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Introduction

Catherine Meeks

How can African Americans and Whites build a foundation that will allow for honest and fruitful conversation? Is it possible to build enough trust between Blacks and Whites for authentic relationships to develop? What do White people need to consider who want to be conscious about racism and its role in the destruction of African American life in America? What do African Americans need to do now? How can our faith and spiritual journeys inform the work of dismantling racism?

These are some of the questions that frame the conversation being forged within this book. Each contributor is quite clear about the need for a different conversation on race in the twenty-first century than the one held in the twentieth century. But they are equally as clear about the difficulty in trying to discern what that conversation needs to encompass and the challenge surrounding the effort to bring Blacks and Whites together to engage one another in dialogue.

The loud cry that “this is not your mother’s civil rights movement” is not lost on us. We know that the times are different, but we know that there are threads in the current struggle that are not that different at all from the ones of the past. The deep need for authentic dialogue continues. Also, there is a need for overt resistance just as fifty years ago when so many courageous warrior men and women took to the streets. At the present time a major challenge offered to any who will dare to engage in active resistance seems to be when and how to enter into the liberation struggle.

Since much appears to have changed and many of the overt structures that made life almost unbearable for Black people are not around,

it is easy for Whites to argue that there is no longer a race problem. The song of a “postracial” America was an easy one to sing after the election of President Barack Obama. That notion lasted for a while as the media pundits and others used the term long enough for it to begin to sound as if we had arrived at some new level of freedom in America. But it did not take long for the reality of having a Black family in the White House to sink into the consciousness of many who believe that house is for Whites only and the old virulent racism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries came to the surface and declared itself alive and well.

There has been no time in the history of America when a president and his family have been treated as this president and his family. The racist comments that have been made about them and the insults to the office are clear evidence of how far we are from being a “postracial” country. The past can no longer take cover in unconsciousness. We have to wake up and realize that it is late and we are many miles from racial equality.

The eight of us who have come together to create this book, *Living into God's Dream: Dismantling Racism in America*, believe that it is possible to look into the mirror to see the truth about ourselves and that we can find the courage and strength to face that truth with the determination to create new and healing narratives about race. We have embraced this task from several perspectives. There are psychological, sociological, and theological threads woven together in this book through personal stories as well as the stories of others who are doing all that they can to forge a new path of genuine racial healing and freedom.

The lead chapter by Dr. Luther Smith calls into the notion that God has a dream for us to be a community and his chapter explores the nature of that dream, what hinders it, and some of the ways that we can begin to embrace it. Dr. Lerita Coleman Brown follows with an enthusiastic assertion that healing the minds of Blacks and Whites alike can lead to the possibility of cultivating the spirit. This is the work that must be done if there is to be true healing. I speak in two chapters about the reasons to continue the conversation on race and the pain that comes to Black parents when their children experience this country as a hard place in which to live because their skin happens not to be white. Don Mosley offers a brilliant analysis of White privilege and its dogged determination to hold him hostage from an early age to his awakening as a young man living and working outside of the United States as a Peace Corps volunteer.

Dr. Diane D'Souza chronicles three stories of groups of people who came together to work on dismantling racism. While these might be

viewed as small examples in some ways, they will give the reader courage as well as wonderful ideas about the ways in which the monstrous system of racism can be tackled by a small group of people who set their intention toward destroying it. Dr. Lynn Huber merges her passion and compassion for Palestinians and African Americans in her discussion of the ways that safe spaces can be conceived and built that will make it possible for the Beloved Community to evolve. Bishop Robert C. Wright follows this chapter with an insightful discussion of the ways in which the South is the Holy Land for America. The combination of Scripture, storytelling, and the lyrics of songs and poetry helps to engage the reader in this provocative discussion and illumine the complexities that surround all efforts to understand the southern ethos. Finally, the work which is being done by the Atlanta Episcopal Diocese Beloved Community: Commission for Dismantling Racism is described by Beth King and me. The Commission has evolved from a group of people who were holding rather unproductive monthly meetings and sponsoring dismantling racism training that many people in the diocese spent a fair amount of time thinking of ways to avoid into a highly functioning group. This inspiring story can help to encourage others who are doing similar work.

The major intention of this book is to offer a body of work that is both informative and practical. The chapters can lead the reader to deep reflection about their own journey through America as a White person or as a person of color. Since there is a possibility to read this book in many ways, the hope is that it will be a valuable tool for all who are attempting to have conversations on race and all who are actively seeking to promote racial healing and who are looking for racial justice to grow among us.

This book can be enjoyed by a single reader or a group ready to engage this subject through a diverse lens. It can be used in classrooms, workshops, and in multiple settings where there is an effort to create a dialogue while supporting the notion that this work is ongoing. The work of dismantling racism is most effective when engaged as spiritual formation. It is ongoing in the same way that keeping spiritual disciplines of prayer, silence, and Bible study might be embraced. It requires patience because it cannot be done in a short period of time. It does not matter whether one is orchestrating conversations on race or organizing direct action, it requires patience along with skill and a willingness to move beyond one's zones of comfort.

The eight contributors to this work are people who have spent a significant number of years working to heal ourselves and trying to help

others locate the places where healing can occur. We share faith and a commitment to be intentional about racial healing and all of us are clear about the need for all of this work to be located underneath the umbrella of faith and an unwavering commitment to seek healing.

This is a testament to the possibilities that can arrive on the shores of one's life when there is an openness and a willingness to step into the red sea of racism with a little faith and a deep determination to leave this world better than one found it. It makes it clear that the work is not simple, the issues are complicated, and the work, though difficult, is possible. The hope is that all who read this book will be inspired in all of the particular ways that are needed to help them advance the conversation on race and to find the necessary energy, courage, or new insights that can make it possible for them to work to change the racial narrative in America.

Many blessings to every reader.