

# It's Time to Talk Honestly

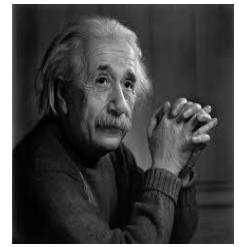
## Friar Bob Hutmacher, ofm

Two past encounters from my life ~ One happened in a department store. I was looking at sweaters and roamed menswear freely; a friend who was with me was watched and followed as if a security risk. That same friend asked me to dinner one night. The waiter presented me with the check without even asking or gesturing as to which of us would be paying. My friend took the folder without a word. Interpretation? I am white, he is not. I was accorded acceptance and freedom in both instances. He was not.

The classic definition of prejudice is the one put forth by the famous Harvard psychologist, Gordon Allport, who published *The Nature of Prejudice* in 1954: "**Prejudice is an antipathy based on faulty and inflexible generalization. It may be felt or expressed. It may be directed toward a group or an individual of that group**". [Antipathy is defined as a strong feeling of dislike.] In 1968 my novice master encouraged me to read Allport's classic work and it opened my mind like nothing else I'd ever read.

48 years later I find that I must speak more forthrightly as a friar about what is going on in our country and our world. It is no longer enough to simply watch news reports of tragedies in the U.S. and around the world and find it all repugnant. "Our prayers and thoughts are with you" simply will not effect change. We friars must become agents and voices of peace and reconciliation like never before. Francis of Assisi grew up surrounded by violence and hatred on many levels, having seen the ugliness of medieval war as a knight and as a prisoner of war. Even before his conversion he was filled with pain because of the constant wars between Assisi and neighboring Perugia, because the people of Umbria were torn between allegiance to either the Pope or the Holy Roman Emperor, and because battles akin to our gang warfare were constant in the streets of Assisi. He was filled with pain. Rage, hatred, violence, death and suffering were constants.

Albert Einstein was visiting and lecturing in the United States when Hitler came into power in 1933 with his National Socialist German Workers' Party, the Nazi's. Aware of what was going on in Germany and because he was a Jew, Einstein decided to remain in the U.S., became a citizen in 1940 and taught at Princeton. Many people are completely unaware that he also became deeply involved with civil rights.



The town of Princeton was racially divided and Einstein became involved in the daily life of the black community. He befriended Paul Robeson, opera singer Marian Anderson and even paid the tuition of a young man from that community. This brilliant man came to the conclusion that segregation was not a black problem but a white problem, born of a mindset of prejudice comparable to what he had experienced in Germany.

In 1946 he traveled to the campus of Pennsylvania's Lincoln University, the first degree-granting public black university in the U.S., to take part in a ceremony conferring upon him the honorary degree of doctor of laws. Prior to accepting that degree, he delivered a speech to the assembled audience in which he called upon the U.S. to take a leading role in preventing another world war and denounced the practice of segregation. [Please consider the date of his speech and its vocabulary.] Here's a snippet: *There is a somber point in the social outlook of Americans. Their sense of equality and human dignity is mainly limited to people of white skin. Even among these there are prejudices of which I as a Jew am clearly conscious; but they are unimportant in comparison with the attitude of the whites toward their fellow-citizens of darker complexion, particularly toward Negroes. The more I feel an American, the more this situation pains me. I can escape the feeling of complicity in it only by speaking out.*

Einstein went on to clearly state that the slave trade embedded the "white privilege" in our culture, social mores and racial attitudes. He quoted Aristotle, who wrote about slavery in

ancient Greece. Even with his intelligence, his attitude that the Greeks' slaves were less intelligent and a lower form of humanity inculcated superiority into Greek culture. Most interesting to note – the slaves of the Greeks were conquered white people. Yes, whites looking down on whites. Hate is color blind

Einstein observed that opinions and emotions which we unconsciously absorb as children from our environment shape our attitudes into a tradition. He concluded that we (remember, this is 1946) must begin to control this tradition and assume a critical attitude toward it if we are ever to change for the better. Concretely, this wise man Einstein offers this advice to parents: have the courage to set an example by word and deed lest your children become influenced by this racial bias. *“Until this goal is reached there is no greater satisfaction for a just and well-meaning person than the knowledge that one has devoted his best energies to the service of this good cause.* Among the many, many lessons my parents gave the five of us children was this: we were never allowed to say ‘shut up’, any racial slurs or the word ‘hate.’ It took root deeply and shows in the kaleidoscope of friends in our large family.

Lori Lakin Hutcherson is editor-in-chief of **Good Black News**, a web site she describes as “Your source for the good things black people do, give and receive all over the world.” Check it out for a fresh perspective! Ms. Hutcherson wrote a response to a white friend’s query about white privilege and racism. The author shares poignant and painful experiences from her life, beginning with one when she was 3 years old. The things white people assume because she is black are embarrassing yet enlightening. For example, she’d been accepted to Harvard and had to get a physical as part of the entrance requirements. When her doctor asked what school she’d be entering, she said “Harvard.” He replied: “You mean the one in Massachusetts?” On the first date with her future husband she asked him why he had baby wipes and a stuffed animal in the car, thinking he may have been secretly married. The reason? He’d been frequently stopped because he was a black man

driving a luxury car and they assumed he had either stolen the car or was a drug dealer. Her point: “If you’ve never had to mask the fruits of your success with a floppy-eared, stuffed bunny rabbit so you won’t get harassed by the police on the way home from your gainful employment, you have white privilege.”

