

The Psychology of Reconciliation

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Good morning! It is my pleasure to be here at this conference sponsored by the John Hope Franklin Center for Reconciliation. As you know, the conference theme is “The Politics of Reconciliation” and I have found the symposium presentations I heard yesterday quite thought-provoking. To be one of the closing speakers is both a challenge and an opportunity as you have to plan your remarks before you know what has preceded you, but you also have a chance to respond to some of what you have heard as well. I am hopeful that what I have to say will resonate with and complement what has come before.

As you know, I am a psychologist, and I tend to look through the world through a psychological lens of analysis, so when asked to be the speaker at this conference, I quite naturally titled my presentation, “*The Psychology of Reconciliation.*” The title was the easy part. The challenge was trying to conceptualize a talk that would be fitting for this gathering. I began by thinking about the concept of forgiveness, but quickly realized that “forgiveness” by itself does not lead to reconciliation. I thought of examples in my own life in which I had felt deeply wronged by someone – fortunately that has not happened often – but in those few instances, I struggled to let go of my anger about what had happened. In one case, my first thought was of revenge – how could I even the score with the person who had injured me. But, then I realized what I wanted most was to be completely free of that person, to no longer have any relationship at all, and to “get even” would require continued interaction. Once I realized that truth, I knew I had to release the anger, as intense as it was, otherwise, I would never be free of that person. In the words of Nelson Mandela, “Having resentment against someone is like drinking poison and thinking it will kill your enemy.” I could feel that my anger was toxic to me, and me alone, and I had to let it go. And, in a moment of grace, I did release it. I even felt able to forgive. But forgiveness did not lead to reconciliation. I have no relationship with that person today, nor do I want one. I moved past anger to absence. That is not reconciliation.

When we talk about reconciliation, we are by definition talking about individuals or groups who intend *by choice or necessity* to remain in relationship with one another. That is more complicated. When I let go of my anger, the other person did not have to do anything except leave me alone. Eventually I moved to another city and our paths no longer crossed. But when we are a part of a community or, as Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King once said, an inescapable network of mutuality – where one part of the community has been wronged by another – true reconciliation cannot occur without joint participation.

So, if it is not just forgiveness, what *is* true reconciliation? Here in Tulsa as we recall the horrific events of 91 years ago, now known as the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921, this question has particular salience. The murders of many by White attackers, the destruction of hundreds of homes and the ruin of a thriving commercial district has had an enduring impact on this community, disproportionately felt by the Black survivors of the assault and their descendants. Hard-won economic gains made by a lifetime of effort by former slaves and their children were wiped out in a weekend of violence, from which some never recovered. To quote the on-line encyclopedia entry of the Oklahoma Historical Society,

“The deep scars left by the riot remained visible for years. While Greenwood was eventually rebuilt, many families never truly recovered from the disaster. Moreover, for many years the riot became something of a taboo subject, particularly in Tulsa. A state commission formed in 1997 to investigate the riot recommended that reparations be paid to the remaining riot survivors, while a team of scientists and historians uncovered evidence supporting long-held beliefs that unidentified riot victims had been buried in unmarked grave sites.

One of the great tragedies of Oklahoma history, the Tulsa race riot has lived on as a potent symbol of the ongoing struggle of black and white Oklahomans to forge a common destiny out of an often troubled past.”¹

“To forge a common destiny out of an often troubled past,” is a phrase that provides a framework for understanding why reconciliation – in this case racial reconciliation - is necessary not just in Oklahoma but across the nation. Like it or not, we do indeed have a common destiny. We will succeed or fail together. So, I return to the question of “true reconciliation” – what is it?

The on-line version of the Merriam-Webster dictionary offers several definitions for the verb, to reconcile.ⁱⁱ And in some ways, they are all relevant. The first is “to restore to friendship or harmony” as in “reconcile the factions.” But has there ever been true friendship or harmony to which one can return, in this instance? Of course, one can find individual instances of interracial friendship, even love, but we know the history of Black-White intergroup relations in America began with the subjugation of enslaved Africans and *there can be no genuine friendship or harmony based on mutual respect and recognition of the other’s shared humanity while in the condition of enslavement*. Enslavement was replaced by Jim Crow subjugation and institutionalized segregation. At best, post-slavery, we might describe Black-White race relations as uneasy coexistence, one easily disrupted by a literal misstep by a Black man in Tulsa who in 1921 inadvertently stepped on the foot of a white woman as he entered an elevator, causing her to scream, and ultimately leading to his arrest and the actions of an angry White lynch mob.

