

The Long Journey To Racial Healing and Reconciliation



by Catherine Meeks, Ph.D.

*Once upon a time a little black boy who lived in rural
Arkansas fell ill and complained of having
a stomach ache. His family treated him with home remedies as
they
always did when someone fell ill.
But his stomach pain lasted too many days.
One night his stomach pain got much worse and his family be-
came
afraid and tried to take him to the local hospital.
It was only about fifteen miles from their house.
But the hospital would not take him because he was poor and
black.
They were told to take him to the "charity" hospital which was
for poor folks and black people in another city.
It was seventy-five miles from their home.
By the time he arrived he had developed a horrible infection
because
he had appendicitis.
He died.
He was twelve years old.*

That little boy was, Garland Meeks, my brother. He was an older brother so he died when I was very young. But it seemed as if I had lived through the trauma around his death, because my father talked about him and how he died all of the time. My father never recovered from Garland's death. He never could reconcile himself to his inability to save his little son from the plight of being born black and poor in one of the richest countries in the world and allowed to die from lack of medical assistance for that fact alone. I internalized my father's grief. He was also angry and significantly immobilized by that anger. He lived all of his life in this way because he could find no way out of it.

Perhaps it was living in the midst of my father's sorrow and anger that helped me to make the decision to work hard to find a way to navigate my way through the maze of being a black person in America. Even though it is not always easy to plot the journey of decisions that lead from one stage of life to another, I am quite certain that I made a clear choice to follow a path that would prevent me from being an immobilized person in this world and that would enable me to be able to take care of my children and myself.

My father was not a literate person. He worked very hard as a sharecropper and janitor but he never realized much material benefit from his hard work. Sharecropping is merely a glorified system of slavery which compels the sharecropper to stay indebted to the landowner year after year and makes it easy to see the people who are forced to live in this system as inferior persons. This designation leads to the justification of those persons as "other" and makes it possible to deny admittance of their twelve year old sick children to the local hospital as well as access to proper education, housing or any other service that might be enjoyed by those who are not seen as inferior.

As a youngster, I did not realize the great impact of racism upon my family and me. We lived as we did and while I knew that there were things that were not available to us, I did not have many questions about that fact. Thus the projection of unworthy person that was being made upon me and my family by the destructive system of racism was accepted and lived as the only reality to embrace. Though now I understand that at some very deep unconscious level, I said, "No" to that system and my father's anger and grief very early in my life.

Long before I heard about C.G. Jung, I had the deep unconscious awareness that there was a path to follow in order to be a human being in this world and that the world that was being presented to me by my parents and the culture around me was not the only one to embrace. Though the idea of individuation would be a concept that I would not learn about until I began working on my graduate degree in Social Work and started seriously studying Jung. My soul knew about it long before and set me on that path as I searched for answers to the questions that arose from the depth of my being about the way in which I was perceived as a black woman in America and the way in which I felt. The two perceptions did not complement one another. Early in my life I knew that something was not right. I knew that I did not have to accept what I saw in the racist environment around me and that if I would dig deeply enough, I would find ways to support the search that seemed so necessary to my health and well-being.

It was not easy to go forward with that journey of searching. My father's fear was an obstacle at times. It would be many years before I learned that his lack of support for the way that I

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wanted to be in the world was born out of his fear for my welfare and his sense of powerlessness. I wish that I could have known more when I was younger because I would have been less wounded by some of my father's restrictions and his massive lack of support for my efforts to achieve as a youngster in school. But, though I did not know it then, I am grateful to know now and to have the ability to extend compassion to my father though he is no longer here with me.

One of my favorite things to do as an eight year old was getting up in the morning to watch the sun rise and to pray. This deep sense of spirituality and faith has been my companion throughout my life and contributes mightily to the quest for racial healing and reconciliation that I have pursued. Though there were times when I could not really name the nature of the quest, I knew that I had to continue to go forward to greater consciousness of myself and to find ways to be free and empowered.

The Self did its great work and kept propelling me toward the goal of individuation even at times when I had a great sense of being lost. Of course, at this point I understand much better that once I had consented to the journey, there was no turning back. The journey of individuation kept leading me to be in close communication and finally close relationships with white people. The very folks that I had avoided as much as possible for my entire life kept showing up in school, church and in the social justice work that I felt called to do as a young college student.

The work with a couple of excellent therapists, my continued education including college and graduate school provided many opportunities to relate to white people in ways that got beyond the superficial. Since I had grown up in a segregated world, the transition into an integrated world presented a confrontation with projections and my own shadow that had never occurred for me before.

As long as white and black people do not enter into real conversation with one another about themselves, it remains easy for each of them to wear one another's projections and never get to the level of seeing each other as equal human beings. It is easy to live one's life based upon projections and the personas created out of them if one does not consciously commit to self-exploration. Once that commitment is made the Self will help to orchestrate many situations where the work of healing can be done as bridges are built to those who have been projected as other.

It has been more than a fifty year journey thus far for me. A process of embracing what it really means to be a woman of African descent in a country that does not honor that heritage and yet seeking to find out what it means to be a human being who can transcend the cultural constructions that are designed to control and to hinder my empowerment. A journey of learning to encounter racist projections without internalizing them.

This is the fruit of the inner work that makes it possible to be available for relationship with anyone regardless of their race while staying in relationship with myself. Yes, it is difficult, because individuation is not easy for anyone. But it is a process that the human psyche has to travel in order to find peace which is sustainable. Though we work very hard to seek healing, it is a life long task and living life with that realization makes it possible to be free. I wish that my father had known a little of what I have come to know ■