

RACISM

The Most Challenging Issue

I want you all to know that I am not necessary thrilled to present this subject. I don't consider myself an expert in race relations nor do I consider myself a blatant racist. I profess to believe in the "Unity of Mankind". I know that racism exists, in many forms, in our society. I know that it isn't right. But I don't have THE answer to cure this wicked disease. I know that I suffer from random periods of superiority syndrome. So, I don't what to talk about racism but I know as a Baja's I have to. Shoghi Effendi called this problem America's Most Challenging Issue. He didn't say world peace was, nor disarmament. He didn't say feeding the world nor caring for our environment was America's focal problem. I'm afraid he diagnosed our most serious illness as racism and prejudice. He clearly told us that racism is the one problem that will elevate this America to be the moral leader of the world or a hypocrisy that will lead to its downfall. It is the source of redemption or destruction for the American civilization. But I still don't want to talk about it.

I don't want to talk about it because I don't know how to solve it in myself let alone my society. It is a source of embarrassment to me. No, I am not a racist but I live in a racist society and as such I am infected by this sickness. I can say I believe in the oneness of humanity and I can work for it and yet in my soul, at times, erupts the air of superiority that is prejudice.

The new book "To Be One" by Nate Rutstein was the original motivation for this talk. It is a man's struggle with the pain of prejudice. It is a commentary on race relations in liberal America. It is a good book and I highly recommended it, if you're ready for it. Boy, oh, boy I was going to come here and lambaste you all, me too. Not that we go around in white sheets and burn crosses or beat up on those "others". That's just one extreme symptom of the disease of racism. For me it might be someone cuts me off while I'm driving, it happens to be someone of a darker complexion than I have. There's a word that comes in to my consciousness I don't have to say it out loud. It's there sometimes. It's Nigger. Picture a young man 15 or 16 in the late 60's. He's marching for open housing. He's wearing an NAACP sweatshirt. He's dedicated to fairness. He's 25 years older not much wiser and still a victim a racism. I don't think "Hey, you honky" if a white person cuts me off. But it wouldn't be any healthier if I did.

You know shame almost caused me to give up on this talk. I went around to some black Bahá'í's. I asked them for some comments. History of racism, root causes, prior efforts to address the sickness. I got plenty of nice white noise. But when I spoke with a dear friend, George Davis, he wouldn't let me get by with that jive. He said "Where are you in relationship to race?" "Why are you talking about racism?" I explained to him my symptoms of prejudice. I told him about Nate's book. He knew about it. And he focused me on Shoghi Effendi, The Advent of Divine Justice. He suggested that I not be too hard on us white folks because the sins of the father are not necessarily the sins of the son. Guilt and wallowing in it isn't the answer. Not that we don't have anything to be guilty

about, but that is not a social responsibility that is a spiritual one. I mean it is between me and my God. As Bahá'ís we all have our relationship to our God. Sometimes we need the help of each other to deal with our problems and help us to better our own relationship with our creator.

Prejudice can only be treated on an individual basis. It is an illness of the heart. Like an alcoholic or drug addict recognition of the problem is only the first step. Abstinence is the cure of the symptom of the disease not the cause. Robert Henderson, Secretary-General of the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States, said at the 1991 Green Lake conference that he as a young child always wanted to know the secrets of the Baha's Faith. He'd ask Hands of the Cause: "What are the secret keys in the Baha's Faith?" And they would tell him: "Love and unity, love and unity." He found their answer, at the time, very unrewarding. How can all the world's troubles be solved by something as simple as love and unity? Maybe I should rephrase my question as: Can the world's problems be caused by the lack of love and unity? This sounds too, simple to believe! But when Dr. Henderson spoke of the time when the rich man realizes that it is unjust for him to have so much when others have so little that he decides to give his excesses to the poor. That this love of justice; this unity of mankind is the spiritual answer to the economic question.

Well, that's sure simple I guess I'll just go around and love everybody, and talk about unity. Wait a minute I heard that somewhere before... love, love, unity, unity, fellowship, fellowship. Why isn't it that simple? Abdu'l-Bahá, the Exemplar, did just that. He did sacrifice most of what he had to help others. What keeps us from this?

As to the question of racism, what is the reason our society continues to encourage this enemy of unity? How do we begin to recognize for our society and ourselves the true costs of this ailment. Why is it so hard for me to rid my heart of distrust?

When I recall the advice my father gave me to my question, "What words of wisdom do you have for me?" my soul twists in anguish. His response was: "Never, trust a nigger!" I knew his words were not good advice but still I wonder at his pain. Around that time he saw his son wearing that NAACP sweatshirt. His advice may have been aimed at my rebellion but its there in a corner of my memory. Nigger is in my vocabulary. I recall my father, his friends, and others talking, joking, cursing. Not only in my family but also in society. I found it most strange though when I heard blacks referring to other blacks as niggers. The extent of this disease is devastating!

