

Race is not real, but race does matter.

“What I am learning from my white grandchildren -- truths about race”

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Damon was five years old when he asked his Aunt Lily the question: "Lily ... am I black or am I white?"

I don't know if his Aunt Lily was surprised by the question. She said, "Well, your mum is white and your dad is white, so you're white."

I'm pretty sure that was not the right answer, because Damon said, "Well, when I grow up, I'm going to be black."

Damon was not confused by his basic colors. So, why would a five-year-old ask such a strange question? He already knew that it mattered. And at five years old, he'd already attached value to race. He wanted answers to questions that we don't want to answer.

But we have to start answering race questions, and we have to start answering with the truth. We tell children that race is real but that race doesn't matter, and the opposite is actually true.

Race is not real, but race does matter.

If that sounds crazy to you, think about the evidence. I was in sixth grade, living in Hawaii, when I decided I was going to be an anthropologist; I wanted to study human cultures. To support my decision, my parents bought me the book "The Color of Man," by Robert Cohen. And I learned from that book that our skin color is determined by the amount of pigment in our skin, especially the pigment "melanin." Dark skin people have a lot of melanin, lighter-skin people have less.

So while the differences in our skin color are very real, anthropologists long ago rejected the idea of races connected to skin color. There is no culture in color. There are no muscular or mental abilities connected to melanin. There are no character traits, no virtues, no vices, no values connected to skin color.

Yet from a very early age, when our children are just learning their colors, they pick up that skin color is different from all other kinds of color, and we don't tell them why.

Elliot loves the human body, and it's not that normal kind of four-year-old obsession with body parts. There is Elliot, and his love of the human body. He was instructing me in anatomy a couple months ago. He told me all about the respiratory system, the part that the lungs and the

diaphragm play, and he told me all about the digestive system, what the esophagus and the stomach and the large and small intestines do, and he told me that the brain is the control center for the entire body.

If you were with him, or if he were here, he would instruct you as well, and he might even draw you a picture.

Well, I was getting a little bored with the lecture, so I stopped him. I said, "Elliot, what color is my skin?"

Without even looking at me, he said, "It's black."

Then I said, "What color is your skin?"

There was a long pause. And then he said, "Grey?" Grey?

If we pay attention, we can catch our children in mid-indoctrination. Elliot had figured out that my brown skin is called "black," but he had not yet been schooled in what to call the color of his own skin. And he had not been told why we call this brown "black," and that pinkish color "white."

Of course, our notions of race go beyond skin color to other physical traits and abilities. I learned the word anthropology from my sixth grade teacher, Mr. Wey. My best friend Ted and I used to stay after school with Mr. Wey and pick his brain. And one of those days, Mr. Wey told us about a U.S. senator who believed that black people were not very bright, but they could run fast and jump high. As the three of us talked about it and thought about the students in our multicultural classroom, we had to laugh because the intellectual and academic stereotypes did not fit the people in our class. And the athletic stereotypes fared even worse.

We also believe that race is somehow connected to bloodlines. And we believe that bloodlines trace back to three or five pure races. But again, science does not back that up. There are no pure races.

I apologize for giving you all the old news. This is old news. This is not something of the domain of these elite experts, and we've known it for a long time, but most of us don't know it. Because in our lived realities, we follow a stubbornly ingrained false narrative.

So, if race is not real, why talk about it?

We certainly have a number of reasons to avoid race talk. We believe that any mention of race means that there are going to be heroes and villains, angels and demons, winners and losers. We believe that someone is going to be called a racist. We might believe that someone should be called a racist.

We don't agree on what racism is; we don't even agree on what race is. We believe that race is the domain of some people and not other people. And we believe that any mention of race only exaggerates our differences, minimises our similarities and exacerbates our problems.

But we must talk about it anyway. In her TED Talk -- "Color blind or color brave?" -- Mellody Hobson lays out the case for pursuing racial diversity in all of our encounters, beginning with businesses and boardrooms. And she gives us that charge for the sake of the children.

Well, recent studies have told us where children get their racial ideas. Ali Michael and Eleonora Bartoli describe what they found in a study of white parents and their white adolescent children. They interviewed the parents and the children both separately and together, and they found that the parents reported teaching their children:

- do not be racist,
- do not talk about race,
- do not use the word black,
- and do not notice racial differences.

