

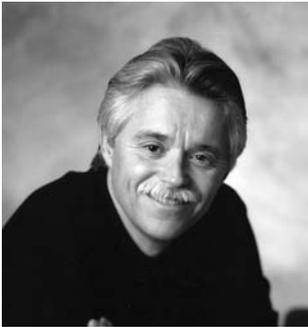


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White Americans in a Multicultural Society: Re-thinking Our Role

By Gary R. Howard



Sometime during the first half of the twenty first century, a profound transition will take place in the United States: white Americans will lose their status as the numerical majority. In a nation where the term “minority” has traditionally meant people of color, this new reality will require a significant rearranging of our psychic maps, particularly for white Americans.

How does an historically dominant ethnic group adjust to a more modest and balanced role? How do white Americans learn to be positive participants in a richly pluralistic nation? These questions have always been a part of the multicultural agenda: now they are coming more clearly into focus. Most of our work in race relations and workforce diversity in the United States has emphasized the particular cultural experiences and perspectives of black, Asian, Hispanic and American Indian groups. These, after all, are the people who have been marginalized by the weight of European American dominance. With the shifting tide of population in the United States, however, there is now a need to take a closer look at the unique and changing role of white Americans.

Part of this need is generated by the growing evidence that the transition out of their dominant position may not be a comfortable one. As our population becomes more diverse, we have seen an alarming increase in acts of overt racism, and the number and size of hate groups in the United States is actually on the rise.

Of equal or perhaps greater concern has been the prolific outpouring of anti multicultural sentiment from some of the *most* educated and accomplished members of white academic circles, who tread frighteningly close to providing an ivory tower rationale for the hate group activity of their less erudite counterparts on the streets. In addition, many white politicians fan the flames of racial fear and hatred to lure various constituencies into their camps. Too many segments of our white American population remain committed to their

position of dominance, willing to defend it and legitimize it even in the face of overwhelming evidence that our world is rapidly changing.

Taken as a whole, these realities strongly suggest that a peaceful transition to a new kind of America, where no ethnic or cultural group is in a dominant position, will require considerable educational change and deep psychological shift for many white Americans. Attempting to effect these changes is part of the challenge that leads us to a central question: What must take place in the minds and hearts of white Americans to convince us that now is the time to begin the journey from dominance to diversity?

It is critical that we white Americans come to terms with our reality and our role. What does it mean for white people to be responsible and aware in a nation where we have been the dominant cultural and political force? What can be our unique contribution, and what are the issues we need to face? How do we help create a nation where all cultures are honored with dignity and the right to thrive and express their full potential? I explore these questions here from the perspective of a white American.

American immigrants

European Americans share at least one commonality: We all came from somewhere else. In my own family, we loosely trace our roots to England, Holland, France and perhaps Scotland. However, with five generations separating us from our various “homelands,” we have derived little meaning from these tenuous connections to ancestral cultures. This is true for many white Americans, who are often repulsed by the appellation “European American.” They simply prefer to be called American and forget the past.

On the other hand, many white Americans have maintained direct and strong ties with their European roots. In the Seattle area, there is an Ethnic Heritage Council comprised of 103 distinct cultural groups, most of them European. These people continue to refer to themselves as Irish American, Croatian American, Italian American, or Russian American—terminology which acknowledges the two sides of their identity.

European Americans are a diverse people. We vary broadly across cultures of origin, and we continue to be diverse in religion, politics, economic status and lifestyle. We also vary greatly in the degree to which we value the melting pot notion. Many of us are ignorant of our ethnic history precisely because our ancestors worked so hard to dismantle their European identity in favor of what they perceived to be the American ideal.

The farther our immigrant ancestors’ cultural identities diverged from the white Anglo Saxon Protestant image of the “real” American, the greater was the pressure for assimilation. Jews, Catholics, Eastern Europeans, Southern Europeans, and minority religious sects all felt the intense heat of the melting pot. From the moment they arrived on American soil, they received a strong message: forget the home language, make sure your children don’t learn to speak it, and change your name to sound more American.

In dealing with the history and culture of European Americans, it is important to acknowledge the pain, suffering and loss often associated with their immigrant

experiences. For many, it was a difficult struggle to carve out a niche in the American political and economic landscape while preserving some sense of their own ethnic identity. Some white American workers resist the diversity movement today precisely because they feel their own history of suffering from prejudice and discrimination has not been adequately addressed.

Family realities

Like many white Americans, I trace my roots in this country back to the land, the Minnesota farm my mother's great-grandparents began working in the 1880's. My uncles and aunts still farm this land, and I spent many summers with them. On this land and with these people I have known my roots—my cultural heritage—much more deeply than in any connection with things European.