Considered to be the single worst incident of racial violence in American history, it is not just the trauma of the Tulsa Race Riot that is the source of disharmony. Oklahoma also has a long and painful history surrounding school desegregation. The judicial history of desegregation in Oklahoma began in 1961 in Oklahoma City as the result of a lawsuit to integrate the schools which had been segregated by order of the state constitution ever since Oklahoma achieved statehood in 1907. In 1963 Federal Judge Luther Bohanon ruled that the “dual” system of education be ended. The Oklahoma City school board adopted a “neighborhood zoning” plan in response, but because of the residential segregation (the end result of racially restrictive real estate covenants supported by state and local law), the neighborhood zoning plan was ineffective. Finally in 1972, because little progress toward desegregation had been made, Judge Bohanon ordered a busing plan designed to achieve racial balance. Five years later, in 1977, the Oklahoma City Board asked Judge Bohanon to close the case and he did, expressing his confidence that the Board would continue to comply with constitutional desegregation requirements. However, in 1985, the School Board reinstated the neighborhood zoning plan, and Robert Dowell and the other original plaintiffs asked that the case be reopened. In 1989 the Tenth Circuit of Appeals ruled in their favor, instructing the Oklahoma City Board to design a new plan to integrate the Oklahoma City schools. The School Board appealed and it went before the Supreme Court. The Court sent the case back to Judge Bohanon to decide whether the State

had satisfied the original desegregation order. In the end, Judge Bohanon ruled in the State's favor and closed the case.ⁱⁱⁱ

In his book, *Jim Crow's Children*, Peter Irons concludes,

“With student assignments now based on the “neighborhood school” policy, Oklahoma City’s schools have become even more racially separated. In the 2000 school year, Black students were the largest racial group, comprising 39 percent of public school enrollment, more than twice the city-wide Black population of 16 percent. White students made up 33 percent in 2000, while Hispanic students had become a growing minority at 20 percent. Substantially more than half of the city’s Black children now attend majority-Black schools, with more than half of the White children in majority-White schools. The outcome of the *Dowell* case seemed to justify the gloomy prediction of Thurgood Marshall . . .seventeen years earlier, that the Court’s abandonment of the *Brown* decisions would result in America’s urban areas being “divided up each into two cities—one White, the other Black,” with the children in each divided city attending schools in which few of their classmates belong to a different race.^{iv}

Indeed the *Oklahoma City v. Dowell* decision had the ripple effect of federal judges releasing other school districts from their court-ordered desegregation plans. This and other related court decisions in the 1990s have contributed to *increasing* rather than decreasing school segregation. Following the *Oklahoma* decision which supported resegregation, for the first time since the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, segregation in Southern public schools is steadily increasing, and the largely intractable segregation of the Northern cities has intensified.^v

Ironically, just as this conference marks the anniversary of the Tulsa Race Riots, we are just a couple of weeks past the 58th anniversary of the May 17, 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, an anniversary we periodically mark, without fully acknowledging the reality of K-12 public school resegregation and the continuing wound that inflicts. Though the media presence of people of color and the election of a Black president might create the assumption that we now live, work and go to school in an integrated society, for many in the United States that simply is not true. According to the 2010 Census data, the U.S. population is now approximately 72% non-Hispanic White, 16% Hispanic, 13% Black, 5% Asian American,

0.9% American Indian, Alaska Native or Pacific Islander. Three percent of Census participants identified themselves as belonging to “two or more races.” That diversity, however, is not reflected in most neighborhoods. As immigration increases in our border states and the population of color multiplies in cities across the nation, one can find a rich urban mosaic of varying cultures and ethnicities, but more often than not, these diverse cultural communities are separated neighborhood by neighborhood, and often school by school. Most African Americans, Latinos, and Whites still live in neighborhoods with people from their same racial group.^{vi}

