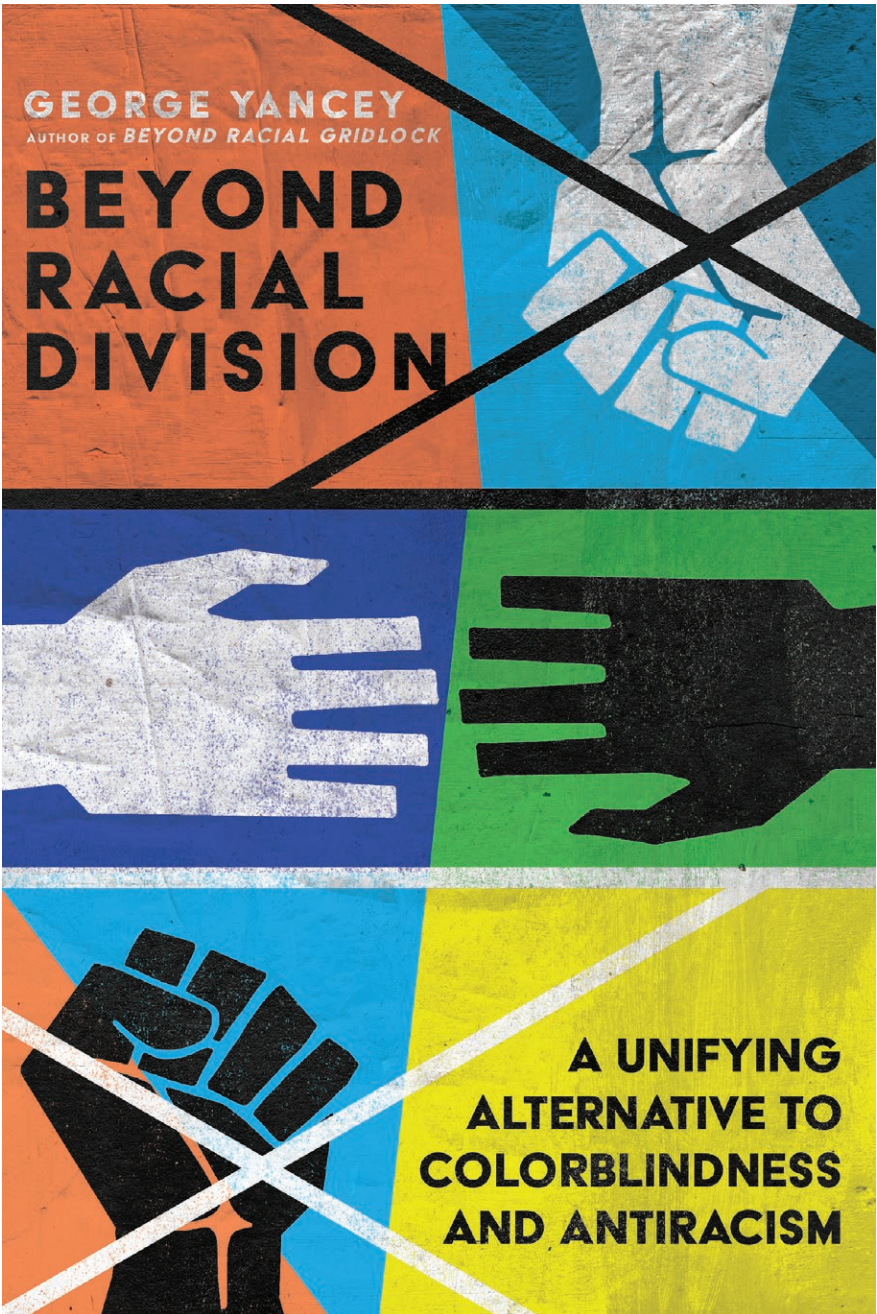


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BEYOND RACIAL DIVISION



**A UNIFYING
ALTERNATIVE TO
COLORBLINDNESS
AND ANTIRACISM**



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THE MUTUAL ACCOUNTABILITY MODEL

