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RACIAL HEALING

CONFRONTING

THE FEAR

BETWEEN

BLACKS

& WHITES

A
NEW YORK TIMES
NOTABLE BOOK OF
THE YEAR

Harlon L. Dalton

RACIAL HEALING



Harlon L. Dalton



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RACIAL HEALING

*Confronting the Fear
Between
Blacks and Whites*



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To Jill M. Strawn

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RACIAL HEALING

Introduction

We are loath to confront one another around race. We are afraid of tapping into pent-up anger, frustration, resentment, and pain. Even when we are not aware of harboring such feelings ourselves, we recognize that they exist in others. Our natural tendency is to hold them in check, in hopes that they will somehow fade away. Unfortunately, they will not. Tangled emotions and inexplicable behavior are the inevitable by-products of our nation's unresolved racial past. Until we deal with them, we resemble peasant villagers who continue to build on the slopes of an ancient but active volcano. Or, more precisely, we are like the mountain itself: oblivious to the gurgling deep within, proud of the new life it has nurtured, and hoping against hope that history will not repeat itself.

America's sorry racial state of affairs is also like a deep and abiding wound.¹ If left untreated, it will continue to ooze and fester. Too often we act as if we are mesmerized by some collective mother who keeps whispering, "Leave it alone. Don't pick the scab." But the truth is that unless we periodi-

cally clean out the wound, clear it of accumulated debris, allow it to breathe, and apply sterile dressings, we will never be able to heal and move on. And even then, we must remain attentive to the ever present possibility of infection.

We have run away from race for far too long. We are so afraid of inflaming the wound that we fail to deal with what remains America's central social problem. We will never achieve racial healing if we do not confront each other, take risks, make ourselves vulnerable, put pride aside, say all the things we are not supposed to say in mixed company—in short, put on the table all of our fears, trepidations, wishes, and hopes.

The first half of this book is intended to shepherd that process along. There are, of course, many real and powerful reasons why we shrink from engaging one another around issues of race. And even when we do try, our efforts often backfire, flame out, or turn to dust. But true engagement *is* possible, and I do my best to show how.

Of course, it will do us little good to heal our racial wounds if we are ultimately destined to inflict them anew. Yet that is inevitable so long as race and social power are intimately linked. Indeed, perpetuating racial hierarchy in a society that professes to be egalitarian is destructive of the spirit as well as of the body politic. But change will not come on its own. If we do not actively intervene, the existing pecking order will constantly reassert itself even as we work to overcome the errors of the past. Those near the bottom may reverse positions from time to time, but the basic structure will endure.

If we as a nation are to achieve *lasting* racial healing, we

must thoroughly dismantle that structure. Simply removing formal impediments to equality is not enough; the pecking order thrives on hidden power and invisible rules. Nor would we gain much by maintaining the pecking order while changing who is on top. Our goal should be to transform how power and prestige are distributed in society and, ultimately, the very meaning of race itself.

But before we can truly imagine, let alone bring about such a transformation, we must first get our respective houses in order. We have to change how we think. We have to change how we act. We have to give up some of what we currently value, and begin valuing some of what we currently disdain. In the second half of the book, I try to mark the path.

In so doing, I confine myself to the work that Blacks and Whites must do, leaving for another day the specific challenges facing Asian-Americans, Native Americans, and Latinos. That is because I write mostly out of my own personal experience. As it is, for me to attempt to articulate the needs, concerns, strengths, and foibles of my own community is fairly presumptuous. To attempt more would be presumptuous in the extreme. I could, of course, rely heavily on the experiences of others, but that would lead to a very different kind of book.

I realize that there are many downsides to viewing a world of color through a lens that refracts only black and white. A major one is that the Black experience tends to become the template against which the experiences of *all* people of color are measured. Another is that frictions among people of color tend to be rendered invisible. I try to avoid both of these pitfalls.

The specific challenges facing Whites are different from those facing people of color. How could it be otherwise, given the distinct historical experiences and present circumstances of each race? The first step is for Whites to conceive of themselves as members of a race and to recognize the advantages that attach to simply having white skin. Many of my White friends readily embrace their ethnic identity, or define themselves by religion, geographic region, or profession. But few spontaneously think of themselves in racial terms. In part, that is because in settings where Whites dominate, being White is not noteworthy. It is like the tick of a familiar clock, part of the easily tuned-out background noise.

The same is true of other facets of identity. Dominance makes the difference. For example, straight people ordinarily do not define themselves in terms of their sexual orientation or think of it as playing much of a role in how their lives unfold. But place them in a predominantly gay setting, and they become acutely aware of their heterosexuality. Similarly, a working-class Irish Catholic accustomed to thinking of himself in ethnic rather than racial terms would most likely feel whiter than white while walking along 125th Street in Harlem.

The challenge for White folk is to realize, even when they are not in the minority, that *their* race matters too. It establishes their place in the social pecking order. It hangs over the relationships they establish with people of color. Like it or not, their unchosen racial identity has a profound influence on their life prospects. Like it or not, their fate as individuals is tied in complex ways to the fate of Whites as a whole.

We have long since grown accustomed to thinking of Blacks as being “racially disadvantaged.” Rarely, however, do we refer to Whites as “racially *advantaged*,” even though that is an equally apt characterization of the existing inequality. “Membership,” as the folk from American Express remind us, “has its privileges.” Whites move to the head of the line simply by being born White.

Many of my White friends blanch at this idea. It makes them deeply uncomfortable. It makes them feel complicitous in something over which they have little personal control. It leaves them feeling somehow guilty while providing no ready way to discharge the guilt. And, frankly, it raises the uncomfortable question of whether they ought to give up something, hand something back, surrender the fruits of their privilege. But even though acknowledging White skin privilege is difficult, awkward, and discomfiting, real progress depends on it. For to ignore the reality of race-based privilege is to deny the very meaning of race in our society. True, our ultimate goal should be to transform that meaning, but we can't get there without starting where we are.

The second step toward racial progress is for White folk to accept partial ownership of America's race problem. Most Whites, according to polls, do not view the current racial malaise as their responsibility.² One need only tune in to talk show radio to get the message. “I didn't create the mess, and I'm not in a position to clean it up. I'm willing to pitch in if others do their part, but if you ask me, Blacks seem to be their own worst enemies.”

While this attitude is understandable, it is altogether wrongheaded. No human being living or dead, Black, White,