Racial segregation is also associated with economic segregation. The vast majority of those living in neighborhoods of concentrated poverty are Black or Latino. Blacks as a group continue to experience the most residential segregation (as compared to other groups of color).^{vii} Approximately one-third of all Blacks live in neighborhoods of concentrated poverty.^{viii} It is clear that those of us who came of age in the 1960s and 1970s are products of a historically unique period of progress toward integration which is not widely shared by young people today. As we consider reconciliation (as in the restoration of friendship and harmony), it is important for us to understand the significance of continuing residential segregation and increasing school resegregation.

One potential consequence is that while interracial contact and more tolerant racial attitudes increased during the last half of the twentieth century, the same may not be true in the first quarter of the 21st century, particularly in our public schools. *For both Whites and Blacks, the likelihood of having either a multiracial social network of acquaintances or at least one close interracial friendship was linked to the experience of attending racially mixed schools in childhood.*^{ix} As school districts move back to neighborhood school policies, the next generation of White students will likely have *less* school contact with people of color than their predecessors did. Particularly for young White children, interaction with people of color is likely to be a *virtual* reality rather than an *actual* one, with media images (often negative ones) most clearly shaping their attitudes and perceived knowledge of communities of color. The progress that has been made in the reduction of racial prejudice that can be associated with shared school experiences is at risk of stalling.

For students of color, the return to segregation means the increased likelihood of attending a school with limited resources. We know that 90% of highly segregated Black and

Latino schools have high percentages of poor children, however at most highly segregated White schools middle-class students are in the majority.^x The negative educational impact of attending high-poverty schools is well-documented. Whether a student comes from a poor or middle-income family, academic achievement is likely to decline if the student attends a high-poverty school. Conversely, academic performance is likely to improve if the student attends a middle-class school, even if his or her own family is poor.^{xi}

The learning conditions which are taken for granted in middle-class suburban schools are too often absent in impoverished classrooms. As an example, the American Civil Liberties Union filed suit in 2000 against the State of California on behalf of children in 18 public school districts, charging that children who attend schools without such basics as sufficient books, materials, working bathroom facilities, clean and safe buildings, trained teachers, and enough seats for every child are being denied their fundamental right to an education. In this case, 96.4% of the children affected by these dismal conditions were children of color, even though as a group children of color represent only 59% of the public school population in California.^{xii} It is not surprising that the outcomes associated with high-poverty schools across the country are bleak: lower test scores, higher dropout rates, fewer course offerings, and low levels of college attendance.^{xiii}

We need to remember that the fight for school desegregation was not simply a symbolic fight for the acknowledgement of the humanity and equality of all children. Fundamentally it was a struggle for equal access to publicly-funded educational resources. Clearly that struggle continues and its continuation directly impacts the possibility of the “restoration of friendship or harmony” across racial lines.

To reconcile also can mean to “settle or resolve” as in “reconcile differences.” Reconciliation of differences requires taking the time to understand what the differences are. Effective cross-racial dialogue is possible, but unfortunately relatively uncommon. When President Bill Clinton launched his Race Initiative in 1997, fifteen years ago, he said that the timing for such a national conversation was good because the nation was not at war and experiencing prosperity. It was at such a moment that the capacity to do the hard emotional work of engaging with each other about a painful subject was at its greatest. I believe President Clinton was correct in his assessment but unfortunately his efforts became derailed in the public

eye by the distraction of the Monica Lewinsky affair, a news story that broke just a few months after the Race Initiative was launched, and then the distraction continued with the subsequent impeachment proceedings. Public attention to the opportunity for dialogue presented by the Clinton Race Initiative was diverted before it could really take hold.

Now as a nation at war in Afghanistan and until recently in Iraq, and with a struggling economy and widespread economic hardship, we are *not* a nation ready to engage in dialogue as much as we are ready to hunker down and defend our individual positions. It is that defensive posture that is being modeled for us daily on the nightly news by our political leaders. Examples of reconciliation as in “the settling of differences” are rare indeed.

