

“Looking at Anti-Racism With Spiritual Eyes”
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When I heard the keynote address at the 6th annual Antiracism and Diversity Conclave in February of this year, held in NYC, I knew I had to bring some ideas I heard there, back here to you. The speaker was David MacClean. MacClean didn't identify his race, didn't call himself a black man or a white man or any other kind of man. If I saw him on the street some part of my brain would probably catalogue him as Black. *There's a Black man*, even if I didn't hear the words. And, if I really stopped to take note I would have added that like most Black persons in America he must have had some white ancestors.

One of the foundational thoughts in MacClean's speech was this: “An anti-racist identity must include an antiracial identity.” By anti-racial identity I believe he meant that we need to move in the direction of *not* seeing and sorting the world into racial categories; that our frame of reference needs to be wider than that.

In our conversations here I have heard many of you quote some of the recent research which proves that racial categories are bogus. How recent genetic studies prove that some European ethnic groups for example have less in common with each other than they do with groups from other races.

Race it appears is truly skin deep. Not that we didn't know this, right?

If an antiracist identity includes an anti-racial identity, MacClean said, we need to question our every impulse to see people in terms of race. This may be one of the reasons he never once referred to himself in terms of race.

Now, I've always cringed when I've heard people say things like: *I'm color blind or, I just see people as people I don't see race at all.* I tend to think, when I hear those sentences that the speaker is naive or just doesn't want to take a look at reality. How can you **not**, in this country see race? It seemed to me that MacClean's ideas would be immediately grabbed upon by "those" types as an excuse for being ostriches.

The history of racism is in the very air molecules around us. When I lived in Kenya I did not experience those **same** molecules. It took me awhile to realize that something felt different. There were of course other problematic molecules of history in that atmosphere. It's too complex to go into now but in Kenya, while there was the colonialist legacy, I felt that I was seen *differently* there than I am here by people who have varying shades of brown skin, and that *I* saw people there, and *myself*, differently.

I believe I did not see race there in the same way because the history is different. Yet, I was often the only white person in sight for many miles. And was called a msungu, a European, at least five times a day. As soon as I

returned to the U.S. I felt our particular racial history take form in front of me, or hanging there in the air. That was an awakening to feel it so clearly having for a year known its absence.

It's peculiar to say that as a white person. You read Black writers on this subject. I think Maya Angelou writes about this, about how when traveling abroad she felt the psychological freedom of being in another country, free of the heaviness of being black in America. And then returning and feeling the weight of history upon her again.

If a white person is trying to be conscious, we also feel the difference on leaving and on our return. So, either that history is present in the very air we breathe here, or we pick up the story again as soon as we set foot on American soil. I think maybe both.

That was an awakening as I said. I felt viscerally that the story came back over me like someone was putting a coat on me. In this country I am white, with all that means. Here others are Black or Asian or Hispanic, with all that means. And we navigate a complex territory as we figure out how to relate within the legacy of our history. So yes, to leave and to come back is to know that racial categories are **both** absolutely artificial and unbelievably powerful. Hasn't race become so much a part of our American psyches that we can't really see each other without it, or around it?

What MacClean seemed to be saying was: practice dismantling your interior which has undoubtedly, in some way, come to resemble this world in which we live. He was saying this to all of us of all “races”. Do it bit by bit, piece by piece, one experience at a time. He asked us to withstand the “daily gauntlet of discomfort” in doing this.

If we do this, if we buy this approach, are we ignoring history? Or are we trying to change the air around us? The tension in the room that day in February at the Anti Racism Conclave was, I think, divided between those who believed his “program” meant ignoring reality, and history, and those who already felt a change in the air around them as they heard him speak.

I was one of the latter.

I’ll repeat his basic thought. If an antiracist identity includes a recognition of the fact that racial categories are bogus, **then** doesn’t it follow that we need to question our every impulse to see people in terms of race?

It makes logical sense when you think about it. If our entire history in this country around race, and that’s most of our entire history, is built on that original evil, then do we want to continue to pattern our thinking and our actions and our choices, our psyches, our spirits, our hopes, our dreams, our politics, our plans, on that original pattern of lies? Isn’t that in a sense participating in the lie?

Spirit, as many of you know, I've said this up here as have others, comes from the root word, air and, breath in Hebrew and Greek. I felt spirit come into me as he talked. A wider breath.

The daily gauntlet of discomfort. I have always thought the daily gauntlet of discomfort meant being willing to withstand the fact that try as I might, read and struggle, and fight for justice as I might, I am still "white" by virtue of my position and privilege and place in history in this society. Therefore in every interaction with a person of color in this country, particularly a black person, I will be seen as a white person, with all that history dragging behind me, even if unconsciously on both our parts.

That heavy coat again. That in my lifetime I can never get out from under it, not unless I leave the country. And since I'm responsible and I care, and I feel committed to the story of justice, I wouldn't leave. So if I'm going to be antiracist, that's just what I have to accept for the rest of my life. It feels like accepting half a life.

This other gauntlet offered me some new hope I don't quite grasp yet but that feels like spiritual freedom. It seemed to be offering MacClean some new freedom as well.

There is something naive about his approach isn't there?

“Unless you change, and become like little children...” Words ascribed to Jesus; words that kept ringing through my mind as I re-read some portions of the Autobiography of Malcolm X which Ron read to you this morning. There is something that rings of naiveté in the autobiography of Malcolm X that we heard this morning. And Malcolm X was an intense intellectual; an accomplished autodidact. He was someone who led with his head. He was passionate and fiery, but he led with his head. As so many of us UU’s do. As David MacClean does.

