

What Really Matters?

I have lived in Minneapolis, Minnesota most of my life. Seeing the video of George Floyd's death at the hands of Minneapolis policemen was disturbing and heart wrenching. In the aftermath of the Memorial Day incident, reverence for sanctity of life and increasing frustration with long-standing inequalities have sparked shock and outrage across the nation. With the backdrop of an ongoing pandemic, thousands of citizens have taken to the streets to decry the injustice and senselessness of Floyd's death. Similar actions have emerged across the globe. It is naïve to say race was a non-factor in this tragic outcome, but is the acknowledgment of racism enough to propel us toward real solutions?

Throughout U.S. history, race has been a prominent factor in multitudes of unjust situations and circumstances. Our nation's history of African slavery and genocide of indigenous people by European settlers has led to countless calls for racial justice. With the mounting number of tragic events, many are coming to the realization that responses to calls for racial justice continue to fall woefully short. For Blacks, indigenous people and other marginalized groups, the frustration has spilled onto streets numerous times throughout our nation's history. Regrettably, those who seek to end injustice are not the only people expressing long-standing frustrations. Those who desire to maintain the status quo also express frustrations with those who seek a more equitable society. By most quantifiable economic and health measures, Caucasians are the major benefactors of status quo and related privileges in our country. Sadly, their collective power has continually thwarted equality and equity efforts for those historically subjugated because of skin color or other identifiable characteristics.

It is not unusual for powerful groups to promote fear and skepticism of other human beings. Skin color, gender and sexual orientation are easy targets to divide people. Life pathways such as religious preferences, cultures and lifestyles are major targets as well. These external differences and preferences are used to cast doubt on human motivations and inclinations. They ultimately generate distrust and fear, while doing little to convey a person's internal substance (e.g., values, character, convictions). External differences and preferences have little correlation with behavior compared to environmental differences. Personal support structures and living conditions have much greater impacts on human behavior. Unfortunately, external form and internal substance are easily coupled together. A person's positive characteristics such as courage and integrity are difficult to discern when we hold negative biases about their form or preferences. Truly inclusive societies and leaders are able to acknowledge human differences without glorifying or dehumanizing people based on their forms and preferences.

Real equality is reached when no one person or group is deemed better than another. Few reasonable people would argue this goal for equality. But equity has been, and continues to be, a different matter. In our country, the impact of historical actions, practices and laws have greatly

benefited certain groups while being extremely detrimental to others. This is why the Black Lives Matter slogan and movement has been impactful. It reminds us how inequitable things are for many people with black skin and the need to dismantle unjust systems. And while I do not address it in this newsletter, we cannot lose sight of indigenous people who have been decimated in our country.

It is not necessary to unravel the origins and construct of race to recognize how it has been used to propagate a white supremacist ideology. From a visual standpoint, black and white skin pigments are bookends of race theory allowing whites in the U.S. to consolidate and maintain power at the expense of other races, particularly Blacks. With force and political power as their allies, early white colonizers were able to decree themselves at the top of the pecking order and subject Black people to centuries of unjust conditions that have considerable legacies today. In recent years, “Black Lives Matter” has emerged as a rallying cry for those seeking to eliminate the systemic injustice faced by too many Black people in the U.S. As part of a growing movement, it has evolved to encompass systematic challenges faced by peoples across the globe. In particular, the movement has gained traction not only among Blacks, but also among other marginalized and empathetic members of society. DeRay McKesson, an early activist of Black Lives Matter, commented that the movement “encompasses all who publicly declare that Black lives matter and devote their time and energy accordingly.”

Some dismiss the slogan and movement as overemphasizing the value of Black lives versus other human lives. Recently, I was reminded of something that contains a tremendous dose of common sense. If we see All Lives Matter as a destination, we can never get there without going through Black Lives Matter!

Who was the slogan Black Lives Matter initially aimed toward? How has support expanded since it became a slogan and movement? How does the message impact those who desire to maintain the status quo? Because the slogan focuses squarely on skin color, these questions are important to deliberate as we tackle the overriding question, “How does acknowledgment of race help us fight injustice for Blacks and other marginalized groups?”

Black Lives Matter was always intended as an inclusive message. While it originally focused on injustices to people with black skin, the founders went on to acknowledge the many types of people who happen to intersect in black skin. This included gender, sexuality, age and disabilities to name a few. Using racial inequalities as a backdrop, the movement highlighted how many people are unfairly treated simply by virtue of their skin color. To be summarily labeled as a Black person above all other attributes and characteristics has exasperated many, including a growing number of people in our country who do not have black skin.

It would be heartening if those who seek to perpetuate the status quo have epiphanies when hearing Black Lives Matter. Unfortunately, many with status and power have no desire to share their affluence with others in society. The slogan Black Lives Matter seems to have little impact on them other than triggering their irritation toward those who seek to dismantle longstanding power structures. They have little empathy for the plights of people with black skin. They are more likely to hastily reinforce their racial views since they have no logical arguments to debate or refute Black Lives Matter.

