



Gary Howard Equity Institutes

Whites in Multicultural Education

Rethinking Our Role*

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How does an ethnic group that has historically been dominant in its society adjust to a more modest and balanced role? Put differently, how do white Americans learn to be positive participants in a richly pluralistic nation? These questions have always been a part of the agenda of multicultural education but are now coming more clearly into focus. Most of our work in race relations and multicultural education in the United States has emphasized -- and appropriately so -- the particular cultural experiences and perspectives of black, Asian, Hispanic, and American Indian groups. These are the people who have been marginalized to varying degrees by the repeated assertion of dominance by Americans of European ancestry. As the population of the United States shifts to embrace ever-larger numbers of previously marginalized groups, there is an emerging need to take a closer look at the changing role of white Americans.

Part of this need is generated by the growing evidence that many white Americans may not be comfortable with the transition from their dominant status. As our population becomes more diverse, we have seen an alarming increase in acts of overt racism. The number and size of hate groups in the United States is rising. Groups such as the Aryan Nation, neo-Nazis, and skinheads tend to play on the anger, ignorance, and fears of the more alienated, disenfranchised, and uneducated segments of white society.

Too many segments of our white American population remain committed to their position of dominance; they are willing to defend it and legitimize it, even in the face of overwhelming evidence that our world is rapidly changing.¹ Taken as a whole, these realities strongly suggest that a peaceful transition to a new kind of America, in which no ethnic or cultural group is in a dominant position, will require considerable change in education and deep psychological shifts for many white Americans. Attempting to effect these changes is part of the work of multicultural education, and that challenge leads us to a central question: What must take place in the minds and hearts of white Americans to convince them that now is the time to begin their journey from dominance to diversity?

There is much that needs to be said to help us understand our collective past, as well as the present. In a sense we are all victims of our history, some more obviously and painfully than others. It is critical that we white Americans come to terms with our reality and our role. What does it mean for white people to be responsible and aware in a nation where we have been the dominant cultural and political force? What can be our unique contribution, and what are the issues we need to face? How do we help create a nation where all cultures are accorded dignity and the right to survive?

I explore these questions here from the perspective of a white American. Each nation, of course, has its own special history to confront and learn from, but the depth and intensity of our struggle with diversity in the United States has significant lessons to teach both our own people and the rest of the world.

AMERICAN IMMIGRANTS

European Americans share at least one commonality; we all came from somewhere else. In my own family, we loosely trace our roots to England, Holland, France, and perhaps Scotland. However, with five generations separating us from our various "homelands," we have derived

little meaning from these tenuous connections with our ancestral people across the water. This is true for many white Americans, who are often repulsed by the appellation "European American" and would never choose such a descriptor for themselves. They simply prefer to be called "American" and to forget the past.

On the other hand, many white Americans have maintained direct and strong ties with their European roots. They continue after many generations to draw meaning and pride from those connections. In the Seattle region there is an Ethnic Heritage Council composed of members of 103 distinct cultural groups, most of them European. These people continue to refer to themselves as Irish American, Croatian American, Italian American, or Russian American -- terminology that acknowledges the two sides of their identity.

European Americans are a diverse people. We vary broadly across extremely different cultures or origin, and we continue here in the United States to be diverse in religion, politics, economic status, and lifestyle.² We also vary greatly in the degree to which we value the notion of the melting pot. Many of us today are ignorant of our ethnic history because our ancestors worked so hard to dismantle their European identity in favor of what they perceived to be the American ideal. The further our immigrant ancestors' cultural identities diverged from the white Anglo-Saxon Protestant image of the "real" American, the greater was the pressure to assimilate. Jews, Catholics, Eastern Europeans, Southern Europeans, and members of minority religious sects all felt the intense heat of the melting pot. From the moment they arrived on American soil, they received a strong message: forget the home language, make sure your children don't learn to speak it, change your name to sound more American -- or, if the immigration officials can't pronounce it, they'll change it for you.

In dealing with the history and culture of European Americans, it is important to acknowledge the pain, suffering, and loss that were often associated with their immigrant experiences. For many of these groups, it was a difficult struggle to carve out a niche in the American political and economic landscape and at the same time to preserve some sense of their own ethnic identity. Some white Americans resist the multicultural movement today because they feel that their own history of suffering from prejudice and discrimination has not been adequately addressed.

