



**WE CAN'T
GET THERE
FROM HERE**

BY LILLIAN A. JACKSON

What can be said of race relations among Americans in the new millennium? It is 144 years since the emancipation of the slaves, 55 years since *Brown v. The Board of Education*, and 45 years since the enactment of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Today a black man is the president of the United States. Nevertheless, how far have we really come and how far do we have to go? *USARiseUp* set out to learn how we as Americans could get from an arguable position of tolerating other races to celebrating our diversity. Is this goal possible—or is it even something we truly want? Are we ultimately destined, tortoise-like for some kind of *Star Trekian* coexistence where there is intergalactic strife, but humans seem to get along very well with each other, and where people of color are in positions of authority and rank?

It presents a pretty picture of Earthling race relations in the future, a rosy state of affairs. How did they get there from here—how do we? Where are the science-fiction series that imagine, that depict the process, the actual events by which our society becomes so egalitarian? How can it be done? What are the possibilities? Is it attrition—the dying off of anyone who perpetrated or has even the remotest memory of the hardships and suffering of the Trail of Tears, the Jim Crow insults and indignities, the disgraceful internment of Japanese Americans? Or, perhaps it is an annihilating world war that exposes the entire race for what it is, self-destructive and counterproductive.

USARiseUp sallied forth to brave the discomfort of asking perfect strangers their thoughts and opinions on race. We asked the butcher and baker and candlestick maker “How do we change? How do we come to accept each other without rancor, resentment or hostility?” Most people we spoke with, without saying so directly, intimated that they had not contemplated the eradication of racism. It is presumed to be impossible.



“Even if there were no racism, there would still be race,” said **Dr. Carlos Cortés**, who is 76 and professor emeritus of history at University of California Riverside, and serves as consultant to the Nickelodeon preschool series *Dora the Explorer*. “People would still notice skin color, features, hair type,” he said.



Jonathan Brent was of a similar opinion. “When people say, ‘I don’t see you as a mixed-race person, I see you as a person,’ I say, ‘Well, I want you to see me as a mixed-race person.’” Brent, 26, is a full-time student at the University Of Virginia School Of Law, and the outreach coordinator for the MultiRacial Americans of Southern California, an organization established to serve the needs of people who are of multiracial heritage, involved in an interracial relationship or trans-racially adopted. Brent, who is half-white and half-Japanese American, sees his racial identity as hapa, the Hawaiian word for “half.” He said that his ethnicity is, “Something I’m proud of. It is something I talk about for hours and set up Website organizations to discuss. Because a lot of the racial strife in our nation’s past and our nation’s present, points to a tendency to see race as a dirty word, as something that if we ignore it will go away. Many people get somewhat colorblind with it. I think really looking at race is a good thing.”



“I don’t really see the point of celebrating our differences,” **Carmen Kerckhove** said. Kerckhove, 31, is Chinese Belgian and the co-founder and president of New Demographic, a consulting firm that describes its mission as helping “people learn about race and racism without having to endure the misery of diversity training.” She hosts the podcast *Addicted to Race*, and weblogs *Racialicious*, *Anti-Racist Parent* and *Race in the Workplace*. Kerckhove lives in New York City. “As a person of color,” she said, “in the workplace, I don’t really need my colleagues

to celebrate my culture; I just need them to treat me as a full human being. I think that’s what racism causes. Racism causes people not to see each other as fully human three-dimensional people with dreams and hopes and aspirations just like everybody else; instead they just see them as a stereotype.”



“I think we need to get to tolerance first. That’s what scares me,” said **Judi Jordan**, who is Latina and black, and declined to give her age. Jordan is a writer-director-producer living in Los Angeles. “I think that [level of] tolerance is relative to where you live. On some level, there is more tolerance in San Francisco, New York ... big urban areas where people are forced to learn how to live together,” Jordan said. “I think tolerance is really based on people living together as closely as possible. Not all people want to do that. Everyone’s dream seems to be getting their own home and living in their own little world. I don’t think that’s going to help tolerance.”

Brent said he has “always hated the word ‘tolerant,’ because, at least when I was growing up, in elementary school, it was always ‘tolerance, tolerance, tolerance.’ When I got older, and actually, thought about it, I thought, ‘I don’t want to be tolerated. I want to be accepted.’ I think that in terms of getting from tolerance to celebration, the first thing we need is to learn to celebrate ourselves as individuals. Because if you as a person, regardless of your race, are ashamed of what you are—if you’re not going to celebrate it, no one else is going to celebrate it.”



