

Winning the (Human) Race

The End of Slavery in America

An Inquiry into the Possibility of Freedom for Human Beings

by Samantha Thomas

Incident

First published in 1925

Once riding in old Baltimore,
Heart-filled, head-filled with glee,
I saw a Baltimorean
Keep looking straight at me.

Now I was eight and very small,
And he was no whit bigger,
And so I smiled, but he poked out
His tongue, and called me, "Nigger."

I saw the whole of Baltimore
From May until December;
Of all the things that happened there
That's all that I remember.

— Countée Cullen
American Poet, 1903 – 1946

What was the significance of this incident for young Countée Cullen? How did it affect his life? For what purpose did he remember this incident so vividly — to the exclusion of anything else that happened during his seven months in Baltimore? Was this his way of breaking into race? How far have we come since young Countée's experience, around the "nadir" of race relations in the United States of America, and our experience now?

These are questions worth asking.

Winning the (Human) Race

The End of Slavery in America

An Inquiry into the Possibility of Freedom for Human Beings, by Samantha Thomas

Introduction

Black America and White America have been co-conspirators in a cover-up that produces the persistence of slavery *right now* in the United States. How can that be? More than one hundred and forty years after the 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, can it be possible that slavery persists? Yes. But haven't the civil rights gains of the 1950's and 60's made a difference? Yes and No.

Yes, there have been gains. Racism is no longer legal, culturally tolerated, socially acceptable or publicly appropriate, and yet there *is* racism. Social statisticians report that seventy-five percent of African-Americans are now middle-class, with the fastest growing net worth of any American demographic group, and yet African-Americans make up the vast majority of Americans living in poverty. The median household income for Black families is less than sixty percent of the median household income for the nation. There is Affirmative Action, and yet no real equality. African-American children can now grow up to be doctors, lawyers, college professors, engineers, scientists, researchers, artists, mathematicians, pastry chefs, police officers, real-estate agents and anything that White American children can. Yet many Black children grow up to be unwed mothers (often in their early teens), gang members, homeless persons, addicts, convicts and chronically unemployed indigents in much larger numbers, and even larger percentages than Whites. Many Black children never have the opportunity to grow up, as Black babies are three times more likely to die in their first year of life than White babies. Based on many social, educational and financial measures, the gap is widening. Our cities are far from desegregated, and most are moving toward even more pronounced segregation. Court cases such as *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) and legislation along the lines of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 were intended to clear the way to a better life for many African-Americans, and to a degree, they have succeeded. Still, very few African-Americans have a sense of being equally, fully, completely and simply "American" without a racial modifier.

Our conversations about rights, privileges and entitlements have no power to free us. Our ideals about how it ought to be have no power. The values attributed to who we are, compared to who we have been for each other, have no power. African-Americans have a condition, and no context for the condition. America itself has a condition without a context, and the condition has **no power**.

There are lots of options and no possibility.

This inquiry is intended to break open into a new domain of being for all people. This is not about the vague gradient of dissimilarities in skin color or physical characteristics or facial features. This is not about our false-true stories about racial differences or our parochial concepts of "them" or "us." This inquiry is

about who we are — our very being, and our being-in-the-world — and who we will constitute ourselves to be, going forward.

To open this inquiry, we will begin in the middle, right where we are. Then we will take a fresh look at our history, not from a Black or White perspective, not from an African-American or Anglo-American perspective, but by widening the frame, to include everyone's point-of-view and the undecidability of all of it. We will examine the basis of our unconscious, unintentional conspiracy to perpetuate slavery in America. We will consider what's possible out of the conscious, intentional cooperation of free people — what has been produced in the past, as well as the future that we could create in the presence of that kind of cooperation. We will contemplate how we got to be this way, open up choices where there have been none, and set ourselves...

...truly

free.

The Inquiry

While this inquiry will be philosophical in nature, its purpose is to have an impact now, in our own present moment, for our own generation. To get at this question of freedom — to inquire into what's possible for us in completing our experience of race, to begin to get at *who we are* in the question of race — we will have to come to the question, not from some unfamiliar place, not from bloodless, abstract theories, not from history, not even from our idealistic hopes for the future. We may think that we have to get back to the beginning, where and when it all started, to rewrite it from there, but we cannot. The beginning is no longer available to us. However, the end is not in sight. There is no chance to jump to the end and start anew. We will have to come to the question from the middle. We have to start right here, where we are, *in medias res*, in the middle of it.

Here in the middle, there is little satisfaction. The standard of living for many Black Americans is incrementally better now than it was for their parents, and no one is satisfied with that. There is a linear progression in the quality-of-life measures for Black Americans. Although the trend is toward continuing nominal increases, everyone knows that — for now and maybe forever — Black Americans are going to remain in the position of not having full access to what is available for White Americans. One of the major indicators of a society in trouble is an increase in infant mortality rates. In several areas of this country, the infant mortality rates are rising for Blacks, while they continue to fall for Whites in the same region. Doctors routinely treat pregnant Black women as “high-risk pregnancies,” although they usually do not discuss the nature and causes of these risks with their patients.

The vision of a color-blind society has degenerated to an ideal: racism *should* be extinct, an historical relic of our chaotic past. The frustration is that racial animosity continues in the present — sometimes violently. Any reasonable projections into the

future indicate that racial considerations will continue to have a huge impact on our society. Our collective insanity when someone says the “N-word” in public conceals a reality of ongoing racial differentiation, with various unspoken meanings attached. Many Black Americans suffer uncertainty and resignation about the future, particularly their children’s future. That remains the persistent “Truth” about being Black in America.

Here in the middle, there is not much satisfaction. Affirmative Action is the collective term for the laws and court rulings intended to “level the playing field” (if such a thing is possible) for African-Americans. This has become an arena of struggle between Black and White Americans. A growing number of Black commentators feel that these programs invalidate the efforts of high-achieving Black individuals, while perpetuating dismissive opinions about Black Americans in general. Many White Americans consider Affirmative Action programs to be discriminatory against Whites, and some Blacks anticipate a backlash. The constitutionality of Affirmative Action is under attack. In a recent U.S. Supreme Court case, the Court decided that the University of Michigan’s attempt to increase the enrollment of students from underrepresented minority groups was a violation of the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment.

Here in the middle, there is not much satisfaction. For White Americans, times are hard. “Good” jobs are scarce and competition is fierce in the latter days of American capitalism. A surprising number of White Americans, who do not consider themselves racist in any way, complain that Black people are taking their jobs. This opinion presupposes that White people are entitled to have jobs, and that there are White jobs and Black jobs. To them, however, this is not an opinion based on dubious presuppositions. To them this is simply “the Truth.” They point to the effect of Affirmative Action programs on hiring and promotions, and complain about being the “wrong color.” This opinion presupposes that there is a wrong color (or perhaps wrong colors) and a right color. Reducing and referring to an “Us” against “Them” contest for survival, this is the “Truth” about race in America.

