



The Dignity Project

Guiding the Way

Promoting awareness and understanding of dignity
through education, communication and spirit.

Navigating Chaos 8

Turning Point

The protests precipitated by the police killing of George Floyd seem to me to be long in coming. Not since the Los Angeles protests and arson on behalf of Rodney King has there been an uprising by and for the black American on a large scale. Before that, I remember Watts Rebellion. In my younger years I distanced myself from the events, in part because my parents only expressed concern for my safety. I had lived a life sheltered from the harsh realities that so many Americans face. I didn't know what I didn't know, and I hadn't yet discovered passion for learning about the dynamics of my world.

A turning point to becoming more aware of the issues of race in our country came when an older friend, a psychologist, shared his story of taking the long bus ride from California to Alabama to join in the Selma March. It was part of the solidarity expressed in sit-ins and the arrest of thousands of protestors in the South that intensified the pressure for President Johnson and the Supreme Court to end segregation. My friend's commitment, as a white man of privilege, to a cause bigger than I knew upon his telling, inspired my interest in Martin Luther King, Metger Evers, Malcolm X, and Bobby Kennedy, all assassinated for their role in moving awareness of oppression and activism forward. I was passionate about Bobby Kennedy's innate ability to speak with leveling honesty about racial injustice and invite, not demand, the best in people. I was shocked and depressed when one man, angry over Kennedy's position on Israel, erased our potential for enlightened leadership in an instant.

The more I studied, the more I believed that the efforts of all these brave men were not in vain. They planted seeds, that wait in the dark, where change speaks in whispers, like in the Underground Railroad, or the catacombs where creative radicals met to keep alive beliefs opposed by Roman rule, like Nelson Mandela grew inwardly, even as he was contained by a small cell and made to do hard labor. When conditions were right, he would emerge into the light of day a free man, to posture a future for his people that it seems to me only a tested man could. The energies that further the progress of life are not seen until they have enough force to survive the sun, the wind, and the challenges that all new life must face.

Last night sleep wouldn't come. I was thinking of James Baldwin, a prolific literary voice of black American reality, wishing he was alive to speak of the times. What would he say about the potential to "bring down the fortress of white supremacy",¹ compared with sixty years ago? What would he say to the many young people in our world who are zealots - a force refusing the status quo and the failure to address continuing oppression of people of color? This truth-teller would warn us to come prepared to be honest about our ignorance and fears. Perhaps he would also call out the personal agendas of the powerful, of the deceptive nature of advertising, and the infectious spread of American glamor and acquisition, as increasing distraction from the core values of a functioning society.

We are overloaded with analyzation and divisions. We are craving the experience of cohesiveness and clarity. Mainstream media fails to give a larger picture or context. We need more understanding as to how systemic racism operates, and how we may unknowingly be perpetuating harm. There are many layers to addressing the issues of injustice and inequality, including institutional, cultural, and individual racism. As I acknowledge the scope and complexity I ponder what I can contribute. Because a large part of my work has been understanding humanness and the psyche, what I can offer is some understanding of how cruelty comes to exist in humans, on the individual level. What causes a person to be cruel? To hate? To dismiss the nation to serve only himself and the few who insure his power? Cruelty is not always about violence. It can be subtle and mistakenly labeled and go unaddressed, and thus breed from generation to generation and wound people in ways that are not clear on the surface.

- Recent research, published as *The Power Paradox*, shows how "power leads to empathy deficits, diminished moral sentiments, and self-serving impulsivity. As power shifts our focus away from others, we lose our ability to read others' emotions effectively. We lose valuable information about how people feel." In people tested from positions of wealth and power, the empathy network in the brain's cortex was not active.
 - German psychiatrist Alice Miller has written extensively that the common link between the world's renowned dictator's is abusive fathers.
 - Recent studies by Dr. Bruce Perry, a leading psychiatrist in child abuse, show dominance, cruelty, and lack of feeling or empathy, are related to the lack of oxytocin production in infancy, normally produced when bonding with a consistent and loving caregiver occurs.
 - Lack of respect for others has many expressions, that are based in a person's early years from birth to age eight. The early years inform the brain as to what is safe and what must be defended.
-

- The pathways of a developing brain can be interrupted, or distracted from the natural growth and self awareness process, or become confused by erratic or changeable behavior in the persons influencing the child. Confusion leads to a person having no position on crucial aspects of human thinking and behavior, lacking empathy or feeling and becoming a follower. It can also lead to nervous and anxious thinking that shows up as defensiveness.
- Projections can be an expression of cruelty, the result of being raised by persons who don't own their own behavior and issues and their impact. The child learns to separate actions from impact.
- Cruelty is a sign of anger that's grown to the point of lashing out. That anger always originates from fear. Fear of the bigger older person when one is small and dependent; fear of survival; fear of loud and unknown things; and repetitive dominance in its various forms: accusation, belittling, physical violence, and undermining confidence.

As you can see, how we participate in the development of children has far-reaching effects. For those who are in the position of educating and parenting there needs to be more support of young people's relationship with the inner self, for it provides the authenticity and confidence a person needs to participate within society and make a positive difference. Although important, this is only one piece of what is necessary to move us forward. Each of us, whatever our calling and daily commitments, can choose to learn more about systemic racism and how it creates violence. When there is more knowledge we can begin to participate in dismantling it. There are situations where we believe we know something but we don't really know it in a visceral or emotional way, to the point where it moves us to action. James Baldwin's prose could make white people, for the first time, feel and understand the anger of black people. Literature can affect our social consciousness.

We can seek to learn more and share when there's opportunity.

We can trace the thread of violence in the world back to our own experience or awareness of it, and then find emotion and compassion for those who experience violence in its many forms.

We can explore our own history and potential for divisiveness. Do we see some people as inferior, even if unconsciously? Have we ever felt hatred? If so, where did it come from? Was it a learned reaction, as Nelson Mandela declared it must be? And especially, what are we complicit with, without being aware of it?

Over 1,000 people are killed each year by police in the U.S., the vast majority are black people and people of color. Our prisons are flooded and Jim Crow is alive. I can reckon with such staggering truths and statistics only when I consider the oppression of people of color as

American “policy”. As a white woman I recognize I have privileges that I can never fully comprehend. Going beneath the surface of understanding white supremacy in our modern world, I see the need to take on more responsibility than ever before. In the words of Derald Wing Sue Ph.D., “White supremacy decides who deserves training and skills, medical care, formal education, political influence, productive employment, fair legal treatment, decent housing, and so forth... You do not have to be actively racist to contribute to the racism problem. Inaction itself, is tacit agreement that racism is acceptable; and because white Americans enjoy the benefits, privileges, and opportunities of the oppressive system... it is my contention... that it is the responsibility of my white brothers and sisters to be centrally involved in combating and ending racial oppression.” His words urge whites to consider how they might begin to view this as “our problem” rather than theirs.

Considering all of the places needs are not met and human rights are violated, I’m certain there will be many breaking points. There will be moments when the inability to “take it any longer” might easily be judged and punished. We can assist these cries for equality and justice - *if* we embrace the chaos they set in motion as patterns breaking, as turning points, as light dawning on a new day, as hearts aching for what could be.

Thank you to Bresha Younger for her contribution to this article.

References:

The Fire Next Time - James Baldwin
The Power Paradox - Dacher Keltner Ph.D.
Thou Shall Not Be Aware - Dr. Alice Miller
Born For Love - by Dr. Bruce Perry
The New Jim Crow - Michelle Alexander

Statistics:

“The Counted” - from The Guardian (for 2016)
“Fatal Force” - from The Washington Post (for 2019)