Dr. William Edmonson, 52, an associate professor of electrical engineering at North Carolina State University, gently espoused a scorched earth philosophy. “It most likely will take the leaders of the country or some type of cataclysmic event to level the playing field for everybody,” he suggested. “Like global warming ... that’s going to be an event where people will have to begin to work together. You cannot do this by yourself. You can’t sit in Detroit or Los Angeles and say, ‘I can deal with this by keeping my head stuck in the sand.’”

Mary Orona is 43 and an immigration agent in Albuquerque, New Mexico. She expressed sentiments similar to Edmonson’s by saying, “Now is a prime time to pull together. We’re suffering from the energy crisis. It’s a prime time to get creative, to get all of us with our thinking caps on, bring together the ideas on how we are going to deal with energy issues, how we are going to deal with food issues. I agree with Will Smith, when he said, ‘I really think most people don’t get up in the morning wanting to hate somebody else.’ I really don’t think that’s people’s motivation. Most people do want to get on with their lives and just be creative, and do what they’re supposed to do and get their jobs done. Right now we’re facing potentially very strong struggles from a global perspective, such as food, and energy, all these things that are going to make us very human, and it’s not going to matter what our skin color is in this country when those issues come into play.”

Getting an Education

Yet not all hope is lost. Nearly everyone we spoke to had positive ideas on how race relations can improve, and listen up, people, the learning process begins at home.

“I think it’s a change that starts within. And the second part I think is just taking time to educate people around you,” said Jonathan Brent.

Carmen Kerckhove said, “One of the most important first steps that people need to take is really self-reflection and self-examination. It’s one thing to point your finger and say something is racist, but it’s another thing to look internally and ask, ‘What racist stereotypes have I internalized?’ That is an extremely uncomfortable exercise that many people are not ready for, and it’s not just something white people need to do. People of color need to do it as well.”



Mary Orona, who described her ethnicity as Irish and Spanish, said we must “start identifying as Americans, rather than breaking it down to it is us against them. ... Focusing on our unity as a nation, the fact that we do come from this continent and we’re North Americans and we’re here with a similar goal ... that’s how I would like to see it happen.”

“I think everybody has to change,” was William Edmonson’s view. “The slaver is just as much enslaved as the slaves themselves; I have found that to be true. If I oppress someone, I find myself also to be in the box. But if you decide I’m not going to play the game, [you’re] not going to get caught up in this victim/victimization, then the rules have to change, because you no longer abide by the rules.”

Carlos Cortés said that to move beyond mere tolerance is to develop genuine intergroup understanding. “Without real understanding,” he said, “tolerance is an empty virtue. Understanding is necessary to create and sustain long-term attitudinal change.” He sees two main institutional avenues for improving intergroup understanding: Educational institutions (schools and religious institutions) and the media.

Brent said, “I have a friend who’s a PhD student in ethnic studies. He always talks about how we should remember the difference between racism and ignorance. His example is when someone says something obviously racially offensive, oftentimes there’s this kind of knee-jerk ‘You’re racist!’ reaction. How could you say that? You’re a bad person.’ Remember that some people say that just because they’re ignorant. They say, ‘What? ‘Half-breed’ is an offensive term? I didn’t know that, I had no idea.’ Or something to that effect, but instead of either getting angry at them or simply ignoring it, it’s good to take that time to educate them.”

“People tend to be very attuned to their own oppression but they are much less interested in hearing about other people’s oppression,” said Kerckhove. “Similarly, I think that people are attuned to their own oppression but much less willing to admit to any privileges or advantages that they may have. But I think if we’re going to be serious about doing something about racism, each of us needs to take a good hard look at ourselves and think, ‘In what way am I contributing to a racist society?’ Or, ‘In what way do I benefit from systems and structures in a way that puts a person of color at a disadvantage?’ I think we really need to get real and be honest about these things.”

Conversational Gambits

Many agree that not only do we need to give ourselves a stern talking to but a national conversation also is necessary. Kerckhove, whose New Demographic, provides diversity training for corporations and other organizations, said, “There’s always a lot of reluctance or fear on the part of organizations to talk about race, but what I’ve found is that people are ready to do it, and they are ready to do it in an authentic and an open and honest way.

“Too many organizations are sticking to a concept where they are focusing too much on the feel-good, touchy-feely stuff. You cannot talk about diversity without talking about racism. You can’t only focus on celebrating diversity, that touchy-feely stuff, without dealing with the fact that people are still experiencing discrimination, and that causes pain and suffering. Therefore, I think it is important to remember that talking around these issues because it is easier is not the answer; it is important too actually engage people with these issues. And I’ve found that people are a lot more receptive than organizations give them credit for.”



