

## Truth Then Reconciliation

By Kimberly Barrett, Ph.D.

Restorative justice, the type of justice that can heal both the targets of injustice and those responsible for it, can only begin after an acknowledgement of the truth. When it comes to racism, we in the United States have never fully acknowledged the truth. Just as scholars, journalists and teachers have gathered new facts that expose the truth about this contested issue to share with students and the public, a dangerous backlash is taking place. It is taking the form of censorship in the classroom, objecting to the content of AP African American history courses, supporting book banning and limiting academic freedom on college campuses. And it is being perpetrated by a small but growing number of governors, state legislators, school boards and others afraid of the inevitable change that is coming with a more diverse population in the U.S.

If these people are in fact concerned about our collective well-being rather than simply maintaining the unearned privilege they have based on skin color, their fear is unfounded. The benefits of greater diversity have been identified [in research for decades](#) . Whether you are talking about education, the economy or society in general, the truth is that diversity in an inclusive environment benefits everyone. But by the same token exclusion hurts everyone. As Martin Luther King Jr, famously wrote, “Nothing in all the world is more dangerous than sincere ignorance and conscientious stupidity.”

I came to understand this in a very visceral way several years ago as part of an evaluation of multicultural programs at a university. I asked to interview some of the frequent participants in these programs to hear in their own words how the initiatives impacted them. One day a blond-haired, blue-eyed Minnesotan walked into my office and began to tell me about how these

programs were the most transformational and impactful of her college career. Then with a harsh look of betrayal in her eyes she asked, “Did you all know this all the time and just didn’t tell us.”

At that moment, I could honestly say that most of the teachers and faculty that she had over the years probably didn’t know what she was learning in our multicultural programs. They were operating from a position of sincere ignorance. But in the years since, we have been expanding our knowledge of these facts and teaching them. So today it seems to me that the type of academic malpractice the student accused us of and that is currently being promoted by some would be an act of willful, “conscientious stupidity”.

Current attempts to promote conscientious stupidity through academic and literary censorship perpetuate vast omissions in what we teach our children that will only serve to broaden the divisions that currently plague us. These omissions create a distorted worldview normalizing the myth of white supremacy, and all forms of chauvinism, contributing to the continued disenfranchisement of many and the vitriol in public discourse today.

Contrary to claims that discussions of racism hurt White identifying children, its omission does deep harm. It helps to perpetuate a national delusion that keeps us from forming a more perfect multicultural union, one in which we see each other for the uniquely diverse but equally human people we are. Our education systems are how we share and create our collective truth, so we must keep them as inclusive as possible.

But it is not only acknowledging our historical truth that matters in creating a foundation upon which restorative justice can occur. We must also make sure that we understand how racism exists and is perpetuated in our society today. This requires learning about current inequities while also cultivating awareness of our mind’s propensity for taking short cuts that result in

biased decision making which falsely empowers some while disadvantaging others. What a disservice we would be doing to young people if we gave into the approach of obfuscation advocated by some. We would be keeping invaluable information from students that tells the true story of struggle, resilience, liberation and reinvention which is the currency of our democracy and could become the foundations of restorative justice for our nation.

If we ever want a nation in which we have justice for all, we must first acknowledge the truth of our past in all its many aspects, painful and triumphant, from the perspective of both the marginalized and privileged. Understanding this reality enabled me to look to our future with clear-eyed optimism and a sense of my own responsibility for making positive social change. And I think it will do the same for others. But it requires access to a more expansive and inclusive education not less, one that allows subject matter experts to determine curriculum in our schools, colleges and universities, not politicians or parents. We must also continue to educate ourselves and those within our realm of influence. And of course, it is imperative that we exercise our right to vote. Only then can we engage in a process of reconciliation that is lasting and restorative to us all.

As James Baldwin famously wrote, “Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.”