The Foundation of Facticity

Here in the middle, we can begin our inquiry into these areas of “Truth” based in presuppositions. We can begin by distinguishing that there are two distinct domains of knowledge: the domain of Fact and the domain of Opinion. There is a distinct difference between a fact and an opinion, although in the day-to-day conduct of life, we pay absolutely no attention to this difference. To be clear in this discussion, we will distinguish this difference by defining a fact as something that is:

1. Physical — Physicality is indicated by observable physical properties, such as mass, weight, size, texture, color, odor and so on. Anything in question demonstrates its physicality by being open to ordinary processing. It can be weighed, measured or metered, moved, changed or rearranged, sliced, diced or minced, bought, sold or stolen, produced, reproduced or represented, *et cetera ad nauseum*. There are a lot (some large, finite number) of processing options in the domain of physicality, and they are all ordinary.

2. Present — Something is present when it is here and now, and only here and now. There is no fact in the past or future. There is no such thing as an historical fact, although we really want to believe that there is. Ask an historian, and he or she will say that even in the study of the very recent past (the morning news, for example), there is always a lot of conjecture.

And,

3. Agreed upon — When all physical beings who are present operate in total agreement concerning anything, it is an agreed upon fact, for as long as the agreement persists.

The satisfaction of all three tests of facticity does not necessarily guarantee that what is being considered is an absolute fact. Absolute fact may be as elusive as Absolute Zero¹. It would definitely require its own lengthy discussion, the end of which would almost certainly be uncertainty. However, for the purposes of this inquiry, we will distinguish a fact as meeting the above three criteria: **physical, present and agreed upon**. Everything else will be considered to be in the domain of opinion.

It won't take very much reflection to see that we do not spend much time talking about facts. If we actually talked about facts, we would quickly tire of it. Someone might stand up in a roomful of people and declare, "This is a chair!" The others would nod dispassionately. Then some wise guy would get up and say, "You know, that looks a little tall to be just a chair. I think it may be a stool," and we would be right back in the domain of Opinion.

No matter how well supported the opinion may be, by evidence, statistics or agreement and consensus; an opinion is an opinion if it does not meet all three criteria for facticity. The world of facts is a world of things — physical, present and agreed-on things. Many of our opinions have taken on a kind of thingness, and appear to be factual. They seem real. They seem like the truth. And yet, these things are not things at all. They are "thinks." We or they or somebody thought these thinks into being, and we have forgotten that we or they or somebody just thought them and brought them into our discourse.

The difficulty in talking about our opinions — and that's essentially all we do, all the time — is that an opinion can never be right or true or wrong or false. Nevertheless, opinions are what we argue about. For example, the answer to the question, "What is your favorite color?" cannot be a wrong answer. Your favorite color is your own personal favorite, and you aren't wrong about that. However, if you answer that your favorite color is black, you are open to criticism. People will tell you that black isn't a color. People will tell you that, no indeed, black is *not* your favorite color. It's still an opinion, but when someone is offended by an opinion, there could be trouble. Opinions are what we fight about and riot about, and we even go to war over opinions. We believe that we're fighting for Truth or Justice or

¹ Absolute Zero is the theoretical temperature at which, hypothetically, all molecular motion and energy cease. It is equal to 0° Kelvin, and approximately equivalent to -273.16° Celsius or -459.69° Fahrenheit. So far, all attempts to reach this temperature, and thereby prove or disprove the theory, have not been successful.

other values, but we have no real knowledge or experience of these ideals. We only have opinions about them, and we sincerely hope or arrogantly assert that we are on the right track, which is another (self-serving and ultimately indefensible) opinion.

In this inquiry, we will have the opportunity to interrogate our opinions about race. We will look at where these opinions came from and where they are going. We will look at what makes them so important to us. We will see if any of this makes a difference. And if not, what does make a difference?

Race, If Such a Thing Exists

Reason, or “Western Thought” as we in the Western Hemisphere arrogantly prefer to call it, is a tool that we have used to ensure the survival of our species and culture. We categorize and classify the elements of our environment, to an ever-finer degree, sharpening our focus and increasing our magnification. We believe that this knowledge, when known, will be useful. In accordance with our belief, we have used what we know. With this approach, we have advanced technologically, expanded our scope and grasp of the world, and we have moved beyond the concerns about simple survival at the biological level. The human species has succeeded as a biological system. After generations of applying our knowledge and expertise, we now have enough of everything to go around.² With our survival assured, we remained stuck in a survival-oriented interpretation of life, so we started eyeing each other suspiciously. Having turned our attention to people, we endeavored to categorize and classify ourselves and each other. We developed — and continue to reinforce — an opinion that we are separate and distinctly different from each other. We further theorized that significantly different people were somehow threatening — to a directly proportionate extent: the more different, the more threatening. Historically, we reacted (and continue to react) to perceived threats in automatic, mechanical and unthinking ways. This makes the perception of threat a very detrimental and disempowering opinion. Of course, we had to survive the perceived threats we inferred from categorical differences. Consequently, detriment and disempowerment constituted the backdrop for our entry onto the racial stage.

There was a time in the development of the human species, and in our own individual development through early childhood, that we did not think about race. From the Prehistoric Era to the very dawn of the Modern Age, race was not an issue. In ancient times, Human Beings interacted with each other without regard to race. That’s not to say that people didn’t fight. They did. A lot. They fought over territory, food and water, strategic position, and other things, but not race. Ancient Greeks and Egyptians knew of distant people who looked distinctly different, and they recognized them as people who looked distinctly different. In those times, people were as likely to mate with someone of another race as fight with them. No one had thought of race. There was utter silence about race. Even now, babies and toddlers don’t think race. They play together and interact with other babies and toddlers without any concern for differences in skin color or hair texture or other

² That our collectively produced abundance does not go around to everyone has nothing to do with not having enough to go around. It has a lot to do with the survival of our system of identifying self and other.

characteristics. It just doesn't occur to them to think that way. When we were that age, it didn't occur to us to think that way either.

As Europe progressed into the Modern Age, beginning with the Renaissance, scientific research became widely supported and culturally appreciated, and mostly it was a governmentally sponsored endeavor. The support of the king (or prince, or other feudal or governmental ruler) usually produced science that honored the government's point-of-view. Scientific study and exploration produced wealth and strategic advantage, which supported more scientific study and exploration that was expected to further the pursuit of more wealth and advantage. As travel became easier and more readily undertaken, the differences in skin color and other characteristics of distant peoples became an interesting and engaging field of investigation, analysis and theorizing. Beginning in the 1400's, and continuing through the 1700's, people began to think about "race" as a meaningful difference between "us" and "them." The sciences of anthropology and ethnology emerged.

