

Do I have the Faith to Overcome our Brokenness?

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So much has changed since the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was alive. Most significantly, Barack Obama is currently in office as the 44th President of the United States. One year ago his Inauguration marked a whole new chapter in the history of our nation. I watched the celebration on television with Peter and my Mom. Holding our month old baby, the significance of that moment was profound.

When I was a child, a poster hung in my elementary school classroom showing the United States Presidents. Perhaps you had a similar one growing up depicting all the American Presidents in chronological order with oval-shaped portraits in gold embossed frames with their dates of office below and names emblazoned above: Washington, Adams, Roosevelt, Kennedy. Now Obama's face appears alongside those white men. My daughter born in December of 2008 never lived in a world where a person of color could not hold the highest public office.

One year ago, seeing the crowd of people gathered in our nation's capital, young, old, and every shade of the human race, I felt liberated and energized. Liberated because a barrier had been lifted that until recently seemed insurmountable: a black man elected to serve as President. MLK's dream realized—a candidate “judged not by the color of [his] skin but by the content of [his] character”. I felt energized because here was the “soul force” that King described—diverse people united to make a difference.

The theme of the Inauguration was “Renewing America's promise,” a vision that underscored the new administration's commitment to restoring opportunity and possibility for all and re-establishing America's standing as a beacon of hope around the world. Even people who did not vote for Obama told me they felt moved by the number of people, especially young people who participated in the election. Instead of apathy, the average citizen felt change was possible.

A new book entitled, *Game Change*¹ has created quite a stir lately. The authors John Heillemann and Mark Halperin wrote about the inner workings of the 2008 Presidential campaign, the subtitle is *Obama and the Clintons, McCain and Palin, and the Race of a Lifetime*. As many of you are aware, this book has caused a lot of trouble for Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid. The controversy arises from one paragraph that recounts a private conversation. Here is that paragraph as it appears in *Game Change*:

Years later, Reid would claim that he was steadfastly neutral in the 2008 race; that he never chose sides between Barack (Obama) and Hillary (Clinton); that all he did was tell Obama that “he could be president,” that “the stars could align for him.” But at the time, in truth, his encouragement of Obama was unequivocal. He was wowed by Obama's oratorical gifts and believed that the country was ready to embrace a black presidential candidate, especially one such as Obama—a “light-skinned” African-

American “with no Negro dialect, unless he wanted to have one,” as he later put it privately.

In response to these statements, there have been calls for Senator Reid’s resignation and accusations of racism. There have been comparisons to then Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott’s comments in 2002 when he wished Senator Strom Thurmond a happy birthday and stated that the country might have been better off if the former segregationist had won his 1948 presidential bid. The suggestion that the country might have been a better place with racial segregation did lead to the downfall of Trent Lott’s leadership of the GOP.

Although this may further complicate Harry Reid’s already tough re-election bid in Nevada, it seems unlikely that Senator Reid will be forced to resign. He issued the following statement: “I sincerely apologize for offending any and all Americans, especially African-Americans for my improper comments.” President Obama has not only accepted the apology but downplayed the incident saying that Reid used “inartful language when trying to praise” him that he was not “mean-spirited”, and was in fact “a good man on the right side of history.”

Why do I bring up this political incident as a part of our religious service? I bring it up because it reveals the racial tension and inequality that still exists not far below the surface of our polite conversation. I actually agree with Senator Reid’s statement although I know it is not common to say such things publicly. As much as I and many other white Americans celebrated the victory of Senator Barack Obama, the fact that he was a light-skinned African-American and speaks with the eloquence of an Ivy League education made him a more readily acceptable candidate.

The reason Reid’s comments have caused such a stir is that they challenge the myth that I told earlier that at last Rev. King’s dream has been realized that the American people elected a candidate “judged not by the color of [his] skin but by the content of [his] character”.

Acknowledging that Obama is “light-skinned” is also to acknowledge that he is in fact half-black and half-white; the son of a black man from Kenya and a white woman from Kansas. He has been called “too black” by some and “not black enough” by others. One of the reasons that he is a compelling figure on the international stage is that he transcends boundaries born from diverse ancestry and having lived in different parts of the world.

Skin color is a sensitive subject—one that we avoid talking about even though it continues to influence the way we relate to one another. One African-American commentator on this story said that it is not so much “racism” but “colorism” that is the issue; a legacy of slavery when plantation owners gave preferential treatment to lighter skinned slaves. Even African Americans have been known to judge one another based on skin tone. This is a painful subject because advantages still exist for people with lighter skin.

Reid's use of the word "Negro" reveals his age. Ironically, the word "Negro" although many believe it is an ethnic slur will actually appear on the 2010 United States Census. Among the fifteen choices citizens are now given to identify race, "Negro", "Black" and "African-American" are three options. Census takers found that many older Americans still self-identify as "Negro".

This brings us to the subject of language. Although "Negro dialect" is certainly not a proper way to express it, there are many ways of speaking beyond the "standard American stage speech" that I was taught in voice class. As my husband Peter has gotten to know me over the years, he has been surprised by the unconventional expressions that sometimes come out of my mouth. Now he knows enough to ask, "Was that Yiddish or Portuguese?" There is a dialect that each one of us speaks which changes depending on the company that we keep and our audience. The fact that our President speaks in the most eloquent oratory certainly made him a more appealing candidate for me the same way that President Bush's Texas drawl made him a more appealing candidate for others despite his New England background and Ivy League education.

