

Chapter Five — An Instinct Perception Of Racism As A Reality

It was particularly useful for me when I was working in Jamaica to learn to see people as people and not as categories of people or as stereotyped examples of people. The fact that I could more easily see people as people helped me understand more clearly the reality of being Black in America and it helped as well in understanding the realities that result from being any other minority group in America.

My own personal levels of insight about what it means to be Black or Hispanic or minority in America took another massive step forward to entirely new levels a few years later when one of my sons and his wife gave me the great gift of multi-racial grandchildren. That gift has been one of the great blessings of my life. It gave me multiple additional levels of direct and personal insight into intergroup realities that were not available to me until that point in my life.

The world we live in looked very different to me at multiple levels when my own family was in the mix of those intergroup issues at a very personal level.

As I described in some detail in the *Cusp of Chaos* book, I had a spectacular “AHA! Moment” in my own head one day, when I heard from

my son and my daughter-in-law that my multi-racial grandson had some kind of issue with another kid in early grade school. I immediately — in less than nanoseconds — wondered if the incident was racial. I was defensive to my very core in microseconds.

I was protective and I was instantly alarmed at a very basic and very immediate level about racial issues and about racist behaviors in that exact moment of hearing and learning that an incident of some kind had occurred.

I was even spontaneously angry in that same moment at the thought that someone might have done a racist thing to my grandson — even though I had no clue at that point about what had actually happened and I had no evidence at any level that the issue at school had any racial elements or even racial undertones.

One of the blessings of my life is that I have five sons. All five of my wonderful and good-hearted sons have an ample supply of personality. If I had heard that any of my sons had an altercation or an issue of some kind with another child at school, I would have immediately suspected that my son might have been the trigger for the incident. When my grandson — also rich in personality — had an incident, I immediately suspected and deeply feared racism.

I said to myself — in that moment when I realized clearly what I had just done — “Wow — this is all going to be a lot harder than I thought.”

I have been working on my intergroup interaction books for years and I had been thinking about a wide range of intergroup topics at multiple levels for a long time before that incident. Prior to that wonderful learning moment, I still had vague hopes at some levels that we would all be able to reason together and that we could all mutually get to a good level of intergroup understanding that would basically fall into place on its own if I could just somehow help everyone to achieve a solid level of pure intellectual awareness about some key and particularly relevant issues that relate to instinctive behaviors and instinctive intergroup interactions.

My Initial Goal Was Intellectual Understanding

I had been writing multiple drafts of my basic interaction books before that time to help create a solid level of intellectual awareness for people from all groups about those instinctive behaviors so we could all ride our intellects together into the future to create a new set of collective and more enlightened behaviors.

I had believed and hoped in writing those early drafts of the books that when we all recognized that our basic instincts create all of those

problematic intergroup behaviors, then we would all be able to intellectually take steps to soften the impact of those incidents and we could spontaneously and collectively — with mutual good intentions — all take steps together to turn our basic instincts toward the cause of Peace.

My intention at that point was to have wise people make wise and fully informed decisions based on our improved and more complete intergroup understanding — I believed strongly at that point in time that simply explaining those instincts in clear and useful ways would cause people to give the issue a new start and would give the country a new beginning.

In that moment, however, as I wondered at a very visceral and slightly painful, fearful, and clearly primal level whether or not racism had just harmed my grandchild, I realized that our history, our instinctive behaviors, and the fact that we do have people in our world who are doing very racist and damaging things to one another and who are doing those negative things to people in our country today have all put us in a much deeper hole than I had previously understood.

I knew in that moment that simply explaining those behavior patterns to relevant people would not somehow make them go away.

I also knew in that moment that we needed to start from a very deep and very visceral hole if we are going to successfully build the new levels of intergroup understanding and intergroup trust that I strongly believed we needed to create in order to have a nation with Intergroup Peace.

I also knew and recognized in that moment that I personally needed to get a much better understanding of how deep that hole was in order to build the strategy that will actually get us to intergroup security, trust, and Peace.

