

Looking into the Past, Living into the Future

Erika Volchan O'Conor

Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.
-Martin Luther King, Jr.

How do you pick up the tattered pieces of a society torn by hatred, distrust and fear? How do you weave the flag of a nation from fabric entwined with inequality and injustice? How do you stitch together the scars of the past?

The generation which witnessed, lived and led the modern American Civil Rights Movement was one which fought for and made change a reality. They took their fates into their own hands, made sacrifices for their principles, and realized many of the changes this country had been deprived of since its foundation. I have always been taught that one must understand and learn from one's history in order to avoid mistakes of the past and construct a better future. As Dr. Launey Roberts said of the need to struggle for social equality, "their ain't no after, it's still going on." Likewise, Reverend Danny Davis, in a fiery Sunday morning sermon, preached living "into the future and not into the past." As my generation faces the reality of a racist social structure which continues to choke our society, I turn to the wisdom of this generation, the generation which made change happen, for words of advice.

What I learned from speaking with the elders of Houston's Third Ward is to have respect and compassion for all and to never allow hope for change to slip out of one's grasp. While there is so much understandable hatred and mistrust between Blacks and Whites, emotions steeped in a fear of the unknown, Dr. Romanuel Washington taught me about having the strength and courage to forgive. "We love our enemy. If you hold onto hatred it will only hurt you," Washington said. I was amazed by their willingness to forgive and their eagerness to reach across lines of division rooted in fear of the unknown. They had a deep understanding of the fundamental humanity of all people. They taught me that one must use one's mind and words to fight injustice, that there are also times when action must be taken, but that one need not revert to violence when words can be one's greatest weapon.

We have been handed the tools needed to make social change a reality. The question now is whether or not we will use them, whether or not we have the courage to reach across boundaries, whether or not we will take up the struggle to embrace the humanity in each of us.

There are at least two approaches that must be taken to "solve" this racist problem. One is economic, the other is psychological. How should we address these two issues? Which is the cause and which is the consequence? The two are closely interlaced.

Take White flight for example. Sure, most Whites who move out of neighborhoods once Blacks start moving in are doing so because they are afraid that the cost of their property will drop, and not because they have a problem with the skin color of their new neighbors. Real estate companies take advantage of racism to profit. They feed off of it and encourage it.

Economics, however, can also have a positive effect on race relations. Take the desegregation of Houston, for instance. In fact, many consider Houston a model city for desegregation. Why did the desegregation of Houston happen so smoothly? Economics. Houston had long been a boom town which could stay afloat economically when the rest of the country was sinking. In the dawn of the Civil Rights movement, Houston had the oil industry, NASA and a new mega sports stadium to put it on the map. Houstonians did not want their city turning into another Birmingham. They did not want the bad press to hurt the city's financial prospects. At the same time, it was also a city that was not accustomed to seeing violent protests, unlike Chicago, Detroit, and San Francisco, cities where large labor union and political protests were common place. Therefore, in a move to protect the city's economic prospects, the city leaders, both White and Black, met together behind closed doors along with members of the press to craft a solution. Their decision was to immediately desegregate the entire city, but to do so without any publicity. One day the decision was made, and slowly and smoothly the people of the city caught on.

I question, however, whether Houston should be held up as a model of smooth integration. I wonder what the students of Texas Southern University, who led the sit-ins at Weingarten's and marched on the streets felt about the change. Yes, their goal of desegregating the city had been achieved, but had they gained the respect and recognition which they undoubtedly also sought? On the one hand, the peaceful means through which integration was achieved should be applauded, but on the other hand, perhaps it should not be? The city was integrated for economic not moral reasons. I believe this left many issues unaddressed.

I believe psychological racism must be addressed before economic racism. This needs to involve an increase in communication and interaction between Whites and Blacks. Both sides need to address their fear and anger in order to find peace and forgiveness, in order change this society and to forge a better future together. My hope is that this photo essay may serve as a spring board for continuing the conversations in which it was conception.