A great deal has changed since the era of Martin Luther King. My college years were different from the college years of Dan retold in this morning's readingⁱⁱ. During the late 1950's, his fraternity was exclusively white. Although Dan was the one who prompted his fraternity to pledge a black student, later he accepted the mandate from headquarters and his peers "to tell the black student member he would have to leave." As Thandeka highlights for us, the shame Dan that carries comes from not only rejecting the black member but also from feeling that was what he had to do in order to belong to his white brotherhood.

I went to college three decades later in the late 1980's. On the surface a great deal had changed. I attended the University of Michigan. As a freshman, I was assigned a black roommate from Detroit. Before the semester began, we exchanged letters and photographs. I imagined that we would become best friends. This was not the case. We did not connect at all. Although we shared a few meals together, soon we sat at separate tables in the cafeteria; she with her black friends and me with my white ones. My roommate went to bed early and spent weekends at home so by and large we politely co-existed in the same room.

We actually did not talk much at all. One day, while flipping through a fashion magazine, I pointed out to her a beautiful African American model. I think it may have actually been Tyra Banks. I thought I was cool showing my black roommate that I admired a black model. She said very little. That is until the next day when she said, quietly but with a great deal of hostility, "Do you remember that photo you showed me of a model who you said was 'soooo beautiful'? I wondered what do you see in her beauty? Do you realize that she is light-skinned? That her features are more European?" I was so stunned that my roommate was even talking to me let alone that I had upset her that I played dumb even though I knew perfectly well the picture she was referring to. I tried to play it off as no big deal like I was color-blind. "I don't remember. I must have just thought she was a beautiful woman, that's all."

In retrospect, it is no wonder that she never bothered talking to me. We came from different worlds. In my liberal white way, I refused to appreciate how different. This is not a story that I share with pride. It does not match my view of myself as a progressive person. I do not feel the same sense of shame as Dan but there is a sense of brokenness; a divide so deep that I do not know how to heal it.

In the words Robert Terry, “To be white in America is not to have to think about it.” How often do you think about your race? For some, it may be an essential part of your identity. For those who are Caucasian like me, how often do you think about being white?ⁱⁱⁱ Being white something is not something I talk about with other white people. I agree with Janet Helms that “White people are raised to be confused about their own color. While we are taught to be aware of the color of other peoples, polite white people do not mention color in public—especially their own.”

The reason that Reid’s comments have attracted so much attention, is not because he is racist, it is because he has named something that Americans do not speak about in polite society. How we look and how we speak continues to influence how we relate to one another. “Whiteness” is still the unspoken norm.

On the cover of Learning to Be White, there is a photo of a Caucasian family painting their peach skin with white paint. Thandeka asserts that “whiteness” is a construct that we learn and yet do not talk about. She challenges us to play the Race Game for a week. What is the Race Game? Whenever you talk about someone, actually name their race, even people who are white. I went to the movies with my white friend. There were eight white folks at the Worship Committee meeting on Wednesday morning. That white waitress at the Diner sure was nice.

As I tried this out myself this week, it felt really awkward and embarrassing. Why? Because although I often identify people of color, the predominance of white people in my world is assumed. It brought to my awareness the way that naming people of color as such also serves to define an aspect of their humanity that I have the luxury of ignoring as a white person.

I do not have to think about my race when I enter a store, buy a car, look for housing, work or apply for a loan. Even with the significant advances, it is important to recognize that the legacy of segregation and inequality is part of the structure of the country we live in today. The average white family has over 8 times the net worth of the median black family and the gap is even greater for Latinos. The conspiracy of silence, the inability to talk about race and acknowledge bias, makes it impossible to overturn the structures of inequality. If we pretend that we all have equal opportunities, so-called whites might think that people of color are not as smart or not as ambitious, when it is not a level-playing field.^{iv}

Advances have been made since the times of Martin Luther King. I invite you to join me in finding ways both subtle and bold to overcome our brokenness. This begins with the spiritual practice of acknowledging that skin-color and language affects how we

relate to one another. Let's dare to talk about these invisible barriers. Not only do we need to continue to work together to Renew the Promise of America, we need to acknowledge the legacy of slavery, segregation, and shame that we carry in our hearts. Only then will we be liberated from the walls of inequality and oppression that hold firm. White people will not fix people of color. We need to work toward greater understanding of the imbalance of power we enjoy. Only then will our brokenness be overcome first in our hearts.

Do you dare play the Race Game, even for one week, one day, over a single meal? I look forward to hearing your stories.

ⁱ John Heilemann & Mark Halperin, *Game Change: Obama and the Clintons, McCain and Palin, and the Race of a Lifetime*, HarperCollins, 2010.

ⁱⁱ Thandeka, *Learning to be White: Money, Race, and God in America*, NY: Continuum Publishing, 1999.

ⁱⁱⁱ Curriculum on Whiteness, Rev. Bill Gardner, UUA Allies for Racial Equity

^{iv} "Ten Things Everyone Should Know About Race," *RACE-The Power of Illusion* produced by CA Newsreel