The research into race was not just an intellectual pursuit. It had an agenda. There were expedient economic incentives for Europeans to define race in a way that justified exploiting and oppressing Asian people, killing the aboriginal peoples of the Americas and Australia, and enslaving Africans. Eventually, anthropologists classified human beings into the Negroid, Caucasoid and Mongoloid races. Not surprisingly, these scientific categories matched up with Noah's three sons: Ham, Shem and Japheth. Biblical hermeneutics of the time suggested that Noah's sons were the ultimate ancestors of the African, European/Mediterranean, and Asian races, respectively. It is so convenient to invent "scientific" categories that correspond with what you already believe. (For those who have not read Genesis, Shem gets the birthright and blessing. What a shock!) Although this three-race system proved inadequate as more of the world was explored, it persists in popular consciousness, even now. After Charles Darwin published his book, *Origin of the Species* in 1859, the new Theory of Evolution added even more significance to racial differences. What is the most evolved, and therefore superior, race of Human Beings? Who are the people naturally selected to dominate? They thought about, measured, studied and researched all sorts of physical and intellectual differences: height, weight, IQ, bone structure, nose length, head size and shape, eyelid geometry, eye color and more were all studied. As one might expect, the "most superior race" coincidentally seems to be the race of the ones doing the research.³

In the 1930s and 40s, under the influence of Nazi ideology and with the direction and motivation of Adolph Hitler, German researchers were very engaged

³ By 1869, Darwin's cousin, Sir Francis Galton, was inspired by the Theory of Evolution and published a book, *Hereditary Genius*, extolling the genetic superiority of the British aristocracy and proposing a form of eugenics for the "betterment of mankind" based on his informal and unscientific studies. In 1918, an American proponent of eugenics, Dr. Paul Popenoe outrageously declared that the IQ of blacks was directly proportional to the amount of "white blood" in their veins. Lighter skinned Blacks would have higher IQ scores than those with darker skin. This belief has sadly contributed to parental preference and sibling animosity within Black families. In 1994, a book entitled *The Bell Curve* renewed the controversy over race, nature and genetic predisposition by relying on biased measures of intelligence and slanted statistical analysis to conclude that, "the ills of welfare, poverty, and an underclass are less matters of justice than biology." According to these darlings of the racist right, Black Americans are simply suffering the consequences of their "genetic disabilities" — not social and economic oppression. Herrnstein, R., & Murray, C. (1994) *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life*. New York: Free Press.

in redefining race in their own image. Nazis believed that they were of the “ultimate” Aryan race⁴, descended from the surviving remnant of the super-human people from the “lost continent of Atlantis,” and they intended to scientifically prove their claim to superiority. Although they seriously studied the matter and had a stake in the outcome, they never reached any useful or factual conclusions about racial differences. This didn’t stop them, however, from justifying (for themselves) a grisly and horrifying “solution” to their self-invented race problem.

Race seems like something that is obviously real, but when it was first thought about, it was all uncertain, *and it remains so*. We really want and expect science to pursue and discover the “Truth” and report it to us in ways that might contribute to our survival. Science cannot do this. Centuries of study and analysis by physical anthropologists, cultural anthropologists, biologists and genetic researchers have brought no clarity to the subject. Hard science and medical research simply cannot and will not endorse anybody’s point-of-view regarding race. Of course we keep looking, because we think that race must be real. The conversation is circular.

The collapse of the distinctions between the facts and opinions about race has become a well-established part of American culture, and we no longer remember that it was just something that we thought into existence. We have been thinking about race, as a *meaningful* difference between people, for a relatively short time in the history of humanity. While it seems real, like a thing, it is a think. We thought it up, and thought it was sensible, and then we thought it was a real thing. Now we have completely forgotten that we simply thought it up and signified it in language — we “language’d” racial divisions into being. The Book of Genesis, the first book of the Hebrew and Christian Bible, which was written perhaps over three thousand years ago, as well as the corresponding portions of the *Qur’an*, speaks of the diverse peoples of the world, their nations and languages, and also points to the common origins of these people and their interrelatedness. From the point-of-view of the Bible and *Qur’an*, we are all part of a very large family.

The facts about race are few. DNA research, like the Book of Genesis, indicates that we are all very closely related. A Black American’s DNA is as likely to match a high percentage of a White American’s DNA, as it is to match a high percentage of another Black’s. An African may match a European closely enough to donate organs, although outwardly looking very different. There are certainly variations (which are physical, present and agreed on) in the skin color, hair texture and skeletal structures of Human Beings. We are a diverse and well-developed species. These variations are not entirely consistent, and characteristic traits occur frequently in people who would be classified as belonging to racial groups not known for them. There are no black people, no white people, no yellow people, no red people. The skin we are in comes in a multitude of colors, with subtle gradients,

⁴ Aryanism, a particular form of racism that is at the heart of Nazi ideology, has thin threads leading back to an extreme interpretation of the work of German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844 – 1900), especially the book *Also Sprach Zarathustra, Ein Buch für Alle und Keinen* (1883-5). Zarathustra, also known as Zoroaster (c. 1200 BCE), established the first religion based on scriptural revelation among the Aryan people in what is now Iran and western India. As a character in Nietzsche’s book, Zarathustra reveals that mankind is an evolutionary transitional form between apes and the *Übermenschen*, the super-men. In addition, Nietzsche, through Zarathustra, informs us that the deity has passed away (*Gott ist Tot*) and that the Will-to-Power gives life its meaning.

ranging from pale beige to dark brown, with even subtler undertones of pink or yellow or green. Make-up artists recognize what scientists resist: there are no absolute colors. The colors of Humanity are all on a continuum. It is a fact that we pigment ourselves in a lot of different colors, but the idea that these variations *mean* something is *entirely* in the realm of opinion.

Racism is a kind of religion, and a rather superstitious one. It is based on certain beliefs, for which there is no earthly evidence. The faithful will tell you that it is "*The Truth*" that White people are this way, and Black people are that way, although there are always exceptions to these assertions. We have no facts to support the opinion that race makes a difference, and certainly no agreement. And still, we have this kind of gut reaction or feeling that it does mean something. Our opinions have chained us to race. This racial issue enslaves us, and constrains us to live our lives at the effect of our emotional experience of race.

The Reality of Race (It's not what you think.)

We all know that race is a major issue in America. It's a big issue everywhere in the world. In recent years, wars have been fought in Europe, Africa and the Middle East over racial distinctions so fine as to be unnoticeable to us. It would be difficult for an average American to pick a Kurd out of a lineup of Turks. In Rwanda, the Tutsi's believe they are of a "superior, and more White" race than the "primitive" Hutus. Americans of any sort would find it difficult to distinguish between them. For them however, it is a major difference that led the Tutsi to attempt the genocide of Hutu (with the tacit approval of European and North American allies), and the Hutu to attempt the genocide of the Tutsi (with general condemnation from the "civilized" world).

Jonathan Swift, in *Gulliver's Travels*, writes of two countries that have been at war for some time, over the issue of how to crack open a boiled egg. One country favored cracking open the wide end and the other preferred the narrow end. Gulliver's suggestion of cracking the egg in the middle was met with disdain on both sides. People have a hard time giving up a "good fight," once it has begun. We don't seem to mind the cost. We will even sacrifice some large number of (other people's) sons and daughters, to keep the fight going. Certainly, no one wants to be the first to give up in an interminable game of "chicken." People seem so willing to take the risk of acting insanely, to avoid the risk of appearing weak. This is how our condition gets worse and worse.