I have a close friend and colleague whose traditional Ojibwa tribal lands once encompassed the area now occupied by my family's farm. This farm, which is the core experience of my cultural rootedness in America, is a symbol of defeat, loss and domination for her people. How do I live with this knowledge that my family's survival and eventual success have been built upon the removal and near extermination of an entire race of people? In this reality is embodied much of the irony of the white American experience.

Some of my relatives hold narrow and prejudicial attitudes about cultural differences. The racist jokes they tell at family gatherings and the ethnic slurs that are part of their daily chatter have been an integral part of my cultural conditioning. It was not until my college years, when I was immersed in a rich multicultural living situation, that these barriers began to break down for me. Most of my relatives have not had that opportunity. They do not understand my work in diversity and multicultural education. The racist jokes diminish in my presence, but the attitudes remain. Yet, I love these people. They are my link with tradition and the past, even though many of their beliefs are diametrically opposed to my own. My family is not atypical. For most white Americans, racism and prejudice are not theoretical constructs; they are members of the family.

When we open ourselves to the historical perspectives and cultural experiences of other races in America, much of what we discover is incompatible with our image of a free and democratic nation. Our collective security and position of economic and political dominance have been fueled, in large measure, by exploitation of other people. The cultural genocide perpetrated against American Indians, the enslavement of African peoples, the exploitation and discrimination against Mexicans and Asians as sources of cheap labor—on such acts of inhumanity rests much of the success of the European enterprise in America.

The luxury of ignorance

In the face of our past and present, many white Americans simply choose to remain unaware, a luxury uniquely available to members of any dominant group. If you are black, Indian, Hispanic or Asian in the United States, daily survival depends on knowledge of white America. You need to know the realities that confront you in the

workplace, in dealing with government agencies, in relation to official authorities like the police. To be successful in mainstream institutions, people of color in the U.S. need to be bicultural, able to function in two worlds, able to play the game according to the rules established by the dominant culture. For most white Americans, on the other hand, there is only one game, and they have traditionally been on the winning team.

The privilege that comes with being a member of the dominant group, however, is invisible to most white Americans. Social research has repeatedly demonstrated that if an African American friend and I walk into the same bank on the same day and apply for a loan with the same officer, I will be more likely to receive my money—and with less hassle, less scrutiny and less delay.

Likewise, if I am turned down for a house purchase, I don't have to wonder whether it was because of the color of my skin. And if I am offered a new job or promotion, I don't worry that my fellow workers may feel I'm there not because of my qualifications but merely to fill an affirmative action quota.

Such privileged treatment is so much a part of the fabric of our daily existence that it functions outside the conscious awareness of most white Americans. From the luxury of ignorance are born the Simi Valley neighborhoods of our nation, which remain painfully out of touch with the actual experiences and sensibilities of multicultural America.

Emotions that kill

At some level, however, we are aware of our past and the fact that our prejudicial attitudes are out of synch with our belief in equality and justice. This is the basis for the cognitive dissonance we experience. When we are asked to participate in programs confronting these attitudes, we resist. We wrap our uncertainties in protective layers of denial, hostility, fear and guilt.

Denial. The most prevalent strategy that white Americans employ to deal with the grim realities of our history is denial. “The past didn't happen. All the talk about workplace diversity and different cultural perspectives is merely ethnic cheerleading. My people made it and so can yours. It's an even playing field and everybody has the same opportunities, so let's get on with the game and quit complaining. We've heard enough of your 'victim's history'.”

Hostility. Another response is hostility. The Aryan Nations organizing in Idaho, the murder of a black man by skinheads in Portland, Oregon, the killing of a Jewish talk show host by neo-Nazis in Denver, cross burnings and Klan marches in Dubuque, and the increase of racist slurs and incidents on college campuses all point to a revival of hate crimes and overt racism in the U.S. We can conjecture why this is occurring now: the economic downturn, fear of job competition, the roll-back on civil rights initiatives by recent administrations, or increasing diversity that is seen as a threat by some whites. Whatever the reason, hostility about racial and cultural differences has always been a part of American life, and was only once again brought into bold relief by the first Rodney King decision and its violent aftermath in Los Angeles.

Fear. Underlying both the denial and the hostility is a deep fear of diversity. This is obvious in the violence and activism of white supremacist groups. Because of their own personal and economic insecurity, they seek to destroy that which is not like them.

