

Oregon Legislature: Poor Grades on Race

On the anniversary of what would've been the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King's birthday, a coalition of seven local community groups issued a report card on how well Oregon's Legislative Assembly did in moving our state toward racial equity. Equity is like justice. Like fairness.

The evaluation is called Facing Race, 2011 Legislative Report Card on Racial Equity. And it addresses our two legislative chambers' 2011 performance within the current context of many of Oregon's racially unjust public institutions. In short, how fair were our elected state leaders? According to the Legislative Report Card: Oregon's Senate scored a C. Our House of Representatives got a D.

In the weeks following the report's publication we heard plenty of commentary. Some thoughtful, some not, but every bit of it essential in moving forward our American instincts for justice, for fairness.

But listen – because race is an

GUEST COLUMNIST

Renault Catalani

emotional menace and a sociological mire for both of Oregon's legislative chambers, for both competing parties, for both our urban and rural populations, for both America's mainstream and our many ethnic minority streams – let me approach the 2011 Legislative Report Card in simpler terms. In talking story-style.

Never mind for the next minutes our issues with race. Forget our efforts at equity. Focus for now on grades.

When we were kids, not one of our mother's four sons could bring home a C. As for the letter D, it was not in her household's alphabet. Not in her children's names. Not one of her magnetic fridge letters.

Today, her standard still rules over her third American generation. The threat: "I'm telling Oma (about your grades)" sent exactly the same spine-straightening jolt

into her eight grandchildren as it now sends into her 10 great grandchildren. Same standard. Same currency.

I talk about this particular traditional elder because that's where Old Worlders and New Americans go when crazy complexity happens on our chaotic new continent. Please lend me another 600 words to set out two lean reasons why dropping back into old-school analysis works, especially in uncertain times.

1. When average is awful

We came to the United States with hearts wide open, even if our eyes were not. That changed about a year after settling into Salem. America's only mahatma, the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was murdered, and America went into riot. Then, President John F. Kennedy's handsome little brother Bobby, the one who cried unashamedly after he walked haltingly out of that Southern Black family's humble home — was also shot dead. Also before our eyes.

Our eyes all went to Momma. She didn't blink. We looked at our

pop. He didn't breathe.

The next morning, without a word on what just happened, our mother made up her mind about her sons' minds. She would not let her boys tumble into it. She would tolerate none of it. Not ever.

Our mom got practical. No negotiation. No backtalk. Her American dreaming would not fail because America was getting an F. Not one of her boys could bring home a D (Poor). An average or passing grade (C) would never do. Not if "average" meant being at level with all that awfulness. Tidak. Not in her house.

Accordingly, us just doing good (B) would never be enough momentum to overcome our country's startling meanness. By our mom's scorecard, only A-grades would do. By her reasoning, only by being excellent would her FOBby boys not fall into that abyss. Only A's could make her kids, her kids' kids, and their kids' kids a place we could all proudly call home.

2. When the news is not new

For four decades, our expanding

American family has done as Oma expected. During those same decades our national and local leaders have tried and tried to pull our public institutions out of their racialized ruts. Deep and unjust ruts. Deep as River Columbia's Gorge and just as sure to determine the course of our mainstream, unless elected lawmakers mind and measure our habitual bigotry as carefully and consistently as our mother guides all those she's responsible for generation after generation.

When average is awful, a passing grade is an approval of awful. Don't like the Report Card's science or the reporters' politics? – Contribute to the work, let's get ready for our next legislative assembly.

By now, the disparities between black and brown and white, in income and in wealth, in schooling and in housing, in jobs and in political leadership, should be old news. The research has been done. And done again. It's an old rut.

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Let's teach it strong

Fighting and violence are only justified when we are defending somebody who is being hurt or if we must defend ourselves against an oppressive force determined to hurt us. At no other point is it justified. All other aspects of the fight have no bearing on the choice these young people made to hurt the young lady in question.

We sell video games that depict what we see on this video, we constantly show people movies that contain this type of behavior, we don't teach people why such behavior is wrong, evil, and non-productive, we don't teach people why and how they are to love one another and care for one another, and then we wonder why these kids did what they did.

They should be punished and by the way, NO, they don't deserve 18 months in jail for it. The American system is off when it comes

to crime and punishment but that's another topic. I grew up in another country where we took care of our fights, we got wooped at home for fighting, the churches taught us to be gentle and kind, and we grew up with a sense of respect. If jail is what is necessary to fix this, all of us would have gone there for fighting and many of us would have so scarred from the experience we would have had a bad life.

Preachers, let's stand up, let's teach it strong, let's call it out, let's teach our young people what it means to be decent human beings, and of course the only real way that works is to teach them the Gospel by our words and by our actions.

This is the only answer but as long as we have preachers who dance and sing on Sunday morning, who go to bed with choir members, who steal the church money, who talk about angels and not about the demons walking around with sagging pants, we will continue to have a society on its way down ever so much more close to the animal kingdom.

As long as we teach our children they are evolved animals, they will continue to grow more towards the manifestation of such animalistic behavior. We are the

only created being made in the image of God. Let's teach it and then watch our societies improve. No amount of social engineering is going to work as long as secular

humanism teaches people to just follow their urges.

*Evangelist Rico Kaplan
Kingston, Jamaica*

Letters to the Editor

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