While race appears to be a big, global and societal issue, perhaps it all comes down to "How do you crack your egg?" Maybe it is at the personal level that this issue of race persists. Consider that the world of race turns, not on the machinations of society-at-large, but on each individual's personally constructed way of being on this racial issue. Each of us is a microcosm of the whole cosmos, and each of us stands at the center of his or her own personal Universe.

But how did we get to be this way? From where did we get our opinions about race? Certainly most of us heard about race from an early age. Some of us were

given stern warnings about “those people” who were of a color or culture that was different to our own. We also heard stories about black cats, walking under ladders and opening umbrellas inside the house. To the degree that we recognize these superstitions as superstitions, none of those things can affect our lives very much. Our experience, over time, has taught us that if a black cat crosses in front of us, life goes on essentially the same as it always has. Superstitions that are not recognized as superstitions have tremendous force. An example is the superstitious practice of *Obeah*, a form of African-Caribbean shamanism, thought to be so powerful that it has been outlawed as a potentially deadly weapon. For the practitioners, followers and victims of this practice, it is not superstition at all. *Obeah* is very real for them, just as race is real for most of us. Perhaps the key to this distinction between superstition and reality is our direct, personal experience.

We know what we know, in major part, as a product of experience. The things we “know” or “have learned” that we carry forward into the future as rules to live by or principles were acquired through an originating experience. One cannot learn to draw a picture, play a musical instrument or ride a bicycle without having an experience of doing those things. Sooner or later, it has to show up in practice. The trouble with experience is that it is very fleeting. For an experience to have an impact on our lives, it must somehow enter into the consciousness. The experience has to be noticed. This is where it gets sticky. When we notice an experience, we are no longer experiencing what we’re experiencing. We are noticing. To be precise, we stop the experience of experiencing whatever is being experienced and shift automatically and unconsciously to an experience of noticing what we were experiencing. These two experiences are distinctly different. Furthermore, immediately upon noticing our experience, it is no longer what we are experiencing. It’s what we *were* experiencing — and it’s not even that. When we notice our experience, it instantly becomes a *memory* of what we were experiencing, filtered of all its extraneous and unnoticed elements and packaged for interpretation and storage as a ready-to-use concept. We will use the concept to “guide” us in the next similar experience. And the next experience *will* be similar to the first because it is so guided. A concept-guided experience is no longer a free and direct experience, but is constrained or enslaved to the concept.

The danger in this process, which is universal among Human Beings of any culture, is that we don’t even distinguish between our experiences and our concepts (or opinions) about our experiences. We just heap them together, call it “empirical knowledge,” and rarely, if ever, realize that we are carrying around a heap of concepts. We are unaware of the chains on us. For example, when a healthy and capable Human Being declares, “I can’t draw,” it is a lie, no matter how true the person thinks it is. What he or she is saying is something like, “I’ve drawn several times, and my friends made fun of my drawing and even my mother laughed at it, and I decided that I’m not good at drawing and I don’t like to draw and so I am not *willing* to draw.” For that person, the experience was conceptualized in a way that constrained any future drawing activity. Another person with the same experience might become a cartoonist, and that is still a constraint, although of a different sort.

If you are reading these words and understanding them, you may get something out of it. However, the real opportunity is to look into your own experience, and to see how the decisions you made are constraining or enslaving you. What do you tell yourself that stops you and chains you down? Remember, this is an inquiry into being truly free. It is also an invitation to create freedom for yourself.

The Racial Life-Principle

At some point in life, each of us experiences a *break into* race. Up to that moment, we are simply children, like any other children. We have already, by that age, entered the world of language and heard others' opinions about people who are Black or White or Hispanic or Asian or Native American. We have also heard that a rhinoceros is a dangerous wild animal, and we are unaffected by these external concepts acquired by hearsay. Before there is a personal experience around which to form a concept, the words are empty signifiers — devoid of significance. The concept of what the words signify is absent. Without the pairing of a word — the signifier — with the signified concept, there is no meaning. It's not significant. And Human Beings crave intelligible meaning and logical significance.

When we are very young children, experiencing all of life directly, as only children may, race has no significance. While we may have heard about race, it is closed to us as a source of meaning and understanding. We have not broken into the conversation of race. It is just not a conversation that includes us.

Then something happens.

Something happens, and the direct, personal experience is interpreted as a *meaningful* difference between “me,” as a person of a specific color or a race, distinct from other people of different colors or races. It is an experience of being frightened, helpless and disempowered. In that moment, we **break into race** and find a new way to identify ourselves to ourselves⁵. To be clear on this point, this is not about defining “them.” They are whoever or whatever they are. This is about the lifelong quest for the definitive answer to the question, “Who am I?” *They* are simply a part of the ever-expanding “objective” domain of everything that is “not me.” This is a major focal point in the ongoing process of creating and supporting the illusion of oneself as a small and isolated entity, in a large and ominous Universe.

In the moment of breaking into race, we take up the chains and manacles and enter into the enslavement of race. We do this willfully, although unconsciously. We do this mechanically, not humanly. We make a decision that destroys any other possibilities. This decision is the Racial Life-Principle, and we will live by this principle from that moment on. Afterward, we are no longer free to be with people of other races without concern. We have opened another area of life in which to be uncomfortable and isolated. Being uncomfortable and isolated is the booby prize we get for defining ourselves.

⁵ It is useful to note that this is not a pathological process nor a mental defect nor an element of insanity. By design, Human Beings self-identify as limited individuals through a common series of significant experiences and their attendant signified decisions and concepts. This was probably crucial to the survival of our species in prehistory. So we survived; now what?

At various times, most people have encountered feelings of discomfort (or some degree of discomfort) in situations with persons of another race. We think it has something to do with them — *their* actions, *their* behaviors, *their* values, *their* attitudes. But is that the case, *really*? Could the source of the discomfort be the decision that separated “me” from “them?” Consider that this uneasiness that we feel in those moments is a sensation of our anguish at being separate from the others – lacking poise or shared experience and language. What separates us is this Racial Life-Principle that we live by and don’t know about.

To be clear, one does not think one’s own Racial Life-Principle. You do not think it — ever. You *are* it. Immediately after deciding it, you become your Racial Life-Principle, and everything that you experience, or *can* experience in your interactions with people of a different race or in relation to your own race, is shaped and guided by it. Whatever your Racial Life-Principle may be — be good, be bad, be defiant, be cool, be violent, be stubborn, be strong, be submissive, be angry, be “nice,” be invisible, be desperate, be a victim, be resigned, be cautious, be unaware — whatever you decide becomes a part of who you are in-the-world. Some Black people choose to “be White,” and some White people choose to “be Black,” but they can only really emulate, based on their concepts and images of what it means to be White or Black, and at times they are openly ridiculed. The most salient characteristic of the Racial Life-Principle is that it is limiting and constraining. In relation to race, what you think and how you behave and what you accomplish or fail to accomplish, is all a product of being your Racial Life-Principle.