But reconcile also means “to make consistent or congruous, as in “*reconcile* an ideal with reality” and for those of us who “pledge allegiance to the flag and to the Republic for which it stands, one nation indivisible with liberty and justice for all,” we need reconciliation to make our actions as a community, as a state, and as a nation consistent with those ideals. When there is no restoration or reparation to the survivors of the state-inflicted wounds caused by the Tulsa Race Riot, when there is no educational equity, or when there is *unequal* treatment under the law (as was witnessed in the circumstances following the killing of young Trayvon Martin), our legitimacy as a democracy anchored by a Constitution that has been amended to provide freedom and protection to all of its citizens, regardless of race, is gravely diminished. To reconcile an ideal with reality requires action which is congruous with the ideals. There can be no reconciliation *without* such action.

To reconcile can also mean “to cause to submit to or accept something unpleasant.” as in “she was *reconciled* to hardship.” It is this form of reconciliation which is perhaps most evident in contemporary society. The recent passivity of communities of color, particularly in terms of electoral politics *since* the presidential election of 2008, is just one example of such apparent reconciliation to subjugated status. In psychological terms, we sometimes speak of learned helplessness, the phenomenon that occurs when repeated attempts to escape a painful situation have failed. Over time, a person may succumb to a sense of helplessness that persists, even when the circumstance has changed. One who has been trapped in a cage a long time may not even recognize the opportunity to escape when the door is finally opened. The irony in our current circumstance is that it is not just people of color who have been trapped by the

dysfunction in our society caused by racism. Wendell Berry, a White writer raised in Kentucky, wrote quite movingly in his memoir, *The Hidden Wound*, about the psychic cost of racism to him and members of his racial group:

“If white people have suffered less obviously from racism than black people, they have nevertheless suffered greatly; the cost has been greater perhaps than we can yet know. If the white man has inflicted the wound of racism upon black men, the cost has been that he would receive the mirror image of that wound into himself. As the master, or as a member of the dominant race, he has felt little compulsion to acknowledge it or speak of it; the more painful it has grown the more deeply he has hidden it within himself. But the wound is there, and it is a profound disorder, as great a damage in his mind as it is in his society.”^{xiv}

And though throughout this talk, as Wendell Berry does in his quote, I have referenced race relations in terms of Black –White relationships (largely framed by the historical specifics of the Tulsa Race Riot), it is important to acknowledge that there is a history requiring reconciliation beyond just Black-White relations, a point certainly understood by the indigenous community of native Americans in Oklahoma as well as other communities of color. *These are issues that impact all of us regardless of race or ethnicity.* Reconciliation to the status quo is one form of reconciliation that we do not need, and that none of us can afford. In a global economy in which America needs to be at its best, reconciliation to dysfunction will be disastrous for our success as a nation. To again invoke the words of Dr. King, “We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly...” He added, “I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. You can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be...”^{xv}

Finally, to reconcile can mean “to check (a financial account) against another for accuracy”, as in “to reconcile a ledger.” Though we don’t often talk about reconciliation between people in this way, there is a form of accounting that is needed for true reconciliation. There needs to be acknowledgment of pain caused and of injuries done that is part of the healing process. This is perhaps most clearly evidenced in the work of the famous South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission led by Bishop Tutu after the end of apartheid. As part of the process, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission established something called the Register of Reconciliation. The Register was not a checkbook register of the kind in which we balance our withdrawals and deposits, but it did allow for a kind of accounting which helped the nation’s

healing process. You can find entries in the Register of Reconciliation on-line and I read some of the postings in preparation for this talk.^{xvi} At the website, you will find this note of explanation:

This register gave members of the public a chance to express their regret at failing to prevent human rights violations and to demonstrate their commitment to reconciliation.

Mrs Mary Burton, the TRC Commissioner who proposed the establishment of the register, explains:

'The register has been established in response to a deep wish for reconciliation in the hearts of many South Africans -- people who did not perhaps commit gross violations of human rights but nevertheless wish to indicate their regret for failures in the past to do all they could have done to prevent such violations; people who want to demonstrate in some symbolic way their commitment to a new kind of future in which human rights abuses will not take place.

