



Are We As Enlightened As We Think We Are About Race?

By Mary Shaw, AlterNet

Posted on February 6, 2007, Printed on February 6, 2007

<http://www.alternet.org/story/47660/>

February is Black History Month in the U.S. It gives us an extra reason to ponder the journey of African-Americans from the early days of slavery, through Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, an on through the present day.

As we do so, most of us are thankful that our society has evolved to where African Americans are no longer bought and sold, treated not like people but rather as property, without reward, without a voice, and virtually without any rights at all.

Yes, we have evolved -- somewhat. African-Americans are free. Like most Americans, they live their lives, go to school, have careers, have families. They are our teachers, our doctors, our stockbrokers, our Secretary of State.

But, even so, is our society really as enlightened today as we might like to believe? Have we really learned enough from the horrible mistake of slavery?

Perhaps not so much after all.

The Declaration of Independence proclaims that all persons are created equal. But, while we no longer practice slavery in this country, are people of color truly equal in our society?

While African-Americans are certainly much better off than they were in centuries past, the socio-economic disparity between the races remains pronounced in the U.S. today.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the 2005 median income for white households was \$48,554, while that of black households was only \$30,858.

The Bureau also reports that in 2001, 22.7 percent of blacks lived below the poverty level, while only 7.8 percent of non-Hispanic whites lived below the poverty level.

And racism and race-based discrimination, while not politically correct in this day and age, are still rampant. People -- especially white people -- are just not comfortable talking about it.

Witness Hurricane Katrina. We didn't see very many white people trapped inside that stadium.

On a wider scale, race-based inequity is perhaps most apparent in the criminal

justice system, where the color of the defendant's skin and the victim's skin play a significant role in determining who receives the death penalty in the U.S.

According to the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), people of color have accounted for a disproportionate 43 percent of all executions since 1976, and currently account for 55 percent of inmates currently awaiting execution. While white victims account for approximately one-half of all murder victims, 80 percent of all death penalty cases involve white victims. Furthermore, according to the ACLU, "as of October 2002, 12 people have been executed where the defendant was white and the murder victim black, compared with 178 black defendants executed for murders with white victims."

Sometimes when I quote these statistics, the listener (usually white) will speculate that perhaps black people proportionally commit more murders than white people, and therefore are more likely to end up on death row. While this theory is racist by its very nature, and not based on facts, we can easily disprove it with actual numbers. A 1997 study of death sentences in Pennsylvania from 1983 through 1993 showed that a black defendant was 38 percent more likely to receive a death sentence than a white defendant accused of a similar crime. Yet Pennsylvania Governor Ed Rendell, like several other governors across the nation, continues to sign death warrants and propagate this racially biased system.

None of this will change until our society evolves a whole lot further. None of this will change until WE change. All of us.

None of this will change until each of us -- white, black, brown, yellow, purple, or polka-dot -- can look in the mirror and look at each other and see humanity, not color.

None of this will change until, to paraphrase the great and wise Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., all people are judged not for the color of their skin but the content of their character.

Mary Shaw is a Philadelphia-based writer and activist. She currently serves as Philadelphia Area Coordinator for Amnesty International, and her views on politics, human rights, and social justice issues have appeared in numerous online forums and in newspapers and magazines worldwide. Note that the ideas expressed in this article are the author's own, and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of Amnesty or any other organization with which she may be associated. E-mail: mary@maryshawonline.com

© 2007 Independent Media Institute. All rights reserved.
View this story online at: <http://www.alternet.org/story/47660/>