To fully illustrate this distinction, consider a few examples of the Racial Life-Principle. These are real-life stories. The names have been changed to protect the privacy of these wonderful Human Beings. They know who they are, and the author deeply appreciates them for their profound contributions to this work.

Freddy’s Story

Freddy grew up in the 1950’s, in the “colored” part of a Southern town. Times were hard, but Freddy was living life exuberantly, as any three-year-old would. His grandmother worked as a maid in the home of some White folks. Freddy heard a lot about White people, but it didn’t have an impact on him. He was busy being a fully self-expressed child. One day, there was no one at home to watch little Freddy, so his grandmother took him to work with her. The day was unremarkable, until late in the afternoon, when they were walking home. Freddy’s grandmother stopped at the drug store in the White part of town, close to where she worked, to pick up a few items. In those days, drug stores had soda fountains. Freddy did what he did when he when he was in the drug store close to his home. He got on one of the shiny vinyl stools with chrome pedestals, and started to spin around on it.

Then it happened. A White woman approached Freddy’s grandmother and said, “You better get that little nigger off that stool.” Instantly, Freddy stopped spinning on the stool. He ceased to be just a child, right then. He was frightened, helpless and disempowered. In that moment, he interpreted the experience of the occurrence in a particular way, and made his decision. He decided that, “You can’t

have fun around White people. You've got to be serious. You can't be yourself." This is his Racial Life-Principle. He locked himself into these chains that day.

The author met Freddy in 1999, when he was serious. Dead serious. Serious and dead to life. His chronic complaint was that, "White people treat me differently because of the color of my skin." After distinguishing his Racial Life-Principle, he recognized that White people treated him differently, mostly because he was a different person around White people, than he was around other Black Americans. He could see that he was one way around his Black friends, and a completely different way around White acquaintances.

In recognizing this, Freddy gained power over his complaint. He has chosen to release the chains he took on when he was three-years-old. He is fearlessly self-expressed with everyone. He is now known as someone with a sharp and warm wit, a very quick and intelligent man, kind, friendly and outgoing, and a joy to be with. He is free.

In Freddy's story, we get a glimpse of the possibility of completion. The real power in distinguishing your own Racial Life-Principle is that you get to see the barriers that you've put in your own way, and you can choose to complete your experience of those barriers and get past them. Will that make racial discrimination and prejudice go away? That is unanswerable at this point. It certainly does open up some space for people to be free of their own self-inflicted bondage, and they can have an unfettered and expanded experience of life. Perhaps this is all it takes — for Black people and White people to see their unconsciously self-constructed barriers, and to consciously give them up in favor of a future of freedom for themselves.

Samson's Story

Samson was born in the South and moved to New Jersey when he was six-years-old. He had heard all about White people from his father and an uncle. Then, at six, he was living among White people. His working-class mixed ethnic neighborhood, in 1940's New Jersey, included not only Blacks, but also Polish, Italian, Irish and German people, as well. In fact, in his second-grade class, he was the only Black child. The teacher was very white. She was teaching her students to square dance and she paired seven-year-old Samson with an Italian girl named Gina.

Samson and Gina became friends while they learned to dance together, and one day, Gina invited Samson to come home with her to practice. When they arrived at Gina's home, her mother was hanging laundry on a clothesline in the back yard.

As soon as Gina's mother saw Samson coming through the gate with her daughter, she began screaming and yelling something in Italian. Samson "knew" (based on what his father and uncle had told him) that White people are dangerous and unpredictable, and he had to leave — and fast.

Samson decided in that moment of fear, helplessness and disempowerment, that White people can't be trusted. His Racial Life-Principle is that, "White people will turn on you without warning. So you've got to be smart — smarter than they are — and you've got to be watchful. Watch and keep your mouth shut"

Samson is very intellectual, with more University degrees than anyone could ever need. He is quiet and cautious to this day. Since distinguishing his Racial Life-Principle, he now has room in his life for ease and playfulness. His tension and anger are gone. He's got a new girlfriend, and sometimes they go dancing.

An interesting aspect of Samson's story is that, since he could not understand Italian, he has no idea what Gina's mother was yelling. She may have been upset that Gina was with a boy. She may have been equally upset if Gina had brought home a White boy, or even an Italian boy. We'll never know. Also, in the 1940's, Italians were just beginning to be accepted as White people, which is probably why the teacher put Samson and Gina together in the first place. When New York City elected an Italian American mayor for the first time, in 1934, it was big news and somewhat disturbing for both the White political elite in New York and the established culture across the nation that associated Italians with the *Mafia*, Anarchism and gluttony. Less than forty years earlier, a mine manager wrote in a letter to H.C. Frick, the Pennsylvania coal magnate, describing the Italian immigrants, who were working in his coalmines as "a sturdier form of Negro." Racial distinctions are changeable over time and reflect the agreement in society.

Samson's story illustrates a key point. In the moment of being frightened, helpless and disempowered, we centralize one interpretation based in our most immediate point-of-view (no matter how absurd it may be), and we exclude any other possible interpretation or point-of-view. We can now make this distinction: the Racial Life-Principle is based on the panicked decision of a frightened, helpless and disempowered child, formed automatically (not humanly) from an opinion derived from a very narrow point-of-view.

Samantha's (the Author's) Story

I identify myself as someone of Italian heritage, although I am only half Italian, on my mother's side. (The other half is of questionable heritage, almost certainly a typical American amalgam, but certainly whoever was in the woodpile was White.) When I was a child, I didn't identify myself as anything. My race and cultural heritage were neither signified nor significant to me. All I knew was that my mother, aunts and uncles told me I was Italian, and they were proud that I "had the map of Italy on my face." In other words, I *looked* Italian.

One of my best friends in the second-grade was a girl named Marsha. She was Black, although I never identified her as such, way back then. She had an older brother, Gerald (who I thought was extremely cute) and a younger brother, Brian.

They were the only Black family in the small elementary school I attended, in a little town in western Pennsylvania.

One day in 1964, when I was in second grade, I was bringing some toys or balls into the basement of the school building after recess. Brian, who was in first-grade, was standing on a crate, in front of the janitor's sinks along the wall. He was scrubbing something vigorously. From where I was standing, I couldn't see what he was scrubbing, so I went over to the sinks and stood next to him to see what he was doing. He was furiously scrubbing his hands and arms.

"Brian, what are you doing?" I asked.

"I'm trying to get this dirt off of me," he replied. "My skin is so dirty!"

"No it's not," I said.

"Yes it is!" He held his arm next to mine and said through his tears, "Look how dark my skin is compared to yours."

I told him it wasn't dirt. I told him that he was just that color, a very even and beautiful color of smooth chocolate. I told him that I thought it was a great color, and that if I could pick a color for my skin, it would be his color. He was inconsolable. I was helpless and disempowered in the face of his anguish. I was frightened by the intensity of his emotional pain. I didn't know what to do. Eventually Gerald came in, took Brian outside and gave him a "talking to."

