

## Are We Living in a Post-Racial World, Yet?

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We live in a very special time right now. The election of President Obama has brought to this world a sense of transcendence and transformation that many never conceived as possible.

Our sense of possibility is in new territory. Having achieved the impossible possibility, many are asking does race still matter? Does the color of one's skin impact one's opportunities for success in the world? Has the time come when anyone can achieve anything? Though simple on the surface, these are complex questions.

There is a gentleman named Mark Ndesandjo, who most people have never heard of. He lives in Shenzhen, China, and has had a very successful career as an internet entrepreneur, social advocate, and musician. The reason you haven't heard of him is because he works tenaciously to avoid the spotlight. Ndesandjo is President Obama's half-brother. He doesn't want to call undue attention to himself.

In the last several years, I've been working tenaciously not to call undue attention to myself, also. It hasn't always been that way for me. There have been times (years!) when I was saturated in race issues. That is not to say that I'm over race. I may never get over it.

My earliest I memory of race distinctions takes me back to the 9<sup>th</sup> grade. That was when I became aware that being African American in America could mean being isolated and lonely.

But in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade, living in Columbus, GA, I was bussed across town to a majority white high school. Though most of my classes were inter-racial, my geometry class had only one black kid. Me!

This didn't become so obvious until one day we were asked to work in small groups or pairs. After the class paired off, I was left sitting by myself. I remember thinking, "this sucks!" I began to dread geometry class from that day forward. All I could think about was getting away from that school. This reminds me of a story.

*A youngster is quarrelling with his parents:*

*"I'm sick and tired of being with you all the time, coming home at the right time. I want freedom, beer, girls! I'm going away and don't try to stop me!"*

*He is decidedly going towards the door when his father begins coming up with him to the doorway.*

*"Daddy, I did tell you: don't try to stop me!"*

*"I'm not stopping you, son. I'm going away with you!"*

Well, I wanted my freedom, too. So, the next year I got away with my sister when I was transferred to a school in my neighborhood. It was at least 15 years before I experienced a direct confrontation with race, again. The next time, it happened in the workplace. That experience stuck with me. And for many years, I found myself thinking about race for a lot of the time.

It has been said that we become what we pay attention to. In fact, "psychologists estimate we have 60k to 70k thoughts a day, 99% of which are more or less what we thought yesterday."<sup>1</sup> The more I paid

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Pipher, "Stopping for Joshua Bell" *Psychotherapy Networker*, Mar/Apr 2009, 52.

attention to race and its impact on my life, the more I became angry. Another 10 years passed before I was able to let that anger go.

I believe that race is such a prominent part of our social landscape because our brains are programmed to make distinctions and identify differences. In fact, evolutionary biologists have evidence that we are hard-wired to make distinctions. Our brains automatically cause us to sort people into groups that look alike.

That is why we walk into a room of strangers at a party we immediately begin looking for people that we know. Not only is it comforting and anxiety-reducing, our minds quickly begin distinguishing between who we know and who we don't. Then, we gravitate to those we know. In most cases, that person will be of the same race that we are.

As persons of faith, we are not exempt from this process of hard-wiring. Instead, the teachings and experiences that we have during our faith journey are a part of our soft-wiring. Soft-wiring can become hard-wiring with enormous practice and repetition. Talking about loving God, neighbor, and country is not enough. To become loving takes a lot of work. We **must** pay attention and do the work. Soft-wiring is instinctually forgotten if we don't practice.

The Apostle Paul was on to this in letter to the Galatians. He was trying to get them to pay attention to the ways of the Spirit, not the flesh (as it's called in the Bible). In this case, the Galatians had been taught about the life in the Spirit. They had learned about redemption and that they were in right relationship by faith. But, again, this was all soft-wiring. They had reverted back to their natural instinct, which was to proclaim the Law. The Law stipulated that only Jews had a claim to God's redeeming love.

So, he issues a stiff rebuke that they pay attention, or remember, what they had been taught and what they had learned to practice. Through faith, they knew that God's promise of love was for everyone— Jews, Greeks, slaves, free, men and women. In other words, following their faith was the path to getting over distinctions. He warned them: don't go back to your instincts.

He asks the question, "Have you suffered (and learned) so much for *nothing*? Does God give you His spirit and work miracles because of the law or because you believe?"

This is really a call to remember who they are. Beyond that, he wants them to know they are all equal in God's sight...all heirs to the promise of God's love.

