

An Open Letter to Brothers and Sisters of Color
By
Derald Wing Sue

Dear Brothers and Sisters of Color:

I write to you and to those white folks who have marched with us against racism and shown that their hearts are in the right place. Throughout our people's histories, we have had to contend with invalidation, oppression, injustice, terrorism and genocide. Racism is a constant reality in our lives. It is a toxic force that has sought to

- strip us of our identities,
- take away our dignity,
- make us second-class citizens,
- destroy our peoples, cultures, and communities,
- steal our land and property,
- torture, rape and murder us,
- imprison us on reservations, concentration camps, inferior schools, segregated neighborhoods and jails,
- use us as guinea pigs in medical experiments, and
- blame our victimization upon the faults of our own people.

Attempts to express these thoughts have generally been met with disbelief and/or incredulity by many of our well-intentioned White brothers and sisters. We have been asked, "Aren't you distorting the truth? Where is your proof? Where is your evidence?"

When we attempt to provide it, we are interrogated about its legitimacy, told that we are biased or paranoid, and accused of being dishonest in how we present the facts. After all, they say, "Our nation is built upon life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. It was founded upon the principles of freedom, democracy, and equality." Yet, these guiding principles seem intended for Whites only. In the classic book, *Animal Farm*, when the issue of inequality arose, the character in a position of power justified the treatment by stating, "Some are more equal than others."

Rather than offer enlightenment and freedom, education and healing, and rather than allowing for equal access and opportunity, historical and current practices in our nation have restricted, stereotyped, damaged and oppressed persons of color.

For too long people of color have not had the opportunity or power to express their points of view. For too long, our voices have not been heard. For too long our worldviews have been diminished, negated, or considered invalid. For too long we have been told that our perceptions are incorrect, that most things are well with our society, and that our concerns and complaints are not supported. For too long we have had to justify our existence, and to fight for our dignity and humanity. No wonder that we are so tired, impatient, and angry. Yet, as people of color, we cannot let fatigue turn into hopelessness, nor anger into bitterness. Hopelessness is the forerunner to surrender, and bitterness leads to blind hatred. Either could spell our downfall!

It is important for us to realize that despite these indignities, we have persevered and become stronger. We have survived through our collective strength. We have survived through our heightened perceptual wisdom. We have survived through our ability to read the contextualized meanings of our oppressors. We have survived through our bicultural flexibility. We have survived through our families and communities. We have survived through our spirituality and our religion. We have survived through our racial/ethnic identity and pride. We have survived through our belief in the interconnectedness of the human condition.

Unlike many of our White brothers and sisters who are untested, we have demonstrated superhuman resiliency in the face of adversity. Our perseverance in battling the forces of racism comes (a) from understanding the strengths and assets developed by our ancestors as they fought oppression and (b) from our cultural values, mores and traditions.

As persons of color, we have been subjected to inhuman stressors in our lives: (a) poverty, high unemployment rates and lower standards of living; (b) conflicting value systems imposed by a White EuroAmerican society; (c) a history of broad governmental actions that have led to the enslavement of Black Americans, the internment of Japanese Americans, and the colonization of Native Americans; and (d) constant microinvalidations and microaggressions that strike at the core of our group identities.

In light of the historical and continuing experiences of oppression, even I marvel at our ability to continue our lives in such a normative fashion. It seems that White America exhibits minimal appreciation for the incredible strength and resiliency that we have shown in surviving and sometimes flourishing in the face of racism. Our experiences of oppression have required us to sharpen and hone our survival skills to such a degree that they now represent assets. We have learned this through the courageous and undefeatable actions of our ancestors who showed us the way. It is ironic that overcoming adversity has led us to develop an ability to understand the minds of our oppressors with astounding clarity.

So, when we begin to become tired and discouraged, when hopelessness seems just around the corner, and when we wonder what good our actions are doing, we need to remind ourselves of the strengths and assets we possess; many of them taught to us by our ancestors. We need to take pride in the fact that our heightened perceptual wisdom, ability to rely on nonverbal and contextual meanings, and bicultural flexibility has proven keys to our survival. We need to listen to the words and wisdom of Maya Angelou from her poem, *Still I Rise*:

*You may write me down in history
With your bitter, twisted lies,
You may tread me in the very dirt,
But still, like dust, I'll rise.*

*You may shoot me with your words,
You may cut me with your eyes,
You may kill me with your hatefulness,
But still, like air, I'll rise.*

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