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# TO RIGHT THE WRONGS OF THE AGES

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## Background of the Problem

Jennifer Gratz applied for admittance to the University of Michigan—never thinking but that she would be accepted. Why wouldn't she? She was a good student in her suburban high school. She was active in leadership and school spirit. She was twelfth in her class with a GPA of 3.79 and a solid score on the ACT. So confidently she filled out one application for one college and waited along with her classmates for the letter to arrive to tell her that she would be admitted to the college of her choice. And then her unthinkable happened—she was “wait-listed” and a couple of months later rejected for admission. She answered the Center for Individual Rights' search for a candidate to challenge the admission grids that the University of Michigan used in determining who would be admitted and who would not. The CIR was looking for a strong candidate to work to change the diversity policy of the University of Michigan (Belkin, 1998).

So what is this really about? Is this a case of someone being discriminated against? Is it just an unlucky break for someone? Is there a problem that needs to be addressed? Yes, indeed there is a problem to be addressed, but it is far deeper than one unhappy college girl. It is a problem of society that cannot be “fixed” by legislation or a law suit or a demanding of rights.

## Natural State of Humankind

The problem that the University of Michigan and other institutions is seeking to address is one of inequity. The roots of this problem are deep. They are deeper than slavery and oppression and colonialism and imperialism. They are as deep as human nature itself. In her book on historical theology, Leclerc (2001) has traced the roots of an untransformed life to two formats. One is the Augustinian concept of this nature as being pride, arrogance, self-interest and other forms of exaggerated self-esteem. While this has been a standard theological concept for centuries, Leclerc's

definitive work has assigned this form of the natural, non-transformed nature of humankind predominately to the male gender. Her work concludes that it generally does not fit a woman's nature as women are self-giving and often suffer from too little self-esteem. Instead, the untransformed nature in the feminine context is one of dependence on others for one's own self definition or a lack of a personal identity. Leclerc calls both of these strands of non-transformed human nature **idolatry**.

I would agree with Leclerc's ideas but I would like to alter her assignment of these concepts to gender. It seems to me that the Augustinian form can be assigned to persons who are the definitive norm of their culture. Because they are the norm in their culture, they do not suffer from a lack of an identity. I would broaden the second category beyond that of the feminine gender to include any who suffer under the arrogance of the normative of the culture. This would include minority groups as well. This is roughly stated for western culture as it currently presents itself. Eastern cultures gather around these two assignments in different ways because of the socio-psychological makeup of their societies. But it seems that the two concepts remain—though perhaps assigned differently in different contexts even for the same person.

### **Historical Perspective**

The logical conclusion of this condition of an untransformed humanity is that those who suffer from pride and arrogance, self interest and other forms of exaggerated self-esteem have succeeded in forming the normative of the society and have created systems of inequity and intimidation. As we look through history, we have example after example of this happening. Feudal systems throughout the world in centuries past exemplify this as well as slavery, colonization and subsequent mistreatment or murder of indigenous peoples, and the continued defining of society based on a normative culture which has an inflated view of itself—and probably does not even realize that it is only one amongst many identities. The voices of histories echo with atrocities of such inequities and it is not the purpose of this paper to recount history. One has only to listen to the voices to understand how insidious the misjudgments that have been leveled on others are.

### **As the World Turns—The Present**

So how does a society go about changing the inequities that exist? How does a society become transformed? Historically, there have been

two means of egalitarian reform. One of these is a bottom-up approach while the other is a top-down approach. Let's look first at the bottom-up approach. This involves many forms of affirmative action. According to McWhirter (1996) affirmative action is at least three things—affirmative recruitment, affirmative fairness, and affirmative preference. He indicates that three reasons have emerged to justify affirmative action. The first of these is the need to compensate for specific instances of race and gender discrimination in the past by particular organizations. The second reason to justify affirmative action is the need to remedy societal discrimination suffered by particular groups in the past at the hands of society in general. The third reason given to justify affirmative action is the need to create more diversity in a particular organization.

