

AN UNFINISHED REVOLUTION

THE VISION OF A COMMON DESTINY

by Anne Braden

Each of us comes to our perspective on racism based on our own life experience. My life experience is rooted in growing up white and relatively privileged in totally segregated Alabama in the 1930s.

Through lucky accidents I came to the realization while I was still very young that the society which had nurtured me was totally wrong. It was wrong because the good things it had given me—cultural and seemingly spiritual, as well as material—derived from the fact that humanity itself was denied to people of color.

Coming to terms with that fact was a tremendously painful experience; it involved literally turning myself inside out. To be truthful, the pain has continued throughout my life in a distortion of relationships with people I love.

But the experience was also totally liberating. I define racism as the assumption that everything should be run by whites for the benefit of whites. For many white Southerners of my generation, understanding that our society was wrong on race was the "open sesame" that brought understanding of all the "other" issues.

From that beginning I quickly grasped the roots of our national violence in the genocide against Native Americans. I understood the wrong of an economy in which the few assume the right to luxury while others go hungry. I understood the wrong of our foreign policy which as I came to maturity in the mid-'40s was setting out to run not only this nation but the world for the benefit of whites. All this was liberating because it opened the way for me to use my talents in creative ways, in movements that were, and are, seeking to transform our society.

I describe my personal experience because I think the turning-inside-out that a white person goes through in dealing with racism is in microcosm what our whole society must do in order to move from death to life. We saw this acted out in the 1960s with the civil rights movement.

C.T. Vivian helped me understand that decade when he put it in the following theological terms: "It is true that we must repent of our sins before we can be saved. In the '60s, this nation took a first step toward admitting that it was wrong on race; the result was an explosion of creativity and humanity."

That was it. The essence of the '60s was that for a moment this nation moved in a humane direction.

This society has never had "room" for people of color. Because it was built on inhumane principles, there has never seemed to be enough for everybody. So people of color get left out. That explains today's depressing statistics that define "institutional racism"—the fact that people of color have only half as much of the good things of life as whites (such as health care, jobs, and education) and twice as much of the bad things (such as prison cells, unemployment, and slums).

In a sense the civil rights movement was people of color saying to the society, "Make room for us." In so doing, they stretched it for everyone. But it was an unfinished revolution. The freedom movement of that period accomplished monumental things, but it was just beginning to deal with economic justice when it was stopped short, I believe deliberately, by those who realized that it threatened their power. The result was that the entire society turned away from humane values and the needs of people were pushed into the shadows.

ALL THIS SUGGESTS that only as white America begins again to deal with racism can it move in creative directions. The hopeful thing today is that this seems to be happening. White Americans are discovering racism again. For many of us, the issue never went away and one wonders where people who are rediscovering it spent the '70s and early '80s. But the important thing is that they are coming back.

This potential new birth of freedom must have political expression. I believe that existed in the Rainbow Coalition. I spent time and energy in 1988 working to elect Jesse Jackson as president of the United States. Not just because it is good that we have a black candidate, but because the fact of that blackness—the struggle it represents—offers the only hope for uniting all those who long for a humane society and can therefore move us in that direction.

We may fail. But I never asked assurance that the freedom movement would prevail in my lifetime. We are trying to undo 400 years of wrong history. It is enough to be a part of that long chain of struggle that stretches into the past and will go on into the future long after we're gone. ■

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