

Removing Our Blinders
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How many of you have seen horses with blinders? ... Have you ever used them on your own horse? Even if you haven't you probably know what they're for—to avoid distraction. This is especially important during a race, when the jockeys want the horses to do nothing but run flat out, all the way to the finish line, without paying any attention to the crowds of people or horses around them. "Driving" horses might use them so as not to get spooked by traffic. Blinders certainly have their uses.

In a metaphorical sense, people put on blinders so we don't have to see what's right around us because it's ugly or it makes us uncomfortable or we're just not tuned in. I have had blinders removed from my eyes by increments over a lifetime, like lifting layers of gauze one at a time, or like peeling an onion. Sometimes my blinders are ripped off like a flash of lightning, through a sudden revelation or a profound experience.

Open the Window

Chorus:

Open the window children,
Open the window now.
Open the window, children,
Open the window let the dove fly in.
Open the window let the dove fly in.

Mama and Papa are fighting like snakes
Open the window let the dove fly in.
Baby is a cryin' like her heart will break—
Open the window let the dove fly in.

Neighbors lock their doors, Build fences so high
Open the window let the dove fly in.
Don't see what's to discover on the other side.
Open the window let the dove fly in.

Borders 'round countries, borders 'round the sky.

Open the window let the dove fly in.
 The only border [enclosing] you is the border 'round your mind.
 Open the window let the dove fly in.

Some people have money, some people have none.
 What's the use of money if your heart's gone numb?

This big old world is in a great big mess.
 Open the window find peace and rest.

I have many windows to open. Some of them are open just a crack, and some have been painted shut for years. The journey is not an easy one, but if we don't open the window and talk about what's out there, we'll never get to know the dove.

For this morning, I've picked just two of the most difficult issues that need a lot of unpacking, just to remove my blinders—our blinders—for just a while: economics and racism.

These issues are not just out there somewhere, but they have directly affected many of us right here in this room. Let's begin with economics.

How many of you are rich?

How do you define rich?

2 cars, a yacht?

More than one pair of shoes?

Clean water to drink?

Enough food to eat?

Access to schools and libraries?

Neil Conan interviewed of Robert Frank, author of *Richistan*, on NPR's Talk of the Nation, and here's part of what I learned:

Nearly all of us define ourselves as middle class.

6% earn over \$97,000/year

1% \$277,000 each; worth \$6 million in assets;

\$400,000 income per house

9 million millionaires in this country

In the fictional country of "Richistan"—1 million doesn't really get you there.

affluent, 1-10 million (lower class rich)
 middle class rich, 10-100 range
 upper class rich, 100-1 billion range
 about 1000 billionaires in the U.S.

Location means a lot, too. In Aspen, millionaires are a dime a dozen. Wealthier people can come into a gallery and buy impulsively, a \$20,000 painting. Maybe on a whim you can pay \$200 for a good pair of shoes. Or \$20 for a meal. Or \$2 for a cup of coffee, without giving it much thought.

Most millionaires made the money themselves, and still consider themselves middle class—very common view. Lots of us aspire to upper class income, but once there, we don't want to call ourselves upper class. Twice what you make=wealth, no matter how much you make.

Pay for house, 2 cars, day care, nutritious food, and we're barely scraping by. Inflation for the wealthy is not 6%, but 12%.

You can always see someone with more money and that makes you feel middle class or even poor. A yacht can make a boat seem like a dinghy. One wealthy man estimated that his household staff numbered between 60 and 70 people, but his wife said, No, I just finished the spreadsheet. We have 105. It's unlikely that either of them knew the entire staff on a personal basis.

One woman, Nancy, said it's all a matter of perspective. She grew up rich and married rich, shopping for years at Nieman's and Sax; but now she's a divorced single mother who shops at Target and feels proud of her mental shift. She can afford health insurance and basic needs; she doesn't need more stuff. Her children applied for grants and scholarship to get into college and they work part time to keep themselves there. The perspective shifts again when you really don't have enough to feed your family.

What do you need to have in order to feel rich? Michelle Singletary, a financial advisor, said, "You have to spend below your means in order to feel truly wealthy. Appreciate what you have. And value your children as much as your cars." Teach them to value what they have and say No to excessive wants, especially as the gift-giving season swoops upon us.

This morning's paper describes the new movie "What Would Jesus Buy?" It features the Rev. Billy's Church of Stop Shopping Gospel Choir.

Most of us here are pretty darn rich, in U.S. terms; we're filthy rich in global terms. We're supporting a pretty fine building and lots of programs. When I convince myself I'm doing the very best, suddenly I'm "born again"—and my diet is better than your diet, and my kids' schools were better than yours, and my kind of peace is better than your kind of responsible gun ownership, and my Unitarian Universalist faith is certainly better than all the rest.

But let me remove those righteous blinders and value each of you as people, whether you have money to spare or you're just scraping by; whether you're vegans or carnivores; whether you're free from addictions or dependent on them. Nobody has it all just right, and wouldn't it be boring if we did?

Having just scratched that economic surface, let me turn to racism, which is both related to economics and independent of it.

We are mostly silent on racism because it is not comfortable for us at all. But we will never overcome it until we acknowledge its presence after all this struggle.

