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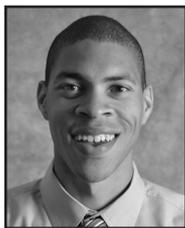
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RACE AND HARMONY: AN AFRICAN AMERICAN PERSPECTIVE



Jeffrie Mallory

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...can Race and Harmony co-exist in today's society?

Initially, I struggled with how to properly frame a discussion for this essay on Race and Harmony: An African-American Perspective. The subject is deep and complex with historical underpinnings. Our current political climate and divisive social dynamics are impacting racial harmony. From a quick glance at a national newspaper to a quick flip through a national news broadcast, you could wonder if race and harmony should even be placed in the same sentence. Recent and historical acts of violence against groups of certain races and national policy debates, would lead many people to question if it is possible to achieve and sustain racial harmony. The topic of this essay is very important and worthy of discussion. It challenged me to personally reflect on my life and experiences to articulate my perspective on this challenging topic. The idea of delivering thoughts to a wider forum is greatly appreciated, as it is a privilege to share such thoughts with others.

It is important to acknowledge that my perspective on Race and Harmony is no more valid than any other African-American. Our perspectives on race were shaped well before we were able to make decisions for ourselves. We are directly informed by our upbringing via influences from many intra-societal cultural norms learned during our early childhood. Furthermore, through many interactions and encounters in our youth, we developed a guide that referenced how we react and respond to the world we currently live in.

I did one simple thing as I began to gather and examine my thoughts on the topic of Race and Harmony. I picked up my phone and scanned a few saved pictures, reviewed my recent calls and my previous week's schedule at work. It was in this moment, that a smile quickly came to my face, but more importantly, I had a basis for examining and referencing my thoughts. What I viewed, was a wide variety of social and professional activities, people, places and things in my life, race was not the most prevalent, but all the harmony one could be privileged to have. This helped me focus on the essay question, can Race and Harmony co-exist in today's society? I am hopeful such a question will come to you as we continue to discuss this topic.

To gain more insight into Race and Harmony, I feel it is important to understand some of the "perceived differences" that divides races. Each of the major divisions of mankind have physical characteristics including differences in skin tone that are distinctive to their specific race. On a deeper level, the differences I view in people and their race, can be found through

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their nation of residence, community, or ethnic group. One of my examples of a community difference, can be taken from the city in which I was raised, Bedford, Virginia. Traditionally, residents resided in specific areas due to the color of their skin. While the socioeconomic status varied amongst all members of the community, it was typically assumed that you resided in certain areas according to your race. People tended to socialize and interacted, outside of the workplace, along specific color lines. To some degree, the division along color lines was recognized as a cultural norm that didn't draw too much criticism or attention from the people of the town.

Race and Harmony: It's Importance in Society

For today's society there are many areas where the racial divide is indeed prevalent. However, in an era of dwindling resources and higher demand, racial harmony may aid in the development and effectiveness of public policy. Policy makers could benefit from the ability to focus on actual constituency needs, absent divisive racially tinged political rhetoric. The divide seems to be growing as a result of a wide variety of influences that appear in subtle and direct acts. We are repeatedly encouraged to pick a side when it comes to certain issues in the many societies we live in. Perhaps, the act of picking a side on where you stand and who you support based on race has taken place in your life. As an extension and taken from recent examples at large, the picking of a side can literally take a physical presence but can also show through other means, such as voting in favor of an initiative that clearly or subtly chooses a preference of one race over another. At a minimum, the act of picking sides based on race can be quite problematic because effective public policy cannot be developed and implemented along racial lines. It may be more appropriate to suggest a best practices based alternative. Such an alternative I wish to provide is for each of us *to know where we stand*.

To know where we stand, goes well beyond what group we associate ourselves with. We have to understand our motivations, desires, and what we are willing to give and accept from society for personal fulfillment. This understanding will enable the proper framing for a productive discussion on Race and Harmony. In today's society, there is an overabundance of influences, including social media and other focused campaigns that purposely influence people's perceptions. Another primary question is, is it possible to make a decision in one's life without understanding and recognizing external influences and how they are guiding the decisions we make? Simply look at the topic of Race and Harmony. At this moment, you have some type of feeling towards the topic. As you truly reflect on the topic and where you stand, there may be a mix of feelings. Such

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a question should be challenging to think about and could even bring you to the point of being emotional, which is perfectly fine.

On the other hand, it is important to note that racial harmony is realized in a variety of ways in our current society. Harmony is found in certain themes and objectives that have crossed the racial and cultural barriers for the common good. For example, war can bring disparate races and cultures together and in the process ameliorate overt biases to defeat a common enemy. Another example is in our response to natural or man-made disasters. In such situations, people will commonly share shelter and food in an attempt to recover ravaged communities. Some groups, such as the American Red Cross, are very effective at collecting and distributing food equitably and without regard to race or cultural background. The aforementioned examples confirm that interracial and intercultural harmony can be obtained across a wide range of “different” individuals.

