

A Lost Opportunity?

An Open Letter to the Leadership of the Episcopal Church from Ed Rodman, Coordinator of the Episcopal Urban Caucus

In the aftermath of the shocking verdict in the O.J. Simpson case and the furor that surrounded the Million Man March, there are many and varied reactions that seem to be at cross purposes if one is of a mind to discuss what good could come out of this situation. Indeed, it is my position that the failure to have been prepared for the possibility of a not guilty verdict may be the ultimate lost opportunity for our generation, if the goal is to address the issue of race relations. The need to resolve the polarization that exists in our society as revealed by these events, cannot be ignored unless we have given up hope of ever overcoming this fundamental flaw in the American character. This is made even more true by Colin Powell's decision not to run for the Office of President. Certainly his candidacy was seen by many (albeit unfairly) as a potentially healing process. We are, therefore, left with the sad reality of focusing on the response to the Simpson trial and the Million Man March. While many may discuss to the end of time whether or not this was an appropriate verdict, or whether Farrakhan is an appropriate leader, the fact of the matter is that the vast majority of people never truly believed that a not guilty verdict was possible, and few paid attention to the message coming from the Million Man March. Thus there was no real thought given to what this significant moment in time might produce in terms of inter-group dynamics. I would suspect that Powell was not unmindful of this reality in making his decision not to run.

Needless to say, we have seen the result and it is both depressing and frightening. It is depressing because there has been very little true dialogue surrounding the obvious issues that this verdict has raised, nor does there seem to be any opportunity to have the type of in-depth discussion that is required between the races in order to arrive at a

genuine understanding of, not only feelings and perceptions, but also the harsh facts that both groups must face if we are to move ahead in the same direction together. Or as President Clinton correctly observed in his already forgotten speech calling for such dialogue ... "While Blacks must bear the burden of racism, it is white people's problem...." Certainly Christians, and all people of good will, should understand the unique opportunity that this situation provides for the Church to be the venue where this crucial matter of human relations can be addressed in a positive rather than in a polarized fashion. However, the Church, like most other institutions in our society, appears to be unwilling to step up to the plate and take on that responsibility. It would appear, therefore, that denial is alive and well even in the Church. This is an immense tragedy. In the small hope that there are those who are still willing to proceed with a positive agenda under the circumstances, I offer these thoughts for your consideration and response.

To begin in a focused and productive manner, I suggest we look at some of the fundamental elements that are present in this situation that can serve as the foundation for the dialogue. Those elements are: shared experience, the valuing of different experiences, and the construction of a common vision or hope for the future. Let us turn to these in order, and see where they lead us in a discussion of how we might go forward from here productively, now that the dust has settled.

Shared experience. Much has been made of the fact that, like the President Kennedy assassination or the first moon landing, the O.J. Simpson verdict was one of those rare moments in contemporary American history in which the vast majority of its citizens witnessed the same event at the same time. Similarly, the entire nation was riveted to some portion, at least, of the Million Man March. Unfortunately, unlike the other two significant occasions noted above, the general reaction was not shared, but rather was radically divided along racial lines. This has come to be in

and of itself, a major issue in both the lead-up to the verdict and the march, as well as in their aftermath. One should note that the reaction to the Powell decision not to run did not break down along racial lines, although it would appear that more Blacks than whites seemed to understand and accept his decision. All of this raises several questions – why were blacks and whites so divided on the potential outcome of the trial, and why in particular, were so many whites shocked and so many blacks apparently happy with the outcome? Why was so much emphasis placed on Farrakhan and his excesses, and so little attention paid to his message and that of the many other speakers and persons who were present? Who has the responsibility to respond to President Clinton's call for dialogue? The answer to these questions is critical, because in the arena of race relations two of these events are the first shared experiences in American history in which the gulf between the races has been so clearly manifested. Looked at in this way, the Powell decision simply ups the ante in terms of trying to answer these questions.

