

**CULTURAL DIVERSITY,  
INCLUSION AND JUSTICE**



# **CULTURAL DIVERSITY, INCLUSION AND JUSTICE**

**Being a Community Activist**

*By*

**GEORGE HENDERSON**



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*For Lisa Gaye Henderson, my daughter, friend and teacher*



## PREFACE

This book is written by an African American, the fifth generation of my American blood line. My human rights and social justice voice were developed during my childhood experiences. I grew up in a poverty-stricken black subcommunity in East Chicago, Indiana. During that time, I experienced varying degrees of bigotry. Most prominent among those experiences were my own racist, sexist and xenophobic behaviors. All of those experiences profoundly shaped my beliefs about humane teaching and community activism. But under the best of circumstances, it was impossible for me to give precise accountings for every historical event. Aggregates of important persons and their behaviors did not come easily to me, and sometimes not at all. Factual aspects of their narratives ranged from crystal clear to being like an old-time fuzzy black and white television show recollection. In whatever form they came to me, those memories were difficult to let go after I wrote them in this book. The task of exhuming them was simultaneously challenging, sad and exhilarating. The recalled parts of some of the narratives do not fit neatly. Nor did I expect all of them to fit. I included hateful slurs exactly as I and other persons wrote them and spoke them. They are not truncated in this book with asterisks, dashes or dots. There are other things to be haggled over in this book, including the absence of foolproof tips and techniques. The conflicted human relationships that I experienced defied simplistic solutions. But they all had historical precedents.

I learned from my mistakes and successes, and those of other people. Under no circumstances did I want to exaggerate or trivialize those lessons. But it was not my intention to write an impersonal academic treatise on social justice activism. Instead, I set out to describe what social justice activism has looked like through the prism of my eyes. The methods of this book are straightforward. Using historical, current and personal data—all of which were inextricably entwined, I turned social justice teaching and activism as I lived and witnessed them upside-down and shook out humane and inhumane behavior. My single-minded devotion to diversity, inclusion and justice account for the breath of topics. The challenge for me was to choose appropriate personal, historical and current information that complemented

or supplemented the experiences that I lived. It is my hope that this book will give those who read it stimulating views of cultural diversity, inclusion and justice.

With my mind opened wide and my beliefs and strategies laid bare, I employ a spiral approach to learning. That is, topics discussed in early chapters are expanded on in later ones. I believe that educational growth and learning is cumulative and continuous. Despite the current climate of mean-spiritedness in human relationships bolstered by rigid racial and ethnic divides, I have learned that rapprochement within and between racial and cultural groups is the best way forward to achieve humane relationships. To achieve that end, I focus on the civil rights movement as segue to three things: (1) To provide basic information about American racial and ethnic groups; (2) To provide additional information about the widening gap between white and nonwhite Americans; (3) To provide critiques of several strategies and tactics that were designed to prevent or abate bigotry in public places and unshared spaces.

For most of us black and brown Americans who were activists during the civil rights movement, the focus on social justice was not an excuse for our failures but a scale that allowed us to measure white and nonwhite Americans' sensitivity to the many ways in which historical events have spawned and nurtured bigotry. Thus, the ghosts of slaves and the aftereffects of slavery tested the strength of the bonds between African Americans and white Americans during the civil rights movement. My brown brothers and sisters had their own the ghosts reminding them of times gone but not forgotten: There were the ghosts of the Native American Indians who died on the Trail of Tears; of Mexicans and Mexican Americans who were worked to death picking crops and building infrastructures for white economies; of Chinese who died building intercontinental railroads; and of Japanese and Japanese Americans who languished in American interment camps, and never got their property back. Those losses were debts that can never be fully paid. But we acknowledged them. During the best interactions, we acknowledged those debts with empathy, patience and tangible ways to receive a measure of equality. But during the worst of times, we blamed one another's ancestors for the pitiable state of race relations in America, and we heaped more bigotry onto one another.

