

In Search of a Basis for Mutual Understanding and Racial Harmony

James Baldwin

The subject is terrifying in its elusive—and authoritative—simplicity: one wishes, nearly, to be attempting to decipher it out of the scratches made on some ancient, forgotten stone slab. What an idea, one might then say. And then: I wonder what happened to the poor guy who 'scratched' this! One would take it for granted that he could not have had a very ordinary or a very happy life.

Mutual understanding and racial harmony: one will find almost no one willing to declare himself or herself against it. On the other hand, not one of the presidential candidates, in this bicentennial year, appears to find the subject obsessive. They have another set of priorities—so they themselves would put it. The possibility of understanding and harmony does not appear to take priority anywhere in the world, be it Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Greece, or Africa. Yet one senses that these dreadful struggles are very deeply motivated by this hope—by the hope, at last, of peace—the imponderable question being on what *basis* to achieve it.

Human harmony—or more accurately, social harmony—resides still in the area of the possible, remains for the most part a hope, and is a matter of the most painful speculation. Human conflict is as universal as air, and would seem to be as necessary. And very probably it is, if we wish to stare the question in the face. It may be important to suggest that there is a distinction between *human* conflict and *social* conflict: these feed on and resemble

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each other, but they are not the same thing. One may even say that the social conflict reveals the failure, or the poverty, brought about by the human conflict.

I do not think that we can hope, ever, to eliminate human conflict, nor do I believe that we should. I think we should learn to use and trust it. Conflict does not necessarily imply murder or hatred or even hostility. Human conflict can be mightily productive—for example, the conflict in the mind which produces the idea, or the conflict in the soul which leads to revelation. The conflict between parent and child, between generations, must be considered as indispensable to the evolving maturity of both. There can be no life without conflict; were this not so, we would never need love, and there is no love without conflict.

This is carrying me somewhat ahead of myself. Our grandiose title is "A Basis for Mutual Understanding and Racial Harmony." Well, this is what the Christian church, to use but one social example, has always described itself as offering. This was the "good news" proclaimed by the gospel. Alas, the church begins with the crucifixion and has been forging nails and hammering these into human flesh every hour on the hour since that day. The "good news" was good news only to those who accepted this good news on the basis dictated by the church. But this basis was not acceptable to everyone. Not everyone wished, nor was able, to be transformed from Saul into Paul. And this is made absolutely clear from the mail we are presently receiving from, for example, Johannesburg, Dakar, Beirut, Dublin, London, and Boston—to say nothing, of course, of Rome.

It would appear that the basis on which the church intended or presumed to establish human harmony proved to be unable to serve this particular human need. The basis on which the fellowship of Christians was offered to the black slave, and then to the American black, was and remains intolerable. The basis for human harmony cannot be established by denying or forbidding to the human being the right to *be*—which means the right to discover—who he or she is. This being said, it must be added—a crucial matter—that people's *right* to be themselves does not necessarily imply that they have any *desire* to be themselves: the

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self is a journey which many, perhaps most, are reluctant to make. But no one knows enough about this mystery. Certainly I do not. When I was young I, like many others, battled on the side of labor unions and would never have dreamed of crossing a picket line. The hunted labor organizer of that hour has evolved into a fat, racist, neofascist bureaucrat, and the grateful rank and file are defending their rights against all comers, especially the niggers, and slobbering into their television sets. This is not exactly the result which many of us had in mind. But this may be and indeed must be accepted, at least provisionally, as a vivid illustration of human desire. I would like to think that this phenomenon illustrates *frustrated* human desire, but I certainly cannot prove this, and in any case it is probably the height of tragic folly to suppose that one can imagine what another person wants. Just the same, it is very vivid to me that millions of people in this country now cling, in a kind of infantile hysteria, to things they know they do not need and which they do not really want. But they do not let go of these things. They do not know how, do not dare to assume their freedom; the very suspicion of freedom fills them with a mortal dread, which makes them mortally dangerous.

Ancient maps of the world stated that the then unknown and unimaginable void in which America was to be discovered was infernally dangerous territory: "Here," the map says, "be dragons." Everyone believed them then, of course, and besides, as we are now (reluctantly) discovering, they were perfectly right.

Here, indeed, be dragons: "We hold these truths to be self-evident—that all men are created equal, and are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights." Swing low, sweet chariot! Consider the Dred Scott decision, which stated that a black person had no rights which a white person was bound to respect. Reconsider the so highly overrated Emancipation Proclamation, in which Lincoln freed those slaves he could not reach in order, hopefully, to "destabilize" the Confederate government. Consider that the "freed" slaves not only never received the promised "forty acres and a mule," but were murdered whenever and wherever they attempted to claim anything as their

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own; consider that this country has never honored a single treaty made with the American Indian; consider how many people were slaughtered by the doctrine of Manifest Destiny.

