

The Biggest Lie

“Ms. Durham, which one came first, the computer mouse or the real mouse?” Shocked, I saw genuine bewilderment in the 11th grader’s eyes. I was in the process of tutoring small groups of high school juniors and seniors in reading and writing as preparation for the Ohio Graduation Test; this 16-year-old’s sincere struggle to distinguish the origin of a mouse from a computer accessory is one of the most jarring confrontations with our society’s failures that I’ve ever experienced.

I remember teaching a lesson on the concept of “origin,” during my three years at the high school, as I knew that the dreaded graduation test would require my students to answer questions relating to word origins. I held up a box of raisins: “What is the *origin* of a raisin?” I asked. Of the 35 students I met with that day, none of them knew that raisins were originally grapes.

What is the origin of . . . ? is a question that goes largely unasked (or unanswered) in everyday conversation. Our eyes and minds are often focused only on what’s clearly detectable in front of us, such that the depths of an issue – its underlying causes, fundamental relationships, and the various dynamics at play – are rarely explored. In failing to go deep and make crucial connections with today’s most pressing issues, we risk following in the footsteps of the students I tutored.

As our nation finally begins to acknowledge some of the horrific realities of systemic racism impacting every aspect of American life, we must dig deeper. The root of racism and all other inequalities is our failure to expose and dismantle a single, pervasive lie: *We are separate*. We insist on seeing ourselves as disconnected from the Earth, distant from all her plant and animal species, and independent from each other. While we generally understand that we have a genetic connection to other human beings through DNA, moving beyond this scientific fact to embrace our vital connection to all people, to every living species and to the Earth itself is necessary to establish a non-racist society.

“A lot of people don’t realize it, but one-third of every bite that you take is dependent on honeybees.”¹ Ted McFall, a beekeeper in Washington state, suffered the loss of over 1000 honeybees overnight, killed by a deadly species of hornet dubbed the “Murder Hornet.” Interviewed on *The Daily* podcast of *The New York Times*, Ted lamented the inevitable spread of the deadly hornet unless drastic measures are taken to contain it. In describing the consequences of losing our honeybees, Ted simply, yet eloquently lays out our essential connection to nature: “If you like apples, well, guess what? A honeybee pollinated that. If you like nuts, well, guess what? A bee pollinated that. If you like avocados, a bee pollinated that. There is so much that our bees pollinate. Actually, [they even] help pollinate alfalfa, which helps feed livestock. Bees do so much for us that if the bees find themselves in trouble, then humanity will find itself in trouble.”

Robin Wall Kimmerer is a botanist and professor of environmental biology at the State University of New York. She is also a member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation and a founding member of the Center for Native Peoples. “I can’t think of a single scientific study in the last few decades that has demonstrated that plants or animals are dumber than we think . . . What we’re revealing is the fact that they have the capacity to learn, to have memory, and we’re at the edge of a wonderful revolution and really understanding the sentience of other beings.”²

In March, 2018, *National Geographic*, published the article, “There’s No Scientific Basis for Race – It’s a Made-Up Label.”³ The piece reveals one of the basic truths derived from genetics: “. . . all humans are very closely related.”³ The thoroughly intriguing article makes one of its most compelling statements in starkly plain language: “Science today tells us that the visible differences between peoples are accidents of history. They reflect how our ancestors dealt with sun exposure, and not much else.”³

I recognize the lie of separation when I see it, and my heart leaps at the reality of our close connection to each other and to all of nature. And yet, I still hold the lie because it’s what I know best. I have decided to reclaim what I knew *first*, instinctively, before being corrupted by society into accepting the lie. So, how do we as open-minded, compassionate, and progressive people, expunge the lie of separation? I

believe we must challenge our own perspectives and belief system by asking: *Do I believe that my quality of life depends on the condition of the Earth, its many species, and its ecosystems? Am I connected to all other human beings such that differences in skin color, place of birth, religion and culture reflect the diversity of a single human race -- or should humans be grouped and classified and our differences used as our primary identifiers?* By maintaining keen awareness of our thoughts, conversations and behavior, and by constantly reminding ourselves – through study and engaging in activities that bring us into direct contact with Earth’s species and diverse human cultures – we will begin to walk in the truth of our connection.

Coming to grips with the lie of separation is not just an intellectual exercise, it’s a matter of the heart. I’m hoping that the doors to many people’s hearts have flung wide open during the weeks following the murder of George Floyd, that many more people are wrestling with the notion of separation, and that enough of us are now motivated to dig up and eradicate the biggest lie.

¹<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/08/podcasts/the-daily/murder-giant-hornets-bees.html>

²“The Intelligence in All Kinds of Life” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2YuB1iU6DQI>

³<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/magazine/2018/04/race-genetics-science-africa/>

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