ENDING RACISM IN AMERICA

Some Thoughts from a Personal, Cultural, and Institutional Perspective

ENDING RACISM IN AMERICA
Some Thoughts from a Personal, Cultural, and Institutional Perspective

How can we end racism? If we're going to ask and answer that question, we have to understand the ways in which racism exists and endures in our lives and society. For many people, myself included, it's normal and helpful to first try and understand racism on a personal level. How does our perception of our own race, or the race of others, affect how we act and how others act toward us on a daily basis? As we begin to understand how the social constructs of race affect our own little worlds, we can then move beyond the personal to examine how race is a part of the culture and society in which we live. How do we learn about the concept of race? How does the constant barrage of the messages that we see in the media teach us about others and about how we are expected to relate to one another? Why are differences judged as superior or inferior rather than being simply valued for their uniqueness? Finally, there is something that unless – and possibly even, if – you are a victim of racism, most people seldom think about, but it goes to the heart of racism in America. How does the social construction of race based on conformity to a dominant Anglo-Saxon worldview effect the institutional and power structures of our society? Are our systems so ingrained with built-in racism that we can't even see it? If that's the case, how can one person make a difference? By breaking racism down into these different levels – personal, cultural, institutional – it seems more manageable to begin to look for ways in which to bring racism to an end. It would be incredibly presumptuous of me to think I have the answers to the question "How can we end racism?" But, unless people are willing to discuss and address these seemingly insurmountable problems, we are guaranteed they will never be solved.

Making sense of these different facets of racism is tricky, though. As I grapple with these issues, I find myself looking at the world in a new way – and it is hard to find any absolutes. Nothing is "black and white" as it were. We can all spot active racism of the "in-your-face" Ku Klux Klan or White Supremacist type. But racism is often much more subtle, as when people accept "white privileges" they aren't even aware they're being offered (Tatum 1997:8). Or, when people start to believe false stereotypes about themselves or others. It is this more subtle, insidious form of passive racism that is harder to fight, because it is easier for all of us to deny it exists. I've just

begun to understand, as Beverly Tatum points out, that racism is not simply prejudice, although they are related and both need to be faced and addressed (Tatum 1997:7). Prejudice is judging someone or something based on incomplete or faulty information. While we often tend to think of racism on a personal or even cultural level – what we are often thinking of is prejudice. And, it is these untrue beliefs and associated judgments about others that have built the foundation of racism. But racism is more than mere prejudice. According to David Wellman, racism is " a system of advantages based on race." It requires power to act upon those advantages, and it is institutionalized (Tatum 1997:7). That is big stuff.

I think this is to some extent why some white people deny racism exists today. They look at the personal or cultural world in which they live, and they don't see or recognize people acting overtly racist against others – in large part because they have limited contact with African-Americans or other people of color. If there is no one to be racist against in someone's world, then they're not going to see racism, and so it makes it easier for people to believe it doesn't exist. But racism does exist in many forms for many people, both as victims and participants. It can be something as simple as hearing insulting racial jokes at work and not speaking out against them. Or it may be a failure to recognize or acknowledge the insidious effects on respect or self-esteem that rise from constantly seeing people of a particular race or ethnic group portrayed with disrespectful stereotypes in advertising or television or movies. Or it may be more blatant, as when someone is steered into less visible or responsible positions in a business environment simply because of his or her race. These are all forms of racism that exist today, and we often participate passively without understanding our role. Unless we see these things happening for ourselves – or more necessarily, to ourselves – it is very easy to believe they don't exist, in part because we don't want to believe they exist. Or we look at them as something other than a form of racism. For most people, to be called a racist is a horrible insult. Yet, unfortunately many of us may behave in racist ways or accept racist actions on the part of others or society as a whole – often without giving it a second thought.

To answer the question, "How can we end racism?" requires me to examine my own attitudes toward the concept of race within both my personal world and the larger context of the culture in which I live. Although I am Japanese and Italian, I feel, for the most part, that I've lived my life as "white," along with the often-unacknowledged

acceptance that brings. Looking back on my childhood, I do remember being called "Jap" by another kid and how much that hurt. I didn't think in terms of race at that point, though. All I knew was that I was being singled out as different – and that there was something wrong with that difference. It made me wish sometimes that my "slanted" eyes were shaped like the other kids' eyes. Being different meant losing acceptance, even in a small and isolated incident kind of way. What I understand now is that difference doesn't have to be a bad thing. If everyone were alike, how boring would that be? But it is the value that society ascribes to those differences that is at the root of racism. When we decide that one group of people – whether they are grouped together by race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, whatever – is superior or another is inferior instead of simply appreciating the value that these differences bring to our world, we split people apart instead of uniting them.