I SAT ACROSS FROM LEROY, a middle-aged African American man. We were having lunch not long after the election of President Donald Trump. The discouragement on his face was evident. He talked to me of his disappointment in the election results and the fact that so many of his white friends had voted for Trump.¹

This was more than political disagreement. Yes, Leroy had been a Democrat his entire life. For him they were the party that cared about him and his community. He did not agree with everything in the Democratic platform, but he appreciated their attention to issues of social justice. Still, over the years he had also come to understand why many of his white friends voted for Republicans, as they saw them as the party of life and family values. But Trump? No way could they support a man who had demonstrated such a high level of immorality and blatant disregard for people of color. Until they did.

I had few words to comfort my friend. I shared his frustration. We both acknowledged that the 2016 vote felt like a stab in the back for us as African Americans. It was like our white brothers and sisters did not even want to listen to us. Before the election Leroy and I had shared with many of our white friends our concerns about having a president who trafficked in race-baiting and appealed to the worst elements of the Republican party—elements we had personally experienced as effects of historical and contemporary racism. For us this was not merely a political disagreement. This was about whether race relations were going to be set back severely.

After the election, we both were at a crossroads. Did we pull away from those we felt had betrayed us? Or did we lean in and try to repair the damage done? I cannot tell you what Leroy did, because he is a compilation of many people of color I communicated with after Trump's election. Some pulled back. Some leaned in. But it was not merely the election that created this reaction. This mistrust has built over time through a history of racial abuse. It is a mistrust reinforced by the actions, intentional and otherwise, of whites indicating a disregard for our racial struggles. Events like the election of Donald Trump were the final straw for some people of color, who washed their hands of dealing with or trying to understand the perspective of whites. While I understand that sentiment, I find no hope going down that route. So I must lean in.

How do we get past this barrier of mistrust? How do we find a solution that serves everyone and not just our chosen group? We need a path forward that compensates for our tendency

to focus on the needs of our group and ignore those of others. We must change how we communicate with each other, because what we are doing now is not working. We need an approach that not only meets the needs of most individuals but has a chance of gaining support across racial and political lines. It is with those ideas in mind that I discuss the mutual accountability approach.

THE ESSENCE OF MUTUAL ACCOUNTABILITY

So how do we find solutions that go beyond the needs of our own group? Let us dispense with one seemingly easy solution. We may be tempted to say that *our* chosen approach will create the best solutions for everyone, not just those in our group. That sounds great in theory, but it underestimates the power of confirmation and self-interest bias. We humans have a natural ability to convince ourselves that what we ourselves want is best for everyone concerned. In doing this we can be blind to the needs of others. We should have little confidence that our own solutions are free from a self-serving bias and truly meet the needs of everybody.

Ever been in the middle of a church split? I have. It was not pleasant. It was the classic example of a church with older individuals who were entrenched in the status quo and a younger cohort who wanted changes. Both groups felt they were doing what was best for the entire church. Neither group (including, I admit, the younger cohort, of which I was a part) seriously considered the interests of the other. For example, the older cohort was resistant to all changes in the musical style. They felt their traditional music was

honoring to God and best for the church. It was connected to tradition and values essential to the founding of the church. Those in the younger cohort felt the music had to change with the times and help make the church relevant. Looking back now I can see that both groups had legitimate concerns. But we could not work our differences out because members of both groups clearly believed their position was best, and neither of us fully considered the needs of the other group. Even if you have not been part of a church split, I bet you have seen this dynamic play itself out in some other organization.

Often in our confidence that we have found the best path we presume to speak for everyone involved. We convince ourselves, just like the two factions in my church split, that what we are doing is for the greater good. We truly believe we are doing right by others. But what we are generally doing, even if we do not realize it at the time, is spinning what we want as the best thing for everyone else. We ignore evidence that what we want may harm others and amplify evidence that it will help them. That is the way confirmation bias works.