Consider the reasoned testimony of Frederick Douglass concerning the basis for mutual understanding and racial harmony: "Slave-holders have made it almost impossible for the slave to commit any crime, known either to the laws of God or to the laws of man. If he steals, he takes his own; if he kills his master, he imitates only the heroes of the revolution." (Booker T. Washington did not agree with this at all. He believed, or said that he believed, that in all things pertaining to the common good we could be as one as the hand, and in all things social, as separate as the fingers: but a grateful Republic fastened on the word *separate*. This is almost exactly what happened in our own day with Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr., with the difference that in our day both men found themselves driven, by their common situation, closer and closer together, and also with the difference that whereas Frederick Douglass and Booker T. Washington both died natural deaths, Martin and Malcolm were assassinated.)

Consider that this tension, and Douglass's statement, are absolutely relevant today—in New York's garment center, for example. Douglass's book or its present day equivalent may be in the hip pocket of that boy over there, pushing the truck, and in Boston's Roxbury; in every ghetto, every city in this nation, every reservation within these continental limits and beyond; in every prison, every school; in the hearts of maids, porters, truckdrivers, taxidivers, singers, comedians, actors, dancers; and in the hearts of brothers (face the meaning of the history of George and Jonathan Jackson!) sisters, sweethearts, mothers and fathers, and small children. Consider, to paraphrase the late Langston Hughes, that this country has always treated black people as "second-class fools"—and then ask yourself on what basis we are likely to arrive at mutual understanding and racial harmony.

I have tried to suggest that human conflict is a necessity which need not debase, which can be ennobling: it is out of this tension

that we learn and grow. Everyone, for example, is born into a language: a *particular* language, there being no general ones. Languages are—or reveal—various ways of looking at the world. Language is the word made flesh, and reveals the root human necessity of ordering, or making coherent, the chaos of experience; language is a way of controlling the specific reality into which one is born.

Clearly, then, what is east for England cannot be east for China. Columbus, looking for a passage to India, discovered what is now called the West, and sometimes the Far West—or, depending on one's stars, the North. Well, we are certainly west of something; everybody is. We are also south, east, and north of something; everybody is. One is neither inferior nor superior to the compass: one knows that one must learn to read it, since all seas are rough. One is neither superior nor inferior to a language. One learns a language by exposing oneself to the assumptions of this language. These unspoken assumptions contain the key to the people who were born into this language, who live it, who form it every day and who are being formed by it every day; thus one begins to glimpse something of the way in which one is oneself endlessly forming and endlessly being formed.

There is no such thing as a "civilized" or an "uncivilized" language; the language is the civilization, or at the very least, reveals it. It may be an appalling civilization, from my point of view; but so is the civilization into which I was born, from another or from many other points of view—or indeed, from my own point of view, even though I was born into this particular civilization. There can exist no civilization which does not have its appalling, even barbaric aspects, but this does not mean that it is not a civilization any more than it means that the people who are creating it and who are being created by it are not people.

Some of the things I have seen in other countries appalled me. I am not accustomed to (physically) deformed children, one-eyed beggars, men amputated from the waist down, scavengers circling the city or the village streets. So I say; I am on far more

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dubious ground if I proclaim myself shocked by the sight of women as chattel, or when I imagine myself as being no longer accustomed to latrines. I, born a Christian, found myself offended by the sight and sound and smell of so much unregenerate flesh.

But this says far more about me than it says about the people I flattered myself as observing, and whom I failed to see. For the children of Sunset Boulevard are at least equally devastated, and I have encountered more than one blind and stinking beggar in the executive suites and mansions of my own country. They were, however dreadfully, my countrymen: I did not want to see what I saw. And they were not foreign. They were too familiar for me to take refuge in "observing" them. An observer is never touched or threatened, and can therefore produce volumes of authoritative detail concerning those others who, crucially, are not the observer. The details so authoritatively and painlessly amassed, as in political polls and public questionnaires, convey various reflexes (known as "facts") and have nothing whatever to do with the truth—the truth being contained in the point of view, and still more in the journey which creates the point of view. No matter, for example, how hostile or friendly the South Boston housewife or hardhat may be, neither she nor he can possibly convey the real reasons for their anguish and terror. The anguish and terror are real. They suppose, since they have no easy means of arriving at any other supposition, that they do not want their children to go to school with niggers, do not want their neighborhoods destroyed, do not want the government "interfering" in their lives. They were poor too, and never asked for anything, and anyone who really wants to can prosper in this country. These are "facts."

But the truth is that the point of view dictated by their unlearned history has precipitated these people into nothing less than paranoia. The truth is that the presence of the nigger has prevented them from realizing that they themselves are treated no better than niggers: if they had not forced themselves to forget the real reasons for their voyage, they might be better equipped to bear the promised land. The truth is that their

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neighborhoods are always being destroyed. The truth is that their government has deliberately placed them in their dreadful position, and manipulates every hour of every day they live. The truth is that the poor whites are absolutely indispensable for the maintenance of the status quo, and madly forge the chains which bind them, imagining that these chains are for blacks only. They, because they are white, can become anything at all—movie stars, labor leaders, president—and everything they see around them, God knows, would seem to prove it. They know that they are free, freedom being a matter of getting the other fellow before he gets you.