FAMILY REALITIES

Like many white Americans, I trace my roots in this country back to the land -- the Minnesota farm my mother's great-grandparents began working in the 1880's. My two uncles still farm this land, and I spent many of the summers of my youth with them. It was there that I learned to drive trucks and tractors at the age of 12. I learned the humor and practical wisdom of hard-working people. I learned to love the land -- its smell and feel; its changing moods and seasons; its power to nurture the crops, the livestock and the simple folks who give their lives to it. On this land and with these people I have known my roots, my cultural heritage, much more deeply than through any connection with things European. The bond of my Americanness has been forged in my experience with the soil.

Yet, as I have grown to understand more of the history of this country, a conflict has emerged in my feelings about our family tradition of the land. I have a close friend and colleague, Robin

Butterfield, whose traditional Ojibwa tribal lands once encompassed the area now occupied by my family's farm. This farm, which is the core experience of my cultural rootedness in America, is for her people a symbol of defeat, loss, and domination. How do I live with this? How can I incorporate into my own sense of being an American the knowledge that my family's survival and eventual success on this continent were built on the removal and near extermination of an entire race of people?

And to bring the issue closer to the present, many of my relatives today hold narrow and prejudicial attitudes about cultural differences. The racist jokes they tell at family gatherings and the ethnic slurs that punctuate their daily chatter have been an integral part of my cultural conditioning. It was not until my college years, when I was immersed in a rich multicultural living situation, that these barriers began to break down for me. Most of my relatives have not had that opportunity. They do not understand my work in multicultural education. "You do *what?*" The racist jokes diminish in my presence, but the attitudes remain. Yet, I love these people. They are my link with tradition and the past, even though many of their beliefs are diametrically opposed to what I have come to know and value about different cultures.

My family is not atypical among white Americans. Internal contradictions and tensions around issues of culture and race are intrinsic to our collective experience. For most white Americans, racism and prejudice are not theoretical constructs; they are members of the family.

When we open ourselves to learning about the historical perspectives and cultural experiences of other races in America, much of what we discover is incompatible with our image of a free and democratic nation. We find conflicting realities that do not fit together easily in our conscious awareness, clashing truths that cause train wrecks in the mind. In this sense, white Americans are caught in a classic state of cognitive dissonance. Our collective security and position of economic and political dominance have been fueled in large measure by the exploitation of other people. The physical and cultural genocide perpetrated against American Indians, the enslavement of African peoples, the exploitation of Mexicans and Asians as sources of cheap labor -- on such acts of inhumanity rests the success of the European enterprise in America.

This cognitive dissonance is not dealt with easily. We can try to be aware. We can try to be sensitive. We can try to be aware. We can try to be sensitive. We can try to deal with racism in our own families, yet the tension remains. We can try to dance to the crazy rhythms of multiculturalism and race relations in the U.S., but the dissonant chords of this painful past and present keep intruding.

LUXURY OF IGNORANCE

Given the difficulty of dealing with such cognitive dissonance, it is no mystery why many white Americans simply choose to remain unaware. In fact, the possibility of remaining ignorant of other cultures is a luxury uniquely available to members of any dominant group. Throughout most of our history, there has been no reason why white Americans, for their own survival or success, have needed to be sensitive to the cultural perspectives of other groups. This is not a luxury available to people of color. If you are black, Indian, Hispanic, or Asian in the United States, daily survival depends on knowledge of white America. You need to know the realities

that confront you in the workplace, in dealing with government agencies, in relation to official authorities like the police. To be successful in mainstream institutions, people of color in the U.S. need to be bicultural -- able to play by the rules of their own cultural community and able to play the game according to the rules established by the dominant culture. For most white Americans, on the other hand, there is only one game, and they have traditionally been on the winning team.

The privilege that comes with being a member of the dominant group, however, is invisible to most white Americans.³ Social research has repeatedly demonstrated that if Jessie Myles, an African American friend, and I walk into the same bank on the same day and apply for a loan with the same officer, I will be more likely to receive my money -- and with less hassle, less scrutiny, and less delay. This is in spite of the fact that Jessie has more education and is also more intelligent, better looking, and a nicer person. Likewise, if I am turned down for a house purchase, I don't wonder whether it was because of my skin. And if I am offered a new job or promotion, I don't worry that my fellow workers may feel that I'm there not because of my qualifications, but merely to fill an affirmative action quota. Such privileged treatment is so much a part of the fabric of our daily existence that it escapes the conscious awareness of most white Americans. From the luxury of ignorance are born the Simi Valley neighborhoods of our nation, which remain painfully out of touch with our experiences and sensibilities of multicultural America.