My Optimism And My Naiveté Crumbled Simultaneously

My optimism and my naiveté on that issue crumbled simultaneously. I knew that the real world that we have created and live in today was going to be a much larger barrier to the intergroup interactions that are needed to be the foundation for Peace than I had believed before that “Aha” moment.

I knew in that moment that we could not simply assume good behavior for each other until we had so much good behavior in our lives that we could trust that good will and good behavior would both exist for any of us — or for all of us in any given setting.

I still believe that we do need to build that very basic level of collective intellectual understanding about the impacts of our instinctive behaviors as an anchor for the Peace process. Having everyone clearly

understand those instinct-related issues is still a key component to The Art of Intergroup Peace and it is a top priority goal of mine to have everyone understand those issues, those processes, those challenges, and those opportunities.

I realized, however, in that moment, that racism was looming over our lives at a very visceral, continuous, and immediate level and I realized that racism was a constant and on-going threat to intergroup trust and to intergroup interactions at a very practical and functional level. That reality was my new reality.

My Racist Fears Were Legitimate And Justified

Racists exist. They do racist things. The fact that we do have real people who are doing racist things to other people today is a truth that has to be recognized as being real as we try to make progress in those key areas.

I very clearly realized in that moment that my own personal and direct concern that had risen spontaneously in my brain in that very moment about possible racism and about potential evil behaviors on the part of racist people relative to my own family had been entirely legitimate and justified. I realized that as we go forward to set up a country that is at Peace with itself that we will need to start with the cold and hard reality that every adverse

event and every negative situation that we face might actually be racist because so many incidents and so many real life situations are, in fact, actually racist.

I recognized in that moment that is the real world we live in. I recognized that we live in a world where there are racist people who do racist and intentionally damaging things to other people and I understood far more clearly that, even though we have made huge and highly visible progress in many key areas and ways, that I had no way of knowing whether or not any given negative intergroup and interpersonal incident might not be triggered and fed by racism, bigotry, and malice.

I also realized in that moment that each incident of real racism that actually does occur in any setting directly activates and reactivates a clear perception for each of us that racism is relevant. Each proof point — no matter how isolated — makes the case that the possibility for that particular kind of behavior exists and is real.

I realized that racism could actually be a key factor behind various behaviors at multiple levels for very real people for the foreseeable future and I recognized, painfully, that we will all need to deal with that reality because it is, in fact, real.

We Can't Talk Our Way Out Of What Is Real

Minority Americans who are reading what I just wrote are justified in saying — “Duh — why is that such a revelation? That is, my friend, the world we live in.”

It was, however, a major, unexpected, powerful, and paradigm jolting revelation for me to personally have that insight and that's why I am sharing it now in this book.

I truly had thought and hoped that we could somehow just talk our way much of the way to the ultimate positive and mutually beneficial intergroup and interpersonal outcomes that I very much wanted us all to have.

I was partially correct about the needed strategy of clear communications to achieve those goals. Talking to each other clearly about those issues is needed. We do need to talk.

But talking is clearly insufficient to create a buffer against the damage that can be done and that sometimes is done to people by the very real people who feel right in doing bad things to other people for racist reasons.

I realized that we needed to have multiple layers of consistent positive behaviors to support intergroup trust. I also recognized that words and

communication approaches, alone, were not going to create that necessary and fundamental level of intergroup trust — because even if the people who are sharing the language of intergroup support and intergroup trust are entirely sincere and even if those people are entirely consistent in their own feelings and in their own behaviors, there will continue to be significant numbers of racist and bigoted people who still feel intergroup hate and who will continue to have that racist mind set affect their behavior in negative and destructive ways.

Some People Will Do Evil Things

We need macro paths of consistent and intentional enlightened behavior to create intergroup trust. We all need to recognize that even when we get people to have those enlightened beliefs and even when we get people to behave in those positive ways, that not everyone will be sharing those beliefs or supporting or even accepting those commitments.