The same fear is dressed in more sophisticated fashion by many of those who continually resist attempts to bring multicultural awareness and equity to the workplace. The uncertainties of the current business climate, from the shop floor to the board room, exacerbate underlying feelings of resentment of the new workers. People who have faced competition only from others “like them” now must compete with people they neither understand nor respect. So they attempt to characterize diversity work as “political correctness” and claim “favoritism” and “reverse racism” when a new worker receives a promotion or a position.

They try to defend a cultural turf which was never really theirs. The United States was never a white European Christian nation, and this fact is becoming more evident in our places of work every day.

Denial, hostility and fear are literally emotions that kill. Our country—indeed, the world—has suffered endless violence and bloodshed over issues of racial, cultural and religious differences. And the killing is not only physical but emotional and psychological as well. These negative responses to diversity threaten to destroy the precious foundation of our national unity, which is a commitment to equality, freedom and justice for all people.

Ironically, these negative responses to diversity are destructive not only for those who are the targets of hate but also for the perpetrators. Racism is ultimately a self-destructive and counter-evolutionary strategy. The positive adaptation to change requires a rich pool of diversity and potential in the population. In denying access to the full range of human variety and possibility, racism drains the essential vitality from everyone, victimizing our businesses, our communities and our entire society.

Guilt. Another emotion that kills is guilt, a major hurdle for well-intentioned white Americans. As we become aware of the heavy weight of oppression and racism that continues to pull our nation apart, it is natural for many of us to feel a collective sense of complicity, shame or guilt. On the rational level, we can say we didn’t contribute to the pain; we weren’t there. Yet on the emotional level there is a sense that we *were* involved, somehow. Through our membership in the dominant culture we remain connected to that painful history, continuing to reap the benefits of past oppression.

There can be a positive side to guilt, of course. It can be a spur to action, a motivation to contribute, a kick in the collective conscience. But ultimately, guilt, too, drains the life blood of our people. If we are finally to become one nation of many cultures, then we need to find a path out of the debilitating cycle of blame and guilt that has occupied so much of our national attention.

Responses that heal

It is possible to move on. We have the opportunity to overcome the dissonance that characterizes our national consciousness and create a new kind of national unity. It is still possible to redefine the meaning of “America” by helping people learn how to bridge the chasms of ethnic, racial and gender differences and create new ways of honoring ourselves and one another. Moving on in this way for white Americans requires honesty, humility, respect and co-responsibility.

Honesty. Facing reality is the beginning of liberation. As white Americans, we can face with honesty the fact that we benefit from racism. We must support historical research providing a more inclusive and multidimensional view of our nation’s past—even when that view confronts us with the woeful immoralities of our forebears. American business needs to be visible in its support of the work of scholars and educators who are searching for the literature, the experiences, the contributions and the historical perspectives that have been ignored in our Eurocentric schooling. The children of today who are to be our workforce of the future must be prepared to recognize the worth and validity of one another’s traditions.

Humility. The future belongs to those who are able to work with and walk beside people of many different perspectives, cultures and lifestyles. A healthy dose of humility can help white Americans overcome the Eurocentric limitations of our past. Part of the unfortunate legacy of our European dominance is the lingering assumption that this perspective is better than others. But where diversity is a bottom-line issue, corporate leaders are recognizing that this single-perspective thinking prevents employees from dealing effectively with change.

Respect. One of the greatest contributions white Americans can make to cultural understanding is simply to learn the power of respect. In the Spanish language, the term *respeto* has a connotation going far beyond mere tolerance or even acceptance. *Respeto* acknowledges the full humanness of other people, their right to be who they are, and their right to be well-treated. When white Americans learn to approach people of different cultures with this kind of deep respect, it enables us to see ourselves more clearly as well. Understanding the strengths and weaknesses of others, we have a measure of our own—and we can build on our mutual strengths to create more productive, stronger organizations as well as a safer and saner society.

One of the greatest contributions white Americans can make to cultural understanding is simply to learn the power of respect.... No one group alone can solve the problems we face. We have become embroiled in these issues together over the 500 years of our history, and if we are to survive and thrive as a nation, we will have to solve them together.

Co-responsibility. The race issue for white Americans is ultimately a question of action: What are we going to do? It is not a black problem or an Indian problem or an Asian problem or a Hispanic problem—or even a white problem.

The reality of cultural diversity in the U.S. is an inclusive human issue, a struggle and an opportunity we are all in together. No one group alone can solve the problems we face. We have become embroiled in these issues together over the 500 years of our history, and if we are to survive and thrive as a nation we have to solve them together.

The Search for Authentic Identity

When white people become aware of the realities of our history, it sometimes becomes difficult for us to feel good about ourselves. Where do we turn to find positive images?