James Cone's, professor at Union Theological Seminary, theologian, and author made a speech at Harvard that so impressed white journalist Bill Moyers, that he invited Cone to a conversation in a recent episode of Bill Moyer's Journal on public television. Cone's thesis is this: "Black and white Americans who want to understand the meaning of the American experience need to remember lynching." Specifically, he refers to the mutual symbolism of the Christian cross and the lynching tree.

The cross, central symbol of the Christian religion. Lynching, done by Christians, Romans, others throughout history. Even our own Unitarian Universalist blindness to the ideal of Christianity and the American dream. We pay lip service, but neglect the relationships required to bridge the enormous gaps between us.

Let's break the silence between race and religion. Lynching is deep in our American experience. It did not take place during slavery, but after slavery was abolished, in order to force black people to work hard for low wages under the control of white people. But no one could control people's humanity, their spirit, and that is the arena of religion and the church. Religion is not defined by what people can do to your body. No one can touch your soul.

Nooses that have appeared in Jena, LA, and CT, and elsewhere across the country, are intended to keep people in their place. The people who place those nooses in the personal and public spaces of black targets don't have to know the whole history in detail to understand something about the fear it generates. They understand this because it's in our history—white America's original sin. After 240 years of slavery and 100 years of legal segregation we can't get away from this without talking about it—it's too deep. Slaves built this country. Minorities continue to build this country.

We don't talk about lynching because it's ugly, really deep and ugly. Billie Holiday's famous song tells the tale with these lyrics:

Southern trees bear strange fruit,
 Blood on the leaves and blood at the root,
 Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze,
 Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.

Reinhold Niebuhr, a white theologian, did a lot of his thinking while WW II was going on. He wrote of a profound understanding of humanity, a creature that is finite, but also free, always a mixture of good and bad.

Niebuhr's book *The Irony of American History*, at its core, is to help America get over its innocence, to see itself through the eyes of the people at the bottom. No human being is innocent. The lynching tree is a symbol of transcendence that gives power to the powerless. It is a symbol of America's crucifixion of black people.

Victims of lynching are not really dead. Their mothers and fathers, brothers, sisters, neighbors live.

Bill Moyers found a photograph of a lynching among his father's effects. 5,000 people in attendance. Those kinds of public lynching didn't stop until the 1930s. James Cone says that the lynching tree gives power to the powerless that the lynchers—white America—find hard to understand.

Ken Gonzales-Day wrote a book on *Lynching in the West: 1850-1935*. He tracked down 300 lynching trees in California. Lynching happened all over the country.

Nooses showing up in this day and age ought to encourage us to connect. Let them be a reality check to remind us that we don't have the community we should have.

Prisons are the contemporary enslavement. African Americans make up 12% of US population and nearly 50% of prison population. Trying to control the people, to keep them in fear, to cram them into living spaces where they have no place to breathe or to express their humanity, will make many of them self-destruct. Another part of today's paper has an opinion piece by Leonard Pitts, in which he says, "Just under 15,000 American were murdered in 2006. Roughly half of them—7,421—were black." Then he repeats the statistics that "African Americans are 12 percent of the nation's population. And this is how we die."

In Cone's view, God is the power that enables the powerless to resist even when you have no political power. Loving God is easy; loving white people is a lot harder.

Is it possible to forgive? Bill Moyers wonders. He isn't sure he could forgive if he were a black man.

Yes, Cone answers. Forgiveness is not what the individual can do, but what the power within us can do, to do the unthinkable because you know you are connected to the scoundrel in human terms.

First, talk with each other about what it means to be in community. See the human race as family. Believe that the Beloved Community can happen. Connect with people who share your hope and organize to make the world the way it ought to be—a Beloved Community.

Don't be bashful about talking about it. Express some identity with minority culture. When blacks identify with their history, whites get scared, but we have to remember that it's our history, too. That's one reason I have begun attending a monthly community conversation with black, white, and Hispanic participants, to learn to listen and to talk, building relationships to bridge the gap between us.

Finally, a word about *The Spirituals and Blues*, another of Cone's interests. On Sunday morning he heard the message in the spirituals, "I am somebody." As a child, on Saturday night, he wasn't allowed to go to the neighborhood juke joints, but he could hear the music from his house. The blues served a need for people who didn't receive the same transcendence that people got on Sunday. They could express what was happening to them and it gave them power over it. They found out about the portion of humanity that no one could take away.

Ella Baker, after 50 years of struggle, declared, "We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes." You may not have money or possessions, but you have a culture that empowers you and makes you know you're a child of the universe, every bit as much as Nehemiah in today's parable for all ages.

"Nobody knows the trouble I've seen; nobody knows my sorrow, nobody knows the trouble I've seen ..." but glory hallelujah, there is a spirit that no one can kill. Outward appearance is a functional uniform; our spiritual uniform is more significant. That was from Mike Manor, who facilitates the monthly Race Unity discussions.

The broken, the dispirited, the whole and the holy. The will to live, to survive no matter what, to keep learning and growing, that is also what it means to be human.

Listen. Forgive. And with E. E. Cummings you might be able to say,
 "[now the ears of my ears awake and
 now the eyes of my eyes are opened]"

Amen