

Erasing Racism A Spiritual Practice

The Rev. Dr. Jacqueline J. Lewis

Talking About Race

10 Important Things to Know

- 1. Race Matters. Every single day. We live in a world built on racial hierarchy; every person of color is raced several times a day. To deny that fact disables us from collaborating to create a new world. The truth really will set us free.
- 2 Never ever say, "I don't see color." You do, you absolutely do. And you have attached meaning to what you see because you grew up in a race-based society.
- 3 If a person of color thinks it's about race, it is about race. We bring our stories to every interaction; and those stories inform our experience. ALL of us bring our racial story/racial ethnic identity to every interaction. If you want to be an accomplice in the fight to build a racially just society, listen for the truth in the experience of others. Make it the starting point of the conversation/interaction. "Tell me more..." might be the best response
- **4** There is power in an "I" Statement. You own your feelings "hurt, embarrassed, confused, disappointed..." and how you feel is a certain kind of fact. This mode of communication can be used with friends, intimates, family, and colleagues.

When I hear that kind of language at the dinner table, I feel worried that the values we say we hold are being undermined.

When my emails and calls go unanswered, I feel undervalued as a colleague. In the present context, I can't help but wonder if this has to do with race.

- In some cultures, direct, straightforward, to-the-point speech is valued.To create a culture in which we dismantle racism, directness is required.
 - State the fact/Observe behavior:

 I did not get an invitation to that meeting.
 - Ask a clarifying question, listen. Ask another if needed: Why did you leave me off the list?
 - Describe the consequence (Using the "I" statement): When this happens, I feel hurt and undervalued.
 - Ask for the preferred behavior:
 Going forward, I ask you to use the distribution list with my name on it so I can better collaborate with our team.

Talking About Race

- 6 If you see something racist, experience something racist, say something. Even if you feel awkward, speaking-up is an act of resistance. You giving voice to the episode and its impact will change the story. This will take practice; your family will be embarrassed if you call it out.
- **7** When you have injured someone around the issues of race, apologize. Your intention has nothing to do with your impact.

"I am sorry" matters much more than "I didn't mean to."

- 8 Make this your mantra: Thank you for telling me.
- **9** You will make mistakes, say it wrong, get it wrong. Try again. Keep learning. Ask for feedback. AND LISTEN.

I can see that I've hurt you; and I'm sorry. Can you tell me more? How could this have gone better?

10 Talk about race/racism with your peeps. Don't pretend the world isn't on fire—it is. If you make race/racism a normal part of your conversation routine, you will be more likely to approach the difficult moments when something needs to be called out. Invite your friends into a period of reflection on racial dynamics in the arts, in television, in music.

Let's talk about race in that episode of Perry Mason. How many Black characters are there in the drama? What does that say?

Changing the Story

Writing the	· Vision and	Making	It Plain:
A Process	for Visioning	a New	Story

Plan to host an event for structured conversations with your team, your board members, your small group of friends, or your family. For this process you will need 2.5 hours. It would be helpful to have snacks and beverages. Breaking bread together builds community. Provide copies of *Getting Started* (See page 5) and the *Tips for Communication* (See page 7).

- 1. Invite people to find a partner and to use questions 1–3 to share with each other. The scriptures listed are my favorite, but you can use any texts that speak to your context. You can use quotes from Toni Morrison or Ralph Waldo Emerson or Alice Walker or. . . . It can be poetry, it can be scenes from a movie. If you have time, you could collect some of these quotes from the people you are inviting, You could issue this invitation: Share with me one _____ that describes your vision for the world right now.
- 2. When the pair finishes sharing, invite them to find another pair and to share their responses to questions 4–6. Encourage them to choose a pair that will increase the diversity of perspectives in the conversation. Have them review the *Tips for Communication* as they begin their discussion. Allow 45 minutes for this exercise.
- **3**. Allow for a 15-minute break, and then invite the groups of four to find another group of four and finish with the remaining questions, allowing 60 minutes for this conversation.
- 4. Close with a prayer.

Getting Started

Exercises for Small Groups

- **1.** For myself, "I have a dream that someday..." And for my community, my dream is...
- **2.** Read these texts, and ask, "What does this say about the future story of this nation?"

