

Living into God's Dream

Dismantling Racism in America

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What Must We Do to Inherit God's Dream of Community?

Howard Thurman provides us keen insights for taking personal responsibility and opportunities to combat racism. His analysis of hate beginning in situations of no contact and no sympathetic understanding focuses on the crisis of alienation. After becoming aware of who are our neighbors, we are faced with the question: How do we bridge the gap of alienation with our neighbors?

The opportunities to end racial alienation are available. Sometimes the opportunity involves volunteering for a community service program where people of a different race are present. Some of these people may be recipients of services to develop literacy skills, or exercise, or to cultivate home maintenance skills. Others who bring racial diversity into your life may be staff or volunteers themselves. Most important is the realization that bridging the racial divide is more than showing up and providing a service. What is needed is the commitment to give sufficient time to cultivate and sustain relationships, as Thurman says, of "sympathetic understanding." The heart given in vulnerability, trust, and caring must accompany whatever energies are spent to complete projects.

When the heart is offered in this way, presence with one another is not characterized by a server/recipient relationship. Instead, a mutual exchange of gifts occurs as the depths of hearts are offered and experienced.

Sometimes the opportunity to bridge racial alienation comes by way of invitation. What may seem like only a courtesy invitation into another's church, or social event, or lunchtime meal, or convalescent home could lead to the transforming experience of living in another's heart. This is one reason that invitations should never be received with the attitude that a "yes" or "no" is inconsequential. Invitations can be life altering for all involved.

Knowing this, how do you extend invitations to and accept invitations from persons of a different race? How do you envision inviting others to a meal or a special event in your life so that your heart expands as you hold dear their heritage and personal histories? What environments best enable persons to pursue a path of friendship?

One of the oldest meanings of the word "reconciliation" is "a place of meeting." This stresses that overcoming alienation requires coming together. If we are to deepen understanding so that processes

of reconciliation might begin, we must establish and come together in public and private places.

This emphasis on being present and interactive with one another reminds us that we cannot approach the overcoming alienation only by reading books or viewing documentaries about race and racism. When people have not had relationships with persons from another racial group, their understanding is impersonal. Knowledge about another is then formed through positive and negative impressions based on reports. The knowledge may be laudatory of another race; still it fails to capture a deeper knowing that comes from sustained interpersonal communication—a knowing that is fundamental to personal and systemic transformation.

Years ago I led a workshop on race relations at a local church. After my presentation, a White man stood to give his testimony about how his own racial consciousness was formed. He said: "I am so grateful that I had parents who taught me to be respectful of all people, and that I was not to think of myself as superior to others. As a White boy growing up in the South, they made certain that I valued and loved all people. And I can honestly say that I grew up through adolescence loving all Black people." He paused and continued, "Then I finally met a Black person." The room erupted in laughter immediately and continued throughout his ongoing description of the conflict that ensued in the relationship with this *first* Black man he met.

His "loving all Black people" was a feeling without the content of experience. Until his first meeting with a Black person, Black people were an abstraction. He had embraced the idea of loving Black people, but it was an emotion for the cardboard figures he had imagined Black people to be. Remote affirmation is not a credible substitute for experiences of relationship that hold the promise for in-depth understanding and authentic love.

Interracial relationships can run the spectrum of feelings that are found in all relationships. People of different races can be truly at home with one another and delight in the ease of conversations and readiness to care. People of different races can also be tense together with defenses up because of mistrust and perhaps even hostility from wounds suffered in previous interracial encounters. The song's refrain "the more we get together, the happier we'll be" is not true for many experiences of people crossing racial boundaries.

Churches committed to overcoming racism will need to be sensitive to the diverse experiences and feelings that may exist in an interracial

gathering. Some processes of coming together may flow easily as persons offer their histories and hopes. Other situations may require a skilled facilitator to help persons to speak and hear fears, anger, guilt, yearning, and other emotions from lives lived in interracial conflict and/or interracial alienation. Bridging the gap of racial alienation can be joyful and it can be painful. Sometimes the joy and the pain occur within the same people involved in crossing the racial divide.

