

Unpacking Racialized Trauma

by Ronald Bell, DMin

When did you know you were the race you are? I can remember the exact day that both of my sons discovered they were “black.” My oldest is nine-years-old now. When he was in first grade, he came home extremely agitated one afternoon. After an uncomfortable encounter with a classmate, he wanted to know why his skin was so different than his classmate’s. I took him outside to sit on the porch where he explained that his classmate had called him “black,” but, as he boldly and accurately pointed out, he was not black, his skin was brown. He could not understand why he was being labeled “black” when his skin was brown and why his skin was so different in color than the classmate making the indictment against him. My son and I sat for some time on that porch. I reminded him of his grandfather, told him stories of his great-grandfather and great-great-grandfather. I showed him pictures of our family. I showed him my hand. I explained to him “Son, we share the same skin. It is your mother’s skin, your grandfather’s, your great-great-grandfather’s, it is your cousins and aunts and uncles’ skin. This is our family skin. It connects us. It marks us. We wear this skin with pride.”

I watched his saddened confused countenance begin to shift and contort. He sat up straight and smiled as he started naming his cousins and making the connection between their skin and his. I watched my son discover that day that he was “black.” His journey to blackness was in stark contrast to my younger son’s.

My youngest son was five when he discovered he was black. George Floyd

had been murdered by Minneapolis police the day before his discovery. We were living in Saint Paul at that time. I was pastoring a church in the area and preparing to distribute food for those in need who had been affected by the previous night’s riots. The energy in the atmosphere was tense. People were in pain; our hearts were broken for how we had been treated. The news was flooded with images of protest and riots, replays of the murder of Floyd and commentary on injustice for African Americans. That day we had coordinated with the Pan Hellenic council and Black Greek fraternities and sororities in the area to pull off the food giveaway. We expected to feed upwards of 500 to 1000 people. There would be hundreds of people coming to drop off food, and hundreds of other people coming to receive food.

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I knew I could not shelter my five-year-old from the reality he was about to be bombarded with. My wife and I sat him and his brother down that morning and had “the talk.” We told them about George Floyd. We explained to him what the police officer did and why it was wrong. We tried as best we could to pivot the discussion to our response as community members, in serving and supporting each other. Instead my five-year-old son kept asking over and over again, “What did Floyd do?” I could tell his brain was trying to make sense of what



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had happened. He was slowly mentally deconstructing all of those societal constructs he had come to believe in; namely, “Police are good and here to help you,” and “Bad guys are bad and the police are there to stop them.” None of those constructs made sense to him anymore. I watched his face contort and change as he realized that the only crime George Floyd committed was looking like us, sharing that same skin that we have. That skin, like his father and mother, that skin like his cousins and aunts and uncles, grandparents and great-grandparents...that skin like his. I watched my son discover that day that he was “black.” His journey had begun.

Each of us is well-acquainted with loss. I do not simply mean the loss of loved ones, though that grief captures each of us. Instead, I am talking about the loss of humanization. What makes us human is our capacity to live in connection with one another. That capacity is constantly being strained and altered, given new historical content, self-awareness, and revelations. We are in a perpetual process of remaking and

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redefining our humanness in relation to other humans. I watched my two sons struggle with this concept as they discovered their “blackness.” However, in fairness, it is a struggle that we all wrestle with, mainly because everyone we encounter is involved in their own process of redefining and remaking, also in relation to us. As a result of this parallel work, each of us carry trauma. A trauma that is both interrelated and individual. A racialized trauma. Racial trauma is not exclusive to African Americans. In fact, it is sewn into the fabric of this nation. It is a part of our history as a nation, our present and if we do nothing more, it will be a part of our future.

Resmaa Menakem, in his groundbreaking work *My Grandmothers Hands* wrote, “Unhealed trauma acts like a rock thrown into a pond; it causes ripples that move outward, affecting many other bodies over time.” Overtime, that unhealed trauma presents as culture, it becomes baked into the fabric of our relations with each other; black and white. Overtime that unhealed racialized trauma creates invisible social borders that effectively reinforce the mythologies that this trauma promulgated. It should be clear that when unhealed trauma metastasizes as culture and gets passed down through generations, it becomes increasingly impossible to empathize for a group or individual existing outside of one’s racialized traumatic frame. You cannot empathize with something or someone you do not recognize as equal in value to yourself. The more we subconsciously reinforce the mythologies of this trauma, the more we further isolate and distance ourselves from each other, until we become unrecognizable as human to each other. This is the ultimate danger of racialized trauma, and

its ability to distort and dehumanize. Therefore, each of us must embrace our own racialized trauma and begin to do the work of healing.

I want my sons to grow up in a world where they are seen as human, equal and valued. I want them to see the color of their skin as nothing more than a connection to their lineage and not a potential death sentence. I want all our children to remake of this world a place of wholeness and peace, one no longer codependent on the mythologies of racialized trauma for sustainability. In order for that work to happen, each us must be bold enough to finally begin to do the work of unpacking, and facing the trauma we are carrying.

Editor’s Note: Rev. Ronald Bell, Jr. is the Lead Pastor of Twin Cities, MN Camphor Memorial United Methodist Church. A saxophone and guitar player, Ron often weaves his love of jazz and reggae into his worship and preaching. He has a BS in Philosophy from Morgan State University, a Master’s in Theology from Regent University School of Divinity, and a Doctorate in Ministry from Lancaster Theological Seminary.

As a writer, pastor, musician, speaker and consultant, Rev. Ron Bell’s passion is “helping people work through emotions to put words to their grief and loss.” His special focus is working with communities of color and millennials. He also sees his role as “helping lead tough conversations around race and trauma. I am passionate about ‘repairing the breach’ by helping each of us grasp the role that racialized trauma has played in our lives.”

Rev. Bell has authored and co-authored several books and journal articles and also released an album, “The Unplugged Project.” Much of his work this past year has centered around Minneapolis/St. Paul and the death of George Floyd, spending time “connecting community members with therapy, counseling, and healing circles. Rev. Bell can be reached at www.drrobell.com.