EMOTIONS THAT KILL

The most prevalent strategy that white Americans adopt to deal with the grim realities of history is denial. "The past doesn't matter. All the talk about multicultural education and revising history from different cultural perspectives is merely ethnic cheerleading. My people made it, and so can yours. It's an even playing field and everybody has the same opportunities, so let's get on with the game and quit complaining. We've heard enough of your victim's history."

Another response is hostility, a reaction to cultural differences that we have seen resurfacing more blatantly in recent years. The Aryan Nation's organizing in Idaho, the murder of a black man by skinheads in Oregon, the killing of a Jewish talk show host by neo-Nazis in Denver, cross burnings and Klan marches in Dubuque, and the increase in racist incidents on college campuses all point to a revival of hate crimes and overt racism in the U.S. We can conjecture why this is occurring now: the economic down-turn, fear of job competition, the rollback on civil rights initiatives by recent Administrations. Whatever the reason, hostility related to racial and cultural differences has always been a part of American life and was only once again brought into bold relief by the first Rodney King decision and its violent aftermath in Los Angeles.

Underlying both the denial and the hostility is a deep fear of diversity. This fear is obvious in the Neanderthal violence and activism of white supremacist groups. Because of their personal and economic insecurities, they seek to destroy that which is not like them.

The same fear is dressed in more sophisticated fashion by Western traditionalists and neoconservatives who campaign against multicultural education. They fear the loss of European and Western cultural supremacy in the school curriculum.⁴ With their fraudulent attempt to

characterize "political correctness" as a new form of McCarthyism and with their outcries against separatism, particularism, reverse racism, and historical inaccuracy in multicultural texts, they defend cultural turf that is already lost. The United States was never a white European Christian nation and is becoming less so every day. Most public school educators know the curriculum has to reflect this reality, but many guardians of the traditional canon still find it frightening to leave the Old World.

Denial, hostility, and fear are literally emotions that kill. Our country -- indeed, the world -- has suffered endless violence and bloodshed over issues of racial, cultural, and religious differences. And the killing is not physical, but emotional and psychological as well. With this hostility toward diversity, we threaten to destroy the precious foundation of our national unity, which is a commitment to equality, freedom, and justice for all people. It is not multiculturalism that threatens to destroy our unity -- as some neoconservative academics would have us believe -- but rather our inability to embrace our differences and our unwillingness to honor the very ideals we espouse.

Ironically, these negative responses to diversity are destructive not only for those who are the targets of hate but also for the perpetrators themselves. Racism is ultimately a self-destructive and counter-evolutionary strategy. As is true for any species in nature, positive adaptation to change requires a rich pool of diversity and potential in the population. In denying access to the full range of human variety and possibility, racism drains the essential vitality from everyone, victimizing our entire society.

Another emotion that kills is guilt. For well-intentioned white Americans guilt is a major hurdle. As we become aware of the realities of the past and the present -- of the heavy weight of oppression and racism that continues to drag our nation down -- it is natural for many of us of European background to feel a collective sense of complicity, shame, or guilt. On a rational level, of course, we can say that we didn't contribute to the pain. We weren't there. We would never do such things to anyone. Yet, on an emotional level, there is a sense that we *were* involved somehow. And our membership in the dominant culture keeps us connected to the wrongs, because we continue to reap the benefits of past oppression.

There is a positive side to guilt, of course. It can be a spur to action, a motivations to contribute, a kick in the collective consciousness. Ultimately, however, guilt must be overcome, along with the other negative responses to diversity -- for it, too, drains the lifeblood of our people. If we are finally to become one nation of many cultures, then we need to find a path out of the debilitating cycle of blame and guilt that has occupied so much of our national energy.

RESPONSES THAT HEAL

How do we as white Americans move beyond these negative responses to diversity and find a place of authentic engagement and positive contribution? The first step is to approach the past and the present with a new sense of honesty. Facing reality is the beginning of liberation. As white Americans we can face honestly the fact that we have benefited from racism. The point is simply to face the reality of our own privilege. We can also become supportive of new

historical research aimed at providing a more inclusive and multidimensional view of our nation's past. Scholars and educators are searching for the literature, the experiences, the contributions, and the historical perspectives that have been ignored in our Eurocentric schooling. It is important that white Americans become involved in and supportive of this endeavor, which is, of course, highly controversial.