In fact, if we are to speak honestly in answering these questions, we might understand how critical this shared experience really is, if we are going to come to value the different experiences that diverse groups have had in American society. For indeed, it is not uncommon for people to have different perceptions of the same experience, but it is rare that there is such a radical division of feeling around a shared experience, especially along racial lines. Now that the period of instant analysis has passed, and before these events get lost in the ever fickle attention span of our society, let us take a moment to examine these questions in the context of shared experiences.

One good example to note is the reaction to the Rodney King beating. While most Americans were shocked at the video tape of Rodney King's beating, and many were outraged at the Simi County verdict that found the police officers not guilty, this reaction cut across racial lines and was a shared reaction, unlike the circumstance surrounding the

Simpson verdict. Indeed few bothered to ask Black Americans how they felt, because most people felt the same way, that is, how could this happen? This was similar to the reaction that Northern whites would have when an all white jury would not convict racist Southerners of the lynching and killing of Blacks, or their white sympathizers, as late as 1966, as for example, in the Jonathan Daniels case. Rather, the media focused American society on the outrage that Black Americans expressed, especially in the Los Angeles area, in the riot. Thus, like the riots of the 1960s, the issues of violence and civil disorder and the reality of racial polarization became the focus, rather than the feelings, perceptions, and attitudes that people had regarding the experience that was the cause for acting out the hostility in the first place. The result was a lack of progress in inter-group understanding.

This is a critical point, because it was widely assumed that there was the possibility that if a guilty verdict came in the O.J. Simpson case, a similar potential for outrage existed. This was a curious attitude on the part of those who held it, because it suggested that the issue was the same, i.e., injustice to a Black person. Few bothered to ask Black Americans whether that was in fact the case, and many may have been surprised to hear that there was at no point any serious belief within the Black community that, had O.J. Simpson been found guilty, such a reaction would have occurred. What is even more interesting is that few, if any, black or white, believed that O.J. would actually be acquitted, and certainly not in the swift time frame in which it occurred. Even more telling is the fact that there was hardly any preparation for the possibility of a hostile white reaction to a not guilty verdict. This becomes a good starting point for understanding the insidious nature of racism in its capacity to define reality, and predetermine to a large extent, our actions and behaviors to the detriment of the resolution of the cultural and experiential gap that exists between black and white Americans. That also might explain why the decision of Colin Powell not to run was so

disappointing to many whites, because it in fact removed the possibility that that particular Black person would take on such a burden when, as Clinton correctly observed, it is white people's problem. Sensing this point in its fullness, i.e., looking to the victim for the solution to the problem, is the critical first step in having any honest dialogue. Black people did not create racism or the racial gulf that exists, and certainly as the victims, cannot be blamed for their reaction to the pain that it creates. To understand this point fully, is why it is so vital that we come to appreciate and value the different experiences that various groups have had in America. It also denies Black's humanity, for it fails to appreciate the genuine moral outrage that Blacks shared with whites at these awful murders.

Valuing different experiences. As we proceed to answer the second question that was raised earlier regarding the Million Man March, Farrakhan and the issues between the message and the messenger, this will be a good opportunity to examine the question of valuing our different experiences. Certainly it would be both myopic and short-sighted of me if, in the context of addressing the need for renewed dialogue on the issues of race and inclusion in our society I did not also note the other major components in the dynamic of exclusion, namely, sexism, class, anti-Semitism, and homophobia. Certainly these elements, when added to race, create that rich stew of divisiveness which is the grist for the mill of those who would keep a common vision of a just, accessible and sustainable society from being agreed upon among us. Indeed it is fair to say, in my opinion, that such significant attention to situations such as the O.J. Simpson trial and the Million Man March, and the attendant fall-out on various sides regarding sexism, class, anti-Semitism, and homophobia, are all facets of one grand diversionary strategy on the part of some politicians and some in the media, to distract us from the critical issue of developing and maintaining a viable social contract and safety net for the vulnerable in our society. These dynamics also underscore the neurotic fascination

America has with the white/black paradigm to the exclusion of the many other ethnic groups that are an increasing part of the U.S. scene.