Bahá'ís must help each other to come to terms with their prejudice. Some of us discovered the faith on our own, and we come with our old world baggage. Becoming a Baha's is a first step on a life long journey. It does not immediately erase your life script. It's painful to admit a weakness especially a spiritual one. Everyone who's a Baha's knows prejudice is wrong. So how can you discuss this personality flaw? You're behind the eight ball before you begin. But I believe that the Baha's community must develop an atmosphere where we can strengthen each other thru a frank and open discussion that is

not a confession of sins. We have to develop a support system to teach, to listen, to love each other into health. Our Divine instructions, our societal remedy to cure the ills of mankind is spiritual. Our medicines are love, unity, concern, caring, courtesy, justice, and fellowship.

We must be doing something right, at least for me, because I keep showing up. But whenever I'm around a large group of Bahá'ís, for a period of time, like Green Lake Conference or Camp Bryon, I find myself asking myself, "Why are you a Bahá'í? Look at all these other good Bahá'ís. They don't have the problems, the spiritual flaws that you have. How can you go on calling yourself a Bahá'í?" Yeah, these thoughts pass and I feel better again. I understand them in reflection to mean that as a community we're not doing enough. I'm a member of the dominant society and if I feel this way, how must a member of the black race or my brother the Indian or our sister from South America feel. We are a diverse group with many needs and few resources, but thank God our guidance is a narrow and clear path, the plans of the Universal House of Justice. How often do I, we, listen to this divine guidance and act immediately, to complete the tasks of our God's Will?

What is Racism? Or Lets call a spade a spade (no pun intended)

What is Racism? Is it only overt attacks on minorities? Is it race-based jokes? Is it a suspicion that enters the room when a minority enters? Is it a social institution?

Racism is a setting apart through act or thought of you from another based on the fact of race. It could be an elevating or demoting of another but it's the fact of noticing a difference, feeling superior or inferior due to race.

I say to myself, I don't feel prejudiced or racist. I believe in the oneness of mankind. I see and support the progress of my black neighbors. I marched for open housing. I went to Washington and demonstrated my support. Yeah, social progress slowed in the seventies and retrogressed in the eighties and it's been awhile since I did something about race relations. But I'm not a racist but have I accepted it as the status quo?

Down deep, due to the fact that I have been raised in a society steeped in racism, I just fooling myself by believing I don't suffer from the disease that inflicts our institutions. For 200 years, a skilled physician has not treated our ailment. We have applied first aid but the disease won't cure itself if I ignore it or deny I suffer its symptoms. It can be likened to a child raised in a dysfunctional alcoholic family who says to him/her self: I choose not to drink, so I'm not affected by alcoholism! I don't suffer from alcohol behavior syndrome.

Racism is a cultural wound that doesn't heal. Someone is always picking at the scab. It festers, spreads its infection throughout the body politic. It is a sense of, an acceptance of, even an awareness of being different because of race. Honestly, can any

white person in the room say he or she is not better off in our society than his/her black brother or sister? Maybe, we don't feel it right but sadly, it is fact. Whites, as a class, have better educational opportunities, better acceptance, and overall vastly greater potential than a similar equipped black. Is it our fault we were born white? No! But we do benefit from it, because our society encourages racism. You can't spend your entire time fighting the majority. And after years of avoiding racist jokes, what good does it do? There's more today than yesterday. I can do what I can to help (see the superiority) my black brothers but I can't change the entire system (see the acceptance) myself. Blacks, Hispanics, Asians don't need a hand; they need a new society.

So, just what am I saying? Am I telling you it's a waste of time to fight racism? In a way, yes. We, Bahá'is have to build the new social order. Erect the institutions that celebrate diversity for its own sake.

We must learn the value of every culture and race and see how God has provided humanity a vast reserve of alternative choices to solve our seemingly impossible problems. If only we share as equals our stewardship of this planet with all its inhabitants.

As individuals, we each need to privately evaluate our perspective on the road to unity. And we need to share our hopes and fears about that which we are building. Our foundation is divinely sourced and solid. But we must each be sure and confident that our individual contributions are welcomed and needed. Unity is forged through the heat of love. We need to love each other. Just like `Abdu'l-Bahá said long ago, If the Bahá'í truly loved each other and were united the entire planet would have accepted the healing potion of Bahá'u'lláh and would be resolving all that ails human society.

My Questions

We are all flowers of one garden, but are roses better than daisies? Are Violets less useful than poppies? Does the gardener cherish the fragrance of lilacs more than the sweetness of the evergreen? In a society that is based on individuals and individual rights, based on greed, based on choice, how can we truly understand that there is no difference based on class but only on content?

A bunch of letters on a page in a book discriminate against those few shaped like a z because there "different" to the reader, like God and humanity, the story is not complete if any letter is not present and equal. So we know the worth of others, great, knowledge is a treatment but not the only treatment. What else can we do? What else must we do?

Is when my children say: "Get your cotton pickin' hands off my book!" a racist slur? How do we direct our children away from the trap of prejudice and racism?