In our society, we have finally becoming aware and have accepted that we are all truly heir to the promises of the Constitution that all says people are created equal. With the election of our CC in Chief, we have a visible reminder of this reality that never before existed.

A time such as this is called *kairos* in the Bible, or a sacred time. The great theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr, would say we've accomplished an "impossible possibility."

Quite often when I see Pres. Obama on TV speaking to the press or to Congress, I get chills running down my spine. To me, Pres. Obama is the epitome of the American Dream. His lineage is both black and white, rich and poor, educated and uneducated, domestic and foreign, exotic and plainly American.

Furthermore, both major political parties have African American men as chairman. This is unprecedented. This is *kairos* time.

When we consider how far we've come in America politically, it's easy for us to feel we've conquered the distinctions of race and ethnicity. But have we?

But then, I read the latest sociology research. What an eye-opener that is! It shows that the poor are getting poorer. It shows that serious "systemic impediments"<sup>2</sup> in our social structure are alive and well. It shows that when most of us are in a recession, people of color are in a depression.

Modern attempts have been made to right the laws that affect equal opportunity in this country. In this scenario, people that advocate for the disinherited appeal to the courts to enforce laws that mandate fairness, equity, and compensate persons for years of discrimination and unequal treatment. But such legislation can only go so far. Companies must decide to do the right thing. They must decide that it's in their best interest to invest in communities in need of development and industrialization that generates employment and opportunity.

The key to this is that *we* are the companies. Each of us that work has an opportunity to impact the company we work for. Those of us who own or lead a business have a greater chance. Individually, we must make decisions that rely less on instinct and more on what we know.

We must continually come to grips with the reality that people are more than who our experience says they are. Our perceptions can be distorted. And the price we pay for living according to that distorted reality can be enormous. We can't judge people on how they look on the outside.

[Story about husband and wife]

The other side of this equation is that real differences exist. Morrison-Reed's text highlights the differences between Unitarian religion and black religion. This text is important for a couple of reasons. One, it is one of the few texts that offers true insight and wisdom regarding the ongoing tension between UU faith and persons of color outside of our movement. We often ask ourselves why aren't more minorities attracted to UU faith. Here is a book that really gets down to the brass tacks.

Morrison-Reed points out, and I concur, that black persons of faith need a faith community that consistently speaks to struggle of this world. Persons of color want reassurance that God knows them and is with them side-by-side in this life where things are not so heavenly. They identify with Jesus because he offers a concrete image of suffering. We just don't have those types of images in our faith. This distinction can leave persons of color puzzled about what we do.

Secondly, this text helped me understand my own faith journey more clearly. Laurel has told me on a number of occasions that people who come here need to understand metaphor. That is true. I believe that people need to be able to think of faith in the abstract terms. That is true. But, Morrison-Reed is much more specific about our differences. He cites personal realization, individual self-fulfillment, and self-actualization as UU values and salvation as a black religious value.

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<sup>2</sup> Richard T. Ford, "Why the Poor Stay Poor" (Review) *New York Times Book Review*, Sunday, March 8, 2009.

Put in these terms, the two worlds might seem like the “peaks of two eternities.” Such a perception, I believe returns us to irrational beliefs. We need a new vision of community and a new vision of faith that breaks down the walls and barriers of race and ethnicity and treats people without regard to what they look like.

So what can we do to bring about transformation given the distinctions we create and are called to navigate? First, we need to take Paul’s message seriously. As persons of faith, we can’t allow ourselves to fall back to our instincts. We *are* what we pay attention to. If we rely on our instincts, we continue to treat people as if race matters. Conversely, if we pay attention to the teachings of our faith, we can transcend race and treat people as if there are no distinctions.

What we practice, we get good at. In fact, research now tells us very clearly what distinguishes amateurs from the pros, or the experts. It’s the amount of time that people practice what they do. In order to become exceptional at what you do, you have to do two things.

First, you have to practice with intention. That means that you have to put in your time with the intention of becoming very good at it. If your intent is just to know how to do something or do it “good enough” that is what you’ll get. To become expert, you have to envision yourself being an authority of your craft.

Second, you have to practice a lot and consistently. Studies show that amateurs practice about 3 times a week for about an hour per sitting. Those who go on to be experts put in 3 hours a day almost 7 days a week. They become consumed with their craft.

Finally, there is a magic number. Everyone wants to know the magic formula. How do we open Pandora’s Box? Becoming an expert demands about 10k hours of practice! That’s about 20 hours a week every week for about 10 years.