If we cannot on our own simply consider the interests of others, what are we to do? This is where the accountability element is critical. If I want to find solutions that serve the interests of everyone, I must listen to everyone. I consider their interests and perspectives and allow them to articulate those interests and perspectives in their own words. Instead of coming to my own conclusions and rationalizing why my solutions are best for everyone, I am obligated to gain the input of others so that their concerns are heard and

incorporated into any path we take in our efforts to deal with racial alienation.

I will never know if that church could have been saved. But what if instead of venting our frustration at the other side during our meetings we actually tried to talk to each other? What if both sides worked together to solve the problems before us in ways that met the needs of all? What if we sought win-win solutions rather than win-lose solutions? Concerning music, we could have held separate worship services devoted to traditional music and contemporary music, as I saw other churches do later in my life. Such an obvious solution, yet we never tried to implement it. To be sure there were other conflicts that were not so easy to solve, and I do not want to make this too simplistic. But we did not listen to each other enough to even try to solve our problems. Instead we went to war. Kind of like the racial war we are in today.

We would have avoided a lot of pain with a mutual accountability approach. What is the essence of the mutual accountability model? This model stipulates that we work to have healthy interracial communications so that we can solve racial problems. In those communications we strive to listen to those in other racial groups and attempt to account for their interests. In this way we fashion solutions to racialized problems that address the needs of individuals across racial groups instead of promoting solutions that are accepted only by certain racial groups. By allowing those we disagree with to hold us “accountable” to their interests, we are forced to confront the ways we have fashioned solutions that conform to our own interests and desires.

Let me clarify what I mean by “mutual.” By this I mean we all, regardless of race and political outlook, have a responsibility to engage in interracial communication in a healthy manner. This means a constructive approach where we listen to others and find relevant ways to communicate with them. Efforts to cut off voices, whether by whites or nonwhites, are not allowed. What mutual does *not* mean is that we find solutions where the ultimate responsibilities of individuals in racial groups and the costs members of these groups pay are identical. Given our history of racial abuse, it seems to me unlikely that we will ultimately come to solutions involving identical responsibilities for members of different racial groups. But to get to solutions that work, we must enter into healthy conversations where everyone is responsible for communicating collaboratively rather than dehumanizing those in other racial groups.

POWER OR MORAL SUASION

What if your child is unwilling to clean up his room? How do you get him to start doing so? Or say your friend is dating a guy who is emotionally manipulative and even abusive. You fear for her safety. How do you get through to her? Or you are teaching a student who needs to put more time into his studies. Can you get him to do that? Or your aunt is picking up toxic QAnon philosophy. How do you show her the error of those ideas? Of course, one option is not to try to convince your son, friend, student, or aunt to change at all. But we often are in situations where, despite our desire to allow people to do what they want, we feel it is

important to intervene. We think it necessary to help someone minimize the pain they or others will suffer and help them go down a different path. When we feel the need to intervene, how do we convince others to go down that other path?

If we want to persuade someone to change, we have the options of using power, moral suasion, or reason. And, to be honest, reason is overrated. Most of us are not driven by reason as much as we like to think we are. Social dynamics such as confirmation bias and groupthink interfere with our ability to rely on our intellect to make decisions, especially when those decisions are tied to emotional commitments to previous ideas. If reason is not a reliable way to produce attitudinal change, we are left with power and moral suasion. We can change someone's ways by using social, political, legal, or some other form of power, or we can find a way to persuade them that making that change is the right thing to do. With rare exception, when people make changes due to the influence of others, there is some degree of power or moral suasion at play.

Let's look first at power. There are many forms of power that can be used. A parent obviously has some power over a child. Legal power can be used to hand out punishment. Social power can be used to stigmatize anyone who does not submit to certain demands or change their attitudes. Those with material resources can offer to give or withhold those resources. The ways power can be used to motivate action are endless. There are times when power needs to be used. I want the police officer to use power to stop the bank robber. As a

parent I need to exercise my power to stop my young boys from making foolish decisions, such as hitting their brother. I have used physical power to stop physical altercations. Power is a necessary tool in certain situations.

