

PRACTICAL DO-ABLES FOR UNLEARNING RACISM

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As the dawn of the 21st century nears, racism, the most important and persistent social problem in America and in the world today, is on the rise in manifold ways. Whether we are talking about ethnic cleansings, tribal conflicts, warring factions, group hatred, subtle discrimination, or retraction of equity laws under the guise of fairness, the underlying result is the same. One group, threatened by a perceived loss of power, exercises social, economic, political, and religious muscle against the Other to retain privilege by restructuring for social advantage. Where lies the solution?

First of all, there is no biological basis for race. Biologically there are no human racial categories, only variations of one humanity. Biology exacerbates racism by providing physical markers, which separate us first in our minds. Out of these mental constructs come the social constructs that then separate us in society, and are undergirded by Power - the preservation of privilege! Both of these constructs, however, are merely surface issues, differences in one dimension. The problem with the usual approaches in diversity training to resolve racial, ethnic, gender conflict, is that the focus is on the surface container (race, skin color, gender) rather than on the contents of the container (deep-level value systems - how people think and act in terms of the world they are in). The result is a failure to recognize that racism and diversity function on two dimensions - Horizontal and Vertical. The Horizontal dimension is the surface level of human relations, the area where our differences - color, gender, status, language, physical features, culture, values, worldviews, and national origin - conflict. To focus on these surface differences, the what - the container - is to miss the larger picture, the Vertical dimension, the why and how of human action - the contents. This is the area of Belief Systems - the core values, conceptual schemes, and frameworks for beliefs and behaviors, from which emerge the surface differences. Ninety-five percent of all diversity training, workshops for unlearning racism, conflict resolution, motivational training, law enforcement, education, business management, and social policy planning focus on these surface differences, the Horizontal dimension. Yet our struggle is not with human types, but with deep-level human Value Systems, or memes - ideas that self-replicate like viruses and use the human mind as a host. These deep-level memes or belief systems are like migrating, bio-psycho-social-spiritual tectonic plates, that on colliding, release energy that reverberates to the surface in conflict over group differences and competition for scarce resources. The problem is not that we are White or Black, male or female, environmentalist or logger, First World or Third World, atheist or believer. It is the deep values within us that are at war. Since belief systems are deep decision systems in people, not types of people, they transcend race, gender, age, class, culture, and societies. Thus, a middle-class Black and a middle-class White may have more in common in terms of their values, beliefs, and socioeconomic status, than the same African American and a working class African American, whose only commonality may be their melanin.

Racism is a meme - a contagious idea - that leaps from mind to mind infecting individuals, organizations, entire cultures, and societies. And, like a deadly virus, it has contaminated all areas of life. What divides us in society, however, is not our genes, but our memes. We look different because of our genes; we think and act different because of our memes. So if racism is a meme and not a gene, how do we counter this infectious idea and social virus? By considering an

alternate course of action. Here are some practical suggestions that an individual or institution can do to lessen the problem of this social evil and sin in the world today.

An Alternate Course of Action:

How? First, a basic premise: Racism in its essence is the refusal to accept the Other as an equal. To do so, one will have to share in the societal rewards of social wealth, political power, and structural privilege. Thus, if racism has nothing to do with biology, but has everything to do with socially structured beliefs and behavior, then it can also be socially unlearned and unstructured. How people proceed, however, depends on how they see themselves when confronted with evil. There are four groups of people representing the four types of responses individuals and institutions can make in the face of evil.

1. Victimizers - the perpetrators of evil.
2. Victims - the recipients of evil.
3. Bystanders - the ones who do nothing in the face of evil.
4. Rescuers - the compassionate and altruistic who take action against evil.

The kind of action people take in a given situation will largely depend on how they interpret that situation, or in general view themselves. Thus, if people generally see themselves as Victimizers, rather than come to the help of someone they will be there to take advantage of a situation. Being a Victim, however, can have a paralyzing effect, creating a "victim mentality." When it comes to racism, people tend to respond on the basis of their own experience. Thus, people who have never experienced racism tend to downplay a situation of racism or discrimination because it has not greatly impacted them. People of color, on the other hand, if they have experienced discrimination, tend to view it as a more aggravated offense. It is a matter of, where you stand determines what you see. If people do not see a situation as threatening to them they may conclude that it is not threatening to others as well, and will remain as Bystanders, often because they see the social system as fair, "with liberty and justice for all." This is a result of the "Just World Phenomenon." Stanley Coren explains the concept this way:

People tend to feel that the world is, with a few bumps here and there, pretty much a fair place, where people generally get what they deserve and deserve what they get. This notion of a just world results from our training as children that good is rewarded and evil is punished. A natural conclusion can be drawn from that kind of reasoning: Those who are rewarded must be good, and those who suffer (even from our own discrimination and prejudice) must deserve their fate.