Anyone who is familiar with the history of the South in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, knows that, whenever the landowners or politicians wished to maintain their advantageous position of power, they would stage a lynching. Could it be that all of our interest and concern on the matters that divide us, are in fact being fanned in order to keep us from focusing on the Contract with America and its devastating impact on the young, the elderly and the vulnerable among us? While I use this primarily as a rhetorical question, I suggest that it is very relevant as a corollary consideration to the content of our dialogue, and is essential in understanding the context from which the differing experiences that we have in this American sojourn are derived. For indeed, those who find themselves perched on the pinnacle of privilege have a much safer perspective from which to view the changes in our society proposed by the new conservatives, than those who find themselves balancing on the precipice of poverty. Nor do either share the total despair of those at the bottom. Therefore, the issues of class and income redistribution inform the anger and frustration, not only in communities of color, who bear an unfair burden on the negative side of this equation, but also many whites who find themselves, their status and security threatened.

It is exactly this situation that breeds the tendency to identify illegal immigrants, minorities, and those with different sexual preferences, as prime candidates for ostracism and scapegoating. It is also this situation that has confronted the Jewish community in the past and leads them to be extremely alert to any rhetoric that engenders anti-Semitism. Each group has sufficient history on their side to justify these concerns, and I would suggest that this must be at the root of a great deal of the distrust and concern that fans the division between Blacks and Jews. Therefore, as we begin to analyze the reaction to the Mil-

lion Man March and the leadership of Louis Farrakhan, we must do so within this broader context if we are to be fair to both the message and the messenger.

At the heart of the reaction to the Million Man March is the elusive dynamic of denial. Indeed Farrakhan himself spoke to this very eloquently in that part of the speech, which I fear most people have not heard, in which he addressed the whole issue of atonement and the importance of the first two steps, which are, having a wrong pointed out and then acknowledging it. The normal reaction to this situation is denial. Denial takes many forms, and we saw that being played out graphically in the media and in the public discourse leading up to and following the march. The first and obvious example of denial is to ignore. Indeed, for weeks prior to the march there was a general effort to ignore that it was going to happen. It was really only after the O.J. verdict was rendered that people began to understand the potential that the march represented, and the speculation began as to whether O.J. was going to be there, or Colin Powell, etc. That then led to the second step which is to belittle. The most graphic example of the belittling is that of the Park Service and those who argued about the numbers of people. Who knows how many were there? The reality is that there were nearly a million, and that far exceeded anybody's expectations, probably including Farrakhan's, but the refusal to acknowledge that was a form of denial. The next step in denial is to caricature, or somehow make fun of the messenger and/or the message. We observed many people trying to make fun of Farrakhan and his allusions to Masonic rites or numerals (which were actually a message within a message), and thereby dismiss the whole thing.

Another form of denial is that of discrediting. This is where the anti-Semitism, homophobia, and the sexism charges came into play. Farrakhan addressed all of these in his speech. I wonder how many people really listened to his acknowledgment of his own faults in these areas, and his pledge, personally as well as in the pledge that every-

one made at the end of the march, to disavow those behaviors. However, because discrediting was the objective, his response was not acknowledged. The final stage of denial is to simply confront and overwhelm the truth-teller with a bigger lie or a contrary truth, and when necessary, utilize brute force. This stage can be seen in the assassination (character or actual) of individuals or the genocide of peoples. The former milder form could be seen in the efforts to get other leaders to disavow Farrakhan, or to resurrect stereotypes. In its more blatant form, the assassination of a Martin Luther King Jr., or the genocide of Native people. We have not had to go through this latter stage in recent American history, but it is unfortunately true that the evidences of this brutal application of force to deny truth is all too evident in slavery, in the Indian wars, in post reconstruction lynching, in the internment of Japanese-Americans, and in the treatment of many political and other prisoners who move beyond the pale of what is acceptable in American society. This was indeed an important dynamic in the Rodney King event, and I am afraid it fuels a great deal of the support for the death penalty. All of these are examples of the application of force by a society that is in denial of the root causes of the injustices and dysfunctions within its midst.

