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What's Holding Us Back & *How Do We Go from Here?*

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17 November 2019

frederickuu.org

In early August, the news spread around the world that Toni Morrison (1931-2019) had died. She was eighty-eight years old. To name only a few of her pathbreaking accomplishments, in 1988, she won the Pulitzer Prize for her novel *Beloved*, arguably her masterpiece. The next year, she joined the faculty at Princeton University, where she taught for more than twenty-five years. And in 1993, she became the first African-American woman to win the Nobel Prize in Literature. Her obituary in *The New York Times* described her writing as **“luminous, incantatory prose resembling that of no other writer in English,”** and she was “one of the rare American authors whose books were both critical and commercial successes.”

I was previously most familiar with her fiction, but her death prompted me to read a powerful recent collection of her non-fiction essays, speeches, and meditations titled The Source of Self-Regard. For now, I will limit myself to a tribute she wrote about The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929-1968). She begins with the time Martin Luther King III (1957-), Dr. King's oldest child, asked her, “If you were having a conversation with my father, what would you like to ask him?” For whatever confluence of reasons, she found herself saying in response, **“Oh, I hope he is not disappointed in me.”**

Morrison never met Dr. King in person. When he was assassinated in 1968, she was thirty-seven years old and a year into her tenure as the first black woman senior editor in the fiction department at Random House in New York City. “Yet,” she writes,

I felt this personal responsibility to him.... I was responding to his mission. His...audacious faith. His expectation of transforming, appending, cosmic elegy into a psalm of brotherhood. His confidence that we were finer than we thought, that there were moral grounds we would not abandon, lines of civil behavior we simply would not cross. That there were things we would gladly give up for the public good, that a comfortable life, resting on the shoulders of other people's misery, was an abomination this country, especially among all nations, found offensive. (129-130)

Morrison eventually concluded that even if she could know the answer to whether King would be disappointed in her, that would be less important than periodically resisting the question itself: **how are each of us *individually* and how are we *collectively* living up to (or falling short of) Dr. King's dream?**

This question reminds me of Dr. King's fourth and final book published in 1967, the year prior to his assassination, titled: Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community? I do think that King would be disappointed in leaders both in this country and around the world who seem much more committed to *chaos* than community. As for us Unitarian Universalists, I think we're clear that we want to make the other choice of beloved community, but we're not always sure *how* to get there.

To use Dr. King as guide, he was clear that **what most consistently prevents us from building beloved community is what he called the "triple threats" of racism, materialism, and militarism.** All three are important. I've addressed each before and will do so again in the future. But for now, I would like to invite us to focus on racism, the first of the three, for how it continues to hold us back from building the world we dream about.

Dr. King's life and writings remain a vital touchstone, but he was taken away from us more than fifty years ago. For today, one of the best contemporary resources I have found recently is the writing of Ibram Kendi. In 2017, Dr. Kendi became the Founding Director of The Antiracist Research & Policy Center at American University in Washington, DC. A year earlier in 2016, **at age thirty-four, he became the youngest-**

ever winner of the National Book Award for Nonfiction for Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America. He jokes that growing up he dreamed of playing in the NBA (National Basketball Association), and he ended up with a very different NBA (National Book Award). And although that book is excellent, I would recommend beginning with his shorter and more accessible book, released a few months ago, titled How to Be an Antiracist.

So *how* do we go from here? *How* do we become more antiracist, more in alignment with a path away from chaos and toward beloved community? For Dr. Kendi, one central touchstone is *science*. The Human Genomic Project confirmed almost three decades ago in 1990 that, “**In genetic terms, all human beings, regardless of race, are more than 99.9 percent the same...**” (52). There is only one race—the human race.

Indeed, scientists tell us that,

The human species is so evolutionarily young, and its migratory patterns so wide [and] restless, that it has simply not had a chance to divide itself into separate biological groups or “races” in any but the most superficial ways.... We all evolved in the last 100,000 years from the same small number of tribes that migrated out of Africa....

