



## None So Blind as the 'Color Blind'

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Several years ago, I went to visit my grandfather at Mass General Hospital in Boston after he had bypass surgery. Thanks to my younger brother (a batboy for the Oakland A's at the time) I had some primo tickets for the A's-Red Sox game that evening and was trying to flag down a cab to take me to Fenway.

After no less than a half-dozen cabbies shooed me away from their empty taxis, I said to myself: *Oh, OK. Now, I've got my own black-man-can't-get-a-cab story.* And that's when I saw this white guy, coming out of a nearby coffee shop, wearing a Red Sox t-shirt.

"You going to Fenway?" I ask.

"Yup."

I told him I had been trying to hail a taxi for the past 15 minutes. Without even mentioning race, he says: "I'm from New York. I know what you're talkin' about. C'mon. You can ride with me."

He walks out to the curb and -- I swear on everything I own -- a taxi immediately pulled up. On the way to Fenway, I offered him one of my behind-home-plate tickets. We had one helluva good time, just the two of us, drinking beer, eating peanuts, enjoying the great American pastime.

One of several problems with using a catch-all word like "racism" is that many white brothers and sisters see it in terms of individual bigotry and hatred. Unless there's KKK or Nazi insignia involved, there's no racism. That's focusing on intent -- what's in an individual's heart.

But for those on the receiving end it's all about effect. (Actually, focusing on intentions while ignoring effect is one of this great nation's most glaring moral shortcomings, blinding millions to seeing, for example, why it's absurd to think Iraqis, or any proud people, would be grateful for being "liberated" by a foreign invader and occupier. If you're family were "collateral damage" in a war of "liberation," I doubt lofty rhetoric about good intentions and democracy would salve your wounds. But I digress).

Race is a social phenomenon that's bigger than the individual. It operates on a group-think level.

What if my baseball buddy hadn't shared that cab with me? That wouldn't make him

a racist but it would mean he was cashing-in on *white-skin privilege* -- the privilege of not having to pay a racial tax for the criminal behavior of a few who happen to share the same skin color.

This racial tax can be seen at work in the national "liberal" media just about every time there's a report of some spectacular crime or news of a celebrity's moral lapse. As conservative cultural critic (and jazz scholar) Stanley Crouch astutely observed, when a black person commits a crime, it's a comment on race. When a white person commits a crime it's a comment on society or that one individual alone.

No matter how many times a disturbed white male shoots up a school, church or workplace, bombs an abortion clinic or is arrested for being a serial killer, nobody raises questions like: is something wrong with white suburban culture? The response is either: that's one sick *individual*, or it just goes to show you how bad *society is getting*.

Too many Allen Iverson "types" in the NBA? Let's institute a dress code to send a message to "black thugs." White NHL players fight all the time but that's just hockey, part of the game, you know. Michael Vick is indicted for his alleged involvement in dog-fighting and next thing you know we're talking about "thugs," "hip hop," the "breakdown of the black family" and all manner of Bill Cosby moralizing.

Quarterback Tom Brady knocks a girl up, then starts dating some other chick while the first girl is pregnant. And the water-cooler talk is: *Tom is such a stud. Why did he leave the first girl? She's so pretty ...* But if it's not Tom Brady, but Antoine Brady in the spotlight there's a whole different conversation, variations on the what's-wrong-with-those-people theme.

These are just a few obvious examples on the cultural front. When it comes to things that really matter, like economic opportunity, economist Dr. Melvin Oliver has shown that the value of lost income to black Americans because of discrimination between 1929 and 1969 alone comes to about \$1.6 trillion. (Note the years 1929 to 1969; not 1869, which should stand out to any one who talks about how their family immigrated to America after slavery and the Civil War etc. and therefore are not implicated in the perpetuation of white-skin privilege).

What affect does this kind of maldistribution of wealth have on present day economic conditions?

Oliver began his research when he noticed how many of his white colleagues were able to buy a house because of a transfer of assets before the death of their parents. This down payment on their homes was a benefit available to few blacks because of bank red-lining and other such policies. Oliver also notes the central role Uncle Sam played in creating a strong white middle class with the GI Bill and federal subsidies of mortgages, inaccessible to most blacks at the time.

And that's why it completely misses the point when "color blind conservatives" talk about "playing the race card," or making whites feel guilty. It's not about making anyone feel guilty, or making excuses for the morally questionable behavior of

*individuals* who happen to be black. It's about being honest about cultural dynamics and majority power in a race-conscious society. As Rabbi Heschel said: we are not all guilty but we are all responsible.

If America is ever going to have a meaningful inter-racial conversation about the legacy of white supremacy and its impact on present day political and economic conditions, then we've got to have mental dexterity to keep track of some important distinctions.

That's a tall order in these times when you can be accused of being a "black racist bigot" for simply daring to question the new PC -- "color blindness."

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