Race and Harmony: Youthful Experience

My perspective as an African-American is firmly attributed to the previously mentioned small, rural community of Bedford in Southwest Virginia. It is in this town of 7,000 people, that I captured many lessons learned. I recall early lessons taken from grandparents as they discussed the Jim Crow era and their time spent as employees at the local rubber plant, which served as a critical link to our region and family’s well-being. More importantly, I was made aware of the differences of races and understood that while equality was desired, oftentimes privileges and injustices were distributed along color lines. The elders endured and conditioned their children to survive and thrive under these conditions.

Through countless conversations and examples, the manner in which my family delivered the lessons and even exposed me to real-life lessons is something I am very thankful for. In retrospect, the residual impact of these lessons still impact me today. This impact is seen when we propose certain programs for students in our university community, it is viewed in our initial welcome to students we are privileged to serve and it is seen in our conversations with students who feel they have been mistreated in some way. We strive to ensure that our community is here to serve them as they learn and grow.

A seminal learning moment took place for me in the early 1990’s between my mother and a neighbor of another color, who resided a quarter mile away. On this particular day in the summer her car broke down at the end of our road. As my mother contemplated who should walk back to the house to inform our family, some half mile away, our neighbor pulled

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up in his pickup truck to offer assistance. This neighbor, who at that time, had resided beside us for over 20 years offered to give my mother a ride back to the house. The one caveat however, is that she would only be allowed to ride in the bed of the truck and not the cab, to which my mother kindly declined. I could only assume that the neighbor saw this as a benevolent act of community friendship and, based on his experiences, thought it proper to insist that she ride in the bed of the pickup. Conversely, my mother knew it was demeaning and not a lesson that she wanted me to learn. Both parties, the neighbor and my mother, brought two different perspectives to this one incident. I was proud of my mother and can only hope that the neighbor had a moment to pause and reflect on why his act of benevolence was turned down.

The impact of this moment touched me deeply. The peaceful manner in which my mother explained and reflected on the situation was a lesson that I will never forget. At first glance, the idea that another person could attempt to demonstrate their superiority over another person, is nothing short of troubling. On the other hand, my mother's response in which she stressed the importance of helping someone in need, regardless of their race, is a lesson that far too many people do not hear or know. To this day, this experience, coupled with a few others, greatly solidified my desire to treat others, regardless of their race, color, and status with the highest dignity and respect possible.

As time progressed, I paid close attention to the lack of achievement in mobility and overall growth for African-Americans in my community. I watched the interactions of people in the community and workplace, which seemingly involved tension at every turn. In the end, it seemed as if African-Americans, in particular, were always lower on the totem pole than the majority of the White community. From positions of authority in the workplace, to leadership positions in community programs, the presence of African-Americans was not found.

During my youth I witnessed a devastating pattern, in which many African-American youth, who were once cherished by community members as school sports stars, were both shunned and not cared for when their time and careers had ceased. I simply could not understand why and how you would not want to help a child at perhaps one of the most critical moments of their development in life. The fact that it seemingly was repeated on a frequent basis, and no one ever challenged it also served a major lesson to me. It pointed to a system that was not designed to help and one in which little race and harmony co-existed outside of winning in a team sport for the glory of the community.

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Race and Harmony: Adult Experience

One major factor for my understanding of Race and Harmony, comes from the sport of basketball. From how I treat other individuals, assimilating in other cultures, and gaining respect for both, myself and others, the sport placed me directly in the path of many teachable moments. As a child, I experienced different cultures through participating on teams and in leagues with children of many different races. As a youth, the notion of playing with children who were different in such factors as race and religion never crossed my mind. In a sense, my interactions and relationships with other children was pure.

During my high school years, my perspective significantly changed. Through attending an affluent boarding school in a nearby community, I quickly noted the many differences between people. From overall amenities including robust food and nutrition options to the great care and concern exhibited by school officials, this experience was much different than anything I had experienced. As a student-athlete, I still had no perceived issues with race. I was thankful to be a member of the basketball team and school community. I would later revisit this situation, and learn that a few of my minority classmates struggled during their time in the school, both on and off the court. I suspect my feelings and positive experience were much different as a result of a positive mindset which was embedded in me as a child.

The sport of basketball continued to play a large part in my years beyond high school. After high school I was fortunate to gain a full scholarship as a student-athlete to Saint Vincent College, a small liberal arts college in Latrobe, Pennsylvania. Knowing little about the Greater Latrobe area, although I would quickly learn that the late Arnold Palmer was a cherished community member, I was focused on being the best teammate and student-athlete possible. Once again, I did not give much attention to the statistics that surrounded me including race, ethnicity and the socioeconomic status of my peers. At this point, I was grateful to be a part of a new and wonderful college community that would aid my academic pursuits and remove any financial barriers in the process.

