

Learning Some Other Country's History

[*holding up paper*] This is a cartoon that has come back to my mind often since I first encountered it. It's by Jules Feiffer, drawn sometime in the Johnson Administration. As is often the case in a Jules Feiffer cartoon, the visual is very simple: the same face, shown twelve times. It's a middle aged guy, looking kind of grumpy. He says: "When I went to school, I learned George Washington never told a lie—slaves were happy on the plantation—the men who opened the west were giants—and we won every war because God was on our side. But where my kid goes to school, he learns George Washington was a slave owner—slaves hated slavery—the men who opened the west committed genocide—and the wars we won were victories for U.S. imperialism.

"No wonder my kid's not an American. They're teaching him some other country's history."

As I say, I have occasion to think of this cartoon on a regular basis, and particularly in these last several months, I've done so quite a lot. The experience of the man in the cartoon is a common experience. We go along thinking we're all Americans and we share one history—we're all in one country, aren't we? Then we come up against a completely different way of seeing things, and we're reminded that the word "history" means "story." What stories we have in our minds influence how we see events—the way we define our country. And those stories aren't all the same.

This shows up sharply in conversations about police brutality and killings of civilians by police. As we have been noting each week on our board out here, that total is soon to hit one

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thousand, and the rate of deaths among black people is far higher than any other racial category, giving rise to the declaration, “Black Lives Matter.”

A friend of mine believes this is all backwards. She doesn't like that slogan; she thinks black lives get *more* attention when there's a death by police. As for all these black people getting killed by cops, she thinks that that's because black people are committing far more crimes. She sincerely believes that if you don't want to tangle with the police, all you need to do, most of the time, is refrain from committing crimes.

She thinks this, I'm sure, because the history she's learned says that the police are colorblind; that they are impartial enforcers of our laws.

Well, there's another history that reveals another country. In this history, when African-Americans wanted to move into a sundown town—a town where they were permitted to work or travel but not stay overnight, much less live in—the police told them “We can't protect you.” And that meant, not that the police *wanted* to protect them from mobs and the KKK, but were simply outgunned (“We just can't manage it!”) but that they *wouldn't* protect the newcomers' rights, that they *didn't want* to protect them, that they were, in fact, actively engaged in *denying* them—as evidenced by the membership of many police in the KKK, including deputies, sheriffs, and chiefs.

The history that I have in my head when I'm arguing with my friend indicates that our enforcement of laws is highly selective based on race, and has always been. Comparing each racial group's rate of current drug use to the national average, the rate is sharply lower among Asian-Americans, somewhat lower among Hispanics and Latinos, and higher among Pacific

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Islanders and Native Americans (although that tends to be a very small sample, so it's hard to say). Between whites and blacks there is not a huge disparity—about 10% more drug use and dealing among African-Americans. But the cops are far more likely to arrest them: not ten percent more likely, not fifty percent more likely, not twice as likely, but *three to five times* as likely. This makes the argument that the key to avoiding trouble with the cops is to refrain from crime appear desperately naïve.

I could give many more examples. But the point is: that version of the history of police and race is not complete. No one has a complete grasp of history. No one's picture of this country is entirely true. Each of us contributes a piece.

That poses a particular challenge to those of us who belong to the dominant culture, who belong to that dominant story, because rather than learning lots of histories to help us put together a composite that might help us approach the truth., we live in an echo chamber, where the stories we tell are the same as the stories in the history books. The stories Hollywood tells tend to affirm the stories that our grandparents tell us. We only learn one country's history, and it is not the country we actually live in.

If one's culture, ethnicity, race, and class have their stories told in the history books, then one's at a disadvantage in understanding one's own country. So people who live in the dominant culture particularly need to hear other versions to begin to see things as they really are.

Those in less dominant subcultures get two versions from the start: the one told in the history books and the one they probably know from their own families. So let's take, for

example, the story of how important Chinese immigrants were to the building of the transcontinental railroad. We might all have learned that; I learned it in my mostly-white school. And in that white version, right, Chinese immigrants were very important—yay, rah, thank you very much! But in the version I've learned since, and which is probably well-known to most Chinese-Americans from the time they are very small¹, the completion of the railroad was shortly followed by a huge shift in immigration policy, in which many Chinese were sent back to China, and the doors were shut to prevent more newcomers from that country.

These contrasts between the versions of history that we hear can be crazy-making and enraging, although the different, contradictory pieces do point to a fuller version of the truth, at least.

