

“Have We Overcome?”

a reflection
by Rev. Bill Gupton

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And so, America is engaged in its annual conversation about race. Perhaps like me, you’ve noticed that, every year at about this time, the racial rhetoric seems to get raised a notch, with everyone from Al Sharpton to Glenn Beck getting in on the action. Beginning with Martin Luther King weekend, and stretching through Black History Month in February, we Americans seem to perennially struggle with a difficult, awkward, and very emotional topic – the history of race relations, and the current state of race relations, in this country.

Last winter, it was newly appointed Attorney General Eric Holder, the first African-American to hold the nation’s highest law enforcement office, who upped the ante when he said in a speech at the Justice Department that “[Al]though [this] nation has proudly thought of itself as an ethnic melting pot – in [all] things racial, we have always been, and continue to be in too many ways – essentially a nation of *cowards*.”

That characterization – intentionally inflammatory, I suspect – proved, of course, to be quite controversial – as does virtually *anything* a public figure says about race in America. Which is precisely why I beg to differ – and strongly so – with African-American commentator John McWhorter, whom Forrest Brandt just quoted as making the case that the United States has entered a “post-racial” age. Would that it were so! But if our society were, in fact, “post-racial,” why are we still so sensitive – and so reticent – about all things having to *do* with race?

As Eric Holder put it in the next sentence of that quote – the sentence *after* he had gotten our collective attention, by calling us all cowards when it comes to race – “Though race-related issues continue to occupy a significant portion of our political discussion, and though there remain many unresolved racial issues in this nation ... average Americans simply do not *talk enough* with each other, about race.”

Which is why I want us to talk about race, today. Which is why I want *you* to ask yourself – and one another – “Have we overcome”? Have we *really* overcome? Are we, in fact, now living, Martin Luther King’s dream?

It is true that, here in 2010, America has not only an African-American Attorney General, but an African-American President. Certainly nowadays little black children, and little white children, *can*, and *do*, sit down together at the welcome table – at least, in some places in America – as equals. Yet there remain too many places where, and too many people who, still judge a person not by the content of their character, but by the color of their skin.

And in the modern world – have no doubt that what each and every one of us thinks, writes, or says, can be multiplied exponentially, through the internet, social networking, and the media. Consider the fact that Rush Limbaugh is broadcast on 600 radio stations in the United States, and an additional 400 radio stations abroad on the Armed Services Radio Network – and the fact that, each week, he has an estimated 15 to 40 *million* listeners. Consider that this past week, among the gems that fell from Limbaugh’s lips, was the charge that the Obama administration is “using Haiti to burnish their, shall we say, *credibility* with the black community, in the both light-skinned and dark-skinned black community.”

If that many *million* people heard him say those words, live – then probably twice that many heard his racist comment through social networking, the internet, or on news coverage in the media.

Has America moved into a post-racial age? I think not!

Consider that Pat Robertson – whose followers are not nearly as numerous as Limbaugh’s – was nevertheless all over the media this week, saying that the earthquake in Haiti was the result of a [quote] “deal with the Devil,” one that the island’s people made more than 200 years ago in order to throw off French imperialism. I find it interesting to note that – amid all the uproar Robertson’s cruel comment has caused – which has included such pushback, by the way, as a wonderful “Open Letter to Pat Robertson” from Satan himself that was printed in the Thursday edition of the Minneapolis Star-Tribune (check it out!) – I find it interesting to note that the underlying implication of what he said has gone largely unremarked: That this hemisphere’s only successful slave revolt, the only slave revolt that has led to the creation of an independent nation, was a “deal with the Devil.”

White preachers, of course, have been saying things like that for centuries. But the thing is – in the past, those kind of hateful, racist remarks usually fell on maybe a few dozen ears at a time. But here, in the 21st century – the influence of such despicable statements is multiplied exponentially, and they are heard by millions.

Is ours a post-racial age? I think not! For every self-righteously indignant black Harvard professor, there is also a racist, right-wing radio commentator. For every overblown “swimming club episode,” there is a so-called “deal with the devil.”

I’ve had people say to me that it’s just *too easy* to pick on the likes of Rush Limbaugh or Pat Robertson – that talking about them just grants them more credibility. But I say that what’s too easy – especially for open-minded, progressive people – is to *dismiss* the Limbaughs and Robertsons of the world out of hand. We do so at our own peril – and at the peril of all that we hold dear.

If we ignore, for example, the fact that those two men’s remarks were two of the top ten Google searches this past week – we leave ourselves unprepared to defend the dream of freedom and justice for all. If we let ourselves simply *hope* that change will come – change to the hearts of women and men who cannot yet see the content of a person’s character ... for the color of their skin – we will never overcome.