It was in college, that like so many, my sphere of influence greatly expanded as I made friends with people from many different cultures and geographic areas. At its core, through many travels and interactions, I was a member of a team and community that had unifying desires. These desires were rooted in securing victories on the court and actively molding productive members of society in the many years ahead. As team members we took great pride in helping one another. We were quick to point out mistreatment caused to us by others and also did a

great job of holding each other accountable in the process. We openly discussed issues relating to race, politics and relationships. The discussion of race in particular was always productive, as we genuinely respected each other's races. Above all, we appreciated the situations we previously came from and cherished an ultimate goal, through the achievement of winning as a team and receiving a college degree

I felt welcomed at every turn. It was affirmed in me that there is a genuine need to Invest in People. I believe that giving people your time and attention can create more harmonious situations.

My most significant moment of cultural awareness and cross cultural experience occurred when I journeyed to Spain to play professional basketball. One of only two Americans on the team, I was quickly faced with a critical decision during my initial welcome. I could either sit in my apartment and not interact with others or I could immerse myself in the wonderful Spanish culture that surrounded us. I quickly chose the latter. As a result, I was welcomed with open arms into numerous situations. Overall, my time in Spain provided the opportunity to learn more about myself, with careful attention to the importance of relationships. In fact, I spent a considerable amount of time watching how people treated one another.

I observed open relationships that seemed to promote a more cordial atmosphere. I felt welcomed at every turn. It was affirmed in me that there is a genuine need to *Invest in People*. I believe that giving people your time and attention can create more harmonious situations. The act of investing in people is something that each of us has the ability to do and more importantly control. With respect to investing in people, the important question is, does an individual desire to invest great time in other individuals? This investment comes with the chance that nothing, monetarily or physically, may be gained as a result. As we reflect on the question, it is important to note how today's society operates and the impact on advancing race and harmony.

If we adequately invest in people, we are announcing in a very large way that we truly care about another individual.

In our society, many of us are in a repetitive cycle to promote harmony. This cycle consists of coordinating countless meetings with individuals and groups from a wide variety of organizations. As we look back at the many meetings we have held, we should ask, what is the true reason for the meeting that took place? Did we solve a problem or move in a concrete direction? As we continue to reflect, we should consider the meeting topics, level of engagement and lessons learned beyond the professional roles we each agreed to fulfill?

If we adequately invest in people, we are announcing in a very large way that we truly care about another individual. By investing in one another, we are showing through mutual acknowledgement that we care well beyond any role that society has placed upon us. In doing so, we are not keeping track of

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how many hours we “spend” with someone, but we are enriching our spirits, knowledge and well-being through spending quality time with another individual, who has been gracious enough to unite in mutual association and share their thoughts, feelings and perspectives.

As previously stated, the ability to invest in people is at the core of who I am. From watching my grandparents, parents and other role models at an early age, I paid close attention to how they treated other people. Encompassed by my surroundings, seeing the genuine pleasure of treating others well and being curious, I assume that we all want to learn and know as much as humanly possible about other individuals. Ultimately, I feel one of the highest honors in life is for someone to share their time with another person.

I now understand that racial and cultural differences are a natural part of life and yet somewhat scripturally, “But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was without effect.” (1 Cor 15:10). I saw differences amongst the people within the community that I lived and played in. I found that people have problems and that the Spanish children that I interacted with had career and life aspirations similar to the kids that I worked with in the United States.

A Final Perspective

As I conclude this reflection, I would like to shift the focus to my height. Literally, as someone who stands out in a crowd (I am 7 feet tall for those who may not know me!), I have thought about what it may be like to encounter someone, that is similar in size to me. A person of my height is hard to miss in a crowd and I realize that I am the center of attention when entering certain rooms or venues. Overall, I am proud of my unique height and perhaps more importantly of the spotlight that it affords me.

It is in this spotlight, I am able to serve many others. Let me explain. As a prism, I am graced with the opportunity to direct that light to illuminate more of the space in which I occupy. It is not about me but my ability to help others that God has so graciously placed in my life. Above and beyond my race, I can be viewed, as I hope another person would do, as an individual that possesses a genuine and caring disposition that provides clear intent to others. As the sages of the ages have always said to create more harmonious society you have to reach across the racial and cultural divide to treat others with respect and dignity. I have made it a personal effort to give more than I receive and assume noble intent in my interaction with others.

It is my everlasting hope that you have been touched

It is my ultimate hope that your meaning is one that encompasses love, compassion and concern for others.

beyond the mention of this essay's title. If true, I am hopeful that such moments will continue to take place in your life as we move forward. Beyond your race, I will simply say that you are a human being. Such words as Race and Harmony, are indeed words. The meaning that we give to these words is a privileged opportunity, given to each of us, that challenges us to determine it in a manner each sees fit. It is my ultimate hope that your meaning is one that encompasses love, compassion and concern for others.

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