We need to accept the reality that there will be some people who will very intentionally and deliberately do evil behaviors in the future no matter how much the rest of us talk in enlightened ways and believe in enlightened values.

Some people hate so deeply that rational thinking on those issues is highly unlikely to happen at any point for those people.

It is not impossible to convert some of the people who personally hold those beliefs, so we do need to convert as many people as we can.

We need to do what we can do to very intentionally convert every racist person we can convert to non-racist beliefs — but we need to expect that those will be people who will not convert and there will be people who will do racist things even if almost all of us reject racism and even if almost all of us want it to be gone forever at every level.

Forgiveness Is Impossible For What Has Been Done

About the same point in time that I learned those lessons, in another key learning moment, I received feedback from a good friend of mine who is an African American professional who read an early draft of this book. That draft had fairly extensively and — I thought — fairly clearly explained the instinctive reasons for our centuries of intergroup conflict and intergroup discrimination. That particular version of that book was, I thought, a clear and persuasive description of the basic intergroup instinct problem.

I called in that particular draft of the book for both clear understanding of those issues by all of us and for a level of intergroup

forgiveness. I said in that book that we needed a fresh start. I also wrote that part of that fresh start needed to be for people in this country to forgive some of the prior levels of bad, discriminatory, and damaging behavior.

My friend read that draft of the book, looked me in the eye, and said — “No. I may understand but do not ever expect me to forgive. It is not possible to forgive.”

That was an unexpected feedback. I was again shocked and I actually was a bit rocked. A very wise and very good-hearted person had just told me that forgiveness was off the table.

That actually made great sense when I thought about it, but I had not thought about it. I had just plugged forgiveness optimistically into my proposed solution set at a key point in the strategy fabric in the hopes that forgiveness could happen and in the clear wish that it actually would happen.

That was one bridge too far. The sins that had been committed — by people who had very intentionally and deliberately committed those sins — were not forgivable sins.

The amazing and brilliant reconciliation process that happened in South Africa at the end of apartheid that was set up by Nelson Mandela as they created their new inclusive nation involved having the individual

sinner in that country come to the commission as individuals who each very explicitly explained their own sins, and their own guilt and then expressed personal sorrow and regret. Then, as the final step, they each actually asked for forgiveness.

I had a chance to have a brief talk with Bishop Tutu of South Africa about that process. In that highly structured setting in South Africa, Bishop Tutu said that forgiveness was often very painful but it was possible.

For us — with no clearly expressed regret and with no individual confessions of past sins by the actual sinners — forgiveness was not possible. That point was made clearly. It made great sense.

Awareness Was Not Enough

This whole process of creating intergroup Peace, I learned, was clearly going to be harder than I had thought at several levels. We could not just give ourselves a fresh start. We were not going to be able to talk ourselves out of those problems.

I realized at that point that awareness wasn't going to be enough.

I had intended to publish that particular draft of that book. I stopped the publishing process at that point. I went back into thinking about the issues. I refocused on designing and testing resolution approaches that could

give us a fresh start without seeking and using forgiveness as part of the package.

As a result of that extended thought processes, I began to develop a multi-level strategy development processes — aimed at understanding the functional realities and processes that will be needed to win people’s hearts and trust instead of just winning people’s heads.

The new strategy was based on the reality that we all will have the potential going forward to be both saints and sinners. We will need to very intentionally do the exact things we need to do to bring us all to win/win status and to activate our most positive sets of intergroup and interpersonal behaviors.

We need to create a functional and inclusive sense of “us” and then we need to build trust around that sense of “us” that is based on our actions, our behaviors, and our interactions in real and validating ways with one another.

We can’t turn to forgiveness, but we can do what South Africa did and start fresh — with clear behavior expectations generating a sense of situational credibility and trust.