Genesis 2.4–3.7 Amos 5.21–24 Exodus 3.1–14 Matthew 28.16–20 Exodus 16.1–30 Luke 1.26–38 Isaiah 65.17–25

- **3.** Imagine that the life of this community is an ongoing story. If you are writing this chapter in the story of this church, what is its title?
- **4.** What is the title of the next chapter?
- **5.** What will help write that chapter and what will hinder it?
- **6.** If values are defined as the way we do what we do, make a list of the values you see lived out in this community, and how they are expressed in behaviors. In other words, what are the norms by which we live out our values?
- **7.** If a vision is a picture of a preferred reality, what is your vision for this community?
- **8.** What do we need in order to fulfill this call in terms of Resources? Money? Staff? Volunteers? Space?
- **9.** What will **you** do in order to fulfill God's call on our lives?

Beloved Community

The work of building multiracial, multicultural communities is exciting and difficult. Conversations and storytelling build relationships and connections. In our conversations, we can find a way to celebrate our differences. We are not all alike, and we are all wonderful. In conversations, we may find out that we have stories in common. In storytelling, we can dream of visions we can share together, and the shared vision connects us more closely.

Creating a community means knowing each other, celebrating each other, having empathy for one another, and supporting one another. Creating community starts with connections in one-on-one conversations, and in small groups. Conversations and storytelling help to cultivate shared vision, theology, and ethics. They are the bedrock for the emerging community.

Every gathering is a chance to take people to a deeper place and create community. One open ended question like, "What feelings are you bringing to the meeting with you tonight?" Or "Where did you see a new story at work this week in your life?" or "What do you need to let go of in order to be present here?" These questions can deepen connections. Creating community is a task that deserves attention.

At Middle Church, our staff does one-on-one conversations with congregants as a weekly spiritual discipline. We do one-on-one meetings with each other to ease the inevitable tensions that happen when creative people work together closely. At special times of the year, such as Valentine's Day, we invite the congregation to have one-on-one conversations with one another. The work of growing multiracial/multicultural communities is facilitated by a strong community in which stories are shared.

Communication

When diverse ethnicities and cultures meet in congregations, they meet on the border. Communities cease to be either/or and become both/and in these border spaces. Communication on the border requires care. We can bring biases, preconceived notions, and anxieties from our histories to the border with us. There are opportunities for hurt feelings, rejection, and misunderstanding. There are also opportunities to deepen relationships, to break down the walls that divide us, and to create new identities together.

In multiracial/multicultural communities, communication is key to creating a safe environment in which we can become one human family. The capacity to communicate in many cultural languages is key; we need to be multilingual on the border. By this I don't just mean learning to speak Spanish or Mandarin, although that is a great idea. I mean communicating in new ways. What is the cultural language of young adults, teens, and children, and how can I as a leader become conversant, if not fluent? What is the cultural language of my Korean neighbors, or my African American choir members? How can I as a leader stretch myself and enhance my ability to be conversant with those I might consider "other"?

can practice Care-full communication that enables understanding, promotes empathy, and provides pathways for engaging each other with respect and with appreciation.

We will need to communicate effectively on the border; we will need to speak in tongues. Effective communication is key to creating what might be called a holding environment in which we can truly see and hear each other as we experiment, try new behaviors, and love each other on the way to the Shalom of God.

Naming and Shifting the Culture of Your Community

Questions for your Staff, Board, and Vision Team

- **1.** What are the stated norms in our system? What are the implicit ones?
- **2.** What is the theology undergirding the norms?
- 3. How do these norms enable multiracial and multicultural connecting?
- **4.** How do these norms impinge or inhibit this connecting?
- **5.** List the new norms that need to be in place in order for a multiracial, multicultural community to grow and thrive?
- **6.** Brainstorm what we need to do to get the norms in place.
- **7.** What norms do we need in order to affirm the racial/ethnic, cultural, gender, and sexual diversity on our team?
- 8. What norms need to be in place in order for us to achieve our five-year vision?
- **9.** What norms need to be in place in order to affirm our commitment to racial/ethnic, gender/sexuality, and economic diversity?
- **10.** What behavioral covenant can we write to express these norms? How can we communicate this covenant to our congregation?

Culture Shift

Systems and communities become racially and culturally diverse with purposefulness and intentionality. Most congregations believe they are welcoming, but often norms, practices, and procedures do not shift. We continue to behave in ways shaped by the past. We let our habits guide us rather than the behaviors for the new vision. Developing a new culture requires creating new norms in conversation with new people.

For example, how do we welcome everyone just as they are and encourage healing and transformation? How are we vulnerable with appropriate boundaries? How are we permission-giving and conscious of the need for balance in our work and in our personal lives? Use Naming and Shifting the Culture of Your Community on page 8 to prompt a discussion about your system.