'We know that many South Africans are ready and eager to turn away from a past history of division and discrimination. Guilt for wrongdoing needs to be translated into positive commitment to building a better society - the healthiest and most productive form of atonement.'

Among the Register postings that I read, I was particularly impressed by this one, posted on 12/15/ 1997 by Dr. Merle Friedman, a resident of Johannesburg:

It is with deep regret that I reflect on my past. It is with deep sorrow that I acknowledge my complicity as a white South African. And it is with immeasurable guilt that I assume responsibility for my role in our shameful past. I cannot say "I did not know." I can only say that I chose not to know. I chose the safety of my own family over my moral duty to my compatriots. I chose my own comfort over the pain of knowing and the imperative to risk that this knowledge would bring. I raised and educated my children with privilege, whilst those around me were deprived. I am so deeply sorry! And the opportunity to express this regret and offer apology does not unburden me. This privilege allows me to

reach even further into my soul to express the remorse that I feel. It impels me to continue to see in my own small way to help repair the damage to our people and our land caused not only by “perpetrators,” but also by us, the bystanders, in the tragedy of our past. It impels me also to rejoice in the present freedom to build a new and great South Africa.^{xvii}

The opportunity for this kind of national accounting has never happened in the U.S. in any systematic way, and I imagine that even the suggestion of such a thing would result in an outpouring of defensive venom from some quarters. Such is the toxic nature of conversations about race at this moment in our history. Yet, recognizing that we all, regardless of racial group membership, have participated in the dysfunction of racism in our society in some way – actively or passively – we all stand in need of reconciliation – in at least one of its many definitions.

So where do we go from here? This is where leadership is required. We live in an anxiety-ridden time. If we had more time together, I could talk at length about the anxiety that comes from a changing paradigm – when things happen in ways you don’t expect -- and there is no better example of a paradigm-changing event in the American imagination, given our collective history, than seeing a Black president serving as commander-in-chief in the White House. That reality is unsettling enough for many, but add to it the 2008 collapse of the American economy prior to the 2008 election, the financial threat that many are experiencing, the ruptured sense of security brought on by 9/11 and other terrorist attacks on American soil, including here in Oklahoma, the slow recognition that the United States might not always be #1 in the world, and perhaps especially that white people will not always be the majority group, and you have the ingredients for a sense of serious psychological threat – even fear.

And how do we deal with fear? As human beings, like other animals, typically we either *withdraw or attack*. In the current climate of incivility, we see evidence of both patterns. The withdrawal takes the form of “hunkering down” – pulling in and pulling away from those we feel threatened by. When we are afraid, we quickly begin to categorize who is for me and who is against me. We start to think and act in terms of “us” and “them”. We withdraw into our circles of safety, and we attack those we believe are outside that circle and who pose a threat. That is what we see in Arizona with the new laws against immigrants, and the many states lining up with

similar legislation. It is why we are seeing a sharp rise in hate groups, and in racially and ethnically motivated hate crimes. According to the Southern Poverty Law Center, the number has grown by 54% in the last eight years, and even in Northern cities like Boston, racially and ethnically motivated hate crimes have risen by 39% over the last three years.

Living in a time of rapid social change, one might ask, how am I supposed to manage my anxiety and my fear – by lashing out? Certainly we see that kind of irrational response growing more common. Incivility has become more common because our society seems to have given us permission to behave in that way. We see more and more examples every day of people out of control – You Tube videos of teens fighting literally to the death, rude and unruly behavior in the “real lives” of reality television, and on the nightly news. What is the daily lesson?

I call these symptoms “birthing pains” because something new is emerging from this changing paradigm, perhaps something positive, but let us be clear, the moment of birth can be a dangerous time. And I think we *are* living in a dangerous time and should take that danger seriously.

When I listen to the polarizing rhetoric of radio and TV commentators, full of “us-them” language, I think of a book I read last year, *Left to Tell* by Immaculee Ilibagiza, a survivor of the Rwandan genocide.^{xviii} She speaks of the hostile rhetoric that was on the radio airways before and during the genocide, demonizing the ethnic minority to which she belonged. That rhetoric was made especially powerful because it came from the country’s leaders.