I say all of this because I believe that it applies to how we become the people that we say we are. It’s not enough to just say that we are post-racial, we have practice being post-racial.

There’s a saying that if you’re not on the court, you’re not in the game. We have to put in the time on the court and off the court. To take the sports metaphor one step further, the basketball MVP, Kobe Bryant, says, “You have to practice like you play. The moves you see [him] do in the game are the exact same moves [he does] in the gym, over and over again.”<sup>3</sup>

To bring this home even closer, I encourage us all to pay close attention to the distinctions that we make. Once we distinguish a stranger, we must remember to act in ways of the Spirit. Go to that person and show interest in them as a human being with inherent worth. Pay attention to that and we will begin to construct a post-racial world in the here and now.

You see, several years ago I made a conscious decision about how I would deal with race relations in my own life. I had been serving as a chaplain at Methodist Hospital for a year. Well before my contract expired, I knew I needed to find my next position. My choices were work or PhD. You know the outcome of that decision, but you don’t know my process.

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<sup>3</sup> Kobe Bryant, “How to Improve Your Hoops Game” *Time* March 23, 2009, 71.

I had interviewed for a university dean position in Atlanta and felt certain that I had made a good impression. The interviews lasted an entire day and the feedback was all positive. However, I never heard from the school after I left. It was quite strange. Not even a rejection later came in the mail. I knew it couldn't be a race issue because the school was a historically black institution. Then, I heard of another woman who'd had a similar experience. So, I began asking myself how should I process this experience. What else could I make of it?

About that time, I learned about the 12 irrational beliefs that are at the source of our suffering. I began studying the irrational beliefs. First, I blew them off. Then, I said I need to look more closely. I then found my own irrational beliefs and identified the source of my anger. Almost immediately, I began to let them go. My anger and sense of victimhood almost immediately evaporated.

I tell that story because it is at the heart of how I had grown to understand race and the racism that I experienced as an adult. My parents didn't raise me to be prejudiced, but my life experience had taught me differently. Over time, I had grown to feel a furnace of anger in my belly. The prophet Jeremiah describes it as a "fire shut in my bones." My irrational beliefs were perpetuating that fire.

So I decided that I needed to be more adaptable to the everyday "reality of this world." I chose to act as if race were not a limiting factor in my life, and therefore, look inside myself for changes that I could make to might help me more relational. I also chose to expect that people will treat me as a person, not as a black person. This is still an ongoing process.

### **Galatians 3.24-29 (transcribed)**

In fact, the Law was our teacher. It was supposed to teach us until we had faith and were acceptable to God. But once a person has learned to have faith, there is no more need to have the Law as a teacher.

All of you are God's children because of your faith in God. Faith in God is what makes each of you equal with each other, whether you are a Jew or a Greek, a slave or a free person, a man or a woman. So if you belong to God, you are now part of Abraham's family, and you will be given what God has promised.

### **2 Corinthians 13.11**

Finally, brothers and sisters, rejoice! Strive for full restoration, encourage one another, be of one mind, live in peace. And the God of love and peace will be with you.

Greet one another with a holy kiss.

### **“Two American Faiths” from *Black Pioneers in a White Denomination* by Rev. Mark Morrison-Reed**

“...The Unitarian Universalist’s ‘orientation [is] towards competence rather than morality and stresses personal realization, individual self-fulfillment, and self-actualization.’ ...Salvation, a primary expectation of the disinherited, ‘comes close to being a disvalue for Unitarian Universalists.’

When we compare the dimensions of freedom in black religion and Unitarianism, we see that their order is reversed. Intellectual freedom dominates in liberal religion and holds only a limited, supportive role in black religion. Spiritual freedom is paramount in black religion, but leads to an ecstatic other-worldly escapism when it is not balanced by other concerns. Intellectual freedom, when it is overemphasized in Unitarianism, dissolves into dissociated intellectualism and esoteric escapism. In neither of these situations are the active qualities of the spiritual and the intellectual brought to bear upon the reality of this world.

...Finally, spirituality in both Unitarianism and black religion is manifested in a sense of connectedness. In black religion this connectedness is the source of integrity and involves a vertical connection to God and a horizontal link with community and family. In Unitarianism this connectedness is more immanent, and its end is to lift individuals from their separation from the world. Herein, the individual is freed from the sense of isolation that middle-class life generates.”