But there is a cost to using power. When we use power successfully, it becomes easier to rely on it to get what we want. Then we live by overpowering others to get our way. As an example, the people of Cuba justifiably used power to throw off the oppressive regime of Fulgencio Batista. But then they installed Fidel Castro as leader, who went on to use his new-found power to continue oppressing Cubans. Those who gain through power often are unwilling to relinquish it once they have it. Furthermore, their expressions of power generally serve to divide members of the community into supporters and resisters of that power.

If reason is ineffective in producing change and power carries its own dangers, what we have left is moral suasion. We persuade an individual that it is right to change his or her mind or to take certain actions. Once people become convinced the new action is the moral thing to do, then change is likely to occur. When some people think of moral suasion, they envision a wild-eyed evangelical preaching incessantly or a liberal professor indoctrinating students. Nothing could be further from the truth. Real moral suasion requires that we build rapport with those we want to persuade (Cialdini, 2001). It means we accurately understand their point of view (Watkins, 2001). We also learn to admit when they are correct and become willing to find areas of agreement (Paulus, 2006). In other words, real moral suasion is about relationship

building, not browbeating. Moral suasion, done properly, unites us by making us want to identify with and care for each other. It makes us want to work with others to find out what is good for them. Real moral suasion builds community.

The mutual accountability model is about moral suasion. It is about engaging in conversation so we can bring about healthy change. Power unites only through fear of being punished or of not getting rewards from the person in power. Mutual accountability is focused on building community through dialogue and relationships. It focuses on working out our problems rather than forcing others to do what we want. If moral suasion and relationship building become the approach used to construct our racial future, then we can find workable compromises instead of continual conflict. We can have less saber rattling on social media and political talk shows and more discussions where we understand the perspective of others. We can figure out solutions that do not denigrate others and invite those who disagree with us to help create solutions alongside us.

We can see this process at work in other areas of our lives. In our interpersonal relationships we know it is not healthy to overpower each other. We have seen how damaging it is when one spouse consistently dominates the other. We see friendships where one person controls the other and wince at the manipulation playing out before us. We know these marriages and friendships would be qualitatively better if partners and friends learned how to communicate with each other and found solutions that met the needs of both individuals. Humans are not built to thrive when we

overpower others. It tends to bring out the worst in us. While there are times when we must use power in a relationship, in the real world we know that good relationships are built using moral suasion instead.

ACTIVE LISTENING AND MUTUAL ACCOUNTABILITY

If we want to see race relations rebuilt through moral suasion rather than power and domination, it is vital that we learn the tools and techniques needed for collaborative conversation. Our greatest challenge is learning to listen. Most of us find it easier to talk about what we want than to listen to what others want. We are eager to tell our spouse what is wrong with him or her, but we do not want to hear what we have done wrong ourselves. But to engage in mutual accountability, we must listen—not merely for information, but to comprehend the perspective of the other person and truly understand why they believe and feel the way they do. There are different terms for this type of listening, but the one I like is *active listening*.

As a social scientist I use active listening whenever I interview research subjects or conduct focus groups. Active listening is listening for understanding, not argument. Too often when we discuss a controversial issue, we listen only so we can make a counterargument against the speaker. There is a time and place for that approach, but to overcome our tribalistic instincts we must temporarily suppress that impulse. Active listening is an important way to build win-win solutions since we are trying not to win an argument but to understand the other person's perspective.

The key to active listening is to put the attitudes and perceptions of the person into our own words in such a way that they agree with what we are saying. For example, several years ago I coauthored a book on atheism (Williamson & Yancey, 2013). In preparing to write that book my partner and I interviewed over fifty atheists, and I personally interviewed about two dozen atheists. I am not an atheist. But when I heard my respondents make a point about why they thought a theological belief was false, I made it a practice to offer my interpretation of their statement and ask them to correct me if I was wrong. I did not want my theistic beliefs to interfere with my ability to understand my atheist respondents, so I tried, imperfectly, to put myself in their shoes. We have to make similar efforts to understand one another if we want to make progress on racial issues.

