



melindajoy mingo

the
colors
of
culture

the beauty
of diverse
friendships

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history matters

Perhaps travel cannot prevent bigotry, but by demonstrating that all peoples cry, laugh, eat, worry, and die, it can introduce the idea that if we try and understand each other, we may even become friends.

MAYA ANGELOU

One day while drinking coffee, laughing, and sharing stories with one of my best friends, who is white, an unexpected question about race came up. It just popped up out of nowhere as we were talking about the possibility of taking a fun trip on a cruise together. My friend asked, “Why do we have a group called Black Lives Matter that is expanding so rapidly in our nation? I believe that it’s a group that is being used to spread hate and division. We don’t need a group like that.”

Before I could answer, she went on to explain that she also now feels that because she is white, people from different racial groups who used to talk with her at her job are now ignoring her. With a trembling voice and tears, she said that

everybody in life has seen injustices—not just a certain group of people. She also admitted to me that she is tired of seeing images on television of people marching and protesting, and that the playing field in America is now equal, so she doesn't understand why people can't just move on from the past. After all, she explained, none of the younger generation of white people in society today were a part of discrimination in the past. She said she was sorry about the pain that people have experienced but that she had nothing to do with placing signs on bathroom doors that read “colored” or “white.” Her voice reached a place of pain that I had never heard as she proclaimed that she now feels like she is the victim of reverse discrimination in society. She ended her remarks by saying, “You know me. I am not a racist. I just have a lot of heart pain. I'm tired and confused.”

My best friend is a committed believer and has one of the tenderest hearts toward people that I have ever seen. We have known each other for over twenty years, and I fondly refer to her as a blue-eyed soul queen, a name I gave her when I found out that she has spent years of living and building friendships within the black community. Whether it has been hanging out at traditional black soul food restaurants, swaying and clapping to the beat of gospel music, or just hanging with diverse groups of people, she has adopted so much of black culture and has always honored other cultural groups.

I therefore listened to her in a bit of shock. Her words made me realize that historical and generational issues of injustice and discrimination in our society seem to appear and reappear in conversations at the most inopportune times—such as when we are enjoying life at a coffee shop drinking a latte with our best friend. Although I knew that my friend was not trying to disrespect me with her questions and comments, I immediately went into a default mode of silence, assuming that no matter how I explained things, she wouldn't get it. And I didn't feel like going into a conversation about Black Lives Matter, All Lives Matter, or anything else that would potentially matter. I wanted to talk about cruises and fun. I didn't want to talk about journeys I had not been a part of and organizations I did not establish.

But after prolonged silence between the two of us, I had an aha moment. She was pretty much saying the same thing to me that I have been feeling for a while each time someone asks me a question about the present state of racial and cultural divides in our nation. People have asked me questions that I can't explain, or have expected me to be the spokesperson for the entire black culture or other ethnic communities. I have felt that I was being drawn into societal issues and cultural divides that I have no responsibility for and that are out of my control. My friend was similarly expressing her pain from the behaviors and words of people who did not take the time to get to know her individually in the true context of

who she really is, and who have also attached her color and ethnicity to the present ills of society.

I knew that the only answers I could share would have to be ones in which I could shed a bit of light about injustices that have occurred in our society due to unequal power structures and the dishonoring of people. But I also knew that the conversation would have to end with the truth that Jesus has given to us in Romans 12:1-2: that we are not to conform to the patterns of this world, even in how we respond to adversity and conversations that stretch us.

I told my friend that we don't have a skin problem but rather a sin problem. The root of the problems of division in our society are mainly because people need to have a relationship with Jesus. My answer felt like a safe response. But then my friend responded, "That's true, but we also have some Christians who are prejudiced."

I didn't think she would understand or care about my journey, but I decided to share anyway. And as I shared more and more with her, she did get it and she did care. In the process I realized that the conversation was not just about my pain but also about me gaining a greater understanding of what she was trying to communicate without getting offended. I, too, listened and grasped better the layers behind her words. Thankfully, we had already established a relationship with each other based on vulnerability and transparency, so we could safely share our pain and joys without feeling judged.

