

Retrospective: In the Midst of a Racial Crisis

In the following retrospective, Ruth R. Middleman looks back upon an article she wrote in 1968 after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King. We have printed the article, following Ruth's reflections, as it originally appeared in Volume 16, Number 3 of the journal, Children (1969).

by
Ruth R. Middleman

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When she authored "In the Midst of a Racial Crisis" in 1968, Ruth was Associate Professor at Temple University, where she helped open its School of Social Administration, while continuing to teach at the School of Allied Medical Professions at the University of Pennsylvania.



Recently, I reread what I wrote of the experience I had almost thirty years ago, of my work with a group of high school students in the so-called "Motivation Program" (this experience has never really been out of my mind). I wanted to consider what was different now and what has remained constant essentially in these intervening years. I also wanted to think about where I am in relation to matters of race.

Always concerned with communication and its value in human interaction, I notice the subtleties of language, of nuance, of intended and unintended messages. As anthropologist Benjamin Whorf proposed, the very words one uses create and limit what one can think about. I am irritated by the word "motivation." Clearly it is a white person's creation. Maybe it attracted a Federal Grant. But its underlying message is that the students were unmotivated and needed this program to motivate them (actually they were serious and college bound). Better it should be called "Opportunity Program" or some such positive label. I would challenge this terminology now. Then, however, both I and the students seemed glad that there was this special program.

To further examine

words, I turn to "whitey." This really dates me. I wouldn't use this now. I don't think it is used at all. What would a white person call herself to accent one's difference these days? Probably "other" would do it. It would refer to a difference and not carry any baggage. What do I think blacks might call white people? Cracker? Honkey? White folk? It's hard to know. My main point is that whitey is out. Vocabulary is so complex. And the vocabulary of teenagers (black or white) has many private words, codes, and symbols, in continuous flux, that are part of their culture. These special words offer privacy, may keep adults out, and may protect them from control or too much intimacy. Many exchanges I simply did not understand in the meetings with that group, but my black co-leader interpreted some of it for me. Without him I would have been lost (or their spontaneity would have been curtailed if they needed to talk only in my language, as they do in school. And what about rap and hip-hop music? Its message is popular, but certainly not part of my world! So much for language.

Now, I am older. I have moved from Philadelphia to Louisville, Kentucky. I am a professor, and I teach others how to work with groups. This

doesn't necessarily mean that I would be better at such a task myself. But I am more seasoned with groups, less naïve, more confident, reflective, and wiser. I may not now have the physical energy that teenagers probably need in a worker. I would stay away from use of "Dr. Ruth" in my work with others and try to avoid all show of power—in words, actions, dress, and attitude toward what matters to them.

I live in the South now. Or is it the Midwest as some Kentuckians say? I am in a smaller, human-sized city whose culture and traditions strike me as tamer, perhaps kinder and less volatile than the Northeast I left. My hair is pretty gray now. This might work in a number of ways: shows wisdom, gains respect, conveys safety, shows distance, accents difference.

I am more sensitive to the big picture, to the politics of the nation and I am attuned to how that context sets the stage for us and affects attitudes and beliefs among races even before actual encounters or any words are spoken. Today's context includes the move to stop affirmative action, pressures to end welfare and "the social programs," hostility to notions of multiculturalism, sentiments for cutting back entitlements and reducing taxes, a love affair with guns despite their human toll, and a proliferation of crack cocaine in urban areas. All these forces affect blacks first. All of these breed greater separation among races, more hostility, more tension.

I remain committed to the values I held thirty years ago: A caring and concern for young people struggling to find their way in today's world. A belief that growing up black exacts a special burden in the culture of the United States. I can empathize easily with this plight. If anything, I am angrier today than I was in the past, angrier that relations between blacks and whites are worse these days despite the resources, programs, and other attempts to accelerate opportunities. In school, in the workplace, in social life the barriers remain. In popular parlance, the playing field is not level. Why, I wonder, do I feel more humble and iffy about how I would be with the teens at this stage of my life? Is it because I know more? Have less faith? Am more impatient? Or because the racial history since Dr. King's assassination is so dismal? □



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