Steps of affirmative action include grassroots organizing against injustices. The Civil Rights movement with the marches and boycotts are an integral part of this bottom-up approach. The normative culture would have continued oblivious to [the kinder version] or impervious to injustice if their lives had not been disrupted by those who called attention to the need for justice. The labor strikes against the steel industry, the railroads, and the coal mines also produced laws that allowed laborers the right to form unions. Rubio (2001) outlines wave after wave of injustices where minorities effected some measure of change but all at great cost. We are familiar with Gandhi and his non-violent protests against injustices in India.

The top-down approaches to effecting change in society have come mainly in the form of legal or legislative action to enact laws to promote equality. Some of these included executive orders for dialogue, standards, and mandatory teacher in-service training (Eden & Ryan, 1999; D Souza, 1996; Halford, 1999; Pullen, 2000). From such documents as the Bill of Rights, to the Emancipation Proclamation, to Truman's executive order creating the Fair Employment Board, to Kennedy's executive order requiring federal contractors to take "affirmative action" to hire more minorities, to the Civil Rights Act of 1964, to Carter's Public Works Employment Act, to court cases on all sides of these issues with majority and minority opinions, the top-down approach has endeavored to superimpose what must come from within.

Both the bottom-up approach and the top-down approach to justice and fairness and equality have their limitations. Freire's (1970) caveat is that the oppressed may tend to become the oppressor when liberation occurs for this is their model of humanity. The limitation of the top-down approach is to want to withdraw affirmative action as per California's vote, and say that the laws are in place for equality so what more do we need to do?

## The Conclusion of the Matter

So in my opinion, neither of these is really the answer—as good as they may be insofar as they go. It is my belief, however, that a society cannot really be transformed unless individuals are transformed. A spiritual transformation of the individual is what must take place. That will involve either the finding of an identity not defined merely by dependence on others or it will involve a transformation from the pride, arrogance, and self-interest of those who look only to their own interests—or perhaps some combination of the two. For this transformation to occur, the individual must be drawn by the power of the Holy Spirit to have a personal encounter with Jesus Christ and be reconciled to God. The transformation is not of the individual's own doing, but is accomplished by the cleansing and indwelling power of the Holy Spirit through the renewing of one's mind (Romans 12:2), letting the peace of Christ rule in their hearts and the word of Christ dwell within richly (Colossians 3:15-16), becoming a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17), for by grace are we saved (Ephesians 2:8). The transformed person is God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do. (Ephesians 2:10).

The real answer to righting the wrongs of the ages comes when the transformed come together and form community. When minority has an identity and can lay aside expectation, and when the transformed normative culture lays aside its privilege—when it is no longer an “us” and “them” mentality, then we can become community. When we talk to one another, but more importantly, when we listen and hear one another; when we acknowledge who we are and when we find out who the others are around us; when we purposefully go beyond our insulated spheres and seek to know those beyond—then we will begin to make progress in eliminating injustices.

Because I am a White woman, I must look at solutions from my own perspective. I have walked the course of our young college woman who didn't get the placement she wanted. When a Black woman was hired for the teaching job I applied for, did I feel discriminated against? My father thought I had been discriminated against. But I understood the need for the affirmative action that was taken—and because no other teaching jobs were open to me at the time, I worked as a secretary. I grew through the experience and it was the beginning of a long journey of understanding what it means to be “my brother's keeper.”

I am inspired by the examples of those who have laid aside their privilege to serve their fellow human beings. In laying aside privilege, it is not to ever deny who one is—but to lay it aside and focus on others—that

is the key. Two people who exemplify this lifestyle for me will serve as examples here. One was the son of a prosperous twelfth century merchant. It was expected that he would take over his father's business, but instead, after experiencing a transformation, he laid it all aside and lived his life in poverty, simplicity, and piety—serving others. This was Francis of Assisi. The second example that inspires me is a woman from Yugoslavia named Agnes Gonxha Bojaxiu. Her transformation led her to love the poorest of the poor and to change her world. She was given the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979 and we know her as Mother Teresa. One life that lays aside privilege and truly forms community with the people around them can literally change the world.

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