

Cultural Insights for Redemption of America's Soul
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As National Black History Month 2022 ends, and Women's History Month begins amid an unrelenting systemic racism pandemic and the threat to democracy is at an all-time high, important instruction on redeeming the soul of America is warranted. Many may be unaware of and/or resistant to these lessons because they come from the Black cultural frame of reference, a history some want silenced. The degree of current disenfranchisement and inhumanity targeting Black people in this nation continues to be made evident in educational and economic inequities, health disparities, and other unaddressed suppressions. The series of murders and general maltreatment perpetrated by some police officers paid to serve and protect and White supremacist vigilantes is ongoing. Many politicians are once again openly committed to taking away voting and other rights for which some have fought so hard to achieve. The nation is moving toward a reckoning, and this is a call for all those who want to be on the right side of history delivered from a Black cultural perspective we must begin to understand and seriously consider in seeking to bring democracy in America back from the precipice of destruction.

Although not sustained, the jarring of America's conscience by the ruthless murder of George Floyd did demonstrate the outrage of many with widespread protests and demands for justice. However, socially sanctioned injustice and systems of dehumanization in this country date back over 400 years. So being, that is how Black people, who were kidnapped, enslaved as caste chattel, and trafficked to the Americas to build the wealth of their captors and Western nations, got to be collectively labeled less than human and their captors' models of humanity. What kind of mindset upholds this egregious contradiction and how does it show up in current divisions and threats to democracy today? It turns out the nation's foundational designs for living and patterns of interpreting reality are the causal roots of systemic racism and the cultural parameters that jeopardize redemption of the soul of America. Here is a bit about how and what we can do about it based upon my 40 years as a university psychology professor researching, writing, and teaching on the topic.

Without a stable, culturally grounded moral framework for determining the difference between right and wrong, the soul of America has always been in jeopardy. In its absence America's birth defect was spawned nurturing the creation of systemic racism. Racism, defined by the Center for Disease Control as an unjust system of assigning value and allocating opportunity based on skin color that unfairly privileges Whites and unjustly disenfranchises Blacks, is the deplorable outcome of moral insufficiency. The below par ethical standards adopted at the birth of the nation set the stage for socially sanctioned untruths, injustice, exploitation, manipulation, corruption, and inhumanity in the name of acquiring increased material wealth at any cost, similar to what is seen today.

This lapse in moral reasoning and development characteristic of this prevailing suboptimal cultural worldview fostered little regard for health, the collective, ecology, nor sustainable well-being on any level. It also inculcated sexism, classism, elitism, and other societal isms into the fabric of America. Resultant social policies, practices, and institutions from formal education, responsible for instilling societal values in the citizenry, to the economic, legal, political, and religious systems, served to support inevitable deterioration. Consequently, the American appetite for vanished truth, absent critical thinking, restricted reasoning, selfish/self-interested greed, and diminished spiritual acumen became increasingly large and quite apparent. Readily witnessed in the insurrection of January 6, 2021, inspired by the former President to stop the electoral process and remain in office, the current state of affairs has hope for American democracy's future at total risk. It will be only those committed to truth, justice,

moral integrity, and humane decency who take a hard stand that will save the possibility for this nation to become the democracy hoped for and was once seen to be as a global leader.

A shift in consciousness toward holistic, integrative, moral elevation and illumination of the soul is required. Here turning to the evidence provided by history showing that Black people have been the moral and spiritual leaders of this nation's movement toward civil rights, democracy, and justice for all will be most helpful. Careful investigation reveals the deep structure of the African cultural worldview Black people brought with them and passed on held strong prior to the most concerted onslaught of cultural disruptions of the past several decades. Rather than strengthen these vital cultural roots inappropriate and failed social policies and practices of community disruption and denigration were imposed. Yet an optimal psychology has been identified which supported the cultural capacity of these Black people to navigate of two and a half centuries of historically unprecedented systems of dehumanization and another century and a half of the continued struggle for equal civil rights in the face of legalized domestic terrorism. My research documenting and developing the theory of optimal psychology provides tried and true substantiation of its power for perseverance and resilience in the face of tremendous hardship and struggle for justice. It also provides a model for generating the courage to do what Congressman John Lewis called creating good trouble, standing up for that which is true, just, and honorable.