Many white Americans feel threatened by the changes that are coming. One of our responsibilities, therefore, is to help them understand that our nation is in a time of necessary transition. This is part of the honesty we are trying to address. It took 500 years to evolve our present curriculum, which, in spite of its many fine qualities, is still flawed and inaccurate and excludes most non-European perspectives and influences. The new multicultural curricula will also have to go through a process of evolution toward balance and accuracy. The appropriate role for aware white Americans is to participate in this evolution, rather than to attack it from the outside, as many critics of multicultural education have chosen to do.

Along with this honesty must come a healthy portion of humility. It is not helpful for white not helpful for white Americans to be marching out in front with all the answers for other groups. The future belongs to those who are able to walk and work beside people of many different cultures, lifestyles, and perspectives. The business world is embracing this understanding. We now see top corporate leaders investing millions of dollars annually to provide their employees with skills to function effectively in a highly diverse work force.⁵ They are forced to make this expenditure because schools, frankly, have not done an adequate job. Diversity is a bottom line issue for employers. Productivity is directly related to our ability to deal with pluralism. Whenever power, truth, control, and the possibility of being right are concentrated in only a few people, a single perspective, one culture, or one approach, the creativity of an entire organization suffers.

Honesty and humility are based on respect. One of the greatest contributions white Americans can make to cultural understanding is simply to learn power of respect. In Spanish, the term *respeto* has a deep connotation. It goes far beyond mere tolerance or even acceptance. *Respeto* acknowledges the full humanness of other people, their right to be who they are, their right to be treated in a good way. When white Americans learn to approach people of different cultures with this kind of deep respect, our own world becomes larger and our embrace of reality is made broader and richer. We are changed by our respect for other perspectives. It is more than just a nice thing to do. In the process of respecting other cultures, we learn to become better people ourselves.

But all of this is not enough. As members of the majority population, we are called to provide more than honesty, humility, and respect. The race issue for white Americans is ultimately a question of action: What are we going to do about it? It is not a black problem or an Indian problem or an Asian problem or a Hispanic problem -- or even a white problem. The issue of racism and cultural diversity in the U.S. is a human problem, a struggle we are all in together. It cannot be solved by any one group. We have become embedded in the problem together, and we will have to deal with it together.

This brings us to the issue of co-responsibility. The way for us to overcome the denial, hostility,

fear, and guilt of the past and present is to become active participants in the creation of a better future. As white Americans, once we become aware of the heavy weight of our oppressive past, our role is not to fall into a kind of morose confessionalism about the sins of our ancestors. The healing response for ourselves, as well as for those who have been the victims of oppression, is involvement, action, contribution, and responsibility. The healing path requires all of us to join our efforts, resources, energy, and commitment. No one group can do it alone. Together we are co-responsible for the creation of a new America.

THE SEARCH FOR AUTHENTIC IDENTITY

Before white Americans can enter fully into this active partnership for change, however, we need to come to terms with who we are as a people. One problem that arises from an honest appraisal of the past is that it sometimes becomes difficult for us as white people to feel good about our history. Where do we turn to find positive images for ourselves and our children? In the 1960s and early 1970s we saw a revolution in positive identity for blacks, American Indians, Hispanics, and Asians. During this period there was an explosion of racial and cultural energy -- what James Banks refers to as the ethnic revitalization movement.⁶ What were white youths doing at this time? There was a revolution happening with them as well: a revolution of rejection. As the civil rights movement, the antiwar movement were bringing to the public's attention many of the fundamental flaws of a culture dominated by white males, the youths of white America were searching for an alternative identity.

At this time in our history, white America was at war with itself. The children of affluence and privilege, the very ones who had benefited the most from membership in the dominant culture, were attacking the foundation of their own privilege. In creating a new counterculture of rebellion and hope, they borrowed heavily from black, Indian, Hispanic, and Asian traditions. Their clothing, ornamentation, hairstyles, spiritual explorations, jargon, values, and music defined an eclectic composite culture that symbolized identification with the oppressed. In their rejection of the dominant culture, they sought to become like those whom the dominant culture had historically rejected.

Thus we have the essence of the "wanabe" phenomenon: white Americans trying to be someone else. When the limitations of privilege, of affluence, of membership in the dominant group become apparent to us as white Americans, we often turn to other cultural experiences to find identity, purpose, meaning, and a sense of belonging. When the truth of our collective history is brought home to us, we turn to other traditions for a new place to be.

But there is another alternative for white identity, one that resides within our own cultural roots. It became clear to me during my sabbatical study tour around the world in 1990-1991. I began the trip with the goal of gaining some new insights about education from the First Peoples in several countries. During a seven-month period I was immersed in the rich contexts of the Navajo, Hopi, Maori, Australian aboriginal, Balinese, and Nepalese culture. I gained much from my exposure to the traditional perspectives of these cultures, but the most powerful personal experiences came for me in the place I least expected them -- my own ancestral Europe.

