

Embracing the Melting Pot **Austin Neighborhoods Council July 27, 2016**

I. Introduction

In reference to the July 12, e-Time article ‘This Is Not a ‘Black and White’ Thing: Former Mayor, Ron Kirk expressed outrage over the sniper shooting deaths of five Dallas Police Officers. This action cannot be justified. He affirmed the peaceful nature of the Black Lives Matter Protest, and commended the character of the current mayor, police chief, and officers for their respect and restraint that resisted an inflammatory response under difficult circumstances. Ron pointed out that a tremendous amount of ground work had already been accomplished between law enforcement and the public prior to this tragedy. These tragedies affect us all.

II. Examining the Problem

I believe that the Dallas incident demonstrates at what a pivotal point we are in our understanding of race relations. The reality is that relations between police and people of color are messy and tense. Black citizens see a long hidden and denied disparity between how we are treated when measured against the typical treatment of white citizens. But in our time of social media and cell phone video, instances of questionable actions are now exposed for all to see, analyze, and lament. We have work to do.

When police officers are killed under any circumstances, those deaths become a call for public widespread mourning. I agree that we need to honor the sacrifices of those on the front lines keeping our country safe, law abiding, and civil. However, our attitudes toward mourning imply that police lives are sacrosanct and have greater value than the rest of ours. As a nation, we are just beginning to apply widespread mourning to the loss of black lives. Honoring police lives should not be inconsistent with honoring our own losses.

With the exception of sacrificing our own lives and safety for our children, or possibly other close loved ones, each of us is hardwired for self-preservation above any other instinct. In cases where that instinct is overlaid with racial bias and the fear of people of color, we are seeing for ourselves that some police officers react in ways that produce the kind of tragic outcomes in the headlines of recent years. Unless we face the reality of racial tensions in communities of color, I believe there will continue to be incidences of inflamed misunderstandings, over reactions, and escalations that lead to unjustified killings of innocents.

Even when a shooting is not supported by camera evidence from the police or independent observers, the two most frequent explanations for unwarranted police shootings and deaths of black citizens are: 1) I feared for my life; and 2) He resisted arrest. This reminds me of the adage: “Are you going to believe me or your lying eyes.

III. Definition of Racism

We are all biased to some degree because humans are basically hardwired to define a comfort zone that generally includes our own family members and community, or people who are most similar to ourselves by education, economics, or some other unifying characteristics. But, racism is bias on another level because it is defined through hierarchy. And in the unfortunate facts of our country’s history, black people have consistently been ranked at the bottom of American society. The result has been over four centuries of black lives and humanity being valued lower than the rest of society.

Bigotry is a more personal form of active racism. A bigot is an individual who comes to perceive or is taught to believe that their self-esteem and well-being is dependent on the ability to maintain an attitude of superiority over people of another race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, age, physical ability, or any other expression of difference. Controlling and maintaining a status quo of societal hierarchy has been the cause of systemic oppression at the heart of our current racial unrest.

IV. Black Lives Matter

The BLM movement is attempting to bring the life value of people of color into a better balance with the value of white ethnicities. By staging peaceful demonstrations to spotlight the reality of what black people face, this movement is opening a public conversation to question and mitigate the “us versus them” mentality of some law enforcers and the public. The movement is also an attempt to move the needle on public recognition of the progress that we still need to make in order to become a more equitable, just society. It is important for the public majority to accept the truth about racial injustice that continues to permeate the lives of too many black and brown citizens. Because, without acknowledging the problem, we cannot solve it.

V. On the Path to the Melting Pot

From *Slavery* to the *Jim Crow Era*, to *Legal Institutionalized Segregation*, “hierarchy” was the overarching reality. Those eras were characterized by open discrimination against people of color. Black people, in particular, had no rights to equality, and no recourse to justice.

During the Era of *Desegregation*, the overarching reality was that of “grudging compliance” with newly enacted civil rights laws. However, our lives remained very separate and unequal. Beginning with true *Integration* efforts, the races became more willing and able to intertwine our lives. “Tolerance” became the overarching theme of a kind of progress that went hand in hand with the mollifying denial that racism still existed. Therefore, our path to being the “American Melting Pot” has been stifled by our slow acknowledgement of reality.

Although integration is not yet pervasive and equality is still an aspiration, we are progressing on our messy path to living America’s vision as the “great melting pot.” Learning the lessons of tolerance placed us in the first phase on the continuum of unconditional acceptance for all races. The melting pot can be characterized as the living blend of humanity with equality and justice for all. Think of it as the possibility that one day, we won’t be able to distinguish racial origin for a large segment of our society, nor will we care to do so.

VI. What Can We Do to Improve Race Relations?

1. Exam your own feelings about race and be honest about where you are on the path to the melting pot. Acknowledge if you feel disassociated from people you don’t know, but have stereotypes about. Feel when your heart automatically opens or closes in response to a different race.
2. Be the one to break the ice and get to know someone outside your comfort zone. Make small efforts and look for opportunities to listen to peoples’ stories so you can get better at understanding our common humanity.
3. Without disregarding your instincts, try to override automatic negative reactions that have no basis in reality. Counterpunch them by overlaying unfounded impressions with memories of specific positive interactions you’ve had with someone of a particular race that troubles you.
4. Reframe bias from ethnic/racial stereotypes to behavioral constructs. Take as much of the emotion out of it as you can. For example, instead of thinking: “I hate black/brown/or LGBTQ people”; reframe it as: I am uncomfortable and don’t like it when people do _____ because it affects me in this way.
5. Use empathy, kindness, consideration, and friendliness to open relationships with a broader array of people.