For **Andrew Susskind**, 44, a life coach operating in Santa Monica, Calif., it’s a question is of individual, personal need. “What is it you really, really want?” he said, explaining how a life coach might approach the conversation with a client who came to him wanting to change his racial views. “What is the outcome that you’re looking for?” What is the obstacle here, what is getting in

the way? Moreover, that’s when they would bring up the race issue, and I would start brainstorming with them. In other words, what is it that people do when they run into difficult feelings around [race]? ... How do they educate themselves? How do they emotionally deal with it? How do they spiritually deal with it? They might speak to someone from church. They might speak with a therapist.”

“I think that there has to be a conversation about it,” Judi Jordan said. “We’ve seen government try to enforce diversity or desegregation, and that doesn’t work. I mean, I don’t know how to open a conversation that becomes measurable [in its] results.”

Brent suggested that one method of opening the conversation might be through forming “deliberate friendships,” which involves the intentional outreach by a person of one race to someone of another race, simply to learn more about the other culture. “I think people are hesitant to do that because, they say, it falls under tokenism. You know, ‘I don’t want to have my one token black friend; my one token Hispanic friend; my one token Asian friend.’ However, I think especially for people who’ve lived in very homogenous areas, that it is important to deliberately make friends among people of different cultures, or otherwise, how are you going to learn more about those cultures?”

“If you’re someone who routinely says we should put more fences up at the border and have more immigration crackdowns, yet you don’t know a single illegal immigrant, then it’s probably good to go out and meet one, become friends with him. Maybe you’ll still have those views afterward, but at least you’ll understand the human toll of what you’re advocating.”

The Obama Factor

People were galvanized by the “A More Perfect Union” speech given in March 2008 by then senator and presidential candidate Barack Obama, and they feel in a sense



he lifted the gag rule off the topic of racism.

“I thought [Obama’s speech] was outstanding. I thought it was a really historic moment,” Carmen Kerckhove said. “I’ve never seen a public figure, much less a presidential candidate openly discuss white privilege and institutional racism on such a national level. I think he did an excellent job of showing the kind of empathy that I’m talking about, he illustrated that people of color have legitimate grievances, and they are not figments of our imaginations. At the same time, he showed that white people have legitimate grievances as well ... so I do think that that was a watershed moment and for a lot of people.”

Jordan too found inspiration in Mr. Obama’s words. “As a product of the ‘revolutionary’ ’70s and someone who had posters of Angela Davis and Che [Guevara] alongside Marvin Gaye, I am one of those people who bless President Obama every day. I am still in a state of perpetual astonishment about his election, his achievement, his family, and support him in my deeds and actions, unconditionally. It feels good for the first time in a long time, to be an American of diverse ethnicity in the world. I am so proud of his calm, courageous, skillful, pragmatic and yet idealistic leadership style. His choice of Judge [Sonia] Sotomayor [for justice of the Supreme Court] has been a masterstroke toward uniting the Latinos and Blacks in the U.S. and abroad. I look forward to seeing more such well-executed tactical and progressive future moves.

“There are no easy answers,” Andrew Susskind said. “I think it’s about awareness. I think it’s about intention and focus. In addition, I think it’s about taking action. It’s not always going to be a linear process. It’s not always going to be something that’s tangible, exactly, but it is about, like Barack said, it’s about opening up dialogue. It’s about having a willingness to talk about whatever needs to be talked about and to do whatever needs to be done.”

A More Perfect World

It seems no one expects a raceless, completely egalitarian world to evolve—which may partly explain why television has leapfrogged over the issue and gone straight to science-fictional racial utopia. We asked people to think about it, to take a moment to explore what such an America, what such a world, would be like. Initial reaction to the question, “What would change in your life if there were no racism?” was often one of surprise that they’d never considered the supposition before. Everyone we asked, however, did give it serious thought. Some of their answers are below.

It would be more peaceful,” Andrew Susskind, who is white and Jewish, said. “I spent some time in Thailand last year, and there was something about their respect, and graciousness and honoring of differences that the Thai culture seems to have. ... I don’t know whether it is the Buddhist practices or what it is, but

there’s less tension in the air. ... And coming back to Los Angeles, there’s a lot of compartmentalizing, there’s a lot of tension between all the differences, whether it be social-economic differences, racial differences, sexual-orientation differences, and somehow, I think that there would be more peacefulness and less stress if there were no racism.”