In that moment, I decided my Racial Life-Principle. "The color of one's skin shouldn't matter, but *it does*, and there is nothing I can do about it." And that was who I was in the matter of race, for many years. "It's a shame, but that's the way it is." I tried very hard to never let my Black friends know that their race (or mine) made any difference to me, although it did. Throughout my school years, White kids would sometimes call me a "nigger-lover," and Black kids sometimes excluded me, saying I would not understand (and I didn't). They had some "colorful" names for me also. Eventually I felt lonely and isolated. I was uncomfortable with everyone, and there was nothing I could do about it. "They" were a problem and I learned to stay away from "them."

Early in 2003, for no particular reason, I opened an inquiry into the question of race. For nearly four decades of my life, I believed there was nothing I could do to make a difference in our experience of race. Now I know that for thirty-nine years, I was in the chains of my Racial Life-Principle. Only when I was able to give up those chains, could I recognize that perhaps I had something of value to say about it — that I might even be able to make a difference. Living into the possibility of being someone who can make a difference, I had the opportunity to talk openly with people about their experience of race. By lifting myself out of bondage, perhaps I will be able to create an opening for others to lift themselves out of theirs.

Discovering the Persistence of Slavery

The inquiry began when the author noticed a difference in the way Black and White customer service representatives did their jobs. White customer service representatives seemed more inclined to find a solution to a problem and take care of the customer, even if it required bending the rules or store policies. Black customer service representatives were more rigid and inflexible in their adherence to the rules and policies, even if it meant that their customer could not be satisfied. The White workers would ask their manager questions and make requests on behalf of the customer. Most of the Black workers would not speak with the manager, and even if the customer requested them to do so, they would refuse.

Rather than speculate on what may be at the source of this difference, the author went back to these stores and businesses to interview the customer service representatives. This informal, unscientific study is as inconclusive as any scientific study, and it is interesting, nonetheless. Both Black and White workers began by defending their actions by stating some form of “I’m just doing my job the best way I know how.” Then, underneath the defensiveness, what began to emerge was a revelation of **preexisting disempowerment**. The Black workers said they feared that if they were as flexible, accommodating and lenient with the customers as their white coworkers were, they would lose their jobs. Most felt the managers were watching them, and that there was a constant, though unspoken, threat to their continued employment. They felt that the White workers took liberties, and they resented that. The White workers said that they were more concerned with (or afraid of) the customer. They wanted to look generous and helpful to avoid having any customers complain about them, although they felt that their managers supported them. They sometimes felt the urge to intervene when their Black coworkers were unable or unwilling to handle a complaint, and they resented that.

In air-conditioned offices and stores, talking with well-dressed and impeccably groomed individuals, one could begin to hear the clanking of the chains and the cracking of the whip. We have made great progress and have left the cotton fields behind, but still there is this subtle and sinister, pervasive persistence of slavery. This form of slavery is discreet. It is so insidious that it often goes unnoticed and certainly remains unspoken, as it is enforced — not by overseers with whips, not in the violent actions of racists; it is enforced, and reinforced over and over and over, in our minds and the way we identify ourselves to ourselves. At the very core of our identities, we are enslaved by race. And we conspire to cover it up, by agreeing that little-by-little things are getting better and we are really *trying* to promote equality.

This is just one example of how this subtle slavery shows up in-the-world. This is not to say that Black workers are all one way and all White workers are another. This is also not an indictment of employers. The employers and managers are not slave masters. The workers are hired *always already enslaved*. The managers and employers are in the same enslaved condition.

The product is often resentment on all sides. We are all the same, although different. We are all equally constrained by our disempowering Life-Principles. Consider that the education you receive and what you do with it, the relationships

you form, the jobs you take and your performance in them are all shaped and dominated by your Racial Life-Principle. Once you have distinguished that there is a Racial Life-Principle, it shows up everywhere, and you begin to get a sense of its pervasiveness, in your own life, the lives of the people you meet and in society.

Everybody experiences this form of slavery differently, due to our differing presuppositions. However, what we do with our experiences and the process by which we make our decisions and agreements are exactly the same, and we unconsciously support the persistence of fear and disempowerment — our own and each other's. This form of slavery enslaves us all, and it has been going on for a very long time. We were all born into the conspiracy, and once we break into race and form a Racial Life-Principle, we all unknowingly play a role in its perpetuation. Once the conspiracy is revealed and we begin to be authentic about it, then we can begin to deal with each other directly and openly.

Revealing the Conspiracy

This essay opens with the intentionally inflammatory assertion that, “Black America and White America have been co-conspirators in a cover-up that produces the persistence of slavery *right now* in the United States.” It is an accusation that we — all of us — have been perpetrating a mischief upon people who are not “us.” Of course, we can point to laws and Court decisions that have changed the way we do business, righted some wrongs, improved conditions, or increased access. That is part of the mischief. We have been trying to “fix” the race problem, and that has been a mischievous undertaking.

As previously noted, we have seen a slow, incremental improvement in the lives of Black Americans over centuries. The Abolitionist Movement that began in the Eighteenth Century, slowly led to the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863. Slaves were then told that they were free. This fixed the problem of slavery. Fixing a problem produces a fixation on the problem. This act of “fixing” the problem of slavery produced mischief by confusing emancipation with freedom. True, slaves were no longer slaves in the legally defined sense of the word. However, the emancipated slaves were left generally illiterate, impoverished, unsupported and unclear on how to proceed. Furthermore, they bore the stigma of the color of their skin and the agreed-on significance of their color, as the only ethnic group in American history to have been once considered property. No one ever addressed what it means to be free, when the emancipated slaves and everyone else knew that they were recently owned. Some went to cities in the North to work for pennies a day. Some stayed in the South, where they continued to do the work they did as slaves, only now they got a small share of the crop. The democratic process was closed to them, as the rules for voter registration were insurmountable. The White people who made the rules told Blacks to stay peacefully in their place and wait for their freedom to come. How it would come was never discussed, although one might assume it must be some slow evolutionary process, as generations came and went without much change in circumstance.