As I've grown older, I've found that race doesn't play a significant role in my life, partly because I don't physically look "typically" Asian, whatever that is, but also because being Japanese doesn't carry quite the stigma it once did in America. If my racial heritage is brought up now, I find that virtually everyone is complimentary. I realize how fortunate I am that reactions against the Japanese aren't the same as when my Dad and his family were taken from their home and placed in an internment camp during World War II. My Dad never spoke of those days, and I know very little of the racism he experienced. Now when people see my last name or I have to spell it for them, the most common reaction I receive is, "That's a pretty name. Is it Japanese?" If someone finds out my Mom was Italian and my Dad was Japanese, they usually say with a smile, "I bet that was interesting growing up."

So, in dealing with my own racial issues, I've come to enjoy having an unusual heritage. But how different my self-esteem would be if people looked down upon my parents' marriage and made my brother and I feel unacceptable because our parents were of different races. If I had constantly been made to worry about being ostracized or fighting for respect or acceptance. I would have learned to be ashamed instead of confident – and I may not have even realized it was happening to me. Until I began to put these thoughts about race down on paper, I didn't think about the fact that my confidence today in who I am comes in large part because I've received positive reinforcement from others that, for me at least, this bi-racial combination is acceptable to others. Although I've probably been aware of this at some level, it isn't something

I've put much thought into. Today, however, I realize that a great deal of what we think of as our own personal identity is actually created in reaction to what others tell us about ourselves. Turned around, this means that all of us can have a positive or negative on how others view themselves. Each of wields a lot of power over others, and we usually don't even realize it.

Power to shape identity also comes from the wider culture in which we find ourselves. When I was little, I went to an integrated grade school and junior high, the later during a turbulent time in American and Kansas City history – 1967 and 1968. I was thirteen years old when the KC School Board refused to let school out on the day of Martin Luther King's funeral as a sign of respect following his assassination. This led to rioting throughout the city and near our home. News coverage was frightening, and I'm sure slanted toward the white community's fears. At the time I didn't understand the years of pent-up frustration within the African-American community that led to the turmoil and violence – in part because that side was never presented well, if at all, in the media. The next year my family moved from our old neighborhood in Kansas City's integrated mid-town area to north of the river. White suburbia. My brother and I marveled that our new friends had never actually met a black person. We didn't know what the fuss was about – or why they seemed to be so concerned that black people might cross the river into their area! Of course, I didn't think about it at the time, but when you don't meet people of different races, or ethnic or economic backgrounds, it's difficult to form a true picture of them. When what you know about people comes from movies or television or advertising – or other forms of mass, popular culture – you begin to believe those viewpoints which often offer easy stereotypes and differences rather than looking for a deeper understanding and common ground.

As I look back on the stereotypes of African-Americans being portrayed in the media at the time – angry, militant – I can see how my friends who lived north of the river in a completely white neighborhood began to develop a distorted view of African-Americans. As the years went by my brother and I didn't meet any new black kids, and it became harder for us to remember friendships as well as the confusing and difficult times we had experienced. In the mid-1970s I went to college at the University of Missouri, but rarely associated with African-Americans or other ethnic groups. These groups existed, but I never made a conscious effort to join them. Segregation between different racial and ethnic groups was accepted – by others and by me. The parties I

attended, the bars I went to, the tables I sat at in the library were all quietly but neatly segregated, except for some of the black athletes who managed to walk within both worlds, at least to some degree.

If I gave this segregation a thought, it was only in passing – and never in terms that I myself was participating in a racist culture. If I'd been asked at the time, I wouldn't have thought that I wasn't hanging out with someone because of their race – it would just be because we had different friends, different interests, blah, blah, blah. And those differences might or might not be completely true. But I never would have realized at the time that the reason it might be true was because we had lived separate lives mainly because of the differences in our races. And even though I'm sure that in reality we did have many things in common, how were we to know if we never even sat down and talked with each other? Yet, how was that to happen? In the 1970s, it wasn't particularly common to see blacks and white mixing in popular culture. There was more black participation in the media and the images were less offensive than in the past, but that wasn't saying much. It was still not widespread, especially in the positive sense of seeing black and white people coming together with any kind of equal basis of respect or responsibility.