Unfortunately, much of what passes for racism in America today is not regarded as such by those who have never experienced racism, because they buy into this Just World Phenomenon. The result is that they tend to see situations from their own perspective - as fair and just - and seldom from the perspective of the Other, the victims of evil. If people of color see themselves as victims it is often believed they bring it on themselves or are making a bigger issue of things than there really is need for. The end result is that when it comes to racism in American society, most Americans "naturally" gravitate to the role of bystander and do nothing. So what can one do? How can one become a Rescuer?

Do-ables for Lessening Racism and Prejudice.
For Individuals - Personal Changes:

1. Examine closely your values and beliefs, and why you think, believe, and behave toward others as you do.
2. Do others who are different from you, either by culture or physical features, make you uncomfortable? Why? Probe deep into your psyche to discover the root causes.
3. Become informed about those groups or individuals with whom you have the greatest contact but about whom you know so little. Remember that one of the bases of prejudice is ignorance. Therefore, read, attend lectures, participate in workshops, view films that will provide correct information about others whom you desire to know better.
4. Seek to become "bicultural" - comfortable in more than one setting or with more than one group - with intercultural competence, a key factor for success in any field in the 21st century.
5. Take courses at a local college on diversity and human relations training.
6. "Live love" by setting an example to your friends, children, family, associates of non-prejudiced, non-discriminatory living, respect for, and acceptance of others.
7. Measure your words carefully before you speak with others, especially since what you may think is harmless may come across as insensitive. For example, just because Blacks and Latinos talk to each other in a certain manner, does not mean you have the right to do the same, for you may not totally understand what is behind the expression(s), nor what the expression means in the hands of an "outsider."
8. Become an "world citizen" - a transcending person who knows no cultural boundaries and who is able to transcend his/her own racial/ethnic, gender, cultural, and socio-political reality and identify with humankind throughout the world, and whose operating life-principle is compassion.
9. Always maintain a teachable spirit and the possibility that we can be wrong due to our ignorance and fears.
10. Make a commitment and act on it!

For Individuals - Assisting Others:

1. Do not conform to prejudiced people.
2. Do not accept prejudiced talk nor racist action. Speak up when you hear disparaging jokes or comments. Don't attack the person; rather discourage their talk or action, "I find such a statement [or action] personally offensive to me since it is demeaning of others."
3. Do not take a "holier-than-thou" attitude or a "self-righteous" behavior in your dealing with others.
4. Give good literature, recommend films, lectures, meetings to your friends and family.
5. If you hear your child making derogatory statements or using "trash-talk" about others, correct them or their friends immediately. For example. "Tyrone, they are not 'illegal aliens,' no one is 'illegal.' They are 'undocumented'; meaning they do not have the necessary papers to enter this country."
6. Write letters to newspapers and magazines giving your opinion on statements and actions that are demeaning of people and inconsistent with your values.
7. Write to TV sponsors and stations regarding offensive or commendable advertisements, programs, or depictions of groups.
8. Organize with others in your community or church to instill positive attitudes and actions toward

others and discourage negative ones.

9. Be careful of your political vote, and vote for laws, policies, and propositions that are honest endeavors to bring about justice for all, and are not simply political disguises to protect the interest of a small group.
10. Write and influence others to write to your political leaders, it does help.

For Institutions - Effecting Change:

1. For institutions to change, their culture, values, and ideology must change. Work toward this end.
2. Examine an institution's deep belief and values systems, and how are such values reflected in surface relations. The key here is not what people think and do, but why and how they do what they do. Work to understand this deeper level of thinking in people.
3. Move from first-order (horizontal) change - fine-tuning and adjusting the system with more of the same - to second-order (vertical) change - awakening in people the next of level of thinking and acting to create a process of continual growth.
4. Examine carefully your employ/membership policies. Do they reflect the diversity of the organization. Are they proactive or merely reactive, to avoid possible lawsuits.
5. Hold training seminars in intercultural competence: how to get to know people of other groups, even though they may be not be highly represented in your organization. But remember that facts or information alone about another group are not sufficient to change attitudes much less behavior.
6. Since class prejudice may be stronger than racial or religious prejudice, create activities that will enable people from various socioeconomic situations to mingle and interact together.
7. Since a high degree of self-acceptance correlates with a low degree of prejudice, address issues of self-acceptance, self-worth, pride in one's own racial/ethnic group as a positive basis of group relations. Jesus gave the operational principle here: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:39). I cannot love my neighbor if I do not love my self.
8. Put people to work and interact in interracial learning teams so as to develop positive attitudes and cross-ethnic friendships.
9. Since contact between groups by itself will not reduce prejudice, but only if the groups are of equal status and do not compete with one another, seek to create situations where groups can come together on an equal and non-competitive basis.
10. Make a commitment and act on it!

While racism is an evil and a social sin that will be hard to eradicate, due to the selfish propensities of human nature, the above steps taken individually and institutionally, can help reduce its impact on society and on others. Edmund Burke once declared: "The only thin necessary for evil to triumph is for good people to do nothing." We cannot take the role of bystanders, but must be rescuers if we are to go about creating a caring society. And thus, Max DePree's dictum of success for the 21st century serves as a challenge to us: "We cannot become what we need to be by remaining what we are."