

# What are we racing for?

By Paul Houston | Categories: Uncategorized

Over the last few months we have seen a lot about the issue of race in the news. In fact, the issue of race seems to be very near most of the time. I grew up in the South and race was a constant companion in my early years. When I got older and was called a racist for the first time, I realized that given my influences that was probably true but it is also probably true that we are all racists to a certain degree.

It is very difficult to grow up in America and not be aware of race and to have it impinge on our lives. It is part of the DNA of our history. From our near eradication of the American Indian to our miserable history of slavery and the war fought to eradicate it to the internment of the Japanese our history is blotted by acts of racism and its attendant repercussions. Now, don't think I am an America-basher. I love this country and I love its intentions. I am just aware our actions haven't always lined up with our intentions.

The election of our first Black president was called by some the beginning of a "post racial" America. As if! If anything, it has heightened some of the latent racism that had gone a bit underground. When you see people with placards that depict the President as a witch doctor, and hear comments about him being a "baboon" you know that racism has not receded from our midst. When we see politicians question the President's birth place or call him a liar in the middle of the state of the Union address, you have to question the motivation when we have a history of, at least, giving lip service to the respect that anyone holding that office should have.

We also have seen the blaming of the victims of racism as the cause of it. I recently saw some commentators on America's more conservative television network discussing the issue of "reverse racism." It seemed that they were suggesting that when the issue of race is raised by a minority, they are really using the "race card" which is an act of racism itself. Now, some might suggest this is a convenient dodge to the bigger issue that in America, we are all racists. We can't help it. Minorities do, in fact, view the world through a racial lens. But so does the majority. We can't seem to help ourselves.

In the musical *South Pacific*, there is a song that sums things up. It is suggested that you aren't born with negative views of others who are darker and different. As the song says, "You have to be carefully taught." In our society that teaching permeates the culture. Even if we are raised by enlightened parents and live in a community that prides itself on color-blindness, the notion that we are not all alike seeps in around the cracks and crevices of our world.

The recent shooting in Kansas City targeting a Jewish Center and retirement home by an avowed racist is but a reminder of the ongoing cost of racism in our culture. It was more than ironic that all three of the victims shot, were, in fact, not Jewish. When you are blinded by racial attitudes, it leaves you blind. You don't always know exactly who you hate. The reality is that racism is built on pretty sandy soil and there is not much beyond hatred of others that holds it up. At its finest racism is ignorant and stupid and a waste.

So if I am right and racial thinking is a part of our society, what do we do about it? And if we are educators, what particularly should we do? I think we have to start by understanding where it comes from. I believe that racism is really "fear-cism." It is all about fear. We fear those who are outside our circle. That can be those who are darker or different or it can be those who worship at a different

church or vote a different way. We tend to trust and love those inside our circle as we fear and hate those outside it. And the worry is often about maintaining our place in the world. When others can move into our neighborhood, or our job or our White House, it scares us.

One thing that educators must do is find ways to reduce the fear by broadening the circle for our children. We have to help them include a wider variety of people in their circle. And we have to be brave enough to talk about these issues even if they are uncomfortable. One good development over the last generation is that younger people, as a whole, seem to be more tolerant of major differences. They don't think nearly as much about race as their parents and grand-parents and they are much more open to people who are different. That is a good thing and probably is a positive mark for educators and their work over the last few decades. However, as the news reports show, there is still much to do when it comes to making the circle larger.

Another four-letter word, nearly as forbidden as race in our discussion is the word "love." We often feel very awkward talking about that deepest emotion that binds us together as humans. One of my favorite movies is *Love Actually*. The basic premise of the movie is that love is actually all around us and that humans feel deepest about those we love.

Educators need to find ways of widening the circle of our children, and making them open to the idea that we really are our brother's keepers, even if those brothers are darker and different. I have admired Nelson Mandela for a long time. I admire him not only for what he did as a leader for his country and as an example to the world, but also I admire his ability to have come through the worst nightmare of repression and cruelty and come out the other side a loving and forgiving person. We need to remember his words. "No one is born hating another person because of the color of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite." As educators we must carefully teach our children to be better than we are and teach them to love.

Watch Paul Houston talk about the Common Core in "A Common Core Conversation with Paul Houston."