For people who have no desire to perpetuate the status quo but have little awareness of their personal advantages vis-à-vis the status quo, they wind up in the crossfire. Unless they are willing to leap headfirst in the Black Lives Matter pool, they are chastised for their ignorance and for perpetuating racism. There is no question social injustice issues require more urgency, but potential allies often become apprehensive as they navigate the minefield of racism against their darker-skinned brothers and sisters.

My racist alarm detector does not necessarily go off when a white person says, “I don’t see race.” In my mind, this is how it should be. But I do need to hear more on their thought process. If they go on to say or imply that past and current race disparities have little to do with systematic injustices, it exposes to me they see the world through a racist lens.

Black Lives Matter brings the realities of color into focus and acknowledges racial disparities both in our country and around the world. As such, I see the slogan having a dual purpose. First, it is intended to galvanize people who have urgency around the issue of racial injustice. Second, it is intended to impact hearts and minds by reminding society of the obvious – the humanity of dark-skinned people. I think the saying has been more helpful for the first purpose than the second. I am doubtful Black Lives Matter will propel us to racial equality and equity without expanding the thoughts even further.

Acknowledgment of race and racial injustice is a necessary initial step toward racial equality and equity. It sets us on a path of healing by looking deeply at what produced the disparities we see. The next steps require us to move beyond acknowledgement of race. Race must become a neutral factor for us to achieve human equality – no one is better than another. When a person’s skin color emerges as their primary identifier, their perceived humanity is boxed by an external characteristic. In this case, race defines an individual’s values, experiences and perspectives. Accordingly, our ability to see a person’s individuality and gifts is limited by our thoughts about the collective. To put it more succinctly, human beings are seen in ways they don’t want to be seen because of how they look.

This is a catch-22. We ask people to see race and imply that they should see the good in different races. However, race should be neutral in determining good or bad. Whether we feel safe with a person or not should not be based on skin color. Paraphrasing Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., race should not be used to judge the content of one's character.

Identity by race is problematic in other significant ways as well. As long as race or color is called out as a main identifier, Black individuals will be expected to represent the collective. While Black people may have similar experiences, the construct of race should not constitute a collective. Other identifiers tie groups together much better than race (e.g., economics, geography, religion, culture).

Most Black people I know, including myself, are uncomfortable representing all Black people. However, a common request we all receive is to provide our perspectives to people who have little idea of the challenges of being Black in America. As long as we couch the injustice narrative in black and white, Black individuals will be asked to represent the wider Black perspective.

From a historical viewpoint, Blacks identified as a collective mainly for safety and support reasons. The institution of slavery separated African tribes and clans on a regular basis and stripped them of their identities. Slaveholders continued to thwart the ability for Blacks to maintain families and communities, especially when they thought their economics were threatened. Conversely, whites identified as a collective mainly to secure and consolidate resources from other groups, particularly Native Americans, Blacks and Asians. With few exceptions, the construct of race has served little purpose beyond acquiring safety, power and status. Because most of the financial power and status resides in white America today, prosperous whites have little need to continue to identify as a collective. If a white person does something good or bad, it does not reflect on others. Accordingly, identity based on skin color is a harmful double standard – it is used to disadvantage some groups but not all.

Our goal going forward should be to see beyond race. When inequities are tied to the concept of race, it continues to feed the narrative that race is a key factor. When people can look beyond race and see individuals as human beings, warts and all, the opportunity for equity is within reach for everyone. Then when people say they don't see race, it truly means they see characteristics and attributes they should have observed all along.

If the thoughts I have shared leave room and inclination for race slogans, I would add some that bring conversation to internal attributes and characteristics: Black Stories Matter, Black Perspectives Matter, Black Wisdom Matters.

Should you have questions or comments regarding this newsletter, please contact me. If you find my thoughts intriguing and would like to hear more about my approach and methods, I welcome your inquiries. If you would like someone added to my distribution list or want to unsubscribe for future additions, please reply to my e-mail address.



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Bio – Consultant and workshop facilitator:

Robert Colbert has over 30 years of corporate experience. He began his career in public accounting, continued into the private sector, moved into the non-profit sector, and subsequently became a business and diversity consultant. During his career, he has had assignments in audit, finance, corporate development, technical sales, marketing and non-profit operations. His educational credentials include a BA from Minnesota State University, Mankato and an MBA from the University of Minnesota Carlson School of Management. He is also a CPA and holder of a U.S. patent. Robert currently serves as treasurer on the board of Cammack Marshall Fund for Children. In addition, he teaches tai chi in the Minneapolis community. His approach to diversity is informed by his tai chi practice and was developed and honed from experiences he and many others faced during their time in the private and non-profit sectors. His basic premise is that human beings struggle with change and variation; challenges that impede our ability to accept and value one another. To build sustainable diversity, our challenge is to find answers to an overlooked question, “How do we compensate for the human condition as it contends with change and variation?”