Suspecting Racism Was A Legitimate Concern

We need to interact with each other in ways that build trust. Trust can be built, but it will need to be earned. It will need to be earned in a context where there are very real and legitimate concerns about behaviors at a deep and personal level.

In my own head — and in my own heart — when that particular incident at school happened, I had personally gone to racism instantly and immediately as a possible cause for that behavior. I realized that my own personal response of suspecting racism as a relevant factor for that incident was a very natural and entirely legitimate response as a possible explanation for the incident.

As I thought that issue through more carefully, I recognized intellectually that my own thinking in that situation about that risk was valid and that my response in suspecting racism when that incident happened to my grandson was entirely appropriate.

Suspecting racism was not an error in my thinking. There is a lot of racism in the world. Racism might easily have been the trigger issue for that particular situation at school. It often is a trigger issue for things that happen in many settings in our country.

I had not personally faced any significant level of racist prejudice directly in my own life, but I had been writing about all of the evil things that people do to one another for racist reasons for several years — so my own evidence base about the amount of racism that exists in our world today filled a big enough space in my own head for me to legitimately have and feel that concern in that situation.

Any minority American who knows that reality from first hand and constant experience is probably wondering why that revelation was so shocking and why that particular learning movement was so powerful for me. It was so powerful because my personal life context up to that point had not ever caused me to feel personally defensive and personally threatened by possible racist behavior.

My context switched from empathetic and sympathetic intellectual awareness and ideological and philosophical support to deep personal relevance and to deep personal concern when that moment of truth about possible racist damage happened for my own family.

Context is everything. I personally needed to see that situation in a context that let me see what I saw in order to actually see it.

White Americans Need To Understand The Context of Racism

I also realized in that moment that we could not succeed in achieving that goal of creating intergroup Peace for our country until more White people in our country also had a sense of how much damage our racism has done and how relevant all of the racist pieces of our world are to people's direct experience and to people's personal expectations.

I realized that my own new enlightenment levels and direct insights on those issues needed to be shared in some clear way with other people who are White and who have also only seen racism and intergroup discrimination from a White and intellectual perspective.

For people who have not faced both direct and indirect incidents of discrimination and racist behavior — the topic can be intellectual, ideological, philosophical, and even theoretical. Racism is a much more powerful issue when it is also has directly functional realities for each person attached.

I later learned that racism actually had not been a factor for that particular incident at school. But that information did not make my fear about racism in the moment of that situation one iota less relevant or any less appropriate.

We All Need To Understand The Damage That Has Been Done

I began to rewrite my books on our intergroup interactions from the perspective that we need to have all parties and all groups understand the damage that racism has done and we need all groups and all parties to also understand the threats that racism still presents.

I also recognized — as a side benefit relative to understanding those issues — that many incidents and occurrences that actually are not racist will be interpreted as either being racist or possibly being racist — and that we will need a process of diagnosing and discussing each of those incidents in a safe and clear way if we want to achieve intergroup trust and alignment and not have misconstrued incidents or outlier incidents that actually represent only individual sinners sinning function as trigger events that divide us or even tear us apart.

My sense now is that we need to create much higher levels of understanding about our collective history and our past behaviors — and that we need to build a culture of inclusion and trust for America.

We all — people from every group — need to have a clear understanding of our current reality and our historical reality in order to determine where we are now and in order to determine what we need to do going forward as a people and a country.

People tend to have very different perceptions of the historical realities for this country. My sense is that we need to collectively agree on some key parts of history so that we can go forward from here to build the new history and the new culture of Peace that we all want to create.

Building the needed new levels of trust will require behaviors that are clearly based on win/win outcomes for all relevant groups of people. Building the new levels of trust will require White Americans to have deeper insights into why trust does not exist today — and to realize how important it will be to collectively earn that trust going forward from where we are now.

Building a country with a culture of Intergroup Peace will require both a shared set of values that can align us and a clear set of behaviors that create trust that we are all sharing that alignment.

All of those behaviors will need to be anchored on a clear understanding of the historical realities that created where we are today.