

Heroes and Villains: From Black and White to I and Thou

I grew up in a typical midwestern family and culture that tended to be what you might call “seemingly-racist.” I say seemingly-racist because it was not as extreme as some and tended to be more covert which in ways this made it even harder to directly identify. Like a fish unaware of being wet, the subtle racism surrounded my world and was programmed into me a little bit at a time. I learned that “We” were better than Black people. “We” deserved more while “they” deserved less, was an underlying truth for “Us.”

Feeling both superior to Black people and afraid of them, I would surround myself with “My” people. As children, we would playfully sing limericks, laugh at jokes, and have sayings that suggested the inferiority of Blacks. “My” people felt the same sense of superiority and we consciously and unconsciously created a confirmation bias where we would reaffirm each other as being better than “them.” This was further confirmed in our minds because Blacks in my hometown didn’t have good jobs, didn’t speak “smart” like us, committed more crime, and didn’t have as good of dress and personal hygiene as we had; not realizing that much of this had to do with the economic and educational disparity.

My belief of White superiority held strongly until one afternoon while hanging out with a guy in college that I really admired. He was smart, deeply philosophical, with long hair and wearing Birkenstocks; and I really wanted him to be my friend. We had just finished a final exam together and decided to go celebrate at a bar. After a few beers, I mentioned that one of my “geeky” White friends had been arrested for shoplifting and was put in a jail cell overnight with a bunch of big Black guys. While I was laughing about this, I noticed that he had little response and was not laughing. When I asked him why he wasn’t laughing, he responded plainly “I just don’t know how I feel about it. I’m not sure if it is funny to laugh about people being afraid of each other.”

That moment created a sense of curiosity because he said it in a non-shaming and non-superior way, which kept me from becoming defensive and digging further into my long-held racist beliefs. His approach allowed me to start openly looking at myself and questioning the racial programming of my youth. Shifting the racist echoes in my mind has been a long process; and occasionally these echoes still rise to the surface if I feel threatened, unsafe, or inferior around a Black person. Each time these echoes surface, I view it as a good thing because it creates the opportunity where I can take another step in correcting the deep racial programming of my youth.

Recently, while watching “Blackklansman”, a movie about the first Black policeman in Colorado Springs, my understanding and perceptions of racism and myself shifted



further. The movie depicts how a Black policeman infiltrated and joined the Ku Klux Klan in the 1970s. The Black policeman did this by pretending to be White, while talking to local Klansman on the phone. These conversations evolved to the point where the Black policeman became a member of the KKK and ended up having regular phone conversations with David Duke, the Grand Wizard of the KKK.

While watching the movie, I had a perceptual shift in my understanding of racism and heroism. I was surprised by my shift of perception as I became aware of how courageous it was for this man on the screen to commit his life to protecting his race from injustice and threats from another race, no matter what the costs. It astonished me how he stood up against public opinion, risked personal injury, and fought for what he considered to be right in his heart of hearts. When I thought about what this man was doing and all of the qualities he demonstrated, the word that came to my mind was “hero.” Only people who demonstrate these qualities are considered heroes and at that moment, surprisingly in a way I saw David Duke, the Grand Wizard of the KKK, as a hero. I was a bit startled and a bit confused. How could I perceive someone I had seen as a villain, leading a cause that I felt was deeply immoral, as a hero. I was amazed at how much sacrifice, faith in his belief, and follow through there was in what he felt was truly right at his core, no matter the costs; while at the same time saw the pain, injustice, and racial divide that he was contributing to. I saw the Black police officer, Ron Stallworth, as a hero also deeply committed to putting himself at risk and making sacrifices on many levels for what he thought was morally right. Based on the qualities and actions of what I would consider constitutes a “hero” I could see how both would be considered heroes depending on which side of the issue you stood.

This insight took a while for me to process and settle into.

