

# The Trauma of Racism: America's Original Sin

*Kenneth T. Ponds*



In a world aspiring to be “color blind,” children of color continue to be traumatized by interpersonal and systemic racism. The author describes a process of racial healing which goes beyond teaching tolerance to transforming lives and relationships.

**M**any years ago, when I began working with youth of color, it became clear that most did not begin to grasp the impact of the trauma of racism on their lives. Yet, their actions could be viewed as a reaction to this racial trauma. Nowhere did their files list racism as related to their problems, although it was the cultural context in which their presenting issues could be framed. It was not only youth who were impacted by racism, but also staff, whether or not they, like the young people, were aware of it. The challenge then and now is helping young people turn their lives around, only to be returned to communities steeped in racism which traumatized them originally.

With the election of Barack Obama as President, many believed we were entering into a post-racial America, a color-blind society where racism could begin to be healed if not totally dismissed. However, a recent Associated Press poll has shown that this is not the case (AP, 2012). In fact, racial prejudice has

increased slightly since 2008, whether measured by explicitly asking about racist attitudes or through experimental testing of implicit views. In sum, 51 percent of Americans express explicit anti-black attitudes compared with 48 percent in a similar 2008 survey. Anti-Hispanic sentiment by non-Hispanic whites also rose from 52 percent a year earlier to 57 percent in 2012.

In spite of hopes for a post-racial America, racism not only survives but thrives, continuing to wound vast numbers of Americans. The usual explanation is that economics, shifting demographics, and accelerated social change generate fear among many. However, I believe something else is in play and that is a lack of understanding. Below we will briefly address what racism is and how it is defined, views equating whiteness with being fully human and truly American, and the traumatic impact of racism on people of color. Genuine understanding will require racial healing and recognizing the oneness of the human family.

## ***Rethinking Racism***

Once called “America’s Original Sin” (Hulteen & Wallis, 1992), racism is exhibited in the physical, mental, economic, and spiritual violence done to people of color. In the United States, Native

Americans, the indigenous people, were the first to experience this violence, followed by black Africans, and later to various degrees, other people of color as they immigrated to the United States.

Racism is defined as power plus prejudice (Glasswing, 2012). Color prejudice is an unquestioned emotional attachment to a falsehood about someone who has a different appearance. Ironically, the idea of race is itself a fiction. Race is neither a biological nor a genetic reality, but a social construct created by human beings to categorize their world. This does not diminish the impact of race but today we know that there is but one race, the human race. Accepting the concept of one race is part of racial healing and the diminishment of trauma.

Many view racism as overt acts against people of color. Since blatant incidents occur less frequently than in the past due to changing laws and social mores, racism appears to be on the decline. However, the AP poll suggests it is not. Instead, racism is far more subtle than most recognize. Regardless of conscious intent, everybody in our society is conditioned, affected, and infected by racism.

Racism assumes the superiority of one group over another, an attitude of arrogance and ignorance. Racism extends beyond personal values and beliefs. The broader societal systems support the notion that whiteness represents superiority and non-whiteness signifies inferiority. Systemic racism disadvantages people of color and operates to the advantage of whites, whether or not they are aware of these privileges or even want them (Glasswing, 2012).

Theologian Brian Bantum (2010) sees race as functioning like a religion, a form of discipleship into which we are recruited. Whiteness is the centerpiece of this religion which places people in a hierarchy of racial classes. This classification was created by Europeans and European Americans—the Western world which asserts that one who is not white is not a full person. This message is reinforced day after day in myriad ways including social interactions, traditions, education, the media, and history. At a deep level, white people are believed to be biologically and morally pure, and, therefore, closer to the divine, the holy. Beauty, intelligence, values, “civilized” behavior, and every other marker of personhood are indexed on a spectrum of whiteness.

## **Rethinking Trauma**

Racism maintains domination, power, and control. It also provides the rationale and justification for debasing, degrading, and doing violence to people of color (Hulteen & Wallis, 1992). This is the basis of trauma. By definition, trauma leaves a person feeling hopeless, helpless, and fearing for safety or survival. It is the victim’s perception of the experience that defines trauma. Racial trauma is the physiological, psychological, and emotional damage resulting from the stressors of racial harassment or discrimination. Yet there is very little recognition of the effects of racial harassment in diagnostic manuals (Carter, 2012). Therefore, for example, when youth of color enter treatment programs, the focus is on the presenting problems with little regard for the racial trauma that also plays an important role in the youth’s life. Racial trauma is seldom addressed, as we focus only on “fixing” part of the child, not the whole child.

