can't we just leave all that behind and face the future together?

But what I saw at the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center was far worse than I knew. I hadn't ever really thought about slavery as an industry, children as a cash crop, and marriage as a threat to stability. Even in the best of settings, female slaves were bred like cattle, often by their owners. Children were separated and sold as soon as was profitable. Any and all romantic liaisons among slaves were seen as a threat to the security and stability of the system. Family ties can be powerful motivators to resist the authority of one's owner. Whenever traces of family sentiment appeared, whenever bonds of love united an enslaved woman and man, they would be separated, and the man would usually be sold to prevent any further disruption to the system.

And then I saw the slave pen that was on display. They had relocated an entire barn that had been used as a way station in the slave trade. It would be too nice a word to call it housing. Slaves would be segregated by sex and packed, chained into a crowded pen where they might be held for months or more at a time, depending on the fluctuations in market value. I thought that the stories about the horrors of the middle passage as Africans were transported across the ocean were the worst of it. The slave pens were just as bad – worse, in some ways because one could be held for much longer without medical care, sanitation, and only minimal food. The slave pens were owned by businessmen who saw slaves as no more than animals and treated them accordingly. It was ghastly.

There are some things that you can't leave behind. I was shocked, stunned, and humbled. This kind of systematic abuse has long-term effects. You don't just

walk away from it. For more than two centuries a people were deprived of their ability to bond in romantic relationships, to love and raise their children, and care for their grandchildren. In the face of all this, it actually struck me as remarkable that things are as good as they are.

And the century of segregation that followed the official end of slavery didn't help things any. Jim Crow laws, lynching, and the terror of the Ku Klux Klan and others enforced a system of radical oppression intended to break the humanity of an entire class of people.

When we look at the African American community today and wonder at the lack of family stability, do we ever consider the effects that the slavery industry would have had on these people? I think we underestimate the long-term consequences of persistently abusive cultural norms. I think that when a black man leaves his family he is acting from a paradigm that was cruelly enforced for centuries.

Have you thanked your great-grandparents today? All this helped me to appreciate how much of my outlook and stability are derived from the many generations of stolid Finnish farmers on my mother's side whose quiet lifestyle and devotion to church and family shaped their heritage. My self-confidence and natural sense of freedom are the legacy of generations of American pioneers on my father's side. Human cultures are less plastic than we sometimes think. Our ancestors shape us because they shaped our parents. It's bad enough to be a child of divorce. What if you stood at the end of a long chain of forcefully broken families? Would you be able to fare much better?

Of course the growing black middle and upper class shows that it's possible for many to grow beyond their heritage – and that's a triumph of human nature with the help of civil rights and affirmative action. But there are many more who, like other groups, are more or less products of their history. Can we be so surprised that this shameful history would still have hurtful consequences today?

I can't be a racist, can I? I never participated in exploitation, segregation, or hatred. I've been an advocate of civil rights my whole life. Harold Dalton has described racism in a new way that gives me pause. He says, "One view – perhaps

the most common – centers on race-based animosity or disdain. Racism equals disliking others (or regarding them as inferior) because of their race. This . . . would be fine if psychic pain were all that mattered, but race-based antipathy can have material consequences as well. And those consequences are not distributed evenly in our racially stratified society. There is a real difference between being insulted and being clubbed; between hurt feelings and radically diminished economic opportunity. Many thoughtful social critics argue for a definition that takes such differences into account. In their view, the label "racism" is appropriate only when negative racial sentiments are put into action and result in serious disadvantage.

"Recently I have come to realize that there is a second flaw in the traditional approach to racism, one that survives even if we take consequences into account. And it is this: by treating antipathy as a necessary condition, we do not reach the behavior of people who have no malice in their hearts but nevertheless act in ways that create and reproduce racial hierarchy. That is why I embrace [the] . . . notion that racism consists of "culturally acceptable beliefs that defend social advantages that are based on race." Or to rephrase it slightly, racism consists of culturally acceptable ideas, beliefs, and attitudes that serve to sustain the racial pecking order."