White liberals who apologized for the transgressions their ancestors asked for our forbearance, but they also asked us to appreciate what we had, and to stop being obsessed with our race relations history. Or as a white friend told me, "Let's just celebrate our American heritage." Although that was a reasonable request, black and brown cultures had to be considered in the context of all aspects of our separate heritages. He did not understand that those cruel acts were part of our American heritage, and our collective



heritages include bigotry. It was difficult for most white Americans, especially those who believed that people of color and white people had long ago gotten past the horrendous events of racial and ethnic discrimination and segregation. He did not understand the unwillingness of some of us people of color to let go of the horrors that bigoted white people had inflicted on our ancestors. Sometimes our conversations about race relations ended when one or both of us acknowledged the importance of the other person's position. But most often they ended, or were suspended, in a standoff or an unspoken truce that allowed us to move on to other, less contentious topics.

A common residual effect of dealing with our nation's unfinished social justice issues was that whites came away thinking of black and brown people as whiners encapsulated in the past, and therefore we were societal cripples who used our ancestries as an excuse for our own shortcomings. And black and brown people labeled most white people as being racists who perpetuated unequal opportunities for black and brown people. Thus, we had white people's truth and black and brown people's truth. Somewhere between the two extremes was a truth that is neither white nor nonwhite. This book is about the latter truth which of bigotry is perpetuated by countless white, black and brown people. More important than academic debates about bigotry, this book is about negating or preventing bigotry.

Social justice activism means helping all people to be accepted as full citizens; and helping them to choose or create pathways to their own self-growth and group-enhancing experiences. In accordance with those beliefs, I dip the intellectual and emotional toes of people who read this book into familiar and unfamiliar cultural diversity and inclusion information. Hopefully, this will sometimes stir up within each of the readers imagined angst and delight unanticipated. I review historical incidents and also tell portions of my own life stories. I want those who read this book to know my perceptions of bigotry; and then to compare and contrast my perceptions with their own. Humane or not, I believe that the meanings of each person's life experiences corroborate this observation in Samuel Beckett's *Proust*: "Yesterday is not a milestone that has been passed but a day stone on the beaten track of the years, and irremediably a part of us, within us, heavy and dangerous" (1965, p.3).

The historical realism, pessimism and optimism that are written in each of the chapters sometimes converge into cavernous-like polemics. These discussions begin with questions that are seeking answers, but they seldom end with finality. Still, I have tried to find modicums of truth. Stated another way, this book is written to be actively read and to initiate meaningful conversations about social justice. The primary audiences for this book are college students who are majoring in social and behavioral sciences, social work and health care. However, all students ought to have a basic understanding of the

racial ethnic and social groups that are discussed in this book. Specifically, I am talking about culturally different students who may be enrolled in the same classes; or who live in the same dormitory or several blocks or many miles away from one another; or whose homelands may be thousands of miles away. Although this book is written primarily for college students, it also may be of value to teachers, community activists, and other persons who want to enhance their knowledge of racism, sexism, homonegativity, ableism, ageism, xenophobia and classism.

Throughout my career as a college professor, I have been fortunate to teach and learn from students. Each of them provided me with the honesty and inquisitiveness I needed as a check to my own beliefs, values and writings. This book was no different. I acknowledge with gratitude the contributions of Brock Anderson, Riley Benson, Miguel Chavez, Destyne Cinocca, Nicole Dube, Natalie Eastman, Giovanni Gonzalez, Andrew Hoang, Han Hoang, Alexandra Jackson, Kale Kinnaird, Alejandro Lozano, Kanjan Manohar, Mhleli Nkanbule, Jessie Ocompo-Pallares, Cesar Pardo, Grace Parsons, Collen Sulaitis and Mackenzie Wright. Natalie deserves special mention. More than any other student, she told me how she thought that I could improve two of the chapters. She was spot on. Finally, words cannot express my gratitude to my wife Barbara Henderson and my daughter Lisa Gaye Henderson for suffering through the first draft of this book. Their comments kept me focused on the goals I initially set for this book. There are other people to whom I am grateful: all of my loved ones, students and friends who are not mentioned here. Thank you!