Taking moral preference out of the equation for a while was a weird space to be in, but it really helped me to see how millions of people were shocked and horrified with 9/11, while millions of others were happy because of it. Is David Duke good or bad, both, or neither is like saying, "Is a painting beautiful or ugly, both or neither?" The scientific and logical answer is neither. How can a painting be beautiful to 50% of the people and ugly to 50% of the people? Our preferences say absolutely nothing about the painting, but it says a lot about us. Similarly, your opinions about former President Trump say absolutely nothing about him, but it says a lot about you and your beliefs. Is David Duke a hero or a villain, 9/11 good or bad, Trump a prophet or only in it for the profit? Only you can say.

I am not suggesting that we discard morality. What I am suggesting is to consider that what we have been programmed to believe may not have the highest level of humanity in mind. What may have been considered moralistic centuries ago can be viewed as an atrocity today. The burning of "witches" and heretics, gays and Jews in the concentration camps, and "educating" the savages in the Americas was largely done by "good" people who thought that they were doing what was morally right. If these events happened by people who were certain that their beliefs were right and actions were good, then how certain can we be of our own beliefs?

I have spent a fair amount of time trying to understand our collective need for a sense of moral superiority and why as a species we tend to only see things from one perspective... our own. Fundamentally, I think it gives us a false sense of safety and power, but in reality, it tends to isolate, divide, and endanger us. With all of the political strife and strong opinions of our times, people are so sure that their opinions are right and what they want is best.

I have also contributed to this divide in the past and am making efforts to reduce this. Believe it or not, I was a person of strong political opinion and my family has spent many tireless hours over the years listening to me preach the "right" opinion to them. I realize now, that much of this was actually to over-compensate for my having felt very dumb in my youth. Doing this made me feel better about myself and better than them, but managed to only distance us and cause my family to dig even further into their own opinions. My approach of superiority tended to create division, conflict, and a mutual sense of frustration unless I was talking with people who held the same beliefs as I had. Airing this sense of superiority with likeminded individuals just reaffirms our sense of superiority and clearly being the ones in the

right. Leading us further and further into biased and narrow-minded understanding of the world.

This myopic lens of self-preservation is the main basis for separation and conflict in marriages/families, prejudice to justify discrimination, and world wars. How can we expect our political representatives to cross the aisle and work together for the collective good of our country, when we can't even do it with one another over the dinner table or on Facebook? In order to do this, it is necessary to open your lens with curiosity and respect for the other person's opinions. I'm not suggesting agreement. I am encouraging you to listen, consider, and then share your thoughts and opinions and disagree in the way that the young cool guy did with me many, many years ago in college. To do it in a way that is not arrogant and "knowing" that creates shame and defensiveness in the other party; but to do it in a manner where they feel heard and respected while expressing your own views. I would suggest being open to realizing that "right" and "wrong," "good" and "bad" as well as morality as being human inventions, to consider seeing people at the other end of the spectrum as possibly being heroic rather than villains, and that "those people" may be more like you than you thought.

By letting go of egoic bias, we can start to open up to a broader and richer understanding of ourselves, others, and the world. When we expand ourselves to really consider another person's perspective, we shift from an "I-it" viewpoint where others are seen as merely objects to be used to an "I-Thou" perspective when we are able to not only see, but to also experience ourselves in others. My transformative view with Black people as well as with David Duke was due to transforming my relational perspective from I-it to I-Thou. The I-it perspective tends to lead to separation, abuses of power, and a system that will not only destroy others, but will destroy itself in the end. Through an I-Thou perspective, we begin to deepen our understand of ourselves and others leading to an increased level of wisdom and compassion. When we do this, our barriers fade and we truly begin to heal and evolve in our families, friendships, and the world.

In my companion article, From "it" to "Thou": a Simple Recipe to Save Relationships, Ourselves and the World, I go into more detail explaining how the I-Thou concept has impacted my relationships with clients, loved ones, and the world. In the article, I explain in more detail about the difference between living in and experiencing a world from an I-it and an I-Thou perspective as well as how you can make the shift happen in your own life. I think you will agree that living in an I-Thou world is better for all of us.