When we actively listen, we have a responsibility to rephrase what the other person is saying in such a way that they agree we have captured their ideas honestly. Anything less than this and we have not truly listened actively. If I am trying to understand why someone hates the Black Lives Matter movement, I need to listen to them and then rephrase their reasoning so that they say, “Yes, you understand why I cannot stand that group.” If we want to know why someone wants to take down Confederate statues, we need to be able to state their purpose in wanting to see the end of those statues in our own words. We must enunciate their desire to tear down those statues in a way that they will say, “Now you get it why I cannot be satisfied if those statues remain up.” The power to say you have actively listened to someone else is not in your hands. It is in the hands of the speaker.

When I speak on this topic, I suggest a little exercise. First, I ask my audience to go have lunch, coffee, or a beer with someone they know disagrees with them on a racial issue. Then they talk to them about that issue. They listen and try to put the other person's ideas into their own words. I ask my audience to actively listen to the other person without expecting that they will then turn around and participate in active listening as well (if they do, then all the better). This exercise helps us learn how to actively listen and how to understand the perspectives of those who do not agree with us. If you get nothing else from this book, try this exercise. It will help you become a better active listener, which will not only help you implement a mutual accountability model but also make you a better communicator overall.

Beyond learning about the perspectives of others, what is the value of active listening? Imagine the next racial incident occurring. When you choose to enter into dialogue with a person you disagree with about that incident, you can do so in such a way that they know you understand them. They will feel heard, and we know that people who feel heard are more open to alternative perspectives. Furthermore, when we feel threatened, we turn off our ability to hear different ideas (Kaplan, Gimbel, & Harris, 2016). You will also know what not to say. If you have a more progressive bent, you will know that characterizing your ideological opponents as white supremacists is a sure way to close their ears. If you have a more conservative bent, you know that saying you do not see race will make people of color feel invisible to you. You have a chance to discuss these

issues collaboratively and productively rather than instigating more racial confrontation.

I am not perfect in my attempts to actively listen. I do not want anyone to think I have mastered this skill beyond any need to improve. Many times I have left research interviews and realized I did not truly understand a particular answer given to me. I wished I had followed up with better questions and truly gotten to the bottom of their perspective. In my personal life I often do not engage in active listening even when it would make me a better husband, father, and friend. I tire sometimes, or I am distracted and do not want to do the hard work of listening in this way. And do not get me started on my failings in social media. This is a skill that will take a lifetime to master and to practice. Even after my years of experience as an interviewer, it is a skill I still fall short of possessing to the fullest extent. So if you fall short, do not beat yourself up. Get up off the ground and resolve to do better next time.

DOES THE SPEAKER HAVE RESPONSIBILITIES?

I have talked about listening. But it is worth considering whether those who are speaking bear responsibility as well. In other words, when we are relating our concerns to others, are there ways we can be more efficient? It is in our best interest to do as good a job as possible since their reaction can help determine if we will gain a partner in finding racial solutions.

Perhaps the first step to being a better communicator is not to abuse the respect being given you by those who are actively

listening. They are making a commitment to give you the benefit of the doubt. This is not the time to be abusive and insulting. Of course, you should express your feelings and perspectives. You should own those feelings and perspectives. Perhaps the person with whom you are communicating has done something that offends you. It is okay to say you have been offended. It is not okay to state that this was the person's intent, because that is not in your area of knowledge. Some degree of venting will occur. Just remember that we do not have to be accusatory in our venting, nor do we have to be belittling. In a situation of mutual accountability, the person to whom you are venting will have an opportunity to vent back to you. Treat them the way you want to be treated when it is your turn to listen.