After writing this book and reflecting on the others that I have written, it dawned on me why I like this passage in Morris West's book *The Shoes of a Fisherman*:

It costs so much to be a full human being that there are very few who have the enlightenment, or the courage, to pay the price. . . . One has to abandon altogether the search for security, and reach out to the risk of living with both arms. One has to embrace the world like a lover, and yet demand no easy return of love. One has to accept pain as a condition of existence. One has to court doubt and darkness as the cost of knowing. One needs a will stubborn in conflict, but apt always to total acceptance of every consequence of living and dying. (1963, p. 254)

On the one hand, I have learned to live with the fact that I am flawed and full of contradictions. On the other hand, I have an unrelenting desire to be an authentic, caring person. That is my reason for getting up every morning and doing the work of a human rights teacher and activist. I clearly understand my daily challenges. The United States is an exceptional nation that

has an exceptional ability to produce people who do not want to humanely take care of one another. I do care about other people, to a fault, and I am trying to be a good fisherman of humane relationships.



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**CULTURAL DIVERSITY,  
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## Chapter 1

### THIS I BELIEVE

**T**his book is not written for people who devalue conciliatory or reconciliatory approaches to social change. Nor is it written for people who are looking for ways to disobey civil rights laws with impunity or for those who want to perpetuate tokenism. With eloquence that nearly matched her stage presence as a nationally renowned singer, Leontyne Price cautioned white Americans who only wanted a few, extremely talented black Americans like her to share our nation's educational, economic and social bounties: "All token blacks have the same experience. I have been pointed to as a resolution to things that have not yet begun to be solved, because pointing to us token blacks eases the experience of millions [of white people], and this is dreadfully wrong" (quoted in Riley, 1993, p. 65).

I have included a great amount of information about the civil rights era. That era was the beginning of the end of legalized bigotry in America. Our nation's Constitution was written by white men who kept for themselves, and other white men like them, most of the political power and social privileges. The successful accomplishments of black and brown activists and their white allies during the civil rights era were monumental. They laid the moral and legal foundations for all disenfranchised peoples to claim their fair share of our nation's power and privileges. *I believe that bigotry ought to become obsolete and legally unenforceable; and that social justice activists and their allies are the people who should do the work needed to help make it happen.* Each of us must confirm or deny our acceptance of bigotry. It is unimportant to me what social justice activists are called. But it is immensely important to oppressed people that somebody do the work of combating bigots.

## The Beginning of Bigotry

The lives of oppressed people are hollowed out by acts of bigotry. But bigotry is not inevitable. It is learned; and prejudice is bigotry's foremost byproduct. Prejudice should never have power over any of us. Contrary to some assertions, bigotry is not embedded in our genes. All babies are born free of prejudice. But they are taught to hate the people that their loved ones hate. Hate speech and intentional hateful behavior should not be ignored. Long before most people know better, their hateful beliefs about people are tightly wrapped in their minds with partial-truths and outright lies.

*I believe that sincere discussions about racial and ethnic group equality can be facilitated through civil conversations.* But expressing negative beliefs about other people for them to examine is discomforting and disquieting. Those conversations usually cover a wide range of emotions: love and hate, security and insecurity, pain and pleasure, and so forth. In the heat of those moments, words often erupt at such a rapid pace that it is hard for the recipients of the confessions to make sense of the content. None of us ever feel totally good about those encounters. They render us disturbingly transparent and shamefully vulnerable. Trying to change someone's deeply held beliefs is always tedious and exhausting. But I have not found a better way than talking about them to remove doubts and suspicions.

*I believe that when racial beliefs and practices are concretized and internalized, civil conversations alone can seldom produce positive changes.* Bigotry is always trapped in norms and behavior created for us by other people. And shedding those hateful norms and hateful behavior does not always culminate in happy endings. It is a truism that the truth can set us free from our ignorance, but first it will make us miserable. Even so, civil conversations can facilitate lasting friendships. Is this meaningless blather? I hope it is not. The following behaviors are the connective tissues of my activism:

1. I do not settle for seeing other people as stereotypes or caricatures. I do not treat them in certain ways based on stereotypes of them or their racial or ethnic groups.
2. I accept cultural differences and celebrate cultural similarities as being valid realities.
3. I try to find mutually acceptable, nonviolent ways to mediate individual and community conflicts.