Similar themes of unity and diversity came up recently in a conversation I was in with a group of leaders. People wanted to know how we could become more intentional in connecting with minorities in the community. I was quiet during most of the conversation because I could tell that others around the table were becoming frustrated.

Someone said, “Why do we need to talk about diversity? There is only one race—the human race. I am not a racist and I love everyone. I don’t see color, and we should be talking about advancing the kingdom of God and not race and diversity issues. We are creating more issues by talking about these things.” I was asked what my thoughts were, and when I didn’t respond, someone said, “I don’t see you as a black woman. You are just like us.” Of course, I understood what they meant, and I knew that my new friends meant no disrespect, but it was a great time to help them understand that it is okay to celebrate the beauty of diversity. It’s okay to see color and yet not make skin color the basis of how we connect with people. I explained to them, as I have before, that they *do* see my color and that it’s okay to celebrate God’s creation and let people be themselves. And I affirmed that talking about ways to bring people from different backgrounds together is indeed okay.

These conversations reminded me that topics such as history and diversity and division will keep coming up, and that they can cause deep hurt or be a pathway to deeper understanding, depending on how we respond.

Listening to Learn About the Experiences of Others

Our present society is full of headline stories and subliminal messages about racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic divisions. We hear about the polarization of people according to what they have or don't have, political preferences, and other differences. They're the stories we would all just rather ignore and hope would go away—but they don't. They linger on the news channels, get likes on social media, get tweeted over and over again, and pop up in our workplaces and places of worship. And because our personal histories and experiences, as well as the histories of our cultural groups, are different, we interpret and understand these stories differently. For example, one person saying that some injustices no longer exist does not negate the fact that the word *exist* means something different to other people, based on what they have personally experienced in society and what constitutes a dishonoring, dehumanizing experience to them.

Intentional and unintentional offenses across cultural lines have existed since Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden of Eden. It can be easy for us to try to dismiss a person's journey because we don't understand it or to think that we can't build a relationship with someone unless we agree about everything. The reality is that we are not necessarily going to agree about many things because, again, we experience the world differently and face different challenges from each other. And relationships and perceptions we have today have been

deeply affected by our different histories, even though people we meet now didn't live during the era of institutional slavery or may not have been born during Jim Crow laws or other horrible acts of injustice in history. Most of my white friends say to me that they really feel like they are being blamed for everything unjust that has happened in our society in the past, whether it is slavery, segregation, or any historical context of racism and prejudice. Many other individuals or groups of people in our society still experience present-day institutional discriminations and intentional acts of prejudice.

History has caused long-standing divisions that need to be broken down. When someone mentions to me that they are not the cause of any problem between different people or cultural groups going on in society right now, my response is that even though that might be true, if they are not being courageous by befriending people who they don't understand, then they are not helping to model a solution. Building relationships with each other can help us get outside of ourselves and see the perspectives and experiences of others that are different from ours, and then lead us to find common ground that we wouldn't have thought existed between us. But how do we go about this?

We must practice empathetic learning and listening. This means being willing to listen in order to attempt to understand what someone is feeling or experiencing and to remind ourselves that one person's experience of situations and people

is not the same as another's, instead of listening with the intent to reprimand or judge a person, or to rewrite their story with our version of it. We have to humble ourselves to truly listen and learn from each other. We also have to learn from our painful experiences and not allow them to harden our hearts against people, cause us to have a victim mentality, or miss opportunities to build new crosscultural friendships. We listen to the stories of others with the intent to learn. When we allow someone to be their authentic self and we remain our authentic self, we establish healthy relationships. We can't change or alter past pain that someone has experienced because it makes us feel uncomfortable.

Empathetic listening builds bridges to authentic relationships. Dismissing others' pain only increases our division and mistrust of each other. I recently heard someone express that he is tired of hearing people say that they are hurt. His response was, "Everyone has been hurt. I'm tired of hearing it." This attitude will never allow another to freely share about their pain. Similarly, when the words "they just need to get over it" are said to someone who has experienced some form of dishonor or disrespect from a person or group in another culture, mistrust is immediately ignited.

