



The Race Story ReWrite Project: Revealing Capacities of our Nobler Selves

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Race. Just the word makes us skittish. We're afraid to talk about it. Yet we can't stop talking about it. Race has shaped how we see ourselves as a nation and how the rest of the world sees us; it's left us wounded and wary. But what if we suddenly realized we had the power to reshape our country's ongoing story of race? Could we believe that we're capable of moving ourselves from an intractable racial

situation to a just society? Or have our experiences convinced us that racism is inherent in human nature and will always be with us? How would things be different if we knew beyond a doubt that we hold the instruments of racial healing in our own hands? It appears that many of us are in the mood for change; we see where the storyline is taking us, and we're ready for a rewrite—not a misrepresentation of the past but a new faith in the potential of

the present. We're ready to claim our right to author a narrative based on listening to our nobler self—the self that feels the pain and disconnect of the past and is driving us to learn from those lessons and become the designers of a far better future. The Race Story ReWrite Project was created to support this process.

A New Model for Racial Healing

Claiming that we need racial healing implies that we are in a condition of disease. *Dis-* is a Latin prefix meaning “away or apart.” So we are apart from ease in regard to race. Restoring ourselves to health means mending that apartness, something that can be accomplished only if we address the attitudes and actions that perpetuate separation and access qualities of our higher selves—spiritual capacities that have yet to be collectively applied to efforts for racial healing but that hold enormous promise.

The Race Story ReWrite Project is a movement to take the *dis* out of our disease, to look honestly at the story we're telling ourselves about race, reimagine the plot, and change the trajectory of that story in a way that radically alters the outcome. It offers tools for participating

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in a transformative process that helps us step out of restrictive, obsolete, and dysfunctional habits of thought and behavior around race and reveals the innate capacities latent within our souls and our communities. Its mission is “to create sustainable social change by elevating the discourse on race and empowering individuals to access their authentic capacities in transforming cross-racial relationships.”

We'd known each other for only two years when our vision began taking form and then spent another year in planning before the project was officially launched on August 28, 2013—the fiftieth anniversary of the March on Washington. At the time of our first meeting, Tod, who is black, had recently published *Seeing Heaven in the Face of Black Men*, and Phyllis and Gene, a white couple, had co-authored *Longing: Stories of Racial Healing*. We realized that our

books addressed the same issues from two different perspectives and immediately recognized that we were destined to collaborate on something bigger. We chose the relationship between blacks and whites as our focus because it was clear that we could rewrite only our own stories, drawing on our particular experiences of race, and that we were ill equipped to speak to the racial perspectives of other ethnic and cultural groups. However, we believe that the principles we teach have broad application and can benefit others as well. We're also aware of our responsibility as elders to work on healing our generation's legacy of racial dysfunction and to offer our understanding in collaboration with younger generations, whose experience of race is different from ours in many ways.

Rising Above Conditioned Responses

For blacks and whites to begin rewriting our race story, we need to recognize that we've developed both conscious and unconscious conditioned responses to each other. *Conditioned* means trained or habituated, even hardened, and we have been exposed to this relentless training for centuries. Frequently, these responses emanate from

emotional reactivity and lead to entrenched patterns of mistrust, fear, condescension, avoidance, and separation. So the first step in healing our cross-racial interactions is learning to recognize when our behavior is the result of conditioning rather than choice. Then, once we've recognized a conditioned response, the next step is to remember that we can access a level of consciousness that is inherently noble. A pivotal point in the healing process is claiming our personal freedom to choose our responses based on that nobility. From this consciousness, we can exercise our free will to behave in ways that transcend our conditioning.

Today's example: Embedded in my memory are childhood experiences of white kids avoiding the seat next to me on the bus and not wanting me as a playmate. Adult memories include very similar "bus" type experiences, as well as women clutching their handbags as I walk by and men holding their wives or girlfriends close as I approach. So when a white woman walks into the Internet café where I'm working at my computer and is clearly looking for a table near an outlet and sees one next to me, I am not surprised when she passes it up and continues looking. Nor am

I surprised when I let her know that the table is available and she quickly responds, "No, I'll find something else." I think, "Just another prejudiced white person." And the old race story continues. Put this together with the media, which too often exercises bias and is adept at portraying black/white conflict, schools that teach far too many distortions of truth, and black friends who've shared their "fear-the-black-man stories," and it's not hard to see how conditioned responses are developed and hardened. If I'd connected with my nobility, I might have considered that *even if the behavior of the woman in my story was based on conditioned fear*, she, too, has nobility and, as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. suggests in *A Gift of Love*, such behavior is "not quite representative of all that [s]he is." I might have risen above my past experiences and considered other plausible explanations for her behavior. I might then have perceived that her coming into my life gave me an opportunity to strengthen my nobility.