What can be said with certainty is that cultivating creative race relations is a lifelong process. This is not a matter of completing what needs to be done in a series of workshops or Lenten study group sessions. There are no quick fixes. In fact, "fixing" race relations is not the goal. We do not fix one another. Every person has a depth of being and becoming that is dynamic. It should be honored. There may be dimensions of the person that require healing. But the notion of fixing someone or a relationship violates the very character of what it means to be human beings.

Correspondingly, racial reconciliation is not an outcome that marks the end to racial conflict. Racial issues are too dynamic, complex, and evolving to be fixed once and for all. I believe a more significant and accurate term for overcoming racial alienation is *being active in reconciling processes*. Being in the reconciling process places us in the relationships and places and times where faith, hope, and love abide. The reconciling process is a destination worthy of Christian commitment.

We Can Do This

Earlier, this chapter listed ways some people experience privilege from racism. Also true is the fact that everyone suffers from it. The byproducts of racism are toxic for an environment in which everyone breathes. Denied housing, jobs, and educational opportunities for generations, whole communities experience futility and its consequences of crime and despair. Law enforcement's too frequent harassment and violence against Black and Hispanic citizens have undermined the respect needed from all citizens for effective policing. Mass incarceration and the dehumanizing conditions of prisons have made the nation less safe for everyone. Racial alienation fuels stereotypes and mistrust that result in fear and hostility. We are all in this together.

Yes, everyone suffers the effects of racism. However, our greatest inspiration for personal and systemic change hopefully comes from anticipating the joy of living in God's dream of community. God

dreams of community where we love one another as neighbors with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind. Living as caring neighbors is not a reality beyond time and place. God calls us to live now into this dream for community.

The above-mentioned personal initiatives may seem inadequate to impact the complex and often impersonal institutions and systems that perpetuate racism. Again, I am not proposing *the plan* that will strike the deathblow to racism. Personal initiatives to overcome racial alienation, however, are essential for involving persons in dismantling racist policies, practices, and mindsets. We must never accept the conclusion that institutions and systems are beyond the capacity of individuals (personally and collectively) to change them. Such a conclusion is advanced to discourage efforts intent on social transformation. This is the defeatist conclusion of especially two types of persons: 1) those who are so benefiting from the status quo that they want to defend and perpetuate systems of the status quo; and 2) those who are so unnerved by the demands of long-term struggle that they declare defeat rather than enter the fray.

Institutions and systems are conceived and protected by individuals. They thrive and fail because of human involvement. And regardless of how slowly they seem to respond to human intervention, they are susceptible to being reconceived and changed by the determination of those whose vision inspires their ultimate commitments.

Perhaps the greatest challenge for effecting social change has less to do with the power of racist systems than it is about our refusal to significantly alter the priorities of our lives. To break from life rhythms dictated by careers, family obligations, and social circles that make heavy time and energy demands on us is a challenge. We are often captive to routines of association that were established earlier in life. We find it severely difficult to commit time to establish new cross-racial relationships even if we intellectually appreciate the vision of community that can emerge from such relationships. We feel trapped by responsibilities and routines that seem to prevent opportunities to form new relationships. Therefore, working on behalf of Beloved Community becomes a dream deferred.

Perhaps such a devotion to our habits, that also have a stranglehold on our spirits, led Howard Thurman to assert that *religion might be the only hope for a world torn apart by hate and violence*. When family obligations, tribal identities, and career demands provide ample justification to not venture into the added demands of interracial relationships, the

desire to submit to God's dream for us may enable us to escape the captivity of the familiar and risk establishing relationships that expand our hearts. With God, we always have a choice. God does not coerce us. We can capitulate to our fears and familiar habits. Or we can choose to live into God's dream of community. I pray that we choose wisely.