Race is not a biological fact; it is a *social construction* of fairly recent origin.

However, because both race and racism are such powerful and influential social constructions, they will require an equally powerful effort and intention to *deconstruct*.

The fact that we humans are all 99.9% the same genetically clarifies that is it illegitimate—and *racist*—whenever anyone makes a claim that there is any inherent, biological problem with people of color as a *group*. Therefore, in Dr. Kendi’s assessment, we should “Admit racial inequity is a problem of ***bad policy, not bad people***.” And our approach should be to keep adjusting our policies until we reach the *result* of a much more equitable, beloved community (231).

In Kendi’s liberating words, just as is the case among lighter-skinned folks, “Black is beautiful—and ugly, intelligent *and* unintelligent, law-abiding *and* law-breaking, industrious *and* lazy—and it is those imperfections that make Black people human, make Black people equal to all other imperfectly human groups” (2017:504).

He continues in the conclusion to his epic, award-winning book *Stamped from the Beginning* that:

There will come a time when Americans will realize that **the only thing wrong with Black people is that [too many Americans] think something is wrong with Black people.** There will come a time when racist ideas will no longer obstruct us from seeing the complete and utter abnormality of racial disparities. There will come a time when we will love humanity, when we will gain the courage to fight for an equitable society, for our beloved humanity, knowing intelligently that when we fight for humanity, we are fighting for ourselves. There will come a time. Maybe, just maybe, that time is now. (Kendi 2017: 510)

I love that. There is so much power in focusing on a goal of a more equitable society—and continuing to adjust policies until we reach that goal.

Notice as well his point that too often, “racist ideas obstruct us from seeing the **complete and utter abnormality of racial disparities.**” We know that we humans are 99.9% the same, but the results of racism’s growth and evolution continue to create devastating inequities:

- “The median wealth of White households is a staggering *thirteen times* the median wealth of Black households” (Kendi 2017: 1)
- “Black people are five times more likely to be incarcerated than Whites” (Kendi 2017: 1).
- Black infants die at twice the rate of White infants.... And African Americans are 25 percent more likely to die to cancer than Whites.

These inequities must be dismantled if we as a society are to have a future with hope. As Justice Harry Blackmun famously wrote, “**In order to get beyond racism, we must first take account of race**” (19).

What Kendi does so brilliantly in his book *Stamped from the Beginning* is trace the “dual and dueling” people and movements in U.S. history who have been supporting *racism* (helping increase or maintain these inequities) and those who have supported *antiracism* (trying to decrease or eliminate racial inequities). In school, I learned some—although not nearly enough—about the history of *racism*:

- In the eighteenth century, our hallowed Constitution was written to count enslaved human beings as “three fifths” of a person.
- In the nineteenth century, a huge number of people were willing to go to war and die to defend the institution of chattel slavery.
- For much of the twentieth century, there were widespread racial segregation laws, lynchings, and more.

And I learned some—though not nearly enough—about the history of what Kendi calls *antiracism*, especially the abolition of slavery in the nineteenth century and the Civil Rights Movement in the twentieth century.

The way I learned the story of racism, however, was that it ended with the Civil Rights Movement—so antiracism wasn’t needed anymore. The result, in Kendi’s words, is that, **“We’ve been using 1960s glasses to see 21st-Century racism”**—and it turns out that many of us who are White— need to get our glasses updated?checked.

In contrast with my own early schooling, what Kendi’s book does so well is to trace both *racism* and *antiracism* as consistent through-lines that have both continued to grow, adapt, and evolve—starting before the beginning of this country and weaving throughout U.S. history until today. So we can celebrate that the old Jim Crow laws have been outlawed, but we also need to recognize that **Jim Crow’s children and grandchildren live on in the New Jim Crow of racially biased mass incarceration, new racially biased voter ID laws, and more** (x).