On what basis can this panic-stricken multitude conceive of mutual understanding and racial harmony?

Mutual understanding is possible only among people who accept that they have something in common, and when whatever they have in common does not menace them. Blacks and whites, in this country, and especially in the South, have a very great deal in common, but they can scarcely put this quantity to any affirmative use, since they are forced to approach it from such different points of view.

For example, both my father and Governor Wallace's father must have known something about cotton fields, but the fact that they held this knowledge in common did not create between them any possibility of mutual understanding. The cotton field had to represent to white people the possibility of freedom from toil, of power—however insanely occult this may sound—and their imaginations dared not allow them to assume for an instant that this same field of cotton could represent the same possibility for a black person. Objective reality, moreover—that is, the reality of white power—appeared to prove the white person right.

To find a basis for mutual understanding in such a context amounts to demanding the impossible; asking whites to relinquish their dream of safety, their grasp or their hope of power, is the same thing as demanding that they alter, indeed surrender, their identity.

And were the social context less forbidding, this might not be impossible. In terms of the human conflict, this alteration, sur-

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render, and re-creation of oneself keeps life and love and ourselves alive. This is how we re-create each other.

But the virulence of the social conflict has very nearly obliterated the possibilities of the human one, for we cannot reach each other. So long as whites cannot transcend the point of view bequeathed them by their history, blacks can approach them only, in essence, as beggars. Even this was possible, and relatively (and rigorously) fruitful, for a time. But that time is behind us. The white people of this country (to speak *only* of this country) consider that they have now given all that they can give. There is in this a dreadful and despairing accuracy: one has only to consider how little black people have been given, if indeed, upon examining the record, one can conclude that black people have been "given" anything at all.

But who truly can blame the maverick, the outcast, the convict, the immigrant, who became the white American, for moving on up the ladder? That is what a ladder is for. Who can be certain, given such options, that he or she would, or could, have acted differently? The suffering which drove these people to these shores was a real suffering; let us not pretend otherwise. And their suffering here was real; let us not pretend otherwise. For nothing is easier than falling into the human trap—and here, the specifically American one—of forgetting one's own suffering; with this lapse of memory the suffering of others has simply no reality. And the principal American motion is flight: the flight from misery, anonymity, pain, death. The survivor may feel a distant pain for the wretched, but rejoices that he or she is not among them. The poor are always with us, and one may feel obliged to lend the poor a helping hand—what a revealing phrase!—but on the whole it is easier, and finally becomes mandatory, to ignore them.

Perhaps the basis of mutual understanding and racial harmony awaits the day when the wretched become "we"—which means there will be no more wretched. History has not recorded such a day, but the human being records such a vision with tenacity. No person has ever lived to see his or her work finished, but that does not mean that the work was not done.

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The very phrase "mutual understanding and racial harmony" is produced by the history and the people responsible for this present devastation. This is not a sneer, but it is not an unfair observation, either. Mutual understanding and racial harmony were not among the British concerns, so long as their empire was intact and visible and their power unchallenged. They were merciless in India and in Palestine, for example, without giving a thought to mutual understanding; and racial harmony was not among their concerns when they sent gunboats down the Chinese river. Neither are the United States Marines famous for their powers of seduction or persuasion, and neither they nor the domestic American police force feel any very vivid need for mutual understanding and racial harmony. The Black Panthers Fred Hampton and Mark Clark (to name but two), who may really have had an interest in understanding and harmony, were simply murdered by the police in cold blood, as they lay in bed, and the police were protected by the American state in the name of the American people. One could multiply examples infinitely; presently, pleas for understanding and harmony will be coming out of South Africa. In short, to put it brutally, mutual understanding and racial harmony are summoned when white people feel in need of them, and not before.

This means that their plea cannot be heard.

It is important, I think, to state the case harshly: a mutual, self-serving courtesy has had its day. It is true that I do not hate white people—now. This is due to mysteries of temperament, luck, and my private history, and my sense that hatred is always, in the depths, self-hatred; I decided, somehow, not to destroy myself that way. But I certainly must have hated white people once, and if I did, no person alive can deny that I would have had profound and unanswerable reasons for that hatred. And this is what we must face, if we are ever to get beyond it: the history of white people includes their sustained attempt to murder me, and mine. By many millions this is all that is known about white people, and indeed, in order to learn anything more than this, one must get beyond the terrifying gate created by white misuse of power.

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Black people are human too, but are not intrinsically more noble than other human beings. If the crimes committed against black people were merely historical, located safely in the past, all might be forgotten. But history does not work that way; history is the present. It cannot be otherwise, since the human being is the vehicle of history. And in the present, therefore, the panic-stricken, blind intransigence on the part of white people will make yet bloodier the social conflict, and all but submerge the human one.

We cannot hope to establish a basis for mutual understanding and racial harmony as long as so many of the wretched of the earth are doomed to this condition by their color, or as long as so much of the world's riches is exploited by so few. Inexorably, then, we are living through the end of an era, and our children's children's lives will depend on the courage which we must summon now to face this mighty crisis of identity.