By the way, one person can live within both a dominant culture and a minority culture. For example, maybe you are white and so you have learned a version of United States history that is sanitized of much of its racism. But you're also Jewish, and you learned about the Holocaust in detail, from survivors of the camps, before you knew how to read. That was several years before the nice Christian kid sitting next to you in your high school classroom was assigned *The Diary of Anne Frank*. They simply did not know a piece of history that you knew from the time you were very young, and when you talk about anti-Semitism (if you do), they think you mean minor incidents of exclusion. They have no idea. They have learned a different history. They need to do some catching up.

¹ The author is not Chinese-American.

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We can remedy our own ignorance, the incompleteness of our own versions of history, by doing just that: by encountering, reading, taking seriously, listening to, other people's stories.

But if you're thinking of beginning to read other histories, hear other stories, I warn you: it's dangerous. You will never be able to regain the history that is in your head right now. You will lose the country that you think you're living in right now, and find yourself in a new one that is largely unexplored by you. The map you have been using as a guide will prove to be partial, and you may feel a little lost.

In the movie *The Matrix*, what we think of as reality is revealed to be a vast illusion keeping us imprisoned. The basic idea of the movie is that we think we walk and talk and travel freely, when actually we are all just in a kind of factory farm, preyed upon by parasites who suck the life from us and bathe us in these illusions to keep us docile. The main character, Neo, gets a glimpse of this reality, and in a scene that became an immediate classic (because the metaphor is so powerful and universal), the character Morpheus offers him a choice between two pills, saying:

This is your last chance. After this, there is no turning back. You take the blue pill – the story ends, you wake up in your bed and believe whatever you want to believe.

The red pill? That will show him what the parasites don't want any of us to see: the reality we live in, and therefore, a long-shot chance of freeing us all. Of course, being the hero of the

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movie, Neo chooses the red pill, as Morpheus gives him one last warning: “Remember... all I'm offering is the truth. Nothing more.”

Once we take that pill, once we start reading accounts we never read, and having conversations we never used to have, and listening to people we never engaged with before, we learn things we can't unlearn. We have more of the truth.

The Bible says, “The truth will make you free.” But Terry Pratchett also knew that the typographical error is not wrong: “The truth will make you fret.” The truth is hard, it's painful, it disturbs your sleep, it disturbs your conscience, and it compels you to change your life. Think well before you take the red pill. Before you learn some other country's history and discover that the old history, your old country, no longer exist in that simple way you trusted for all those years.

Just last night I learned two pieces of that country's history—my country's history—I hadn't known before. I've been trying to remediate this; I've been reading books that were never assigned to me, seeking to encounter voices that I didn't encounter in my particular upbringing. But then I came to a church event and had a conversation in which I learned these two things:

The GI Bill offered government-guaranteed housing loans to veterans returning from World War II. We know this; the suburbs were growing, housing was booming, and veterans got a piece of that new economy. That's the history I learned: how the GI Bill helped a generation of Americans move into the middle class and stay there.

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The other country's history crashed into me last night and informed me (fact #1) that the black members of that generation were excluded. Black veterans were not permitted to get those housing loans.

For that matter (fact #2), the Department of Housing and Urban Development, HUD, which is supposed to ensure equal access to housing, has in fact funded segregation and gutted attempts at integrating housing for decades. (Some of you are nodding. I'm a little late learning this.) When Congress passed the Fair Housing Act in 1968, prohibiting discriminatory zoning and other practices that maintained segregation, the Nixon administration went to great lengths to circumvent it. When Nixon's own housing secretary, George Romney (a name known well to us), tried to enforce the new law, he was excluded from discussions of domestic policy. *The president's housing secretary could not speak to the president about housing.* He was ostracized within the administration and finally kicked out of the cabinet. And so to this day, neighborhoods are sharply segregated, not just by income but by race: black Americans earning \$75,000 a year live in poorer neighborhoods than white Americans earning \$40,000.

So if you know one history, you may think (as I imagine my friend does) that black Americans have had equal opportunity since 1865, or at the very least since the Civil Rights movement, and conclude they have done nothing with it—why else are they in such dire straits? And that is in fact the story that is told over and over . . . Whereas, if you know the other history, the conclusions are very different. They explain something about persistent poverty and inequality. They explain something about rage.

