

Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. Back then, black unemployment was 10.8 percent. Now it is 14 percent nationwide and runs much higher in the inner cities. Overall, the national poverty rate increased from 12.8 percent to 14.4 percent during that same period, with more than one-third of black Americans living below the poverty line. One in every four black children lives in inadequate housing.

King, who won the 1964 Nobel Peace Prize, spoke bluntly about racism: In indicting white America for its ingrained and tenacious racism, I am using the term “white” to describe the majority, not all who are white. We have found that there are many white people who clearly perceive the justice of the Negro struggle for human dignity.... Yet the largest part of white America is still poisoned by racism, which is as native to our soil as pine trees, sagebrush and buffalo grass.

That view was more recently echoed by King’s daughter, Bernice King, who addressed a Bahá’í Youth Conference in June at Alabama A&M University in Huntsville. In her speech on civil rights today, Miss King said, “If we are to eradicate the evils of racism and cure its cancerous effects, then it is time we stop our lip service to the guarantee of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” Racism, she said, is “an eternal moral issue that may well determine the destiny of the nation.” The 23-year-old theology and law graduate student told the Bahá’í youth that a good education is not a guarantee of a prosperous life for a student who is black. She urged them to be “maladjusted” to such social norms as racism “disguising itself behind the big ‘S’ of sophistication [which] has attacked our capacity to love, has temporarily destroyed our quest for peace and continues to diminish our spiritual efforts.”

One of the best ways white Bahá’ís have of showing their dedication to eliminating racism is by following the concept of encouraging minorities as outlined in the writings. A careful reading of those writings reveals that they do not advocate equal treatment for all, but urge special consideration for minorities. As Shoghi Effendi wrote in *The Advent of Divine Justice* (pp. 29-30), “If any discrimination is at all to be tolerated, it should be a discrimination not against, but rather in favor of the minority, be it racial or otherwise.” Along that same line, the Guardian made it the “inescapable obligation” of the Bahá’ís to “nurture, encourage and safeguard every minority belonging to any faith, race, class or nation.”

Why is it so important for blacks to receive preferential treatment? Charles Silberman, writing in *Crisis in Black and White*, states what

...white prejudice and discrimination have done to the Negro’s personality and self-esteem...[is to] treat people as inferiors and they begin to believe that. White men began three and a half centuries ago to treat black men as inferiors and they haven’t stopped yet....If whites were to stop all discriminatory practices tomorrow, this alone would not solve “the Negro problem.”...Too many Negroes are unable or unwilling to compete; segregation

is an affliction, but for many it is a crutch as well....The Negro will be able to compete on equal terms when he has been able to purge from his mind all sense of white superiority and black inferiority....Nothing less than a radical reconstruction of American society is required if the Negro is able to take his rightful place in American life.

Eliminating prejudice and forming bonds of brotherhood are concepts with which the whites are comfortable, and they are working to bring their own lives into conformity with these principles. But the concept of encouraging, of giving special treatment to a particular group runs against the grain. That shouldn't be surprising when one considers that this concept is at odds with so much in American ideology. It is inimical to the one-man, one-vote political ideal; contrary to the up-by-your-own-bootstraps creed of capitalism; incongruent with the to-each-his-own icon of individualism; and far afield from the may-the-best-man-win whoop of the frontier spirit. Yet it is just this preferential policy that lives in the heart of the Bahá'í writings. The writings do not advocate equal treatment for all, as many in the white community would prefer, but require special consideration for minorities.

The Guardian wrote, "So great and vital is this principle [of minority encouragement] that...where the qualifications for any office are balanced as between the various races, faiths or nationalities within the community, priority should unhesitatingly be accorded to the party representing the minority, and this for no other reason except to stimulate and encourage it..."

