

What does not exist...but is with us all the time?
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I have a riddle for you. What does not exist...but is with us all the time?

The answer is race. Science tells us there is no such thing as race, there is no biological markers for race, yet every one of us knows race is real; we know people of different races or at least recognize people as being of different races. We know race is an issue, sometimes, often a controversial issue. We know race is at the base of slavery, sometimes referred to as America's Original Sin.

Since it doesn't scientifically exist AND yet we all know it does....by definition, we have to realize we're dealing with a curious thing; something odd. At best, a powerful myth. At worst a horrible dream, even a nightmare.

But lets not panic, race is not the only thing in our culture that doesn't exist, yet gets treated as if it were real. We all know about Santa Claus. In many ways we cherish him—and it *is* always a HIM. Many of us adopt his persona each year---as we play Santa at the department store or secretly put presents under the tree. And then there's the Easter Bunny.

We as a people seem very good at making things up, then treating them as if they were real... with great commitment and determination. And while the details may change over time, the meanings we assign persists.

This dynamic exists within local communities, work sites and families. Once someone is labeled an SOB, or a liar, or, or, or, they tend to be treated that way for as long as we know them, as if there is nothing else about them that matters. It's as if, that's all they are...because we (with good reason of course) have decided it was so!

We need to accept the truth that we made up this thing called race. It is a social construct, not a biological reality. It is a construct that we, as a society, have ascribed particular meaning.

We also need to recognize the inherent truth in the statement "history is written by those who won the war". Those who won the war get to decide what's at the center, how things get defined, what's of value, what's proper, acceptable, what's good. And equally important, they decide what's of little value, little significance; what's bad, what's to be excluded, what's to be marginalized.

We do not know American history thru the eyes of Native Americans. We do not know American history thru the eyes of the Japanese who were interned by their own government. We as a nation have not been taught American history as experienced by slaves and the progeny of slaves.

Inherent in the meaning of race in America is always the notion of “them”. I say, “them” because when we talk about race, for the most part we are talking about black people and others who are perceived to have “race” ...native peoples, Asians, and Latinos...also known as People of Color.

You see, a foundational concept is that non-whites have what we call race. White people are just people...each an individual.

Now maybe, only those of us who are deemed to have “race” recognize this. But I suspect, upon reflection, every one of those known as white, at some point in their lives have said—or maybe only thought---“don’t label me, don’t lump me in with everyone else....I’m an individual!”.

I want you to trust me on this, white people can get pretty haughty about this “individual” thing. I’ve almost been cussed out for suggesting white people can be described as a group. They typically refuse to be treated as anything other than an individual,...seeing themselves as self-made, worked hard to “earn” everything they have; separate from the history of white America---those who wrote the founding documents, those who made the laws, interpreted and enforced the laws and established acceptable societal norms.

We learned so-called American history primarily through the eyes of white men, learned, land owning men...the same men (and their heirs), who did not consider women, white women, full citizens with the right to vote (they were mere appendages of men). The same men who negotiated to define African slaves to be three fifths of a human. In the constitution they didn’t use the term slave. Instead they used the euphemism “those bound to service for a term of years”, and excluding Indians, who would not be taxed.

Can you see the arch between then and now...the basis for the women’s suffrage and feminist movements; the civil rights and Black Lives matter movements???

Race in America was “born” out of slavery, before America was the United States. The first African slaves, 20 of them, were brought to Jamestown VA, on a Dutch ship in 1619. The numbers soared thereafter. Six to seven million African slaves were brought to the New World during the 18th century.

Slavery has never been uncommon in the world. It was a common practice in 17th century Europe to enslave defeated enemies. It was done in the American colonies as well. And there was another type of slave. One third of immigrants to these lands in 1776 came as indentured servants. They were not treated well.

A critical event occurred in Virginia, 1676, Bacon's Rebellion. A similar revolt occurred in Maryland that same year. Bacon and a thousand others, including white indentured servants and African slaves revolted against the governor. They were eventually put down but the alliance of poor whites and enslaved Africans frightened the elite.

Thereafter, slave codes were enacted in part to separate the blacks and poor whites...you know, divide and concur. In addition, race was used to bridge the gap between slaves as people and slaves as property. Blacks, both free and enslaved, became grouped together as an inferior people, non-Christian barbarians, seen as children, even animals. And they were deemed to be happy!

Each wave of immigrants were defined as "other", treated as different, less than, dangerous, scapegoated in the face of economic downturns. (Sound familiar???) But in large part, based on the pseudo-science of racial ordering...blacks at the bottom, native peoples in the middle and whites on top...a very important rubric was crossed.

At some point, each ethnic group became more and more accepted into normalcy. Overtime each group was allowed entry into the sacred category of white...the Irish, Poles, Italians, Jews, and now even Asians are almost accepted as white.

But not so the progeny of slaves and free blacks in this country; the black cowboys of the west and southwest, the farmers of the Midwest, the scientist and professors throughout the land, not even a president.

Serving their country during times of war, dying for their country was not enough to "earn" full citizenship in this country of ours. Each wave came back from war, defending their country, to less-than status.

Do you know how the term "Red-Lining" came into existence? After WWII, our government implemented the G.I. Bill. It provided benefits such as low-cost mortgages, loans to start a business, cash payments of tuition and living expenses to attend university and vocational education. The programs were directed by local, white officials; deliberately designed to accommodate Jim Crow. The government drew a red-line around black communities; labeled them high risk. Of the first 67,000 mortgages insured by the G.I. Bill, fewer than 100 were taken out by non-whites.

To this day, blacks, people of color and poor folks are forced into more expensive loans and mortgages—a direct follow-on to the government's red lining process.

Now imagine, against this country's well-crafted social construct of blacks as less than, hearing the well-intended statement, "I don't see color, I just see a person". Or, the factually accurate statement, "All Lives Matter".

Both statements sound hollow, even an affront to those of us who so often are seen in a negative light, and treated as if we don't really matter. We were 3/5 human in the founding documents of this country, we do not receive blind justice, our churches have been terrorized, voting rights have been abridged.

So now, when black folks --yet again—assert their inherent humanity, demand their inherent humanness be recognized... when they hold up a mirror to moral injustice...Now to be told no, no, no, don't say black lives matter, say all lives matter...it's enough to drive one to rage.

At what point will America have the courage to see the truth of the nation we've created? At what point will America, rit large, accept the truth of the depths of racism that is imbued in every institution, city, county and governmental operation?

At what point will America do what Germany did in confronting their very particular role in the holocaust? What South Africa did in confronting the horror of Apartheid with the Truth And Reconciliation Commission?

I sincerely believe this country will not, and can not, eradicate the significant vestiges of slavery until we engage with humility, and serious commitment to the truth, the issue of reparations for slaves and their progeny. In other words, does this country owe anything to a people we've allowed to be enslaved, terrorized, abused and demeaned for centuries?

Money talks. We need to put the issue of race and racism into terms of dollars and cents ---like King Cotton, the basis of its creation...in order for this capitalist culture to truly engage the significance of the issue.

What's at the center of our analysis and what's on the margins matters a great deal. The bigotry in our current presidential elections and the Black Lives Matter movement, may be paving the way for just such a conversation.

We who believe in the inherent worth and dignity of every person have been given an opportunity to test the depth of that belief. May we be up to the task.

Amen