She concludes her response to her friend’s question about white privilege by saying that it’s “not just strangers but people you know and care for who have suffered and are suffering because we are excluded from the privilege you have to not be judged, questioned or assaulted in any way because of your race.”

Her advice: “acknowledge that white privilege does exist, treat people of races that differ from yours with respect and humor, don’t let jokes or off-color comments slide by without challenge and constantly put yourself in someone else’s shoes. This way we can all cherish and respect our unique and special contributions to society as much as we do our common ground.”

I personally believe our country is filled with more good than bad, filled with people who care about our future and how we express the ideals we so cherish. I also believe it is time for very honest discussion among all of us. If any talk of white privilege upsets you, then take this article as a moment of truth and opportunity. Try to understand why people are angry and want justice. Walk in shoes you’ve never worn. Listen to the leaders of our Church and the prophets among us. We must, absolutely must, bring about a change in our attitudes toward people who are different than ourselves. Attitudes are difficult to transform but with God, all things are possible.

Author Toni Morrison wrote that “in this country, American means white. Everybody else gets hyphenated.” How true! Some of us are white and then come Asian-Americans, Mexican-Americans, African-Americans, Native Americans. Consider what it might be like to be hyphenated. In your own country.

Archbishop Blase Cupich gave a speech at Catholic Theological Union this spring for the annual Blessed Are the Peacemakers Trustee Dinner. He said: “the word peace is both

ambiguous and elusive...it's striking that Jesus never said 'blessed are those who are peaceful.' Peace is not a state of being, but rather something that is to be made, to be done. It is a dynamic reality. For God, peace is more a verb than a noun..." Our present pope has often said that salvation history has been God's pursuit of peace and reconciliation. I love our Archbishop's statement that peace is a verb. Exactly like the Eucharist, peace is an action, not a concept.

My experiences with people over the past 37 years of ordained ministry have helped me understand that anger is very often a cover for fear. When the comfort of social institutions like segregation are threatened, fear rises within some people. Then out come the self-preservation tools of angry words and violence. Witness our own Civil War and its aftermath, Selma, Watts, 9/11, Englewood, Ferguson, Paris, Baton Rouge, Dallas, Nice, Syria, Ukraine, South Sudan and countless other places of strife around the world. Fear and ignorance create unfounded hatred, which so often erupts into violence.

2016 is a tumultuous year in every facet of our lives. It may seem that we will never rise above the mayhem, hatred, anger and terror. But I believe our Franciscan message and mission is essential to counterbalance the ugliness around us. If the reality of white privilege is upsetting, then the commandments of Jesus such as "love your enemies", "first be reconciled with the other, then offer your gift", or "whoever wishes to be great among you shall be the servant" should also rattle our complacency. We all see news reports from neighborhoods where yet another child is struck down; parents plead for a change, scream in agony because of their loss. Are change and healing possible? We MUST believe!

Francis was a product of his own violent world but he listened to God and **then** was able to preach reconciliation, able to greet people before he preached with *Il Signore vi dia la pace*, able to live Love. **Francis became peace and lived forgiveness.** He wrote the last two verses of his *Canticle of Creatures* just before he died in 1226 and one was to help settle a dispute between the bishop and the mayor of Assisi: *Be praised, my Lord, through those who forgive for*

*love of You, through those who endure sickness and trial. Happy those who endure in peace, for by You, Most High, they will be crowned.* When the friars sang this verse before the two leaders, both men broke down, embraced and changed their ways. His *Canticle* begins with a verse that proclaims that no one is worthy to pronounce the name of God. Yet the *Canticle* goes on to praise God for creation: sun, moon and stars, wind and air, water, fire and Mother Earth. All of creation is unified with its Creator. Finally Francis adds the verses wherein God is praised because human beings are also reconciled with one another and with all of creation. His *Canticle* is a perfect prayer of reconciliation of the "finite and infinite, the depths of earth and the immensity of heaven. The *Canticle* gives expression to that supreme illumination of the soul" when humans behold themselves as images of God. [*The Canticle of Creatures, Symbols of Union* by Eloi LeClerc, o.f.m., p. 35]

I am not so naïve as to think that a few homilies or group discussions will dramatically change our world overnight. However, we MUST begin somewhere and that somewhere is in the depths of our souls. Gun laws, lobbyists, gang and drug lords, mass shootings, vile rhetoric in politics, racial barriers, police problems, a history of violence, a broken justice system – yes, we have much work to do, my friends. Remember: **peace is a verb, an action!** Begin with an attitude you find is out of sync with the Gospel and let grace change it. One word of kindness has more power than a word of hate. Speak bravely and lovingly with your children about race relations. Consider what life without assault weapons might be like. An attempt to understand someone of another faith system is holy. Read **Good Black News**, Einstein's speech of 1946 or Pope Francis' letter *The Joy of the Gospel*. Be a conduit of God's grace with actions of respect. Reach out to a family touched by violence. There is much work, yes, but myriad ways to bring about God's peace and all good. *Fr. Bob Hutmacher, ofm*