Thus, the discussion became one about the dynamics of denial, rather than the content and meaning that was inherent in the Million Man March or in the reaction to the O.J. Simpson verdict. For in fact in both circumstances there are legitimate issues of concern that have been raised and that should be addressed. Atonement for one, i.e., acknowledging, confessing, repenting, and restoring, all of which should be important ingredients in the social contract of America, but which have been systematically and historically denied. What we have chosen to do, for example, is to adopt the welfare system and affirmative action, rather than to restore the lost wealth of the free labor of slaves, and others denied economic opportunity. These become reparations on the installment plan. Even they are

now under attack, so that the movement toward denial seems stronger than the movement toward common ground by refusing to recognize the systemic injustice. This is probably in direct proportion to the movement of wealth to fewer and fewer people, and the increase in poverty and anxiety among more and more people. The two go hand in hand. This is a particularly ironic situation since the message that Farrakhan delivered was in large part exactly the same message that Pat Robinson and the Christian Coalition have given about personal responsibility, the evils of pornography, and family values. Indeed Farrakhan's castigation of the entertainment and sports industries was far more eloquent and penetrating than any brought forward by Dan Quayle or representatives of the religious right. Finally it should be observed that the issues of racist police behaviors, violence against women, and the quality of defense for less than wealthy persons have all been lost in the shuffle.

This in turn raises some very interesting questions about the degree to which issues of nationalism and separatism within the Black community are not respected as legitimate manifestations of conservative tendencies there. Those tendencies are quite consistent with and resonate to the general rightward drift of the country. Indeed it is extremely ironic that while some might agree with Farrakhan's analysis of many problems, because they disagree with his solutions and the rhetoric that he uses to attract attention to their presentation, they reject the analysis. This is a mistake that whites make because of their racism, but Blacks do not because they understand the difference between the messenger and the message. I suggest that this is a very serious problem that is not unique to Louis Farrakhan, who is but the last of a long line of social critics on issues of race and class in this century, beginning with DuBois, going-through Myrdal, the Kerner Commission, Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, and Jesse Jackson. The sickness of America is apparent to all who have eyes to see, and to deny that this sickness rooted in racism, class divi-

sion, exclusion, and the pitting of classes and races against one another, while at the same time exploiting sexism and homophobia, is to deny the reality of what is going on in America today.

Until we can break through this wall of denial and begin to talk about these issues and understand the reality that underlies the pain that those who have suffered these injustices feel, and the remedies that they suggest to bring about change, we will not only not make a bad situation better, but we will all be participating in making a volatile situation worse. At the end of the day, it is the failure to give value and meaning to the varying experiences that people have had in American society, and to acknowledge that all of those experiences are valid, that may spell our doom as a coherent society, especially as we become more diverse as a people. To avoid such a fate, we must begin to find ways and means by which those experiences and what lies behind them, can be shared and valued, so that the similarities that unite us can begin to emerge. Until we do this, the divisions that keep us apart will be maintained as a result of our ignorance of our common and shared beliefs. It is precisely on this point that I would suggest that the dialogue must begin. It must begin with the telling of stories and the acceptance and validation of those stories by everyone. It must also begin with the common belief in the need to tell the stories, and not ignore the history that has brought us to this point. It is precisely the ignorance and denial of our history that is at the root of so much of the social unrest, distrust, and discord that plague us.

Essential to this task is to tell that story and to understand that history. It must be full and complete, and not slanted in one direction or another. This has always been difficult because in fact, American society is the result of one group of people — the Europeans — being victorious over two other groups of people — Native and African — in order to create the current arrangements that favor Europeans and disfavor Native peoples and people of color. To deny this is to perpetuate the injustice and unearned privi-

lege and advantage that comes from that current arrangement for the descendants of the Europeans. That is a very painful message to hear, but it can only be heard, I believe, in the individual stories of people and communities and situations, and not in overarching ideological pronouncements or rhetorical challenges. Those do not lend themselves to dialogue, and they are not in and of themselves, valid experiences. One further point should be made, and that is that in any sharing of experiences it is important that ground rules be established that give ample opportunity for people to feel safe in telling their stories. In that way, the lies and misinformation about groups can be exposed and discredited, and not perpetuated.