And so, I hardly think this Martin Luther King Sunday is the one, where we can declare “mission accomplished.” The noble dream has begun – but we have not yet reached the promised land.

As a case in point, I want to read for you some lines from a poem, written by a young man who holds a very special place in my heart. Jordan Argus is someone whose character I know to be both outstanding and upstanding, and whose skin color I know to be deep, dark ebony. He is among that rarest of breeds – an African-American who was raised Unitarian Universalist. It was my privilege to be Jordan’s minister as he went through both the Coming of Age and high school youth programs at the First Unitarian Church in Columbus.

Now in his late 20’s, Jordan was at the ordination ceremony of a colleague that I attended in Columbus last month. It was there that we reconnected – and that he shared with me his story. He’s now a corrections officer, working to help rehabilitate black, urban youth who have run afoul of the law. He is a powerful motivational speaker – he was invited, as I was, to speak at the ordination – but I have to say, I think he’s an even more powerful poet.

I realize I won’t do his hip-hop, slam poetry, justice with my reading – but I want you to hear a few selected lines from the title poem of his newly published book, “Stockholm Syndrome.” (By the way, you will recall that the so-called “Stockholm Syndrome” describes the tendency of a person or group of persons who have been held captive or prisoner for an extended period of time, to lose their own identity – and ultimately, to identify with, and justify the actions of, their captors).

From “Stockholm Syndrome”:

The weapons have changed, but the war still rages.

[They] still use bars – now made with spirits, not metal – and zip codes, to keep us in cages.

“Never forget!” – the great American catchphrase. Is that nine-eleven, for [white] Americans – or when 9-1-1 is called on black ones – ’cause that gets instant action!

But what happens when the niggers beckon? Response, is delayed...

Diallo’s killers still walk the beat, getting paid off ordinance allowances. Morbid counsel instructs youth to endure injustice – and for the sake of tomorrow – play possum...

Never forget you were *owned* once – ’cause they don’t. And power doesn’t submit lightly. Don’t be naïve; there *is* no noble concede. No bull, you should read – the acts of Congress. Twenty-two years ago they gave 20K, to the living Japanese, who braved the camps in the Second World War... Why them? Why then? Why then did FEMA, turn its aid into loans – my people pulverized...

Never forget to measure progress by “how many *fears*” ago. Seventy-seven hundred hate crimes, reported in the U.S. in 2006 – does that ignite you?... Or are you so beaten down, you can’t even hear...

Never forget – healing is always an option!

I tell ya, folks – it does ignite me. It ignites me that twice as many blacks as non-blacks, live in poverty, in America. It ignites me that a black child born today is, statistically, more likely to go to *jail*, than to college. It ignites me that the life expectancy of a young black man is seven years less than that of any other demographic group. It ignites me that *anyone* could know those facts, and say we are in a post-racial society.

It ignites me, too, that a soul as sensitive and beautiful as Jordan’s, has witnessed so much pain and violence, in such a short lifetime. It ignites me that he can never forget that his people were once considered *less* than people.

There’s another line in Jordan’s poem – “accept, that there will *always* be something there...” Yes, the wounds of slavery run deep. The degradation of segregation runs deep. The lynchings of unnamed and unknown blacks, and the assassination of the man who dared to call for justice to roll like a mighty stream, are still too fresh in our memories, for *us* to dare claim, that we are a post-racial society.

Yet somehow, the human spirit aspires to such a world. “Healing, is an option.” “The noble dream, has begun.” A little more than a year ago, 69 million Americans voted for an African-American to be President of the United States. Such a figure was unthinkable when I grew up; it was unthinkable, in truth, just a few years ago.

So yes, the noble dream *has* begun. Barack Obama has, as the title of the book declares, changed the game. Yet we must never forget – we must never forget that, for now, the game *itself* remains rigged – the playing field tilted in favor of people who look like you and me, and against people who look like Jordan Argus. Though we have come a long way, we have not yet overcome.

But deep in my heart, I do believe, the day will come, when we shall. The generation of Americans that is growing up today, already is – and will continue to be – more color-blind, and less color-sensitive, than was mine. Every bit of evidence points to the fact that the generation coming of age today, pays little or no attention to most of the categories and dividing lines that have defined American life for most of *our* lifetimes: race, sexual orientation, religion, gender – these categories are beginning to blur, for our children – and that bodes well, for the future.

Have we overcome? Not just yet. But my friends – we’re getting there. Slowly but surely, in fits and in starts, with great strides, and great backslides – we’re getting there. We’re getting ever closer, to the dream. And I do believe, we shall overcome, someday...

May it be so. Amen!