One of the hardest things for some people to deal with is the minimization or marginalization of their pain of being dishonored as a human being. Words such as "It's not that bad, and we don't want to talk about it," or agreeing that a situation

was bad but declaring that it can only be discussed at the comfort level of others, cause emotional walls to be erected in relationships, rather than building bridges to wholeness.

Keeping our feelings bottled up can also feed mistrust. Unless we have relationships built on mutual trust and respect, awkward moments will occur in which we don't want to share with others what we really feel or believe because we fear that we might become an instant outsider to that person. This fear of damaging a friendship can lead us to merely smile and create invisible mental compartments for what we will and will not share with a person. The beauty of any genuine relationship is that what we say in hard conversations about life or what is happening in our society, or even what we say when we're expressing our true feelings, does not have to be taken as a personal insult but rather can be an opportunity to pursue mutual understanding.

All relationships will be tested, given that we have had such different experiences in life, and at some point we just have to make a decision that we will allow the transforming work of Jesus to keep our hearts soft and help us continue to display love. It is helpful to pray right in the midst of hard conversations and ask Jesus to use your encounter with the person positively to help rewrite their narrative of mistrust.

The day at the coffee shop with my friend is one I will never forget. I watched her move through the emotions of anger, pain, and then fear that her comments had truly offended me

and perhaps breached the trust in our relationship. It was also the moment when I knew God was speaking to my heart about me playing a key role in pointing her to the truth about Jesus and the life that he modeled while here on earth. In addition, it was a special opportunity to speak truthfully with her about why there is so much mistrust among some people of color toward the white race. For example, I told her about firms that provided meals to passengers at railroad stations in the past. They were prohibited from serving meals to white passengers and passengers of color in the same room, at the same counter, or at the same table; the penalty for doing so was a fine ranging from twenty-five dollars to a hundred dollars or imprisonment for up to thirty days. She, in turn, explained to me why some white people have also developed mistrust toward different racial groups. I shared how, even if it's not the best way to relate to others, historical pain can be the framework through which some people see and treat other cultures. And I explained that, even though my life in Christ gives me a different blueprint for and perspective on how I should treat all people whether I agree with them or not, everyone has to allow God to do the personal work of healing and truth-telling in their lives.

My friend and I were able to have a hard conversation that day about racism, dishonor, and cultural differences because we have a relationship based on transparency and vulnerability

with each other that we have cultivated throughout the years. We have learned to listen to each other and pray for each other. I realized a bit later in the day that I should not have viewed my friend's questions as an interruption in our time together but rather as a gift from God that allowed us to learn more about each other and to share both tears and joy through our stories.

I can honestly say that our conversation that day, during which we both had to release the need to be right and genuinely listen to each other and wait in the presence of Jesus to hear what he would say to each of us, has deepened our relationship in a beautiful way.

The big subsets of prejudice—racism (prejudice based on race or ethnicity), sexism, classism, and prejudice based on religion—are always before us and don't seem to go away. Sometimes we are torn about all of these things, but we don't have to be torn apart. We can't isolate ourselves from these issues, but we can try to build bridges with diverse people through employing empathetic learning and listening. Most heart changes are truly tested in a struggle, and when we allow Jesus to show us how we might be the instrument of healing for someone else, we don't see their pains as trivial but rather as a place where we can connect over our common humanity. All it takes sometimes is one positive interaction with someone from a different culture to learn to trust a new person or group.

Healing Historical Hurts Through Racial Righteousness

While writing this book I had the privilege of being part of an event called Journey to Racial Righteousness. I had heard the term *racial righteousness* before and thought that it was similar to racial reconciliation, which is bringing to light the truth that the finished work of Jesus on the cross has made us all one. Racial righteousness, I learned, deals deeply with the inner working of our hearts by addressing the biblical, ethical, and moral issues of how we treat each other.