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Those were two facts to add to the history of social programs in this country that I've been accumulating through my remedial reading. For example, I picked up in my reading that in order to get the New Deal passed, FDR cut some deals that cut out African-Americans. He proposed Social Security—as we know, one of the most important pieces of social legislation in our country's history—to help Americans save for retirement, but members of Congress, mostly from the South, said they wouldn't vote for it unless it excluded two labor sectors that dominated their region and were populated mostly by African-Americans: agricultural work and domestic work.

Farmworkers were finally added to the system after being excluded for twenty years. But to this day, if you're working in a factory, some of your earnings and your employer's earnings go into your Social Security, while you can be working 40 hours a week or more cleaning houses, getting a regular paycheck, with nothing at all going into Social Security. After a lifetime of that work, your Social Security wage statement adds up to zero.

This is what Malcolm X meant when he said "You can't drive a knife into a man's back nine inches, pull it out six inches, and call it progress." He knew all the facts that I just told. But that gap in inches was missing from most of the discussions of affirmative action I've ever heard. It was missing from the history of the New Deal that I learned in school. What sense could we have made of that famous assertion of his, without knowing what he knew?

Whatever race we are, and however short or long a time we have lived in this country, racism is one of the deepest wounds that our country has suffered.

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Nurses and doctors have learned something about deep wounds. A deep cut, such as a surgical incision: if you leave it open, simply packing it with sterile material, it will heal from the inside out. If you stitch it closed, it looks great on the surface, and that outer layer is soon almost perfectly healed. But underneath you run the serious risk of an abscess: pain, festering infection, deterioration, a spreading of the disease, and quite possibly death.

We have told a nice, tidy version of history for a long time. Those on its underside have always known that it wasn't true. And maybe now more people who only heard the nice, tidy version are listening, seeking out the other stories that will make a more complete truth. Not just a few people here in our city, but thousands around the country are reading about the pipeline to prison in *The New Jim Crow*—the president has spoken and taken action about it and members of Congress across the political spectrum are seeking prison reform. Maybe this is a moment of growing awareness of how racism has poisoned our law enforcement and criminal justice systems.

More books are becoming recognized across the bestseller list, not just in small university departments, not just in specialized bookstores; more movies (both documentary and fiction) are expressing these stories that have been known for a long time but were not being heard by those of the dominant culture. More and more people, perhaps, are listening. This is our moment to help tip that balance.

In the movie *The Matrix*, it's once and for all—you take the red pill and it reveals reality. In real life, actually you go deeper and deeper. You don't take a single pill and learn the truth.

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The truth comes piecemeal, by hearing many versions; by hearing many stories and histories.

What will *you* learn? It all depends whom you're listening to.

We have some opportunities (we are creating opportunities), here among ourselves and in the wider community, for broader and deeper listening. Dr. Mark Hicks, an African-American Unitarian Universalist religious educator, has created a curriculum called Beloved Conversations, a program for helping Unitarian Universalists hear one another's stories across lines of race and ethnicity. Beginning [on date X] with a retreat in [city Y], and continuing with eight Sunday sessions here at our congregation co-facilitated by me and [member], you have an opportunity to join that conversation.

Pastor _____ of the [local] AME Zion Church called many of us together last summer to speak together and understand more about racism and the possibilities for racial justice in our local community. I am speaking with him about a community exploration of the ten-point plan for ending police violence against civilians, created by some of the intellectual and policy leaders in Black Lives Matter. I'll let you know what happens with that.

And we can listen to each other's histories. If there is a book that you have read that reveals a piece of U.S. history that is important, perhaps revealing something to you that you never knew before, I invite you to write it on the flip chart right there [*pointing*]. I'll compile those and share them, because sometimes something that opens our eyes is completely unknown to others, and they can learn so much from that: something about your own heritage or someone else's. We may not all agree on which stories are worth telling or are even accurate. But by doing that, we are adding to a bigger picture. We have a faith (don't we?) that truth is always partial,

that it's always unfolding, that we can learn from one another so much more than we can know just on our own.

Injustices neatly covered up and showing a nice smooth surface make a lie, and the bitter truth will not go away. If we don't acknowledge it, it can kill us. It kills our individual souls, our relationships, our hopes for truly peaceful, just communities, as it has threatened from the very beginning of this country's history to kill our country. But if we do acknowledge it, if we do seek out the truth, we can be healed and healthy and whole. We set out long ago to be one people, and we can help make that dream come true.

So may we do.