One hundred years after the Emancipation Proclamation, in his Letter From Birmingham City Jail, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote:

We have waited for more than 340 years for our constitutional and God-given rights. The nations of Asia and Africa are moving with jetlike speed toward gaining political independence, but we still creep at horse-and-buggy pace toward gaining a cup of coffee at a lunch counter. Perhaps it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say, "Wait." But when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim; when you have seen hate-filled policemen curse, kick and even kill your black brothers and sisters with impunity; when you see the vast majority of your twenty million Negro brothers smothering in an airtight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society; when you suddenly find your tongue twisted and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your six-year-old daughter why she can't go to the public amusement park that has just been advertised on television, and see tears welling up in her eyes when she is told that Funtown is closed to colored children, and see ominous clouds of inferiority beginning to form in her little mental sky, and see her beginning to distort her personality by developing an unconscious bitterness toward white people; when you have to concoct an answer for a five-year-old son who is asking: "Daddy, why do white people treat colored people so mean?"; when you take a cross-county drive and find it necessary to sleep night after night in the uncomfortable corners of your automobile because no motel will accept you; when you are humiliated day in and day out by nagging signs reading "white" and "colored"; when your first name becomes "nigger," your middle name becomes "boy" (however old you are) and your last name becomes "John," and your wife and mother are never given the respected title "Mrs.;" when you are harried by day and haunted by night by the fact that you are a Negro, living constantly at tiptoe stance, never quite knowing what to expect next, and are plagued with inner fears and outer resentments; when you are forever fighting a degenerating sense of "nobodiness" then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait. There comes a time when the cup of endurance runs over, and men are no longer willing to be plunged into the abyss of despair. I hope, sirs, you can understand our legitimate and unavoidable impatience.⁶

Since Dr. King wrote this letter in 1963, there have been changes. A black person can sit down at a lunch counter in the White part of town, without any question. A White person can also sit at a lunch counter in the Black part of town. Whether or not they are well served or treated with respect is unpredictable. What's really disturbing is that there is a White part of town and a Black part of town, despite laws against segregation. We carry our nagging signs that read "white" and "colored" with us, in the form of our Racial Life-Principles. We self-segregate, because our Racial Life-Principles will not allow us to do otherwise.

This is how slavery persists beyond emancipation: we set up a "White/Black" or "Free/Emancipated" dichotomy. The privileged Whites apply the force of law and policy to maintain their status in the face of an anticipated threat to their way of

⁶ Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., *Why We Can't Wait* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963, 1964).

living. Based in their fear and disempowerment, they seek to perpetuate the objectification and dehumanization of Black people — as “them.” This is how Whites survive emancipated Blacks.

Meanwhile Blacks apply their own disempowering self-assessments, fears and despair to themselves. Blacks then have to find a way to survive Whites. We have been striving to survive each other for a distressingly long time. So far, the survival strategies on both sides have produced violence, lynching, bombing, rioting, poverty, alienation, protest, segregation, separatism, resignation, judicial and legislative intervention, complacency (at times), and general dissatisfaction. Sometimes Blacks get some leverage and gain something, such as Affirmative Action. Then the Whites find a way to circumvent it. It keeps going back and forth, as the dichotomy gets overturned and overturned again. The dichotomy prevails and persists, and we are chained to it — sold into this dichotomy.

This dichotomy is the polarized system that reduces to “us” *or* “them.” Historically White has been privileged and centralized, while Black has been disenfranchised and marginalized. Whenever this polarity gets reversed a bit — as in *Brown v. Board of Education*, the boycotts and marches of the 1960’s that brought down the Jim Crow Laws, conversations about reparations or Affirmative Action programs, or when a Black person becomes a celebrity or sports star — Black becomes centralized and White becomes marginalized. Then it is overturned again — a Court decides that Affirmative Action is inherently racist, the news media reports that the Black celebrity smokes something — and it keeps flipping. Even when White people are sympathetic toward Black people, it occurs as “helping them,” which maintains the dichotomy. What is produced by this polar dichotomy is the perpetuation of slavery, which is why things only get incrementally better, and are not resolved. We are not approaching justice or equality. We are only, at best, stabilizing the shifting of the poles to avoid either side being upset enough to stop playing the game. There is no possibility of Justice (or anything else) inside of the shifting of this dichotomy. In the dichotomy, there are only options: more or less, better or worse, improved, different and still the same — no possibilities. Slavery under nicer conditions is still slavery, and it is time to end it.

The End Of Slavery

To get past the dichotomy of White/Black, we must complete it and get past it. It sounds tautological: to get past it, we must get past it. We cannot wait for the government to provide a way past it. By the very meaning of the word, government is in the business of maintaining order — the currently imposed order. It is not bad that the government maintains, defends and reproduces the social order. That is what government is set up to do. Governments that attempt progressive changes to the social order (like Nazi Germany) usually produce horrifying results. Getting past race cannot be legislated or adjudicated or enacted by decree. Racism persists in our unspoken agreements and principles. The access to getting past race, and our enslavement to the dichotomy of Black or White and “us” or “them,” is to renovate the agreement. And renovation can only take place in the Self (who we are being).

Renovation means “to make new again,” and carries with it the implication of restoration, which means “to bring back into being.” To get past our experience of race, we must complete it and make ourselves new again. This is how we can make a difference. When we distinguish our original experience of race, and what we made it mean about us — one’s personal Racial Life-Principle — and we can see that it really didn’t mean that, then we can bring back into being who we were for each other before we broke into race. We can stand for ourselves and generate the power to give up our childish fear and disempowerment, in favor of a child-like openness and love for each other. This is our best chance for Peace, Freedom and Justice.

Remaining in the shifting polarity of the dichotomy is not, nor has it ever been, a workable alternative. It is definitely an option — the one we have mostly been stuck with, and it just does not work. One side has to lose something for the other side to win. It is, by its inescapable nature, divisive. The vision of a world that works for all of Us, including everything and everybody is an empowering context for this endeavor. So far, we’ve been living in an “us *or* them” world. What this will take is a “me *and* you” world. How we reach that vision and bring that world into being begins with completing our experience of race as something real and meaningful. When it is fully laid open for questioning, race appears to be not only meaningless, but also not even real. It’s just something we made up. This is not about overturning the dichotomy again. This is about allowing it to be the way it is, without adding any significance to it. Human Beings come in colors. **So what?**

The vision is not new. Martin Luther King, Jr. had this vision. He knew that overturning the dichotomy was as unworkable as not overturning it. He said:

I know sometimes we get discouraged and sometimes disappointed with the slow pace of things. At times we begin to talk about racial separation instead of racial integration, feeling that there is no other way out. My only answer is that the problem will never be solved by substituting one tyranny for another. Black supremacy is as dangerous as white supremacy, and God is not interested merely in the freedom of black men and brown men and yellow men. God is interested in the freedom of the whole human race and the creation of a society where all men can live together as brothers, where every man will respect the dignity and the worth of human personality.⁷

When we can each complete our personal experience of race and get to the “So what?” of race, a new clearing opens. Where there was once only resistance to the way we organized our lives, according to the “us or them” model, there is now only space — the space to be ourselves. Rather than slavishly following the dictates of a decision made by a frightened and disempowered child, we can now choose a new way to be, and be with each other. We don’t know what it will look like, as it has not made an appearance heretofore.

First, we’ll have to give something up. Anyone who has been to a circus and looked around where they keep the elephants — wonderful and powerful, majestic creatures — has noticed something that seems strange. These behemoths are

⁷ Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., “The American Dream.” *The Negro History Bulletin* 31 (May 1968) p 10-15.

tethered in place by a very light rope around one foot. With some effort, a healthy adult human being could break free from this rope, and yet the mighty elephant is held by it. How does this work? When an elephant is young and weak and small, the trainers use heavy ropes and chains to keep the baby elephant from getting away. The baby elephants keep trying to break free, and find it impossible. As the elephant grows up, it eventually stops trying. Then the trainers can use the light rope, which is much easier for the trainers to handle. The presence of *anything* on that foot will keep the elephant from trying to escape. Occasionally an elephant will go mad, and in that moment of madness, the beast snaps the rope and goes on a rampage. Only in madness does the elephant discover how easily it can escape its bonds.

