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OPINION

Race Matters: The Narrative Continues

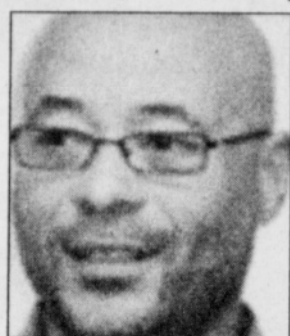
Viewing the world differently

BY THE REV. BENTLEY DE BARDELABEN

More than two months have passed since the shooting of unarmed teen Michael Brown in Ferguson, Mo., and no indictment has been issued against Officer Darren Wilson despite testimony before a grand jury. During this period there has been elevated talk of race matters populating all media platforms.

For some, the volatile subject of race and racism has become nothing more than white noise to be ignored. For others, it may finally be the opening needed to achieve a deeper understanding of the sociological, economical pathology which underlie the issue.

While for many there is a palpable sense of déjà vu - it just feels like another



day in North America where the media exploits a hot button issue, peddling fear to sell papers, catch eyeballs, and/or improve ratings. Regardless of where one falls it is abundantly clear that a healthy discussion on race matters is much needed. But who can lead this national conversation? How can we begin?

Recently PBS' Point of View series televised a provocative series titled, "The Whiteness Project: Inside the White Caucasian Box." It offers rare, bold, brave, and insightful perspectives.

According to their website, "The Whiteness Project is a multiplatform investigation into how Americans who identify as "white" experience their ethnicity." While my experiences, teachings, and cultural lenses are radically different to those persons featured, this program is worthy of viewing by all.

In one of many snippets shown, a male doctor discusses his views. He asserts that "color means absolutely nothing" to

him, all people are "human beings", and "discrimination is nonsense because we are all equal." In a word, he declares himself to be "colorblind." Each segment ends with a statistic. The one following the aforementioned doctor's segment reads, "73 percent of whites believe blacks should receive 'no special favors' to overcome inequality."

In another segment, a woman who labels herself as "friendly" discusses "black men in general." She shares that we are "very beautiful people." However, it is clear her experiences have trained her to fear African American men. She further states that her "smile is not an invitation to follow [her] home." The stat following her piece declares, "More than 40 percent of white Americans say 'many' or 'almost all' black men are violent."

There are several vignettes shared and each provides a hearty starting point for a conversation on race. The takeaways range from "I have never

come across anything that made me aware of my race" to "I don't get the 'white person' treatment" to "because slavery happened, does that mean we owe black people something?"

This documentary clearly underscores the reality that people of color and whites view the world through vastly different lenses.

The United Church of Christ developed a "Sacred Conversation on Race" tool kit to help further the dialogue in our congregations. While the first step is often the hardest, the learning gleaned could greatly advance the debate (and perhaps even our society). At least, that is my hope.

For additional information visit: ucc.org/sacred-conversation and whitenessproject.org/checkbox.

The Rev. Bentley de Bardelaben is executive for administration and communications for the United Church of Christ's Justice and Witness Ministries.

Loving My Late Brother and His Flaws

Understanding the human experience

BY JILL RICHARDSON

My brother would have turned 29 the other day. Thus begins the season of difficult anniversaries.

Six years ago, my baby bro turned 23. It was 2008, a week before Barack Obama's first presidential election. Hope and change were in the air. I had a new job and a new car, and life was good.

Then, just a few weeks later, all the hope died. But boy, did I get some change.

Through a misunderstanding, a distant cousin gave me the news. It felt like an eternity as the words came out of his mouth. "I have bad news," he said. "It's your family."

"Not my brother," I thought.

"It's your brother."

"Not dead," I thought.

"He died."

And that was it. No explanation why, nothing. I called my mother and got little more information. She couldn't reach him

for several days and finally they sent the landlord to check on him and, well...he'd already been dead several days. That was all they knew.

I found out the cause of death years later — something that respectable people in the upper-

middle class suburb where I grow up "just don't do." So we don't talk about it.

My little brother Adam was my best friend in the world. He was my only sibling. While we were different in so many ways, in other ways we were like one soul in two bodies.

My brother was no saint. He had a heart of gold, but in the years before his death he suffered failures and disappointment. At age 22, he told the family that he suffered from anxiety and he sought treatment for it. But two decades of anxiety aren't cured quickly.

Most of his difficulties in life probably stemmed from his severe anxiety, but nobody realized that until the end. And in America, when you fail, it's your fault. Bad grades? Work harder. Too fat? Eat less and work out,

you lazy bum.

Adam was the smartest person I ever knew. He had no plausible deniability that any bad grades were because of a lack of intelligence. This kid sat home and read Faulkner and Shakespeare for fun during high school. Who does that? So the label that stuck on my brother — at least in his own mind — was lazy.

I'm not blaming my family here. These are messages our culture sends us and we internalize them. One generation passes them on to the next. We mistake our grades and our salaries for our self worth instead of measuring our lives in joy and love.

After Adam died, I sat at the computer writing his eulogy. I process my thoughts by writing, and only by writing could I begin to thaw my numb emotions. I didn't even know what I was feeling until I saw the words I had written on the page:

"If you've been close to Adam these past few years, you know that life dealt him a few curveballs. He struggled at times, but he was a fighter. It challenged each of us to try and help him move ahead while simulta-

neously accepting his limitations and helping him accept them too.

I am sorry for all of the anguish these problems caused him, but I want to say this: I would not wish away Adam's shortcomings. They made him who he was, and that is the brother I love.

Please, in honor of Adam, love the important people in your life not in spite of their flaws but

because of them. Shame is toxic. Empathy and love are the cure.

Our flaws cause us pain, but they also make us who we are. By overcoming them, we grow stronger and deepen our understanding of the human experience.

OtherWords columnist Jill Richardson is the author of *Recipe for America: Why Our Food System Is Broken and What We Can Do to Fix It*.



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