I do not mean to suggest that what we are seeing in the U.S. today is on par with what was happening in Rwanda. But I do want to make clear that *what we say* matters, and *leadership* matters. The expectations and values of the leaders can change the tone of the community, and the nature of our conversation.

Fundamentally, we know that human beings are not that different from other social animals. Not unlike wolves, we follow the leader. Yes, we have an innate tendency to think in “us” and “them” categories, but we also look to the leader to help us know who the “us” is and who the “them” is. The leader can define who is in and who is out. The leader can draw the circle narrowly, or widely. When the leader draws the circle in an exclusionary way, with the rhetoric of hostility, the sense of threat among the followers is heightened. When the rhetoric is

expansive and inclusionary, the threat is reduced. It sounds simple, but we know it is not. It requires courage, and sometimes means we must speak up against strident voices. But that is what leaders do.

The leader has to ask the question, how is the circle being drawn? Who is inside it? Who is outside it? What can I do to make the circle bigger, more inclusive? When I speak of leaders, I want to be clear that I am not just talking about elected officials. Each of you here plays a leadership role in some context. We all have a sphere of influence. It may be in your home, your classroom, your house of worship, your neighborhood, your workplace, your civic organization. In those leadership roles, we all have to ask the question, how is the circle being drawn? *How am I drawing the circle?*

We live in a time when fear is rising – and us-them lines are being drawn in a way that *does not bode well* for the health of our society. We cannot lock people out and expect success. We cannot lock people in and expect success. Truly we are caught in a “web of mutuality,” and that means we must look to *include*, rather than *exclude*; we must *expand* opportunity for all, not *limit* it; we must *recognize* talent in *all* communities including low income communities of color, not *overlook* it; we must *set the example*, knowing that others will follow. When we do that, we will be on the road to reconciliation – meaning, on the road to friendship and harmony, on the road to being able to understand and resolve differences, on the road to aligning our reality with our ideals, no longer accepting the status quo, but instead on the road to taking accountability for our actions, and to borrow a phrase from Dr. Friedman of Johannesburg, we will be “able to rejoice in the present freedom to build a new and greater” America!

Thank you very much for your attention.

ⁱ <http://digital.library.okstate.edu/encyclopedia/entries/T/TU013.html>

ⁱⁱ <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/reconcile>

ⁱⁱⁱ Irons, *Jim Crow's Children*, 259-271.

^{iv} Ibid, 271.

^v John Charles Boger and Gary Orfield, eds., *School Resegregation: Must the South Turn Back?* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 3.

^{vi} John Logan et al., "Ethnic Diversity Grows, Neighborhood Integration Lags Behind." Report of the Lewis Mumford Center for Comparative Urban and Regional Research. Retrieved November 2006 from <http://mumford.albany.edu/census/WholePop/WPreport/page1.html>

^{vii} Thomas W. Sanchez, Rich Stolz, and Jacinta S. Ma, "Moving Toward Equity: Addressing Inequitable Effects of Transportation Policy on Minorities." (Harvard College: Center for Community Change and Civil Rights Project, 2003).

^{viii} John A. Powell, "True Integration," in John Charles Boger and Gary Orfield, eds. *School Resegregation: Must the South Turn Back?* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005). 284.

^{ix} Ibid, 192.

^x Boger and Orfield, *School Resegregation*, 20.

^{xi} Ibid, 314.

^{xii} Marilyn Cochran-Smith, *Walking the Road: Race, Diversity and Social Justice in Teacher Education* (New York: Teachers College Press), 7.

^{xiii} Boger and Orfield, *School Resegregation*, 314.

^{xiv} Berry, Wendell. *The Hidden Wound*. San Francisco: North Point Press, 1989. 3-4.

^{xv} Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Letter from Birmingham Jail, April 16, 1963.

^{xvi} <http://www.justice.gov.za/trc/ror/index.htm>

^{xvii} <http://www.justice.gov.za/trc/ror/page01.htm> as posted on 5.28/2012

^{xviii} Immaculee Ilibagiza. (2006) *Left to Tell: Discovering God amidst the Rwandan Holocaust*. Carlsbad, CA: Hay House.