

Minnijean Brown Trickey

Teacher, Writer, and Motivational Speaker



Minnijean Brown Trickey is one of the nine African American students who collectively resisted the opposition to the desegregation of Little Rock Central High School in 1957—an act of great historical importance that has been featured in numerous documentaries, magazines, television specials, and other media. Since making this courageous stance for social justice as a young woman, Brown Trickey has maintained a lifelong commitment to peacemaking, youth leadership development, diversity education and training, cross-cultural communication, and gender and social justice advocacy. She holds a Bachelor of Social Work in Native Human Services from Laurentian University and a Master's of Social Work from Carleton University. Brown Trickey served in the Clinton Administration as Deputy Assistant Secretary for Workforce Diversity and continues to be active as a teacher, writer, and motivational speaker. Minnijean Brown Trickey is the mother of three sons and three daughters.

Confronting Racism, Past and Present, to Heal Ourselves and Heal the World

As a social worker and a citizen, I claim to be the perennial community philanthropist devoting time, skill, and love to bring about the beloved community, sometimes by accident of fate and other times by choice. I admit to being a social worker who is touchy, feely, bleeding-hearted and as committed to empowerment as the worst stereotype of social worker implies. I believe in the adage, do no harm.

Based on what I have come to know, I believe unequivocally that those considered least among us tell us who we are, what our real values are. They are our mirror image. We may describe some as vulnerable, but their vulnerability is ours as well.

My actions have found me walking side by side with the least among us: Inuit and Aboriginal peoples in different parts of the world, youth, the incarcerated, the homeless, immigrant and refugee women, rich or poor schoolchildren of every rainbow hue, those with disabilities, victims of violence, and the list goes on. They are my friends, my neighbors, those I work with, and even my family. This is not a list to glorify myself, but a set of descriptors to indicate my range of experience and contact. Based on what I have come to know, I believe unequivocally that those considered least among us tell us who we are, what our real values are. They are our mirror image. We may describe some as vulnerable, but their vulnerability is ours as well. I translate that to mean if others are not free, then I am not free.

If they are us and we are them, the service we render as allies, advocates, activists, and community philanthropists can heal us and, ultimately, heal the world. But we can only heal the world by knowing something about the embedded social problems that plague us and those we serve.

Reflecting on Racism

At the base of Elizabeth Eckford's statue on the State Capitol grounds in Little Rock, an inscription of her words proclaims, "If we have honestly acknowledged our painful but shared past, then we can have reconciliation." Eckford is absolutely correct. Our past has predicted our future.

In my role as an educator—and to my own satisfaction—I had to find the definitive definition of racism, to find the ideas that have plagued us for centuries to help myself and others understand the intractability and resonance of racism in our lives. It is crucial to understand the source of racism and how deeply it is embedded in all our social relations. It is also important to see racism as bigger than individual acts against individuals. The definition I selected serves adequately for most forms of oppression and is the concept delineated by antiracism scholar Philomena Essed. In *Understanding Everyday Racism*, Essed states:

[K]eeping in mind that “race” is an ideological construction with structural expressions (racialized or “ethnicized” structures of power), racism must be understood as ideology, structure, and process in which inequalities inherent in the wider social structure are related, in a deterministic way, to biological and cultural factors attributed to those who are seen as a different “race” or “ethnic” group. “Race” is called an ideological construction, and not just a social construction, because the idea of “race” has never existed outside a framework of group interest. . . . Furthermore racism is a structure because racial and ethnic dominance exists in and is reproduced by the system through the formulation and application of rules, laws, and regulations and through access to and the allocation of resources. Finally racism is a process because structures and ideologies do not exist outside the everyday practices through which they are created and confirmed. These practices both adapt to and themselves contribute to changing social, economic, and political conditions in society.

During the framing of this nation, the social existence of blacks was determined at three-fifths of persons and as property. Legal scholar Richard Kluger describes this process as the “original sin,” the ideological creation of non-citizens of this glorious experiment that was to become the United States. Kluger states, “There it was stated in the most reasonable and monstrous fashion. White supremacy and black degradation were institutionalized within the very framework of the new government.” It follows—as indicated by Essed—that laws, rules, and policies must support ideology. The rage to preserve persons as property must be codified.

The Dred Scott decision ruled that the framers had no intention to include blacks as citizens. In this decision, the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court Roger B. Taney concluded that Negroes were “beings of an inferior order, and altogether unfit to associate with the white race, either in social or political relations, and so far inferior that they had no rights which the white man was bound to respect” (Kluger). The list of ways that blacks were excluded includes the court decisions, Black Codes, Jim Crow Laws, Sundown Laws, and local ordinances that barred blacks from suburbs, isolating them in cities. We have so many euphemisms for segregation, “inner city,” “reservations,” “internment,” even “the hood.”

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Do we wonder where our racist attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors come from? This is not designed as a history lesson, but as a reminder. We who are here today can be guilt-free, because we did not decide those things—they were decided for us. Guilt is inert. But the legacy is alive and well, in segregation, mass incarceration, unequal schools, poverty, and mistrust. Deb Reich, in her book *No More Enemies*, states it clearly, “it’s not the people . . . it’s the paradigm . . . loyalty to an idea can persist long past the time when any neutral observer knows that the idea is dead.”

If we as community philanthropists understand that we are saving ourselves, then according to Reich, our efforts have “this new orientation that would help liberate people whose lives as someone’s designated enemies have been grossly stunted, while other people are privileged at their expense. The new orientation could also liberate many of the unfairly or accidentally privileged from the spiritual wilderness of unearned advantage in which they pass their days.”

Moving Forward

In *Talking to Strangers*, Danielle Allen tells us that one of the first lessons we teach children is “don’t talk to strangers . . . but democracy requires vulnerability before one’s fellow citizens.” How can we talk to each other when we insist on using such terms as *different*, *strange*, and *alien*—terms that sound to me like other, not like me, not us, dangerous, a stranger. Difference, if we rethink Essed, is structured into our psyche—structured, but not inherent. We must remember this if, as we often claim, we consider that we want the same things for our families and ourselves as others do.

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Did we create slavery? No, we did not. But we are the beneficiaries of the wealth creation made by persons who worked uncompensated for centuries. Did we declare war on the indigenous peoples? No, we did not, but we live on the land we took from them and use its natural resources, while many of their descendants live in abject poverty on reservations. Did we create famines? No, we did not, but we can admire the resilience of the more than 40 million men, women, and children who are refugees in the world. Many refugees walked for countless miles to escape the ravages of famine or war. Some even watched their children die in their arms, yet they kept walking.

I have a good friend with Doctors Without Borders who worked in a refugee camp somewhere in Africa. She describes herself as an uptight white woman doctor who went to help—and of course, she did help. Yet she attributes her personal and professional transformation to a moment in the midst of suffering and tragedy when she was told, “You must dance!” And dance she did, with the women who insisted upon joy amid misery. This is no more or no less

than an example of how we deal with adversity, find ways to be resilient, and remain basically human in the face of overwhelming odds. Our responsibility is to tap into those strengths, and to honor those struggles.

Reich insists “that the decision, the intention to move toward no more enemies does not mean that every person walking the earth is suddenly good, benign, compassionate, and looking to promote the greater good for everyone. But by labeling them enemies, we only intensify and prolong the lack of harmony and synergy.” If we remember these truths, rather than denying them, could we do something about them?

We must know our painful shared history in order to stop repeating it. We can teach and learn. The challenge is great, as we fan out as philanthropists. Remember, and be ready to dance.

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