

NCBI helps cities face, resolve hard racial realities.

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Many voices spoke out in pain and outrage regarding the virtual acquittal of the police in the Rodney King case. And many, both White and Black, reacted with a growing sense of grief and powerlessness as that outrage translated into random acts of violence in Los Angeles and elsewhere. For a number of years the National Coalition Building Institute [NCBI] has been assisting communities across the United States to find effective ways to deal with racism and intergroup violence. With heightened attention to the dynamics of racism in the United States in the aftermath of the recent events in Los Angeles, we at NCBI would like to contribute to the public discussion what we have learned from our work.

Violence as Unhealed Grief, Fear, and Rage

Violence is unhealed grief, fear and rage. Violence never occurs as an isolated event. It is part of a pattern, a response to prior mistreatment. Only those who have been beaten down first strike back.

In coming to terms with the outcome of the Rodney King trial and the ensuing racial violence in Los Angeles, we are confronted with the question of its origins. Conservatives cite the decadence of traditional institutions and personal morality. Liberals cite the failures of the current administration and its domestic social policy. Both insights may have merit, but violence has a logic of its own. Violence is often an attempt to show others what has been done to us, an effort to draw attention to our own pain. In NCBI's work with communities throughout the world that have been torn apart by ethnic conflict, we have come to understand violence as something more, a call for healing.

Listening to the Voices of Rage

Lashing out against others is often the only way human beings have known for trying to stop the cycle of violence. Ironically, the method is self-defeating. Yet, appeals for nonviolent responses, important as they are, can often be ineffective. They tend to ignore the essential first step of creating opportunities for people to come together in neighborhoods and schools to vent and heal rage and frustration in a safe, constructive environment.

One of the most powerful tools we at NCBI have discovered in working with people at community meetings is a process called role exchange. The process is a method for dealing with and learning from community experiences of mistreatment. In role exchange we ask a number of individuals to say, "I am going to ruin your life the way my life has been ruined; I am going to do to you what has been done to me." What follows is an emotional outpouring, describing in detail all the indignities that members of particular groups have suffered. To have the opportunity to take all the pent up rage and direct it verbally at another person, helps many individuals to release their unhealed grief. There is then less need to act out the violence. In addition, those listening can gain a profound and rare understanding of the way in which peoples lives have been ruined by injustices.

At an NCBI program two years ago an African American high school student recounted an incident when several police officers brutally assaulted him. In working with him we asked him to remember the incident and to say what he would have liked to say and do to those police officers. By healing the need to act out his rage, he has become an effective activist in his school. His response to the events in Los Angeles last week was to conduct a series of programs for his classmates focussed on finding ways to improve racial conditions in his own school.

Even when the alienation and history of violence between groups is entrenched, the process of speaking and listening to personal and specific experiences of injustice can effect healing. NCBI facilitated a community meeting in Northern Ireland between working class Protestants and Catholics, all who had lost members of their families to sectarian violence. At the outset of the gathering, a young Catholic man yelled out, "I don't know what I'm doing here--this won't do any good anyway." Later on a Protestant participant spoke with enormous grief about the day he witnessed the shooting of his father. With tears in his eyes, the Catholic youth went over to the Protestant speaker and said, "If you have the guts to express that kind of grief with me; then I have to have the guts to stay here and listen to your story."

The Courage to Face the Grief over Racism

The unfinished work in the United States of addressing the growing divisions of race and class will not move forward until each of us can honestly face our own grief and horror about what has been done and what is still being done to African Americans [not to mention Native Americans and other people of color]. Much of our culture is based on seeking comfort, often resulting in numbness to our own pain and to the pain of others. We seek comfort through drugs, food, and alcohol; through sex and relationships; and through work and the acquisition of material wealth. Only those who are numb can mistreat other human beings or stand by and watch while another is being mistreated. If we were at all attentive to the depth of the injustices around us, every reading of the newspaper, every listening to the evening news would bring us to tears of profound grief. And the shedding of tears keeps us human. Events like the Rodney King verdict and its aftermath can become a powerful impetus for change only if we do not run away from them. They can shake us out of our numbness, allow us to feel the pain around us, and challenge us to eschew comfortable retreat.

The Courage to be an Ally

In "The Altruistic Personality," Samuel and Pearl Oliner interviewed hundreds of gentiles who had

risked their lives to save Jews in Nazi Europe. What they found were ordinary people who believed that their efforts in some small way could make a difference. People have to believe that they can change things for the better, or they remain defeated by feelings of powerlessness.

To be an ally on the front lines speaking out against injustice will require us to act boldly and to confront our own fears for survival. It may mean being targeted with the same mistreatment. It most definitely will mean facing all of our own timidity. We need to be working with community leaders--helping them to heal the fears that keep all of us from risking our own lives or our illusions of security on behalf of one another.

At a training program to launch an NCBI team in Santa Cruz, California, an African-American young man recounted the day Skinheads from his school taunted him on the school bus. He had been so frozen with terror he laughed along with them. No one on the bus intervened in any way. As a group of community leaders, we imagined returning with him to the scene of the bus. We practiced all the different courageous strategies for stopping the mistreatment [e.g. interrupting the racial slurs, sitting next to him and standing up to the bigots, stopping the bus, etc.]. Taking these courageous stands will require learning active skills for intervening in the face of mistreatment.

Building a Constructive Action Plan

NCBI learned that the best way to sustain ongoing community action on issues of racism was to train teams of 30-40 leaders who would work together in a local community leading anti-racism programs based on the NCBI healing models. These training teams are now in place in 25 cities across the United States and in numerous public schools, on college campuses, and in organizations. The key to each team's long range success is not only in being a vital resource for the whole community--leading anti-racism and inter-group conflict resolution programs everywhere, but also in having a commitment to stick by one another-- modeling the power of a team of community allies. Each NCBI trained team utilizes the NCBI healing tools internally, building a commitment to one another and to a concept,--All for One and One for All--namely that every group in society needs to be for every other group. When racial conflict broke out in Woodrow Wilson High School in Washington, D.C. last year, the NCBI trained team of student leaders moved into action. They went into every classroom, leading healing sessions for both teachers and students teaching skills for intervening if future incidents occurred.

The issue of urban violence and racism will not disappear. Without any significant leadership from national policy makers addressing these issues with courage and integrity, it becomes even more imperative that every local community build such a proactive leadership healing team. The acquittal of the police officers in Los Angeles shocked us out of our numbness. May the event also help us to face the grief we've needed to face as a nation for a very long time and lead us closer to a shared commitment to end the injustices around us.

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community leaders in skills of prejudice reduction and inter-group conflict.

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