4. I do not write or speak words with the intent to demean or otherwise demonize other persons, nor do I incite others to engage in that kind of behavior.
5. I have found these words to be very helpful when I am collaborating with other persons during social justice projects: “I admit I made a mistake,” “You did a good job,” “What is your opinion?” “If you please,” “Thank you.” Two of the most important words that I try to use consistently when working with other people are “we” and “us.” The least important word to me is “I.”

*I believe that it impossible to intuit good people from the bad ones by looking at them or listening to what they say. We have to dig deeper and find their intent.* There is an abundance of information about black-white race relations and male-female issues, but there is considerably less information about other marginalized or oppressed peoples. During the civil rights era, for example, a preponderance of media photos, news stories and movies depicted minorities in the United States as though they were insignificant or hopeless losers. The only people of importance in those activities were white people and a few token blacks. It was as though there were no other people living in the United States. The major exceptions were western movies and World War II movies. In westerns movies, there were always cowardly Indians or Mexicans (both of them often played by white actors). They were routinely killed by brave white cowboys or cavalrymen. The World War II movies had seemingly endless numbers of unscrupulous Japanese soldiers (largely played by non-Japanese) who were defeated by a few creative white soldiers. Most of peoples in other countries who saw those movies had no reason to think about other marginalized Americans. They were nonexistent in all but a few movies, novels and short stories. But bigots knew about them, and they taught their children to ignore them, to pity them, to hate them or to destroy them. I knew about them, too. And I was afraid of them.

*I believe that people who oppress others do it by virtue of their power over them.* Powerless people can seldom muster enough courage or community resources to alter their pitiful living situations. That is where humane helpers can come in. But it is not just oppressed people who need help. Their oppressors also need help to extricate themselves from their hateful beliefs and behavior. A great number of Americans have positive feelings about racial diversity and cultural inclusion. But

seldom do they get past esoteric conversations. So, I ask you: Are you someone who actively fosters cultural rapprochement? Cheers for you, if you are one of those persons.

*I believe that oppressed people do not want to be treated off-handedly as though they are irreparably damaged people.* Nor do oppressed people want their lives to be reduced to comedies or tragedies. To the contrary, they wish to be treated humanely. That wish is primal. All of us desperately want to be accepted as we are; and we do not want to become as bigots wish us to be. That is a primal need that too few marginalized individuals ever realize. Enlightened people give themselves permission to stop trying to please other people. But even then their lives do not always match what they wish for.

*I believe that adequately trained teachers, students and community activists can help abate or prevent hateful interactions on a case-by-case basis, but only if the other participants are willing.* Inadequately trained helpers engage in poorly designed and poorly executed social interventions. They carry out slapstick parodies of activism. But there is nothing funny about failed outcomes. If they are to promote positive self-concepts or otherwise help oppressed people, social and community interventions must be carefully created and skillfully carried out. Successful interventions can cause oppressed people to experience unexpected and joyful epiphanies. But it is unreasonable for anyone, oppressed or not, to expect all social justice interventions to be epiphanies. Most of our lives are characterized by mundane interactions, not magnificent ones. But an epiphany or two should be a birthright for all of us. At the very least, activists ought to shore up the backbones and tenacity of oppressed persons who want to be more than what they currently are.

*I believe that adequately trained teachers, students and community activists can help abate or prevent hateful conflicts on a case-by-case basis, but only if the other participants are willing.* But nothing good can be done if oppressed people have become unyieldingly accustomed to being victims. When that happens, they are truly powerless to improve their lives. Inertia is the perfect antidote to positive social changes. A democracy needs people to be actively involved in their own self-realization. Notwithstanding that fact, it is morally wrong for anyone to oppress other persons; and it is sad when oppressed individuals become inured with their plight. Nobody has the right to treat other people despicably. A long time ago, I decided to stop hating people who do cruel things to