Moving away from the fractured, exploitive, materialist cultural worldview that now prevails, there are four basic undertakings we can begin immediately to set ourselves and this nation back on course for soul revitalization. Needed first is a look into our own hearts and minds increasing knowledge of self around the assumptions and principles, or conceptual system, informing our own perceptions, thoughts, feelings, behavior, and experience. For direction regarding worldview correction, we can among other things truly follow the science in terms of what is known about the nature of reality itself from quantum physics and neuroscience now affirming the teachings of the wisdom tradition of African deep thought. Known to those who never lost sight of and pride in the deep thought traditions of their African cultural heritage, this wisdom has been maintained experientially, epigenetically, and through ancient sacred texts.

Characteristic of the unitary consciousness optimal psychology generates, the spiritual aspect of being is acknowledged as primary, proactive, and subjective in transcending disconnections and alienation from becoming one with supreme being in human experience. A materialistic, spiritually alienated orientation disrupts human connection to a vital spiritual anchor and essential moral compass. Optimal psychology speaks to these truths outside of the context of religious doctrines. Should we so choose we each can access our best selves, higher consciousness, eternal beingness which is one with creative life source. All of humanity originated in the continent we now call Africa according to the most current biogenetic, linguistic, anthropological, archaeological evidence. A truly comprehensive understanding of human evolution and development must be inclusive of this cultural knowledge for which we have evidence thrived for at least 6,000 years and spread globally.

A second necessity is truth telling. The claim we are a nation with freedom and justice for all can no longer only apply to an unjustly advantaged group inhering the human diversity markers of being White (racism), male (sexism), and materially benefitted (classism) to name a few most often favored. Learning to think critically and deeply no longer dissuaded by labels assigned by the media and others, focus should be on the substantive values and ethical standards for which people stand. All too often labels such as liberal, conservative, progressive, moderate, socialist, and so on are used to deceptively misguide listeners take stands on issues not in their own best interest. Shifting focus from being

politically correct to being morally correct is essential, a noble endeavor for enhancing authenticity and developing integrity.

Third, the capacity for advanced moral reasoning must be enhanced and developed. While wrong may be wrong, all wrongs are not the same in terms of degree of impact, intention, long term consequences, or commitment to restitution, repair, and restoration. Despite what Brene Brown might tell you, there is a difference between stealing an old lady's pocketbook and stealing her pension. While both acts are deplorable, in this society which criminal will likely be imprisoned versus rewarded with a bonus worth millions of dollars for which the tax-paying public will have to pay? While all may make regrettable decisions, false equivalence for moral infractions must be recognized and rejected. Those seeking to demonstrate commitment toward fulfillment of America's promise could make significant movement by taking a stand in support of meaningful reparations for the descendants of those caste chattel enslaved non-immigrant Africans upon whose backs the wealth of their captors, this nation, and that of the Western world was built.

A fourth understanding and appreciation that must be developed and pursued is that of civility and respectful regard. True diversity, equity, and inclusion going beyond the superficial difference of appearance requires acknowledgement and valuing of cultural frames of reference different than those that brought us to this point in human history. The assumptions and principles informing diverse thinking and backgrounds can enhance collective progress. A group of people who look different but think alike will yield little movement toward real cultural diversity, the only inclusion will be that of others perpetuating the status quo and inequity. Functional cultural diversity must go beyond the surface structures of culture, such as language, dress, diet, music, and so on, to the deep structures, those assumptions and principles shaping the conceptual system, worldview, ideology, values, and moral compass. Embracing hearts and minds that enhance justice versus just maintaining the status quo with window dressing is very wise and capable of leading us out of the current morass. Unity around beliefs, values, and behaviors that contribute to creating a just, sacred, and sustainable world will save the soul of America. Enough Americans choosing to stand for justice and not succumb to the oppression and intimidation of others and themselves can save the possibility of creating a true democracy.

By exposing, confronting, and rectifying the driving forces behind the toxic behaviors of a fragmented, fearful, insecure, violent mindset without moral grounding, freedom from all forms of oppression can be achieved. In his 1967 keynote address to the American Psychological Association Martin Luther King, Jr. shared the requirements for overcoming systemic racism which still ring true today. Stating liberation from ideological dependence on dominant White society is requisite, he noted its philosophy and morals are not holy or sacred but often degenerate and profane. Describing the inability to question and defy the fundamental precepts of the larger society as the worst aspect of the oppression of Black people, King foresaw and applauded the critical trend of Black thought returning to its roots. Now fifty-five years later a new yet ancient understanding of optimal psychology is affirmed, it encourages all who have internalized the destructive ideology of systemic racism to free themselves and future generations promoting the creation of a just, sacred, and sustainable world for all.

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Building a just, sacred, sustainable world