If we had such ground rules, an honest discussion between Blacks and Jews about the nature of anti-Semitism and the reasons why a person like Farrakhan can draw upon that well so effectively might be possible. In that way both groups could come to understand the way in which the other group sees them. In any event, one group cannot define the reality of the other. We must recognize that it is this tendency of one group to define someone else's reality that is the ultimate form of oppression and humiliation, especially if that group has greater access to the media or greater power to enforce their definitions upon the other groups. This is the nature of white racism, and for better or for worse, Jews have identified as white, and it is because of this that Blacks see racism utilizing fears of anti-Semitism and class warfare to maintain divisions between those who are the victims of that very racism. If we can begin to fashion that kind of dialogue and the ground rules that make it possible, we then have the opportunity to find some hopeful ways out of our current morass. But this makes the final question, and that is, whose responsibility is it to make this happen, and how can we see it occurring in the foreseeable future so crucial. It is also for these reasons that one should not be surprised by Colin Powell's decision not to run for President.

Creating the dialogue. There is an African proverb that observes "If you don't know where you're going, any road will take you there...." This puts as succinctly as I can imagine, the dilemma that we currently face, if we are to create and maintain the type of dialogue for which I am calling. It is my opinion that the failure to have a common vision of where we should be in relationship to matters of race, is central to the confusion that currently exists in our society. As a specific proposal to address this problem, in light of what has come before, I suggest a four-step process:

1. That we target Martin Luther King Day as the time in which such a dialogue would commence. I make this recommendation in light of the failure of American society to find an appropriate way to celebrate the life of this great American leader, other than to have commemorative services. If his dream for this society is to be realized, and the vision that he painted where people would be judged by the content of their character rather than the color of their skin, is to become a reality, what greater tribute could be rendered than setting aside that day as an opportunity to begin the discussions between the races. In many ways racism is like an addiction, and like any addition, the first step is to acknowledge its hold on us, and the second step is to pick the date when we are going to begin the process of overcoming it. By choosing this date, we again identify an opportunity for a shared experiences and we do it in the context of the commemoration of a national leader who fought for justice and human rights. There is absolutely no reason why this cannot be something that we would all agree on as an appropriate use of this holiday, and provides an annual opportunity to evaluate our progress toward realizing the goal of a truly inclusive society.

2. In order to carry this dialogue forward, it is also important that we be clear on the process that must be involved. Central to this process are the ground rules noted

above, but beyond them there must be a dual attack on both the individual foundations of the learned behavior of racism, and on its structural manifestations that have rendered our society so polarized. To simply work on the individual issues of prejudice and bigotry without addressing the systemic causes of racism, is to miss the point and to reduce this very critical exercise to the more practical but less fruitful effort of managing diversity. While this latter goal may be a practical one in business, and certainly a minimum standard for tolerance in an increasingly diverse society, managing diversity alone does not provide for justice, nor will it bring about the kind of collective movement toward a just, sustainable, accessible and equitable society that must be the corollary goal that we seek. Inherent in that process is not only establishing the vision, but also identifying measurable goals that would be meant to mark our progress toward that vision. Once those measurable goals have been identified, beginning with the Church, we can then start the more difficult task of acknowledging the obstacles that stand in the way of achieving these goals. Only then can the most important task of devising those strategies that will help us overcome the obstacles that prevent us from making progress begin.

The final step becomes returning to the original vision and marking our progress, on an annual basis, toward achieving it. If this type of envisioning was utilized, we could overcome a great deal of the rhetoric and extraneous conversation that passes as dialogue on these matters, and avoid the tendency toward the paralysis of analysis, which too often bogs down such discussions. The other advantage lies in the practical consideration that, in establishing measurable goals, we are able to determine whether or not we are achieving the ends desired.