Phyllis's example: A black female friend and I were discussing the role of elder woman in racial healing, and I said, "Our advantage is that we've earned the right to do our own thing. In fact,

society not only allows us to be powerful women, it even gives us permission to be eccentric and not care what anyone else thinks!" But when I looked across the table at my companion, she gave me the eye—the one that says "Oh, really?" I didn't get it at all. She finally said, "That's very interesting. I don't recall society giving me permission to do anything." Then I realized I'd spoken from a place of privilege, which allowed me to forget that black women do not automatically experience the same advantages I take for granted as a white woman. For a moment, all of my conditioned responses kicked in: embarrassment, guilt and shame, and fear that my friend would be so tired of this kind of ignorance that she'd decide she was done with me, which could so easily lead me to "this is too hard. I don't want to make the effort." What pulled me out of this emotional swamp was the look of love on her face, and, so reinforced, I was able to reach for humility instead of shame, trust instead of fear, and courage instead of withdrawal.

But if this conditioning is so ingrained and can sometimes be subconscious, how are we supposed to practice rising above it?



Phyllis Unterschuetz, Tod Ewing, and Gene Unterschuetz

We used to believe that we couldn't control our emotional reactions to triggering events, that our response to an occurrence, perception, or situation is automatic; we would experience a feeling whether we wanted to or not. However, certain spiritual traditions—Buddhism in particular—disagree. Recent brain studies, such as those discussed in Daniel Goleman's *Destructive Emotions: A Scientific Dialogue with the Dalai Lama*, have corroborated these teachings. Now we know that emotions are not generated by the experience itself, but rather by the meaning we assign to it. We can change an emotional response, even when it's deeply ingrained, by changing what we tell ourselves about what just

happened—in other words, by changing our stories.

Neuroscience has shown that there is a brief window of time between the event and the emotion during which we create an explanation that makes sense to us, given our temperaments and experiences. Then we have what appears to be an instantaneous reaction to that explanation. What if we could train ourselves to become aware, during that momentary interlude, that we were playing out a conditioned response? What if we then used that brief window of time to exercise free will and—instead of telling ourselves a story that triggers fear, suspicion, anger, shame, or resentment—reach for trust, compassion, empathy, integrity,

or forgiveness? Our cross-racial interactions would be radically different if we could learn to consciously replace emotional reactivity with spiritual capacities and higher-self attributes. Tapping those noble capacities then begins a process of transformation that not only changes reactionary behavior, but also creates a desire to proactively reach out to people we have historically feared or distrusted. Meditation and other spiritual practices can expand that window of time, giving us a better chance to choose a response based on nobility rather than conditioning.

Humanity is emerging from its collective adolescence and moving toward maturity, an evolutionary progression that involves both integrative and disintegrative processes. Because human beings are all part of the organism of humanity, our unity is already a spiritual reality; we are gradually becoming more adept at reflecting that reality in the material world. The integrative process of racial healing has been steadily evolving alongside the more visible history of racial separation; our well-being is assured when we align ourselves with the integrative aspects of our evolution.

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Accomplishing the Project's Mission

Our website is an interactive space where visitors post stories of cross-racial connection, share resources, and learn about the project's foundational concepts. In workshops, our facilitation team uses storytelling exercises, theater games, and rewriting activities to help participants examine their current race stories and identify the attitudes that characterize them, detect behaviors and emotional responses that are based on past conditioning, and practice making choices from a spiritual consciousness. Finally, participants reflect on their respective roles in creating healing and justice within a context of understanding that all are responsible to evolve and transform, whether they have been a member of a dominant or a subordinate group in the material world. All have access to the same spiritual power

that allows them to transcend their conditioned responses; together they come to appreciate the energy that can be released through their corresponding efforts to heal themselves and their relationships.

People who have attended workshops report feeling a sense of freedom and self-determination, hope, bravery, empowerment, relief, and clarity. One participant remarked that the presentation “inspires, lifts us up, gives us the courage to try one more time to bridge the painful gap between black and white in America.” Another stated that engaging with this healing model “called my soul out of exile into the light of reality.” We encourage people to continue their own processes of transformation by *experimenting* with new behaviors, *reflecting* on the experience, and *evaluating* their successes. When we are practicing reaching for a spiritual response, this action-reflection-evaluation cycle can keep some from slipping into hopelessness and frustration and others from becoming paralyzed by guilt and shame. Asking ourselves, “How effective was I in that situation?” helps us prepare for our next opportunity.

The three of us are constantly pushed to grow as we work together. We help each other—

sometimes unintentionally—to recognize our own conditioned reactions and provide one another with many chances to practice a spiritual response. Our evolving mutual trust supports our continued transformation and makes us better able to serve as facilitators for others. The work is far from pain-free; however, we find we’re actually rewriting our own race stories before our very eyes.

An Invitation to Participate

We hope that you will join us in this movement to reframe our collective race story and create a society characterized by dignity, justice, and authentic partnership. Help us elevate the public discourse on race by engaging in the conversation from a spiritual perspective. Transform your cross-racial interactions by paying attention to your own responses and choosing freedom over conditioning. Contribute your video stories and answer questions on our website and spread the word in your social networks. Connect our team members with organizations that are ready to heal racial separation. And above all, rewrite! Make sure that your personal race story reflects your highest, noblest self. ■