

Notes from a Mis-Educated White Man

January 1992

I am an educated man.

I went twelve years to schools and graduated from high school.

I am an educated man.

I went to college for two years, before going to World War II.

I am an educated man.

I went to college for three years, and graduated, after World War II.

I am an educated man.

I went to graduate school for four years, and graduated.

I am an educated man.

In all that "education" I was told little about African Americans, most of it wrong.

In all that "education" no one ever asked me to read a book by an African American author.

The most I learned about enslaved African people during those years was that they were "happy", passive, and loved their masters, (a la Samuel Eliot Morrison).

I was not taught that our national economy was built on the backs of enslaved African men and women.

I was not taught that the religion I loved condoned and at times inspired the enslavement of blacks.

I was not told that it was absurd and arrogant for the Pope and the Kings of Spain and Portugal to assume that they had the right to divide the world between the two countries.

I was not told that many years before Columbus African people had come to this hemisphere.

I was not taught that the coming of Columbus to these shores was the beginning of genocide for Arawaks, other native people, and slavery for African people in this hemisphere.

I was not taught that for thousands of years before Columbus there were flourishing societies, with elaborate ways of relating, governing, living, and surviving in this hemisphere.

No one explained to me the existence and growth in Europe of anti-black attitudes, prior to the explorations into this part of the world.

No one described to me how those old European attitudes got translated into the decisions to enslave African people here.

No one told me of the heroic and steady resistance by African people to their

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enslavement.

No one told me of the ways in which countless laws in our colonies denied the value of African lives.

No one told me that most of our admired Founding Fathers believed African people to be inferior to whites.

I was not taught that the original Constitution of the United States had written into it assumptions of white superiority.

I was not taught that most white Abolitionists believed in white superiority.

I was not taught about the continuing discrimination practiced legally against African people for three centuries, continued in more subtle forms today.

I was not taught about the amazing tenacity with which African peoples struggled to maintain their culture in spite of enslavement.

I was not taught about the ways in which "my" government was involved in the willful neglect of black health, for instance, in the Tuskegee syphilis experiment, nor how that neglect continues today in policies which watch black infants die at a rate far greater than whites.

I was not taught that the unemployment rate of blacks has for years been almost double that of whites, and no one seems much concerned to correct that institutionalized discrepancy.

No one told me about the campaigns of some branches of "my" government to undermine black leadership, instanced by the the FBI's conspiracy against Dr. King, or by alleged continued harassment of black elected officials today.

No one in all those years of "education" told me about the persistent ways in which many of the systems of my society are infected with both personal prejudice and institutional "tilts" which deny African American equal access to goods, services, and resources.

No one explained how sometimes subtle but pervasive anti-Black prejudice often drains the energies of African American people into simply coping, thus diminishing their abilities to perform in the academic or professional world.

No one told me that I, as a white male, had some obligation and ought to take a role in amending the wrongs of the past, and in creating a present-future which is more racially just.

No one told me that often times what is "wrong" is not in the Black community, or in Black individuals, but in the heads, hearts, and habits of white people.

No one told me of the differences between prejudice, discrimination, and systemic racism, nor did they explain how those differences affect the ways I work for racial justice.