More Thoughts on a National Conversation on Race

By Norm R. Allen Jr.

In early October 2014, PBS featured videos on their Website under the title "White people in Buffalo, NY talk about race." The videos are part of "The Whiteness Project," (http://www.whitenessproject.org) the brainchild of filmmaker Whitney Dow. Twenty-one Whites sit down to discuss what it is like to be White. Some speak of White pride, some complain that Whites face racial discrimination, some believe Blacks have a sense of entitlement, etc. Some people praised the project, others slammed it.

In an interview in *The Buffalo News*, Dow said, "I've had people criticize me for putting up what they call 'uninformed people' who don't understand things like structural racism and the bigger picture....But if I try to explain structuralism to a guy who's lost his job...well, it's very hard for people who are struggling to see the larger view, and frankly their view is important too. It should be part of the discussion." ("Videos on race stir provocative response," November 12, 2014, p. A2.)

This is one of the main problems with calls for a national conversation on race. Many Whites are not interested in understanding Blacks and many Blacks are simply interested in dominating the discussion and calling Whites misinformed. Much more heat than light is usually generated in these kinds of discussions.

Dow is correct. Allegedly uninformed people have to be included in the discussion. After all, why even have such a discussion if everyone is enlightened in the first place? And if the goal is to be informed, why do so many Blacks get angry when they hear Whites making allegedly uninformed comments in such discussions? Are not these supposed to be teachable moments?

Some Whites are not racist. They are simply ignorant, i.e. innocent and incapable of understanding what Blacks experience. If they are sufficiently open-minded, they can learn and change. However, they are unlikely to get to that point if they are constantly attacked and suspected of bad faith.

Many Blacks attack White progressives more harshly than they attack White reactionary bigots. For example, many Blacks attacked Piers Morgan for criticizing Blacks for using the word "nigger" or "nigga." ("If black Americans want the N-word to die, they have to kill it themselves," www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-289080/PIERS-MORGAN-black-Americans-want-N-word-die-kill-themselves.html.) Morgan even ended the piece by saying, "As a white man, I have no right to demand that any black person gives up using the N-word. But as someone who believes passionately in civil rights, I just think it's the right thing to do."

The piece struck me as sensible, sensitive and respectful. Yet, some Blacks called Morgan "paternalistic," a "privileged white male," a "white savior," and worse. It seems that, in the minds of some African Americans that rationalize use of the N-word, Whites should have no say in the matter. Is this what a national conversation on race is supposed to sound like? If so, who really benefits? What happens if, in a national conversation on race, Whites cannot even feel free to condemn use of the N-word among Blacks? Should Whites feel free to *condone* its use? Or should they be so fearful as to avoid the subject altogether in a national conversation on race?

Many Blacks complain that Whites simply cannot understand what it is like to be Black. But why should they have to know what it is like to be Black to sympathize with Black people and Black causes? Do men really have to know what it is like to be a woman in order to fight for women's rights? Did Americans have to know what it was like to be a Black South African to fight against apartheid? Do heterosexuals have to know what it is like to be an LGBT person to fight against discrimination based on sexual orientation? All one must do – indeed, about all one can do – is get as much understanding of the Other as possible and try to do the right thing. Indeed, it is senseless and unfair to blame people simply because they are not part of one's group.

The Black secular humanist poet Langston Hughes once said that it is not enough to see himself through his own eyes. He also wanted to see himself through the eyes of others. This is the kind of attitude that all participants in any national conversation on race should have. Sometimes those outside your group can help you to see yourself in a new way. They could help you to better see your flaws as well as your strengths. To go into a national conversation on race with the sole purpose of defending your race and attacking others is the height of foolishness and accomplishes nothing of genuine value. Humility and a desire to learn and grow should be at the center of any proposed national conversation on race. However, that seems to be mere wishful thinking.