

Creating spaces for Truth-telling about Race in the United States

April 2, 2009

Attorney General Eric Holder's remarks at the Department of Justice on February 18, 2009, have rather typically --and sadly---sparked more heat than light. For this outcome I do not blame Mr. Holder. He not only has a right to his voice, but the responsibility to use his personal and political power to help move us farther along the long arc, which Dr. King famously said, bends towards justice.

What I want to accomplish in this reflection is an invitation to "the other half," the perennially missing half: that of learning and teaching how to create spaces where more truth, and thus more light, can emerge.

First, the opening paragraphs of the speech: Wednesday, February 18, 2009

Eric Holder, Attorney General of the United States

Every year, in February, we attempt to recognize and to appreciate black history. It is a worthwhile endeavor for the contributions of African Americans to this great nation are numerous and significant. Even as we fight a war against terrorism, deal with the reality of electing an African American as our President for the first time and deal with the other significant issues of the day, the need to confront our racial past, and our racial present, and to understand the history of African people in this country, endures. One cannot truly understand America without understanding the historical experience of black people in this nation. Simply put, to get to the heart of this country one must examine its racial soul.

Though this nation has proudly thought of itself as an ethnic melting pot, in things racial we have always been and continue to be, in too many ways, essentially a nation of cowards. Though race related issues continue to occupy a significant portion of our political discussion, and though there remain many unresolved racial issues in this nation, we, average Americans, simply do not talk enough with each other about race. It is an issue we have never been at ease with

and given our nation's history this is in some ways understandable. And yet, if we are to make progress in this area we must feel comfortable enough with one another, and tolerant enough of each other, to have frank conversations about the racial matters that continue to divide us. But we must do more- and we in this room bear a special responsibility. Through its work and through its example this Department of Justice, as long as I am here, must - and will - lead the nation to the "new birth of freedom" so long ago promised by our greatest President. This is our duty and our solemn obligation.

I want to call Mr. Holder, and ask him for an hour of his time. I know, I know, that's like asking for a week in Washington time, but still. . .

First I would say, Mr. Holder, thank you for speaking your truth to your power, and thank you for hearing this humble citizen speak my truth to my power.

With respect, sir, I don't agree that most of us are cowards, nor do I believe we need more confrontation. Confrontation of various kinds is how we came to this impasse, and ignores Einstein's very wise insight that we cannot solve problems at the same level of consciousness that created them.

Mr. Holder, we will never 'get to the heart,' nor will we 'examine the racial (or any other kind of) soul' in confrontation, nor in 'simply talking with one another about race.' The soul, to paraphrase Parker Palmer, is shy; it doesn't show up in noisy, confrontational spaces. Nor does the heart open in places lacking psychological safety, in places promising, frankly, more violence.

I would say, Sir, I am not suggesting another diversity program with its own vaunted experts and expertise. We don't need more theories, regulations, more studies, more well-intentioned conferences in sterile hotel rooms where earnest people get bludgeoned with the usual instruments of torture: panels of talking heads, edgy experiments in unsafe containers. Even the official apologies and public rituals of accountability---while important-- have failed to effect much healing as they have rarely emerged from authentic and sustained engagement with our tangled personal and collective histories of oppressing and being oppressed.

I would say Mr. Holder , *May I read you a poem?*

Zeroing In

"I am a landscape," he said.

"a landscape and a person walking in that landscape.

There are daunting cliffs there,

And plains glad in their way

of brown monotony. But especially

there are sinkholes, places

of sudden terror, of small circumference

and malevolent depths."

"I know," she said. "When I set forth

to walk in myself, as it might be

on a fine afternoon, forgetting,

sooner or later I come to where sedge

and clumps of white flowers, rue perhaps,

mark the bogland, and I know

there are quagmires there that can pull you

down, and sink you in bubbling mud."

"We had an old dog," he told her, "when I was a boy,

a good dog, friendly. But there was an injured spot

on his head, if you happened

just to touch it he'd jump up yelping

and bite you. He bit a young child,

they had to take him down to the vet's and destroy him."

"No one knows where it is," she said,

"and even by accident no one touches it.

It's inside my landscape, and only I, making my way

preoccupied through my life, crossing my hills,

sleeping on green moss of my own woods,

I myself without warning touch it,

and leap up at myself -"

"- or flinch back

just in time."

"Yes, we learn that.

It's not a terror, it's pain we're talking about:

those places in us, like your dog's bruised head,

that are bruised forever, that time

never assuages, never."

Denise Levertov

In the silence after reading the poem, I would ask, *would you be willing to lend the authority and resources of the Department of Justice to teaching and learning simple and transformational practices of being together in our complicated landscapes of injury?*

There is pain there-but -no, we are not cowards for flinching back from stepping yet again into the sinkholes of blame and recrimination, continued wounding of one another. On the contrary, it requires a great deal of courage to admit that sitting down with one another among diverse ---and even competing-- truths holds as much promise for racial and all other forms of justice (economic, gender, environmental) than the decades of standing at podiums and in courtrooms pressing in on one another's injured places. No wonder we bite one another!

Sir, in addition to your very important and still necessary practices of pursuing justice in the courts, will you, beginning with one circle made up of your immediate staff begin the process? I know some people who can help.

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