The question is how to transform dream to reality. Mary K. Radpour, a licensed clinical social worker, family and marriage counselor, and a member of the Bahá'í Race Unity Committee for the last several years, said the first step is consultation with an attitude of mutual respect. "Those involved in the consultative process should have the attitude, 'We are peers and we want to create something that is better than what we have,'" she said. "The white participants should want to encourage minorities, not out of a sense of power or superiority but out of a feeling that community life is incomplete without their ethnic offering. The encouragement of minorities should come out of a wish by us in the white community to help ourselves."

The consultative process gives blacks the opportunity and responsibility to speak frankly about their needs and hopes. This would end the cycle of acceptance of unsolicited help which perpetuates a sense of helplessness on the part of blacks and fosters a sense of superiority among whites. "This consultative process avoids hurt feelings and misunderstandings on both sides," Radpour said. The principle of consultation in which opinions are expressed with the goal of reaching the best results for all should allow for a non-threatening, dignified, loving yet forthright exchange of equally valued viewpoints.

This can be done in the local community where a few blacks and whites consult, the whites being careful not to carry with them any of the accoutrements of a

fast-crumbling old world order such as superiority, a patronizing attitude, aloofness, and the blacks being careful to leave behind the shackles of suspicion. Perhaps some of the following suggestions for encouragement may be food for thought during these consultative sessions. When Coretta Scott King, Dr. King's widow, had a forum to sum up where the civil rights movement has been and what people can do to carry the dream of her husband forward, she recommended to the predominantly black readership of Ebony magazine to "buy black." "As Atlanta Mayor Andrew Young says, 'The struggle of the 80s is to integrate the money.' Yet, black spending power in America is still greater than the gross national product of Saudi Arabia. If, as black Americans, we invest more in ourselves, we will soon see a dramatic improvement in our economic statistics. Whenever possible, we should support black enterprise," wrote Mrs. King.

That approach means some readjustment among blacks. One black woman who opened a dress shop in northern Alabama after running a successful business in New Orleans moved back to Louisiana after one year. She complained that blacks would not shop at her store because they thought the white-owned stores were superior. If whites and blacks in the Bahá'í community begin supporting black enterprise with their dollars, the result not only would be financial gains for the employer and the employees but it would help to muffle the chant of a black folk — saying, "If you're white, you're right; if you're brown, stick around; if you're black, stay back." Both races within the Bahá'í community can make a special effort to give their business to black dentists, doctors, veterinarians, lawyers, accountants, babysitters, mechanics, morticians, bank tellers, and so on. Special efforts can also be made by whites to integrate blacks into those social settings where key acquaintanceships are often made: over lunch, at the golf course, weight room, night spot, social club, informal gatherings at homes, etc. Bahá'í employers may practice their own personal affirmative action programs in deliberately seeking blacks to hire and helping them move up the promotion ladder. In the future, Bahá'ís may join or form their own corporations to establish their own credit unions, small business bureaus, etc., to assist minorities.

Certainly the Negro child has to be taught not to hate himself; everything in his environment conspires to destroy any sense of his own worth. By first grade, if not sooner, Negro children feel negative about themselves....The Negro's self-esteem suffers not only from the hurts of discrimination but also from his sense of powerlessness and impotence, his conviction that whites control everything — control everything, moreover, in a manner calculated to keep him in his place.

King was a strong advocate of affirmative action to bring blacks up to an equal footing with whites. He wrote,

No amount of gold could provide an adequate compensation for the exploitation and humiliation of the Negro in America down through the centuries. Yet, a price can be placed on unpaid wages. The ancient common law has always provided a remedy for the appropriation of the labor of one human being by another. This

law should be made to apply for American Negroes. The payment should be in the form of a massive program by the government of special, compensatory measures which could be regarded as a settlement in accordance with the accepted practice of common law.

The concept of encouragement of minorities has been a missing link that has kept American society, steeped religiously and politically in the doctrines of brotherhood, equality, and justice, from realizing its true destiny. The application of this simple principle not only will end the pernicious effects of racial prejudice but will cement the bonds of brotherhood, thereby raising the economic and social status of blacks and heal the divided psyche of this nation.

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