In the 1960's and 1970's, while blacks, American Indians, Hispanics and Asians were experiencing an explosion of racial and cultural awareness and energy, what were white youth doing? There was a revolution happening with them as well—a revolution of rejection. While the civil rights movement, the anti-war movement, and the women's liberation movement were bringing to public attention the fundamental flaws of white male dominant culture, the youth of white America, were searching for an alternative identity.

White America was at war with itself. The children of affluence and privilege, the very ones who had benefited most from membership in the dominant culture, were attacking the foundation of their own privilege. In creating a new counter-culture of rebellion and hope, they borrowed heavily from black, Indian, Hispanic and Asian traditions. Their clothing, ornamentation, hairstyles, spiritual explorations, jargon, values and music became an eclectic composite culture—a symbolic identification with the oppressed. In their rejection of the dominant culture, they sought to become like those whom the dominant culture had historically rejected.

When the truth of our collective history is brought home to us, we turn to other traditions for a new place to be.

But there is another alternative for a legitimate white identity. It is not necessary for us to look for culture in other peoples' traditions, because we can find a rich source of identity in our own. This became dear to me when during a study tour in 1990-91, I was immersed in rich experiences with Navajo, Hopi, Maori, Aboriginal, Balinese and Nepalese people. I gained much from exposure to these cultures, but the most powerful personal experiences came in the place I least expected them—my own ancestral Europe.

In a prehistoric cave in the Basque country of northern Spain, I discovered twenty-one handprints created by ancient Europeans that were in the exact style of prints in the caves of the Anasazi and the Australian Aboriginal peoples. In this experience I recognized that I had not only found a connection to my own people's ancient culture, but a connection to the universality of all human experience, as well.

It is time for a redefinition of white America. As our percentage of the population declines, our commitment to the future must change. It is neither possible nor desirable to continue to be in positions of dominance.

In touring ancient sacred sites in England and Scotland, this sense of rootedness and connection was deepened. The culture of my Celtic ancestors had been overwhelmed by the two-fold aggression of the Roman Catholic Church and by the Roman imperial army—thus much of their history is lost to us today. Stone circles, such as Stonehenge, testify to the power of that cultural history and its sacred connection to both earth and sky.

My experience in Europe taught me that white Americans do not need to look to other cultures for our own senses of identity. The history of oppression and expansionism perpetrated by European nations is only part of our past reality, but not our only heritage as white Americans. We have a rich and diverse history, just waiting to be discovered. And when we push back far enough in our cultural history we come to a place of common connection, where people of all races are brothers and sisters on the same planet.

In this recognition, both out of uniqueness as European Americans and our universality as human beings, we can begin to make an authentic contribution to the healing of our nation.

Who are my people?

It is time for a redefinition of white America. As our percentage of the population declines, our commitment to the future must change. It is neither possible nor desirable to continue to be in positions of dominance. We need not continue to identify only with that strand of our history which is a legacy of oppression. White Americans can be full participants in the building of a multicultural nation.

In the America of the twenty-first century, white Americans will still have a major role to play in the leadership of our businesses. Rather than continuing to be isolated in our role of dominance, we now have an exciting opportunity to join with Americans of all cultures in creating a nation that actually embodies its own ideals. At the deepest level, we are all one people—and this could be our vision.

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Gary R. Howard

Diversity Training and Consultation

Gary R. Howard has 30 years of experience in diversity leadership and training, including 25 years as the Founder and President of the REACH Center for Multicultural Education. Mr. Howard completed his undergraduate and graduate work in Cultural Anthropology and Social Psychology at Yale University. He holds a Masters Degree in Education. He has served as an Adjunct Professor at both Western Washington University and Seattle University.

Mr. Howard has provided extensive training in cultural awareness to schools, universities, social service agencies, and businesses throughout the United States, Canada and Australia. Mr. Howard is the author of numerous articles on multicultural issues and diversity training and has developed collections of curriculum materials which are being used internationally. His most recent book, **We Can't Teach What We Don't Know**, was published by Columbia University in 1999 and is considered a groundbreaking work examining issues of privilege, power, and the role of White leaders and educators in a multicultural society.

In addition to providing leadership for the REACH Center and diversity workshops for a wide variety of organizations, Mr. Howard is frequently asked to deliver keynote addresses at regional and national conferences. In these presentations he draws on a wide range of experiences and travel exploring diversity issues with leaders from many cultures around the world. Mr. Howard's speeches employ rich imagery and stories drawn from his annual white water diversity workshops on the Colorado River in the Grand Canyon.

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