**The Strange Fruit of the Equity and Empathy Gap**

Each morning with alarming regularity, fresh evidence reinforces my perception that the malignancy of virulent hate and violence is worsening. Such is the strange fruit of the equity and empathy gap. It is too easy to succumb to hopelessness. Instead, we need to call out the causes and act.

Inequity is the fuel that feeds the fires of the racism and bigotry that underlie most of the pervasive violence around the world and in the United States. However, let’s be clear. Divisiveness enables the privileged to attain or maintain their power.

Others lash out in hatred to vent the pent up frustrations and fears for which no friend, family member, politician or spiritual leader have provided a better channel. When the patina of democracy disintegrates in a society dominated by the few some of the disempowered become susceptible to the simplistic appeal of blame and authoritarianism.

As a nation, the United States is infected with racial and socio-economic myopia. Sadly, the malignant biases that support the empowered also undermine the ability of the disempowered to identify and empathize with one another.

Disparate reactions to the hate-driven mass shootings in Orlando and Dallas and the videotaped killings of yet more Black men in Baton Rouge and Falcon Heights highlight growing divisiveness. As a society, we have refused to deal substantively with these perceptual differences. Too many politicians run from substantive solutions that cut to the core of how the intertwined plagues of racism and inequity scar everyday lives of all but the few.

Divergent race and class perceptions do not just shape ideas about justice and police behavior. They also shape the debate about how to improve educational outcomes for students of color in poor neighborhoods. Billionaires and their political allies see low levels of performance of students of color through their presumptive lens of unmotivated teachers with low expectations. They ascribe causation to poor kids who have not learned what they imagine are the success-driving behaviors of their privileged children.

Alternatively, others see teachers with too few resources and too little support to educate students whose lives are extraordinarily challenged. They ascribe causation to a society in which racism and inequity are endemic and pervasive. Here too, politicians run from tackling the roles of racism and poverty and instead accept the facile charge that opponents of market-driven education schemes or over-testing just want to make excuses for bad teachers.

As a nation, we continue to be stunned when people look at the same events or data and reach sharply divergent conclusions. We should not be so surprised. Even in places where some, but not all, folks interact with one another daily, their lived experiences are markedly different. As many have vividly recounted, the stuff of daily life — a walk down the street, a visit to a department store, feeding one’s family, sending the kids off to school each day, and most significantly, a chance encounter with the police – are all mediated by race and class.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the achievement gap was the common referent for disparate education outcomes related to race and class differences. Later, trying to shift attention from test results to causation, some began to speak about an opportunity gap. That made sense to me because it focused attention on the inequitably distributed educational and community resources that framed widely divergent opportunities to learn.

Now, however, the United States has a far deeper problem. We have a profoundly endogenous equity and empathy gap. What the too frequent impunity of police in disproportionate killing of Black men and the market competition and no-excuses behavioral prescriptions for school improvement have in common, is a failure to imagine the life experience of another. It is particularly difficult for the empowered to visualize what it is like to be disempowered, especially without social pressure to do so. And, without forging common cause, even small differences in relative powerlessness lead to a failure to empathize. In the last three decades, our ability as a nation to engage in multiple-perspective taking appears to have deteriorated.

This deterioration has many parents.

First, it is the result of vast and growing structural inequality and the erosion of democracy. The rules and processes that govern day-to-day life are increasingly influenced by a tiny percentage of unfathomably wealthy individuals. They live in a rarified environment. Even when they advocate for others, it is within the context of maintaining, if not increasing, their power and influence. Their education remedies are for other people’s children. The empowered treat police brutality as if it is a problem of others’ (the victims) behavioral pathology, rather than a systemic problem to which extreme wealth and poverty contribute.

Second, hardening patterns of residential racial and economic segregation and divergent employment opportunities mean that the rest of us interact less often. We fail not just to interact across perceptions, but temporally and spatially. As a result, it is more difficult to identify common problems and easier for divisiveness to plant seeds, grow roots and thrive. In tough times, people often come to see their survival as contingent on the diminishment of others.

Finally, public schools — the one place where young people might engage in planned early experiences with perspective-taking across differences — are becoming more balkanized in the name of choice and more focused on narrowing academic outcomes in the name of better test results. In addition, the test-driven focus on reading and mathematics has diminished attention to science and social studies, the two areas of study that might engage students in discussions of controversial issues, evidence-based thinking, examination of bias in reaching conclusions, and reasoned argumentation.

I am searching for hope. However, hope will not be found in the next charismatic leader, at least not without an emerging interracial mass movement for which average citizens do the building. I do see a ray of light in courageous people who continue to defy negative community norms to make a moral and strategic case for common ground. I see it in relentless researchers and writers who expose the hypocrisy of the powerful who seek benefit from division. I see it in parents and teachers who push back against their schools being taken over and turned into testing factories. I see it in the diversity of citizens who demonstrate their outrage and call for unbiased justice.

Now is the time to close the equity and empathy gap.

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