Change Management

Change is necessary for personal growth and institutional health. We know this intellectually, yet we are capable of resisting change even when that change is in our own or our institution's best interests. In faith communities healthy change is often viewed as a repudiation or rejection of how we have done things in the u C

ast or of what we value. In this sense, change challenges the status quo, calls	
is into unfamiliar territory, and requires of us new ways of behaving. Change	
an be disorienting and, if not managed well, can generate anxiety and conflict.	
As the world around them changes many congregations are living in the	
lace of disorientation and anxiety. Under these circumstances, they often make	
l informed decisions, seek out someone to blame for a difficult situation, or live	
n denial about mounting problems. Most faith traditions accept the premise	
hat God creates and recreates, makes all things new and moves us toward	
ransformation. This faith stands in contrast to the fear and anxiety that makes	
ongregations resistant to change.	
Systems and communities can find themselves tossed about between nos-	
algia for the past and an urgent need for a compelling vision for the future.	
Inderstanding the dynamics of change is a fundamental leadership capacity.	
A Fave Principles of Change	
A Few Principles of Change	
If change is to occur there must be "enough" discomfort, pain, sense of	
urgency or awareness of threat in the system to motivate the change. How-	
ever, pain needs hope to create possibilities, otherwise the system and its	
leaders can become immobilized.	
Leaders are rewarded for making people happy. By making people happy,	
we decrease the motivation for change. Leaders need to create safety rather	
than comfort to explore needed change.	
We tend to do the things we know how to do, are comfortable doing, and	
like to do, even though they have nothing to do with what needs to be done.	
• We cannot change the system without changing the norms. If we change	
the norms, we will not likely get rewarded because we are asking people to	
behave differently.	
behave unrelently.	

- Change requires listening and learning; a sense of hope, sustained attention to issues over time and a sense of continuity with the past.
- We cannot effect needed change without realigning resources (people and capital) with the vision of a preferred reality.
- Deep change in systems requires time, learning, support of leaders and a willingness to lose some people in the process of choosing the faithful path to a new story.

Capacity Building

You and your system will need new skills along the multiracial, multicultural journey. This is an issue not only of spiritual leadership, but also of developing cultural competencies. Develop a list of resources in your area. Use the resources and bibliographies provided at these conferences to compile a library of books about leadership development, race and racial identity, managing change and conflict, and the theology and ethics of multiracial and multicultural life.

Through conversations with colleagues around the country about the nature of this work, below are capacities I've discovered ten capacities needed to build a multiethnic, multicultural system.

Ten Capacities Needed in the Multiracial/Multiethnic, Multicultural Future

- The ability to create and work on a team.
- Self-awareness and other-awareness (Emotional intelligence)
- The ability to understand systems dynamics
- The ability to understand and use power responsibly
- The ability to listen with empathy
- The ability to cast a compelling vision
- A sophisticated understanding of gender and sexuality
- A sophisticated understanding of race and ethnicity
- The willingness to be vulnerable and take risks
- Curiosity about and respect for other cultures

Selected Bibliography

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Channing Brown. I'm Still Here

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Virgilio Elizondo, David Carrasco, et al. <u>The Future Is</u> <u>Mestizo: Life Where Cultures Meet</u>

Eddie S. Glaude, Jr. <u>Begin Again: James Baldwin's America</u> and Its Urgent Lessons for Our Own

June Jordan. "Poem for South African Women"

Ibram X. Kendi. How to Be an Antiracist

Audre Lorde. <u>The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the</u> <u>Master's House</u>

Cherrie Moraga & Gloria Anzadúa, eds. <u>This Bridge Called</u> <u>My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color</u>

Thandeka. <u>Learning to Be White: Money, Race and God in</u>
<u>American</u>

Isabel Wilkerson. Caste



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is Senior Minister at Middle Collegiate Church, a 1,300-member congregation in New York City. An activist and public theologian, Jacqui leads her welcoming, artistic, multi-everything congregation to work for racial, gender, economic, and LGBTQIA equality, and against gun violence, preaching "Love God, Neighbor, and Self; Love. Period. Everything else is commentary." She is a graduate of Princeton Theological Seminary and earned her Ph.D. in Religion and Society/Psychology and Religion at Drew University. Believing faith communities can lead the way to racial reconciliation, Jacqui and her spouse, The Rev. John Janka, co-founded The Middle Project which trains leaders to create a more just society. Ordained in the Presbyterian Church (USA), Jacqui hosted "Just Faith," an on-demand television program on MSNBC.com and is a frequent media commentator. Her books include *The* Power of Stories: A Guide for Leaders in Multi-racial, Multicultural Congregations, Ten Strategies for Becoming a Multiracial Congregation, and the children's book, You Are So Wonderful! She is currently at work on a book on how to heal souls and our world.

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