Because racism has continued to grow and evolve, antiracism too must continue to grow and evolve. And here we reach another of Dr. Kendi’s crucial points that can help us get beyond what has been holding us back: **“The opposite of ‘racist’ isn’t ‘not racist.’ It is ‘antiracist’ (9).**

I’ve lost count of the number of times I have heard politicians and other public figures defensively insist, “I’m not racist!” Kendi shows that claiming to be “not racist” is a distraction. Trying to carve out a position of “not racist” results in a false neutrality that usually results in the perpetuation of a racist *status quo*—and is therefore still on the side of racism. As the activist historian Howard Zinn used to say, “You can’t stay neutral on a moving train.”

A much more important question than “Are you a racist?” is “How are you being *antiracist*? Or are you *proactively* acting to dismantle systemic racism, and to implement politics that will measurably increase equity?” Here’s another way Dr. Kendi puts it: **“We know how to be racist. We know how to pretend to be not racist. Now let’s know how to be antiracist”** (11).

I particularly appreciate the way this perspective cuts straight through the fog that often develops around the question of whether or not a given person is a racist. So much time, energy, and ink has been spent trying to discern if a given person is racist. Sometimes there is a smoking gun proving racist intent. More often, as any lawyer will tell you, trying to prove intent is often difficult or impossible.

Thus, Dr. Kendi wisely advises us to set aside the question of trying to prove whether someone intended to be racist and ask instead, “Was the *impact* racist?” As the saying goes, “Even if you didn’t *intend* to step on my foot, the *impact* is that my foot hurts!” So Dr. Kendi invites us to ask— *regardless of intent*—did a given action increase or perpetuate racial hierarchy? If so, it’s racist. Likewise—*regardless of intent*—did a given action create more racial equity? If so, it’s antiracist (9).

What’s especially useful about this framework is that it can defuse the charge around whether someone “is a racist”—as if any of us had some unchanging racist or antiracist essence at our core. It turns out that we human beings are much messier than that: sometimes we’re *racist* (contributing to racial inequity), other times we’re *antiracist* (contributing to racial equity). The same white person can, for example, have a black friend (which is antiracist) *and* still support systems, policies, and laws that increase or maintain racial inequity (which is racist). Indeed, “Kendi has found the same person saying racist and antiracist things in the same speech.” In his words, “We change, and we’re deeply complex, and our definitions of ‘racist’ and ‘antiracist’ must reflect that” (Montgomery 3).

So with some of these new and improved insights, will we be able to let go of the racist systems holding us back from reaching the beloved community, and commit to a pro-active antiracism? To say more about that, let me share a relevant piece of Dr. Kendi’s powerful life story from his book. In January 2018, he was diagnosed with stage four colon cancer. The good news is that after both surgery and chemotherapy

he is currently cancer free. But the result could have been otherwise: “About 88 percent of people diagnosed with stage-4 colon cancer die within five years” (234).

Reflecting on his harrowing experience of surviving cancer against all odds, he began to develop a metaphor for the current state of our body politic. In his words, **“My society has racism. The most serious stage. Racism is likely to kill my society. My society can survive racism against all odds”** (235). As with cancer, if we remain in denial, the racism will keep spreading. But if we are willing to be honest about our situation and undergo some of the pain that will be required to heal, there are still no guarantees—but there is the possibility of a future with hope.

In Dr. Kendi’s words:

Saturate the body politic with the chemotherapy or immunotherapy of antiracist policies that shrink the tumors of racial inequalities, that kill undetectable cancer cells. Remove any remaining racist politics, the way surgeons remove the tumors. Ensure there are clear margins, meaning no cancer cells of inequity left in the body politic, only the healthy cells of equity.... Detect and treat a recurrence early, before it can grow.... Racism is not even six hundred years old. It’s a cancer that we’ve caught early.... Once we lose hope, we are guaranteed to lose. But if we ignore the odds and fight to create an antiracist world, then we give humanity a chance to one day survive, a chance to live in communion, a chance to be forever free. (237-238)