After college, I went to work in the media-related advertising industry where there are few African-Americans or any people of color. I didn't work on the creative side of the business, but through the years I found myself paying more attention to the cultural messages put forth by advertising. I became cynical about the way our racial, gender, and class identities were being manipulated to sell products that people didn't really need. I grew frustrated with the fact that the people who were creating these identities were generally white, and that those who held most of the power in the industry were white males. Without realizing it, I had begun to see gender bias and racism on a different level – as an institutional inclination to keep women and people of color from participating in the power structure not just within the advertising industry, but in business and politics in general.

While women are well-represented in advertising agencies as far as numbers, they hold few significant positions of power. But their lack of power is nothing compared to the miniscule numbers of blacks who work in the ad industry, especially in agencies of any size. I would hear, "we'd love to hire minorities, but we just don't receive any resumes." Why is that? Is it because blacks have been discouraged from

entering into advertising or journalism careers in college? Or because when they do apply at an agency, they don't seem to fit in the culture? Or once they're hired, do they find it difficult because they have no black mentors to show them the way? Or is it because advertising is a very chummy industry, and people tend to hire people they know, or friends of friends? And, if you don't have friends outside your racial or ethnic groups, well, that makes it hard for you to let minorities know that positions are available without a specific, directed effort. All or none of these factors might be responsible.

What happens in the advertising industry is mirrored in businesses – and educational, judicial and legislative structures – throughout the country. Without experience or connections, you can't get hired. And you can't get experience unless someone will hire you. And unless people believe you will fit into their pre-existing culture, it's difficult to make your way into a company at all, let alone into a position of power. America has always been a multicultural nation from the very beginning of its history, yet unfortunately, most of that history has been written – literally and figuratively – from an Anglo-Saxon, male point of view. While the word "diversity" has gained prominence in our culture as something to strive for – and while many gains have been made to embrace a more multi-cultural viewpoint of America – there is still a long way to go. In reality, discrimination based on socially constructed racial identities continues to exist throughout our society. As people become more sensitive to prejudice and racism on a personal level, they still often don't, or refuse to, see the system of privileges and barriers that exist through the nation's institutions – educational, business, political.

I'd like to believe that my exposure to and friendship with black kids, along with my own brief but self-conscious experiences with being different, have helped me be more conscious of accepting people for just being people. Am I being naïve? Sadly, I'm sure I am. Am I perfectly accepting of people who are different from me? Not completely. Am I more sensitive than some others are? Possibly. Yet, in the world in which I live now, I have very little opportunity to test myself and see if I'm as noble as I'd like to think I am. I live in an older, mostly white suburb of Johnson County, Kansas – almost a bad joke for being so incredibly white and conservative. Yet, I feel I have made some progress merely by enrolling and participating in this class on diversity. I am much more aware and conscious of how gender, race, and class are socially

constructed – and how those constructions have affected my life and how they effect others. I hope to continue to develop my newfound sense of responsibility and face and discuss some of the uncomfortable or hidden issues that I've managed to avoid in the past. I feel much more hopeful that I can contribute, in some small way, toward broadening people's understanding of what it means to be not just tolerant, but accepting and welcoming toward the differences between people in our world. Racism is everyone's problem. Mine, too.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Tatum, Beverly
  1997 "Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?" And
      Other Conversations About Race. New York: Basic Books, A Member of
      the Perseus Books Group.