They wanted to teach their children that everyone is the same, and that racism is bad. And they defined racism as:

- overt,
- violent,
- and, for the most part, obsolete.

But the messages the children reported were conflicting and incomplete. The children reported learning:

- everyone is the same,
- race is superfluous,
- and hard-work determines where you get in life.

They also reported some views they had learned about certain racial groups, including the belief that:

- black people are poor,
- black people are lazy,
- black neighborhoods are dangerous,
- and black people are physically stronger than white people.

Those views are not far from those of the U.S. Senator when I was in sixth grade. Now, I don't suspect that this kind of racial teaching is exclusive to white families. The racial mixed messages we give transcend our own family racial histories. And when it comes to race, to ethnicity, to color, we do talk about it, but not in mixed company and not in polite company. It comes up when there's some event in our national culture ...

- O. J. Simpson,
- English only,
- Trayvon and Zimmerman,
- border control,
- 9/11,
- President Barack Obama.

Something happens in our culture, and we hear the responses from the media. And we express our own opinions to people who we believe, we hope, are like-minded with us. And we hear the views of everyone around us. And sometimes we hear views of people, our closest friends, that we never knew they held, and we realize that race does matter.

These incidents happen and our children who have been taught to be color-blind are left blindsided. But these incidents give us the opportunity to tell the truth to children.

And there are incidents in our personal lives. Chelsea was six, she was sitting with me, looking up images from the Disney animated movie "Frozen." She stumbled upon a picture of Elsa, her favorite character. This Elsa had dark brown skin.

And Chelsea was not having it.

"What?! That's not Elsa! She is black! It's ugly!"

She's sitting right here with me, she is almost in my lap.

What would you say?

I sat there frozen.

I could ignore it. "Let it go, let it go."

I could get angry. "Don't say that about black people!"

But I love our Chelsea, and I wanted to know more. So, I said, "You think black skin is ugly?"

"Yes!" she said.

"Well, not your skin ... but Elsa is not supposed to be black."

And I could only agree with her.

What followed was a loving and truthful conversation with six-year-old Chelsea, now ten-year-old Damon and three-year-old Zoe. Three white children and their black grandfather. And what Chelsea taught in that moment is that our ethnicity is essential to our identity, even if you are an animated character.

When we talk openly with our children about race, we don't burden them, we free them. We allow them to embrace an essential part of their own identity and to embrace the identity of everyone they come in contact with.

We handicap our children when we operate in racial silence, and we rob them of an essential part of their own identity. I believe this is especially the case for white, or "grey," children like Damon, Chelsea, Elliot and Zoe.

The vision I longed for is not a post-racial society. I cherish my experiences in multicultural Hawaii and in the ever-growing diversity of Antioch, Tennessee. When we ignore differences, it diminishes us all. The vision I longed for, and the vision I suspect you longed for, is not post-racial, but post-racist -- where the destruction wrought by race and power is eliminated. We are not here to talk about racism although it remains stubbornly real. Its inequalities are well-documented, but those inequalities are only symptoms of something deeper in our psyche. There is the reality that race matters and not always in positive ways.

So, how do we proceed?

Well, we start by taking our cues from the children.

We answer those questions.

We tell them that race is not real but that race does matter.

We break our silence when they want to know why some brown skin is called brown but other brown skin is called red or yellow or black or white.

And if we really want to benefit from our diversity, and if we really want to break the strongholds of racism, we tell the truth to children even before they ask.

Tell them again: Race is not real, but race does matter.

And tell them why.

Christian is Damon's and Chelsea's older brother. Christian was 11 when five-year-old Damon asked one more question. We were in a fast food restaurant, and the two boys were sitting at a table, separate from the grown-ups and children. Damon got up, out of his seat, walked over to us, touched my arm and turned back to his brother, and said, "I just want to know what color is this."

We could see the reluctance on Christian's face, he did not want to answer this question. He'd already learned the rules of racial silence.

So, I tried to break the tension for him, and I said, "Just answer the question. What color is it?"

Finally, reluctantly, he said, "It's brown ..."

Damon walked proudly back to his seat: "That's all I'm saying."

He just wanted the truth.

Thank you.

* Anthony Peterson, TEDxAntioch, November, 2014, "What I am learning from my white grandchildren -- truths about race," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u5GCetbP7Fg>