

Multiculturalism and Diversity: Necessary But Insufficient Challenges to Racism

Excerpts from a talk by Barbara Joseph

I come here not to praise multiculturalism (nor to bury it) but to talk about the dreaded "R" word -- racism -- (your garden variety racism) and the "S" word (sexism), combined as "racism," since for women of color, you can't have one without the other. I also come to talk about heterosexism and the "isms" in general, and our pressing need to undo these things directly and frontally. For until we do this, we may not know what true diversity is or how it enriches our lives, collectively and in a deeply personal way.

Talk about identity, I am a racism survivor: how else could I emerge from a process of naming designed to engender multipersonalities or schizophrenia. Today I say I'm an African, Native American woman; but once I was "Negro" - never "African" (those folks who followed Tarzan with eyes popping fearful of a land and environment they have survived in for thousands of years) or "Black" (which was and is synonymous with "bad": black lies, black listed, black balled) but "Negro" was better than "Nigger" and "Nig row." Then I was "colored," as in (NAACP, National Association of Colored People) interesting; more universal than the assigned misnomer "Negro." Then also "Indian" (as in Columbus' mistake), then Afro-American, which was closer to basic origins, but still devoid of a geographic and ethnic sense of place and culture afforded most other groups. There are, after all, not Frencho-Americans, Italo-, Chino-, Japo-, etc., Americans. And where is "Afro"? Lately, I have been a woman or person of color, (dropping the "ed" of "colored"); and now, African American: a refinement and important step located in the reality of land, history and culture. I think, however, it isn't over yet -- the important thing may be the process of naming one's self and one's world, as part of a crucial act of empowerment. And I may be holding out for "person" or "human," able and determined to identify with all people in the richness of their differences and common needs.

Our challenge is to come to terms with cultural and class pain, inflicted by some groups upon others, in some cases intentionally, born of a consummate institutional ignorance of each other's reality, by learning to ask critical questions and putting them to people in power. What approach do we have for working through pain and injury, how do we help each other to assess their relationships with self and others in the context of exploitation and domination expressed through racism, sexism, all the "isms"? Do people ask, "what are you?" Do we, in split second timing perceive a person's color, gender, age, sexual preference and conjure up responses that are time-honored stereotypical judgements and expectations? Can we acknowledge and recognize emerging identities of different groups of people based on:

a: Current and transitional characteristics and principles -- understanding these as open-ended -- because much of it can only be understood or at least determined in the very language and practice of oppression. If there are no "races" as the scientists, anthropologists and sociologists concluded nearly 50 years ago at a United National conference and reaffirmed subsequently over decades, why are we still taught this myth and code of difference?

b: Recognition that real identity is a process, one that has a universal core, grounded in human nature and human needs which are essentially positive and mutually reinforcing. Through problem-solving and mediated by experience, real identity changes as the reality and conditions offered afford more choices and opportunities to securely build upon that which creates community cooperation, intimacy and health-giving life chances; conditions which promote empowerment, self and group actualization.