3. I recommend the Church as the place to start this dialogue because clearly the Church has a mandate to bring about greater equity among people, and to work for justice. It is my contention that justice is simply love distributed, i.e., love is not only the establishment of right

relations between individuals, but also between groups. Indeed, the primary struggle that we are engaged in in our society today with regard to the social safety net, has to do with what I call the movement from charity to justice. That is, attempting to address the problems of hunger, homelessness, and the maldistribution of wealth, not from our surplus, but from the heart of our immense wealth. Just as the Prophet Micah asked ... what does the Lord require ... is it not to seek justice, love mercy, and to walk humbly with our God? The Church pays lip service to this, but like other institutions in American society, has chosen to adopt cultural divisions that divide us, rather than working toward the goal of bringing us together across our divisions. If there ever was a time to repent, it is now.

4. If we can agree on the place to have a dialogue, the time that it should occur, and the means by which it should be carried forward, then the only task remaining is, who is to assume the responsibility for initiating it? In my own Church, I would call upon the Presiding Bishop and the House of Bishops who recently issued a statement on "The Sin of Racism", to see this as a top priority for the Episcopal Church. I would further urge them in turn, to communicate with other church leaders in the various denominations and religious communities, to seek their cooperation so that this could be an inter-faith effort. Certainly there are those within the Jewish and Islamic communities who must sense the urgency for this, as much, if not more than we do. In working together on this, we might begin to develop a common agenda that could have salutary effects far beyond the attempt to resolve the racial polarization and religious and cultural tensions between us. I, therefore, call upon the Presiding Bishop and other leaders of the Episcopal Church, to take this proposal seriously and to begin discussions with relevant persons on their staff and within the denomination that could help expedite this process. In so doing, it may also help our Church move beyond some of the preoccupation that we have had with

our own internal problems, and restore a position of appropriate leadership for the Episcopal Church, which it has exercised in the past.

To help make this real, I would urge that the dialogue begin at the judicatory level i.e., the Presiding Bishop with his peers, and Bishops with their peers. The call could go out in that fashion so that the leadership of the church models its importance by their actions. On the local level, the Episcopal Church could offer its site as a place to hold the meetings/discussions, either among themselves if that is safer, or on an interfaith basis where appropriate. The important point is that this is not a one shot deal, but rather one that will become a traditional part of the observance of the King holiday. The key is in making the commitment to start, which in the first year i.e., 1996, could simply be a planning meeting or gathering with discussions and preparations proceeding, in an orderly fashion, toward a full blown dialogical experience in 1997. The Episcopal Urban Caucus stands ready to provide resources to all levels of the Church where there exists a serious desire to pursue this idea. In any event, it is offered as an opportunity to incarnate in a meaningful fashion, our commitment to inclusiveness and racial harmony.

Conclusion.

If anything has emerged from this paper and its call to action, I trust that the reader has a greater understanding of what is at stake if we fail to take this opportunity. Clearly the momentum that emerged from the Million Man March will continue to be felt in our society for some time to come, and if it is not appropriately focused, could become a contributing factor to increased polarization. Similarly, the pending civil suit in the ongoing saga of the Brown and Goldman murders, will once again raise the same issues and passions that the recent trial so clearly sparked. More than likely these will be coming to a crescendo at the time of the Martin Luther King holiday and, the observance of Black History Month. This further

commends it as an appropriate place and time to begin.

Finally, the maintaining of our social fabric and the related social safety net is clearly becoming the central issue, not only in the Presidential debate, but in the seemingly endless and complex discussion of our national priorities as reflected in the impasse on the budget. If we are to make progress on those matters, it is clear that the issues of race and class must be removed from the table as divisive elements in the discussion. If this is not accomplished, then the discussion of priorities will be a fruitless exercise, and the consequent fallout of vindictive decision making to the detriment of many, and the advantage of the few will further exacerbate the tension among us. Thus, to commence a dialogue on Martin Luther King Day and then carry it forward through the Presidential election and the debate on national priorities, will provide the appropriate context in which we can hold these two critical concerns in tension.

Needless to say, I invite the response of all concerned persons to this call to action, and any comments, criticisms and concerns that arise from the reading of this paper, I trust will become the first stages of the dialogue. In any event, this is offered in the hope that we can agree on where we must go, and find the road to get us there, so that, in the words of the salutation of the Union of Black Episcopalians, there can truly be peace among us and we can cease being instruments of our own oppression.

Thanksgiving 1995

— Edward Rodman