Perhaps, what is being suggested here is madness.

We will have to give up that our opinions and deeply held beliefs are right or true or useful. We will have to give up the agreed-on “sanity” and sensibility of what we think and know and believe about how life really is. We will have to give up that we can’t make a difference. We will have to give up the disempowering notion that there is *anything* that we, as human beings, *can’t be* or *can’t create*. When we look honestly and authentically at those things we “can’t” do or attempt — those areas of life, or in the world, where we “can’t” make a difference — we will discover that we have simply been, like the elephant, *unwilling* to test the tether. Testing the tether begins with asking open questions, and in these pages we have opened the inquiry into the tether that keeps us tied to race.

If we can give up the White/Black dichotomy in favor of Colors, if we can give up the True/False dichotomy in favor of Uncertainty, if we can give up the dichotomy of Us/Them in favor of All, then we can truly renovate our agreements, and make ourselves new again. We can open a new epoch of human experience. In this new epoch, where we have given up our enslavement in favor of hitherto unimagined possibilities, who knows what may show up? Peace? Freedom? Perhaps even Justice can finally make its long-desired appearance.

Conclusion

We are not the victims of the color of our skin. We are not the victims of some organized oppressive force mounted by other people of a different skin color. We are the victims neither of cruel and indifferent fate, nor of brutal intent. If we are victims at all, we are the victims of our own imagination, fear and helplessness that throw us into the ongoing maelstrom of race.

What can be said about the persistent, formidable barriers to equality and “upward” social mobility? These barriers are not imaginary. They are the concrete products of the imaginary — the accumulated effect of the longstanding agreements and principles that have unconcealed themselves in these pages. Under these old and decrepit agreements, we remain caught in an institutionally perpetuated maelstrom of race. Corporations, religious and community organizations, educational institutions, the healthcare system and government all participate in this racial whirlpool bath, in which none is cleansed and all are contaminated.

Meanwhile, some Black celebrities and intellectuals sneer and recycle the former White racist rant that Blacks at the poorer end of the socio-economic scale should “pull themselves up by their bootstraps,” as if such a thing were possible. They either dismiss or deny the desperate condition of many Black Americans.

The post-emancipation phenomenon of the *Über-Schwarzen* — a parade of highly celebrated Black Americans, beginning with Booker T. Washington and continuing today, invariably cast their fishy eyes upon the less fortunate (or less privileged) Black Americans — is deleterious to completing the experience of race in America, and perpetuates the marginalization of Black in the White/Black dichotomy. Bill Cosby, a comedian who holds a doctorate in education, blames African American Vernacular English (Ebonics) for the limited choices available to young urban Blacks. In a speech delivered during the NAACP gala, celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the Supreme Court decision that “ended” school segregation, he delivered a scathing indictment of Hip-Hop culture and the parenting skills of Black Americans. He rants, “It’s time for you to not accept the language that these people are speaking, which will take them nowhere. What the hell good is *Brown v. Board of Education* if nobody wants it?”⁸ Does he know the causal flow? Is it possible that the segregation, isolation and limited choices produced the culture and its linguistic expression? Hard questions remain unanswered, and perhaps unanswerable.

Oprah Winfrey was asked why she spent \$40 millions to establish a “leadership academy” for girls in South Africa, while neglecting the condition of inner-city schools in her highly segregated home city of Chicago. Oprah justified her decision by invalidating the inner-city youths: “I became so frustrated with visiting inner-city schools that I just stopped going. The sense that you need to learn just isn’t there... If you ask the kids what they want or need, they will say an iPod or some sneakers. In South Africa, they don’t ask for money or toys. They ask for uniforms so they can go to school.”⁹ Apparently, Oprah does not find it ironic to blame these inner-city young people for being enslaved to an acquisitive consumer culture that she slavishly promotes five days a week, on her television show — the show on which the iPod was introduced. Perhaps if she really visited the “hood,” talked to the “hoodlums” and listened to them, listened to their rap, she might find that what they are really wanting and needing and crying out for is freedom.

Black Star beautifully sings our plight in their rap, *Thieves In The Night...*

Not strong, only aggressive
Not free, we only licensed
Not compassionate, only polite
Now, who the nicest?
Not good, but well behaved
Chasin’ after death, so we can call ourselves brave

⁸ Cosby, W. H., Jr. (2004, May 17). Address at the NAACP's Gala to Commemorate the 50th Anniversary of [Brown v. Board of Education](#), Washington, DC.

⁹ Samuels, A. (2007, January 8). *Oprah Goes To School*. Newsweek. Retrieved January 16, 2007 from <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/16396343/site/newsweek/page/3/>

Still livin' like mental slaves.¹⁰

This inquiry leads us to free ourselves, not to blame others or ourselves, and not to wait for our freedom to come from somewhere external to us. When we recognize that each of us is experiencing race, dominated by the decisions of a frightened and disempowered child, then we will begin to understand our predicament. Then we will be able to see a way out of the maelstrom. In that moment, we create a place to stand in the world. From that place, we can begin to interact with the world directly, with power and poise.

The childhood decision that put race in the way of living a life of peace, satisfaction and full self-expression does not have to persist. We can generate power over the experience of race. We can exercise the power of choice to overcome the force of the past. It isn't simply that we can. If we are to move forward into a future of what's possible for Human Being on this planet, then we **must** gain power over race. The time is now.

There will be resistance to these conversations and distinctions — this new approach to being responsible and authentic about race. Some people are so stuck in their positions and opinions that they are willing to sacrifice anything, including Peace and Freedom, to cling to their righteousness and indignation. Some have made a career of it. **They are not wrong.** They are focusing on what they focus on, and confronting what they must confront. We love them for their passion and devotion. Remember that this is all in the domain of opinion. Generate kindness and compassion for the people who are stuck with their fear and anger and disempowerment, and be generous with them.

Most importantly, keep moving forward into the possibility of being truly free. Dr. King expressed it movingly:

...And so if we will go out with this faith and this determination to solve these problems, we will bring into being that new day and that new America. When that day comes, the fears of insecurity and the doubts clouding our future will be transformed into radiant confidence, into glowing excitement to reach creative goals...¹¹

Today is the day. Transformation. Confidence. Creative goals. These are available here and now, in the middle of things, right where we are.

©2007 Samantha Thomas

¹⁰ Black Star (1998). Thieves In The Night. [Album: Mos Def and Talib Kweli are Black Star]. [CD]. Rawkus Records.

¹¹ Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., "If the Negro Wins, Labor Wins." *Hotel* (12 February 1962) p 4, 6.