Why are youth of color more traumatized by racism than youth who are considered white? Many people are exposed to adverse life events which might be seen as traumatic, but not all develop psychological symptoms. Researchers have suggested that people of color are confronted with hostility, neglect, and racism that may heighten the effects of other traumatic life events. Whites may also be exposed to traumatic events, but their social status seems to buffer the impact of what might produce severe stress in people of color.

Racial trauma may involve a negative, sudden, and uncontrollable experience or crisis. Or it may be an ongoing physical or psychological threat that produces feelings of fear, anxiety, depression, helplessness, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Much racial trauma is the result of what are called micro aggressions, the everyday verbal or non-verbal slights, snubs, or insults (whether intentional or unintentional) which communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to targeted persons (Sue, 2010). Micro aggressions have a powerful impact upon the psychological well-being of the targeted group or person. Sadly, the most detrimental forms of micro aggressions can be delivered by well-intentioned individuals who are unaware that they have engaged in harmful conduct toward a socially devalued group.

***Regardless of their conscious intent, everybody in our society is conditioned, affected, and infected by racism.***

Racial events, including micro aggressions, leave people of color feeling stressed. Responses to stress are fight, flight, or freeze. Fight is apparent: one stands one's ground and defends oneself from attack. Flight is running away from the stressor. Internalized racism may lead to violence against one's own group: black on black, red on red, brown on brown. It also leads to escapist activities such as substance abuse and destruction of family structure. Many youth of color do not act out but exhibit the flight and freeze response. Freeze is an involuntary, biological response used as a last resort for survival. It is a state of shutdown and disconnect while waiting for the threat to pass. One must guard against the cause of stress, working hard to manage one's anger, fear, and distrust. There is always the impending feeling that something terrible is about to happen.

### **Pathways to Healing**

If youth of color are to be made whole, the idea of racial healing must become an important component in education and treatment. However, an atmosphere of safety must first be created, for racism is an assault on our fundamental sense of safety and the right to exist in the world. We must also help youth of color to feel valued for who they are and what they have to offer to a world starving for their gifts and talents.

Racial healing does not seek to offer a solution, but works to transform the person to such an extent that he or she becomes one with others. We treat others as brothers, or sisters, and act in ways which bring no harm to these relatives. This expands one's capacity to experience the reality of another person's life experience through education of the heart and mind (Glasswing, 2012).

Education of the mind would entail rethinking the entire concept of race and gaining a historical view of racism. This helps the young person understand the impact of racism on his or her life and how reactions may be tied to this trauma. Education of the heart develops empathy with others. This requires learning not only to listen but to feel the life experiences of others. Without judging these experiences, we pay attention to the images and sensations of the experiences of others.

The pathways to racial healing proposed in Glasswing (2012) involve five shifts which go beyond "teaching tolerance" to transform lives and human relationships:

- The first Shift—*Material to Spiritual* is the Pathway to Connection. Beneath physical appearance is the inner person with values, beliefs, experiences, and feelings.
- The second Shift—*Cognitive to Affective* is the Pathway to Compassion. We go beyond rational arguments to develop empathy for each other's feelings.
- The third Shift—*Certainty to Curiosity* is the Pathway to Genuine Understanding. We abandon judging and attempt to understand why one does what one does.
- The fourth Shift—*Solution to Transformation* is the Pathway to Courage. We go beyond superficial fixes to new attitudes and behaviors about self and our relationships.
- The fifth Shift—*Debate to Dialogue* is the Pathway to Listening and Learning Together by deep understanding of one another's experiences.

Healing racial trauma frees the young people to respond in more positive ways to the challenges facing them and to discover their hidden greatness.

**Kenneth T. Ponds, MA**, is Chaplain at Starr Commonwealth, Albion, Michigan. He is an ordained pastor and a certified trainer in Glasswing racial healing. He can be contacted at ponds@starr.org

### **References**

Associated Press. (2012). Majority harbor prejudice against blacks. Poll conducted by the Associated Press, October 27, 2012. Retrieved from [http://usnews.nbcnews.com/\\_news/2012/10/27/14740413-ap-poll-majority-harbor-prejudice-against-blacks?lite](http://usnews.nbcnews.com/_news/2012/10/27/14740413-ap-poll-majority-harbor-prejudice-against-blacks?lite)

Bantum, B. (2010). *Redeeming mulatto: A theology of race and Christian hybridity*. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press.

Carter, R. T. (2012). *Racial harassment: The unidentified trauma*. Retrieved from <http://roberttcarterassociates.com/pres2.html>

Glasswing. (2012). *Glasswing training manual*. Albion, MI: Starr Commonwealth.

Hulteen, B., & Wallis, J. (1992). *America's original sin: A study guide on white racism*. Washington, DC: Sojourners.

Sue, D. W. (2010). *Micro aggressions and marginality*. New York, NY: Wiley & Sons.