“I could feel the change from just [being asked the question],” Judi Jordan said. “I can feel the change just from walking into an office or walking on a set to get a job. If someone would just look at my resume or listen to my ideas and not sit there and think, ‘OK, here we have this woman who’s—and we don’t really quite know what she is’—because I’m black and Latino—‘so we don’t really know what she’s going to come out with.’ Because everyone thinks that the color of your skin dictates the kind of material you’re going to be producing, that you’re going to write, so there’s a stereotype right there. They’re going to assume that I can’t write white characters, or Jewish characters, and I can’t direct those people. To just be judged on who I am and not on what I am, that would be a great day; that would be a very freeing day for me.”

William Edmonson expressed some ambivalence. “My gut reaction? Nothing. I can’t say I’ve gotten beyond it, but I don’t let it bother me. Oh, [my life] has been affected by racism. Today? Let me put it this way. I don’t let it affect me. That’s what I work for every day and that’s what I fight for every day. If there were no racism, I would not have to think about me being a black person. Every day you’re saying, are they doing this because I’m black? Or, are they doing this just because they’re crazy people? Did I get this because I’m black, or didn’t I get this because I’m black? In addition, I think it’s true, every day I have to think about me being black. I think it is a lot of wasted energy. Because I’m questioning ... some times you begin to question—this is what it has been in the past—maybe I shouldn’t be doing this or maybe I shouldn’t be achieving this because I’m a black person. Or they’re putting up roadblocks because I’m a black person.”

“It would be just pure,” Mary Orona said, “to be able to tap into each other’s creativity and expand and really be part of what life is to be. ... If only that could happen every day, that feeling of, OK, everybody’s coming to the table to add something in their own unique voice and it’s going to be honored, and we can allow our energy to flow into something we never expected.”

Jonathan Brent would remain true to his cause. “I would say it wouldn’t change a whole lot simply because I’m still ... I would be happy, but I would still think that race is something to be celebrated, I would still be doing activities to promote that celebration.” Things got harder for Meek once she entered school. “I was called Chink and gook and Jap,” she says, “and I didn’t really know what those things meant. I just knew that they meant I was different, but I wanted to be the same as everyone else.” ■

■ “STICKY WICKET” QUESTIONS

This is where we get real. Each month, Sticky Wicket takes on a thorny question about a racial, ethnic, cultural or religious issue. These are the hard topics; the stuff that people don't like talking about at work, school or cocktail parties. But these are also the issues we need to explore. To ask your Sticky Wicket question, write: stickywicket@usariseup.com.



Bureau of Colored Troops photos. Circa 1790-1860.

Dear Sticky Wicket,

What is the origin of the phrase, “people of color” and why has it become so popular in academic circles, among public officials, and the media?

— Juan Santiago

Dear Juan,

The proper term of reference for people of color has evolved significantly throughout the course of U.S. history. Well throughout the 1800s, “colored” was the preferred term used to describe the nation’s “non-white” citizens — primarily African-Americans. In 1863, the War Department established the Bureau of Colored Troops. Eight Census counts taken between 1790-1860 included tallies for “colored” people.

The term, viewed as derogatory by modern standards, is still used, though infrequently. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People still uses “colored” in its name. “Times change and terms change. Racial designations go through phases. At one time, Negro was accepted, at an earlier time colored, and so on. This organization has been in existence for 80 years, and the initials NAACP



are part of the American vocabulary, firmly embedded in the national consciousness, and we feel it would not be to our benefit to change our name,” James Williams, former NAACP public relations director, is quoted as saying.

The phrase “people of color” — a term that is widely acceptable among the races

— was coined later in American history. Martin Luther King used the phrase in his famous “I Have A Dream” speech in 1963. However, the term’s origin dates back to the early 1800s. *Gens de couleur libres*, French for “free person of color,” was used to describe a population of free citizens who constituted a segment of the New Orleans population. Largely of French and Caribbean origin, these persons of color were afforded a status and privilege that was foreign to the scores of enslaved African-Americans.

Some of its noteworthy citizens included Louis Charles Roudanez, a physician, civic leader, and owner of Creole newspapers *L'Union* and *La Tribune de la Nouvelle Orleans*. Henriette Delille founded the Sisters of the Holy family, the second oldest Catholic religious order for women of color.

As our society becomes more diverse, “people of color” appears to be a more inclusive term. “It strikes me, then, that ‘people of color’ is a phrase often used by non-whites to put non-white positively. Politically, it expresses solidarity with other non-whites, and subtly reminds whites that they are a minority,” says William Safire, a Pulitzer-prize winning columnist and former speechwriter for President Richard Nixon. ■

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