Next, try to find concepts the other person can relate to. When I talk with different audiences, I emphasize selective facts I know will be relevant to them. If I am speaking to a more progressive audience, I talk about the importance of justice. I emphasize the lack of efficacy of an antiracist approach. When I talk with a white conservative Christian audience, I point out work I have done showing that their Christian kids are more likely to date outside their faith than their race (Yancey, Hubbard, & Smith, 2009) to indicate that they cannot ignore the racism in their own communities. I am not lying in either instance, but I do emphasize points that are most relevant to them. I understand those values because I have put in the work of actively listening to members of each group. Active listening makes us better communicators because we know how to reach people with topics they find important.

Furthermore, I have found that stories or word pictures can often help us connect with others. If we can find illustrations—often illustrations from the experiences and lives of those with whom we are talking—we have a better chance of conveying our thoughts and even emotions. When I talk to my students, I sometimes tell them about what it is like to be the first person in my family to get any college degree, much less a doctorate. I relate to them how my fears drove me to take important steps to make certain I did not fall behind in my work. I also attempt to convey that emotion of fear in hopes that some of them who are anxious may channel that anxiety in productive ways. Does it always work? No. But it is more effective than telling them to just try harder.

Finally, be patient, because active listening is hard work. You may be emotional at the moment you are speaking, and that is okay. Often we are dealing with emotional topics and we cannot get away from that reality. But we must have some patience for the person trying to understand our perspective. They are not in our head and words are an imperfect form of communication. They also are dealing with psychological barriers and biases interfering with their ability to process what we are stating. Be willing to provide a little grace if they are honestly struggling to comprehend your point of view. There are ways we can do a better job communicating our concerns to others. Our role as a communicator is as serious as our role as a listener. Hopefully we will consistently look at finding ways to improve in that role.

WHAT MUTUAL ACCOUNTABILITY LOOKS LIKE IN PROBLEM SOLVING

A fair question to ask is what this model looks like in solving racialized problems. How does it help us find solutions that move us closer to dealing with our history of racial abuse in a fair manner? Mutual accountability is not just an approach to constructing better interracial relationships; it also helps us engage in the problem solving we so desperately need in our society. If all we do is improve interpersonal relationships between racial groups, while laudable, that falls far short of the promise of this approach.

Several years ago Michael Emerson and I (2010) talked about a systematic way we can use the skills of active listening and awareness of the effects of group interest to solve racialized problems in our society. We theorized five steps that could be taken as part of a mutual accountability approach to problem solving. These steps have not been fully empirically tested, but they are supported by research on what it takes to build consensus. The steps we argue should be taken are

1. Define the racial problem.
2. Identify what we have in common.
3. Recognize our cultural or racial differences.
4. Create solutions that answer the concerns of the racial outgroup.
5. Find a compromise solution that works best for all.

Our first step is to clearly define which racial problems we want to address. We all can think of times when we started a

discussion on one issue and then jumped around to so many other matters that we never solved the first issue that concerned us. There are many manifestations of our racialized society. If we try to solve them all at once, we will likely solve none of them. We must keep our conversation and effort focused on one issue at a time. Ideally, once we learn how to solve one racialized issue, we will learn how to solve other problems. Building momentum can be vital as success begets success through increased confidence in our ability to work across racial lines.

The next step is to identify what we have in common with those with whom we disagree. Obviously there are clear differences between racial groups or we would not be looking at a racialized problem. But it is also important to remember that we share some common values and concerns. Finding agreement can help us start a meaningful conversation. Research has indicated that recognizing where we agree can help us avoid unproductive conflict (Paulus, 2006). Recognizing areas of consensus is likely to lead to further agreements in our discussions with each other. That can be an important starting point for our conversation since it helps us build the trust we need to work together. Furthermore, recognizing what we have in common can help us forge a common identity that allows for more collaboration. What individuals agree on can vary depending on the issue being discussed. Agreement may be based on similar goals or values shared between the groups. Perhaps we can build on those elements. The key is that before we start looking at our disagreements, we should first identify our agreements.

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