

The Brutal Denial of Our Humanity

In 2011, I was facilitating a “Dismantling Racism” workshop for a group of county employees when one of my co-facilitators, Shannon (not her real name), shared a painful story. At the time, Shannon was studying for her family therapy license and was passionate about racial justice. Her background made what she shared very compelling: Shannon was driving home from work, tired. She came to a stop light, and a young Latina woman pulled up next to her driving a new BMW. The first thought that came to Shannon’s mind was, *How can **she** be driving a car like that?* Shannon caught herself questioning the Latina’s equal entitlement to owning a BMW. Devastated, she pulled over to the side of the road and wept profusely.

Shannon’s presumption of superiority over people of color was more a part of her being than she realized. In the scope of the workshop, we defined “denial” as the failure to question our most basic assumptions about our identity. We discussed how denial perpetuates a lie and often results in crucial missed opportunities to face facts, become self-aware and evolve. Shannon had thought of herself as socially tolerant and progressive, but in sharing her story with the workshop participants, she confessed that her superior attitude over non-Whites denied their humanity and that this amounted to an act of brutality.

I have read several commentaries about the most recent high-profile acts of violence against Black people in this country; none of them ventures far beyond the primary question: *What can we do to stop the ongoing, rampant brutality against Blacks and other people of color?* I suggest that a more fundamental question needing immediate, rigorous analysis followed by massive action is: *How have racism and widespread racial disparities persisted in this country, despite over 50 years of passing legislation and creating policies designed to undo those disparities?*

In the United States, people of color have never been equal to Whites. This outrage is America’s operational truth. Only a fundamental, even if unconscious, embrace of White superiority by the dominant culture could tolerate, for more than *four centuries*, the strategic ripping of babies from their mothers’ arms and the wanton raping, beating, lynching, kidnapping, and strangulation of Blacks and all non-white hues considered to be the “inferior” ones.

No reasonable argument or horrific video has yet persuaded enough White people to respond to racism as if they were on the receiving end of America's racial oppression. Even with changes in law and policing tactics, the brutality has remained virtually unchanged since the police shot and killed Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri.¹ I suggest that the reason is not simply racist cops; rather, too many Whites harbor deep within themselves a denial that people of color are their equals.

Ending American racism, therefore, can never be achieved through new laws, planning commissions or even community investment. This major feat will be accomplished only when a sufficient number of individual minds and hearts of the dominant culture – Whites -- are open to undergoing an intense self-awareness that leads to altering how they fundamentally see themselves and Americans of darker skin.

While I am heartened that the younger generation seems to profess a greater intolerance for racism than do those over 40, the moral intolerance of a thing is still a long way from its eradication. If you are White, whatever your age, know that our nation will become non-racist when your heart redefines America as equally inclusive of Blacks and every other skin color. Any level of denial of this equality is excruciating. It is the border wall. It stands guard at every prison and detention center. It works hard to cover up the truth every time a police officer maims or murders a Black person. *It is killing us.*

Resources abound for Whites who are ready to move beyond external acts, who understand that, for example, writing to a district attorney about an act of police brutality will not stop the killing. I offer one excellent resource for those who are willing to look at the historical context of racism and how it has played out in this country.



The Long Shadow is a compelling documentary film by Frances Causey, a White woman who grew up in the early '60's South in a family steeped in its privilege. The film provides critical historical information and skillfully lays out the long-term impact of slavery and the institutional oppression and violence against African Americans for 400 years. You can watch the film and access more information at:

<http://thelongshadowfilm.com/>

If you are moved by this film, you will find at your fingertips numerous additional resources to support dismantling the denial of the full humanity of people of color in this country.

Can we end the madness of racism in this country? That depends on whether White Americans immediately and boldly decide to see themselves in the light of truth.

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¹<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/28/opinion/minneapolis-police-brutality.html>