When I was invited to take part in this journey of racial righteousness with four other churches coming together over one weekend, I was beyond elated. The thought of having a place to share honestly and vulnerably, build new relationships, be listened to in an accepting environment, and of finally having a forum for spiritual growth was just as delightful to me as a piece of crispy fried chicken!

The purpose of the weekend was to learn from each other as we wrestled with the issue of racial righteousness and the godly response to ethnic and racial divisions. We wanted to share our fears and hope in a safe environment where the Spirit of God could lead us and our emotions into truth about his heart for all people.

We began the journey all together in one large room, but we were sitting with people we already knew. It was the safe thing to do. However, it meant that the start of the two-day journey was a bit stagnant for me. The lectures on diversity

and biblical insights were the necessary foundation for our time together, but by the end of that first day it looked like the weekend was going to be a surface-only experience because no one wanted to offend anyone. It was similar to some of the trainings I had facilitated in the past in which I wanted to keep it safe, inoffensive, and just get through the time with minimal confrontation. After careful conversations about division in the church, we all politely stood in line for our lunch, barely speaking to each other.

It was not until the second day of our journey to racial righteousness that our group *really* took a journey together. We were placed in smaller groups, and a Hispanic man sitting next to me at my table broke down in tears in front of us when he received a phone call during our lunch time. He came back to the group table after his phone call with tears still running down his cheeks. Just a few minutes into his weeping, everyone at the table got up from their chairs without any prompting or words and surrounded him, offering prayers, hugs, and some measure of comfort without knowing what the situation was that had brought so much pain to him. He then shared with us about the recent personal loss of his wife and how the phone call had ignited pain afresh. We didn't ask him to give us details of the phone call because we knew that his pain had touched all of us in some way.

Before the tears from this man started, my experience at the table had been one of being with a group of seven people

who had said very little to each other, and thus there had been very few steps toward transforming into a caring, compassionate community. Our journey up to that point had not had any real relational aspect; it was only once we connected over similar stories of pain that transformation began to occur.

Even though the situation was different from the one this man had experienced, my experience of the cancer-related death of my husband moved me from talking to a Hispanic male (who I actually thought was white) about being a black woman on a journey, to a spiritual sojourner sharing in pain with a fellow traveler in life. Through the shared experience of pain and brokenness, I came to realize that the greatest journey with anyone is the journey of compassion, understanding, and empathy, which can only happen when individuals are transparent with each other.

When we move closer in transparency and vulnerability to those we fear or even feel uncomfortable around, we can share our difficult experiences while creating a safe environment that allows us to dive deep into hard conversations. In my group that day, we weren't thinking about whether we should call him Hispanic, Mexican, or Latino. After his tears and sharing, our time and focus shifted to how Jesus has transformed our pain and forged in us a greater sense of dependency on the Lord. We found that our true journey with each other had nothing to do with the color of our eyes and hair but with the invisible connection of our hearts. Our

personal relationship with Jesus was the catalyst and motive for wanting to build community with each other. And our journey of racial righteousness began on the day we let our guard down with each other. Since then we have remained in touch with each other. And yes, we did talk about historical injustices, too, but not from a place of just talking about problems. Instead, we focused on solutions that could begin with us at that table together.

We can no longer choose to stay in our comfort zones and believe that real spiritual transformation will still take place in our hearts or that our character will be formed more and more into the likeness of Christ. If our everyday encounters are only with people who always think the same way we do, eat the same foods, read the same books, and embrace life the same way we do, we are not being stretched and formed into the ultimate image of Christ.

Pause Moment

- What effects do you think feeling the continued pain of systemic racial and ethnic discrimination can have on a person? Are the conversations uncomfortable for you, or do you engage courageously as a learner and at times a teacher? Explain.
- Do you feel that the playing field is equal for all people? Why or why not?

THE CONNECTION BETWEEN CULTURE AND IDENTITY

- If a person from a different cultural group pointed out to you that one of your comments was offensive to them, how would you respond at the time? Would it change the likelihood of you making a similar comment in the future? Why or why not?
- Revisit the definition of Ubuntu and write in your own words what it means to you about building a diverse community of friends.

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