TEN WAYS TO END RACISM
(or at least make a start)

1. LEARN WHAT RACISM IS
   - Have an open mind that you can learn something new
   - Take a class on diversity; encourage others to do the same
   - Talk to other people of other races or ethnic groups – and within your own about how race or ethnicity affects us… on a personal, cultural, or institutional level
   - Watch films depicting race and discuss with others
   - Read books and magazines and articles about racism and ethnicity
   - Watch the news or talk shows like Washington Week in Review
   - Make up your own mind; don't accept things at face value; be sure you have good information and synthesize it yourself

2. KNOW YOURSELF
   - Look at your life (where you've been, where you are now, where you want to go)
   - Look at your family and how it handles race and ethnicity for itself and others
   - Look and think about how you speak to others and about others
   - Understand your comfort zone; figure out where you are and where you want to be in terms of racial identity

3. GET TO KNOW OTHERS OF DIFFERENT RACES AND ETHNIC BACKGROUNDS
   - Realize differences exist, and learn to value them
   - Attend new ethnic events or events in areas you wouldn't normally think to participate; include others
   - Get out of your comfort zone; mentally, physically, emotionally
   - Be open, be honest – be willing to listen and to speak
   - Ask people of different racial or ethnic background to lunch, out to dinner, over to your house
   - Acknowledge and talk to people of different races or ethnic groups when you're out in public – at the store, at a ballgame, at a concert

4. TAKE A STAND & SPEAK OUT
   - Speak out at work and among your friends…
     …against racist language and racist actions (overt and passive)
     …about current events and issues in the news; bring racism into the discussion when   appropriate
     … in uncomfortable situations; don't hide
   - Help others understand the concept of white privilege
   - Work with young kids to help them be comfortable with race and ethnicity – to embrace differences and find common ground
   - Write stories or articles that highlight injustices – or solutions

- Create films; write articles; take pictures that inform and celebrate differences, as well as point out the things we all have in common

5. SPEAK WITH YOUR WALLET
   - Don't buy products from companies with racist policies if you're aware of them
   - Don't buy movie tickets or rent videos that promote racial stereotypes
   - Tell all your friends to do the same and why

6. BE ACTIVE IN YOUR COMMUNITY & IN OTHERS
   - Volunteer in a different neighborhood
   - If you volunteer with people in your own community, encourage them to volunteer with different groups in different neighborhoods
   - Set up programs between your neighborhood and another to work together
   - Work with neighborhood homes associations to set multiculturalism as a goal for the neighborhood; encourage different races to move into and stay within the community
   - Find people who are interested in overcoming racism; work with them
   - Look for people who aren't interested in overcoming racism; this is much harder, but it is important to communicate with them, too
   - Attend rallies in neighborhoods where you don't normally go

7. PARTICIPATE IN YOUR INDUSTRY ASSOCIATIONS
   - Work from within to encourage minority involvement in your company and industry
   - Monitor policies, practices, and procedures to ensure that cultural differences are accepted and encouraged
   - Foster communication at all levels within your industry; seminars, workshops, committees with the responsibility for understanding, achieving, and welcoming diversity

8. BECOME ACTIVE POLITICALLY
   - Read the paper and newsmagazines and Internet: learn about the issues and the candidates in depth
   - Volunteer for a local, regional or national campaign
   - Vote for candidates (legislators, judges) who reflect your beliefs
   - Encourage others to vote; work to make youth as interested in the power of voting for their Congressmen as they are in voting for the next American Idol
   - Write your Congressman about important issues

9. REAFFIRM AND CLARIFY AFFIRMATIVE ACTION PROGRAMS
   - Keep the focus on why the goal of diversity is in the best interests of a given organization (schools, businesses, government)
   - Show people that balancing the power structure with people of different backgrounds and experiences will enhance, not diminish ideas and creativity

- Work within your organization to encourage multiculturalism at every step; don't be silent; be sure policies are written and followed
- Establish clear, meaningful, targeted selection criteria: if an organization is truly interested in a multi-cultural environment, then multi-cultural experience should be part of the initial selection criteria (Tatum 1997:124-25)

10.   CREATE EDUCATIONAL CURRICULUMS THAT ADDRESS RACE
- develop grade school programs in which children of all races read books and watch films on racial issues – then discuss
- encourage individual and group writing or storytelling as a means of learning about other cultures, and learning how to discuss openly and safely
- institute diversity classes into junior high, high school, and colleges – and require that everyone take at least one, for credit
- encourage multicultural teachers; if not on staff (unfortunately), bring in people of other cultures to talk to kids, often and on a regular basis
- encourage discussions, not lectures

CINDY TSUTSUMI
University of Missouri – Kansas City
8 July 2003

ANTH 580: Diversity & You
Race, Class, and Gender
Dr. Tanya Price