Even we who have no malice in our hearts can benefit from a system that profits from injustice. We don't see it; don't notice it. I may not be a racist in the traditional sense, but I've benefited every day of my life from being from a middle-class white family. And even when you factor in class and income level, African-Americans are harassed, arrested, and imprisoned far more than any other group in America.

What can we do with all this? The multigenerational family systems of white Americans, no less than those of African-Americans, assume and support the status quo. Good will, in itself, doesn't seem to be enough. But we've done so much; we've come so far! What can ever be enough? The more you understand the pervasive persistence and pain of racism, the harder it is to imagine that we could ever fix things, the more we're tempted to sigh in despair. After all, as the Polish poet and satirist, Stanislaw J. Lee, wrote, "Each snowflake in an avalanche

pleads not guilty." But Martin Luther King, Jr. had a dream. He said that we could "hew a stone of hope out of a mountain of despair." He was not just a preacher and activist. Martin Luther King, Jr. was a gifted analyst of social patterns. He saw what we now see.

In our reading this morning, he gave us the tools to move forward. He said, "We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." But when we're safe and secure, it's hard to truly empathize with those who are not. As Michael Young said, "We are so easily seduced by what we wish were so; so easily blinded to that which we do not wish to know. The good things of life are so pleasant. In the striving to provide for ourselves it is so easy to forget or not to see the cost we impose on others. Distortions and preconceptions come so beautifully clothed, like an old shirt, seem to fit so well. It is so easy to find them ours without ever having been examined or chosen; whereas truth and empathy make such demands and trouble so our ease." King's single garment of destiny demands that we see through our own personal comfort zone.

When we do, we see things that we wish were otherwise, "There are some things in our social system to which all of us ought to be maladjusted." When we do see those things, it may seem righteous to be angry. But King says no, "Hatred and bitterness can never cure the disease of fear, only love can do that. We must evolve for all human conflict a method which rejects revenge, aggression, and retaliation." Good grief! Isn't our tradition one of righteous anger at social injustice? Didn't Unitarian activist Julia Ward Howe write the words to "The Battle Hymn of the Republic?"

But King rejects what many of us feel to be the backbone of our tradition. He says, "The foundation of such a method is love." Love that isn't just warm feelings, but such love as makes us vulnerable to experience the pain and suffering of others. That can be a hard kind of love to sustain. But King says that we must, "Before it is too late, we must narrow the gaping chasm between our proclamations of peace and our lowly deeds which precipitate and perpetuate war." He's not just talking about the military here; he's talking about the way we

conduct our everyday lives, our willingness to be hurt and angry in response to the behavior of others.

He says, “One day we must come to see that peace is not merely a distant goal that we seek but a means by which we arrive at that goal. We must pursue peaceful ends through peaceful means.” There is no way to peace. Peace is the way.

When we open our hearts as well as our minds to the suffering of others, we are called to action. Inaction is too painful to tolerate; we either act or close our hearts again to protect ourselves. We know that peace isn’t a feeling; it’s an activity that can take us out of our comfort zone. As Jim Wallis, prominent Christian advocate for social justice, author of *God’s Politics* and founder of *Sojourners* magazine, said, “Anyone can love peace, but Jesus didn’t say, ‘Blessed are the peace-lovers.’ He says ‘peacemakers.’ He is referring to a life vocation, not a hobby on the sidelines of life.”

Martin Luther King, Jr. had a dream that served as a beacon for social change in America. The lamp he lit is still burning, but it is not enough today. For too long, we have relied on his dream as our own. The time has come for a new dream, a vision of a world transformed by *our* care, a world where peace means understanding and justice means something more than punishment – where justice means that the weak are protected from the excesses of the powerful, where all can share freely in our heritage of freedom and responsibility. I have such a dream today. And I ask you, “What’s your dream?”