As passionate as we may be we sort with our heads first and foremost, our hearts sometimes get lost in the shuffle. But I believe that one of the signs of a transformative spiritual experience can often be simplicity, a child like spirit. A return to the self we were before we sucked in too much of the deadly air in this country.

I am considering today the power of the possibility of allowing that child like spirit to have some room next to my adult self which needs to know a lot and study a lot and have good opinions about things. I want an adult awareness of the history and potency of racism but I’m thinking that maybe I want it not to bury that naive openness. I am wondering how they

might blend together, the child like spirit with the adult awareness, which needs to keep growing as well.

I am beginning to wonder if I have to accept the American racist history, that story as my **spiritual** story. I have to accept reality and history but does it have to define my **spiritual story**?

I am beginning to see that what MacClean is talking about, is a personal, and shared, spiritual **practice**, which involves retraining our brains. Kind of like using the left hand if you're used to the right, or the right if you're used to the left. When you do that, some unused part of the brain wakes up. And maybe when that happens **creativity and a spirit of renewal** are released.

Remember when you were a child and you first realized there was horrible injustice in the world? I do. One of my first memories is at an A&P in the Bronx. It was down under the elevated train in a racially mixed neighborhood. A neighborhood where I'd stare fascinated at older girls going by eating these huge waffles with giant wedges of ice cream sandwiched between them, while my mother went to get the car and me and my sister held onto the grocery cart.

On this day in memory we are guarding a cart piled high with groceries for our family of six. On top is a pile of golden bananas. A man is

leaning on the brick storefront, and his son, who is about my age, maybe six or seven, is next to him. The man is smoking a cigarette and looks tired and worried. His son is saying Dad what's wrong, what's wrong? The man is staring at the food in our cart. There is the golden fruit sitting on top. To me it looks like a prize.

I think the man looks hungry. "Go home son, go home" he says. The child looks scared. "What's wrong, what's wrong?"

I doubt if I had any words for what I was feeling but I think it would have been something like this: We have too much, they have too little. They don't have money for a pile of groceries like this. That's not right and I don't know what to feel or do about it.

By the way in those days my father made \$6,000 a year as a minister which put us right about at the national poverty level which was \$4,000 for a family of four. But while there was often worry in my family about money it never included a father who looked defeated, leaning on a wall, smoking a cigarette and telling his son to just go home.

I felt rich next to them. And powerless, as a child. Do I need to tell you whether the man and his son were black or white? Is that part of the story? I don't know.

They happened to be white.

Should I have told you that the big girls going by with their enviable wedges of ice cream were black? Does it matter? Did I notice that then? I don't remember.

Children look at everything in the world in terms of what's fair and what's not. How come he or she has that toy and I don't. It seems petty but we carried that same sense of justice into the world, the scales were in our eyes. And I think every child has some first encounter that is a revelation about injustice. Some moment when he or she realizes that everything is pretty screwy out there. And if it's like this for some people, then it's not a safe world and the adults who are running it don't know what the hell they're doing. But we're in their hands for the next however many years.

And then we become one of them.

Do you remember the story of Siddhartha Gautama Buddha. The Buddha. Legend has it that as a child he grew up in a palace and was kept from seeing any suffering, poverty or death, at all. One day he snuck out of his palace and saw all three of these things and went into such shock, that in one fell swoop he was changed forever. His life became dedicated to the alleviation of suffering and the practice of compassion.

His life and Buddhism are about learning to stay awake. I think that was part of Jesus message as well.

We are not the Buddha. Most of us get lost along the way, we fall asleep again. Our hearts fall asleep. What happens to that original, naive, heart felt call to justice and compassion? There's so much bargaining that goes on inside of us around that original pole of justice.

Here is another key thought from MacClean's speech this one is paraphrased: He said that in a spiritual community we're supposed to be about something different than psychology or sociology or philosophy and we need to remember that. He said that in forming our anti-racist identity "the **eyes of the spirit** must be the primary organs of sight." That was one of the sentences that brought me more air.

And what are the eyes of the spirit? What does that mean to you?

Here is another thought, one which I've heard often. Having a good progressive or liberal or radical analysis of racism, or even a deep understanding of its history, having the right politics, doesn't in itself make us a *spiritual* anti racist community, though that political and historical understanding is *absolutely essential*. If we are to be a spiritual community and I believe we must be that first and foremost, we need to learn what it means to practice anti racism through spiritual eyes.

I have no idea what that means yet, practically speaking. Or how to do that in tandem with an awakened intellect. MacClean didn't give us a lot of particulars. I think these are dawning ideas, and they take form through practice. But I want to ask you to explore these questions with me.

What MacClean is asking us to do in a sense is take a continual spiritual inventory. The last time I was up here I talked about taking a personal inventory around money which I see as an inventory of our values. Here is another inventory to take. An inventory is a continual spiritual practice of staying awake of noticing our own reactions, and noticing our choices. That's the practical side of the practice.

There is a promise inherent in it. And that is what I'm trying to get a hold of today. I sense there is a freedom available to us as a spiritual anti-racist community. As a community that would learn to see with spiritual eyes. Maybe a freedom to be as wide in our hearts as a child as we look at the present moment, yet without developing amnesia about history.