In the Basque country of northern Spain, in the Pyrenees Mountains near the French border, I entered a prehistoric cave that was one of the sacred sites of the ancient people of Europe. I was amazed by the beauty and the power this cave held for me. I had been in the sacred caves of the Anasazi, those people who preceded the Navaho and Hopi in what is now Arizona and New Mexico. I had been in the ceremonial caves of the aboriginal people of Australia. In both of these previous experiences. I had been drawn to the handprints on the walls, created there by ancient artists blowing pigment through a bone or reed to leave images of their hands on the surface of the stone.

When I discovered, in the deepest part of a cave in the Pyrenees, 21 handprints created by ancient Europeans in the exact style of the Anasazi and the aborigine, I knew I had connected with a profound source of my own identity. There was a sense of the universality of all human experience. In the projection of our hands on stone walls, in the desire to express ourselves and find meaning in life, we are all one. And then came an even deeper lesson. In my journey around the world, I had been searching for meaning in other people's cultures. Here in a cave in Europe was a connection with my own. After leaving the Pyrenees, I spent the next three weeks exploring the ancient sacred sites of England and Scotland. In the company of Peter Vallance, a storyteller, dancer, and modern version of the old Celtic bard, I continued to grow more deeply into a sense of rootedness in my own past. I learned that the old Celts and other ancient ones of Great Britain were a fascinating people. They had spread over a large area in Europe and were, in fact, some of the people who worshipped in those magnificent caves in Northern Spain.

I also learned that the Celts became the victims of the imperialistic expansion of Roman Christianity. Their culture was overwhelmed by the twofold aggression of the Roman army and the church. Consequently, much of their history is lost to us today. The amazing stone circles, like Stonehenge, which are still evident throughout the British Isles, stand as powerful reminders of the Celtic vision of nature and of the people's sacred connection with both the earth and the sky.

What does my experience in Europe mean for us as white Americans? First, there is no need to look to other cultures for our own sense of identity. Any of us who choose to look more deeply into our roots will find there a rich and diverse experience waiting to be discovered. Second, the history of oppression and expansionism perpetrated by European nations is only part of our past. It is a reality that must be acknowledged and dealt with, but it is not our only heritage as white Americans. In fact, many of our own ancestral groups, like the Celts, have themselves been the victims of the same kind of imperialistic drives that have been so devastating to other indigenous populations around the world. And third, when we push the human story back far enough, we come to a place of common connection to this earth, to a place where people of all races are brothers and sisters on the same planet. It is in this recognition of both our uniqueness as European Americans and our universality as human beings that we can begin to make an authentic contribution to the healing of our nation.

WHO ARE MY PEOPLE?

As a result of my world tour and of my lengthy struggle with the issues discussed here, I have come to a new sense of my own identity as a white American. I have seen that I have deep

connections with this earth through my own cultural ancestry. I have also become aware of a complex, painful, yet rich history of connections to all other peoples. I have seen that white Americans can be drawn together with people everywhere who are struggling with the questions of cultural and human survival. We can develop a deep commitment to and a strong stake in the preservation and strengthening of diversity at home and throughout the world. We can become aware that our energy and vision, along with those of other Americans of all cultures, are essential to the healing that must take place if we are to survive as a pluralistic and just nation.

It is time for a redefinition of white America. As our percentage of the population declines, our commitment to the future must change. It is neither appropriate nor desirable to be in a position of dominance. Even though we are undeniably connected by history and ethnicity with a long legacy of oppression, this identification with the oppressor is not our only means of defining ourselves. We can choose now to contribute to the making of a new kind of nation. Young white students need to see that they, too, can be full participants in the building of a multicultural America.

Because the music of the United States is propelled by such a rich mixture of cultural rhythms, it is time for all of us to learn to move with grace and style to the new sounds. The future calls each of us to become partners in the dance of diversity, a dance in which everyone shares the lead. And because we have been separated by race and ethnicity for so long, we may all feel awkward at first with the new moves. It will take time to learn to fully embrace our emerging multicultural partnerships. But with a little help from our friends in other cultures, even white folks can learn to dance again, as we once did among the great stone circles of ancient Europe. Rather than being isolated in the dance hall of the dominant, we now have an exciting opportunity to join with Americans of all cultures in creating a nation that actually tries to move to the tune of its own ideals. These are my people, and this could be our vision.

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