

Dear Senator Obama:

You've expressed an interest in a frank and open discussion on race in this country. I think you have a good idea and I'd like to offer my perspective.

I am 60 years old. My wife and I are white. We live in Houston. I began growing up in the Navy, living in integrated enlisted housing. My family settled in Houston, not far from my father's hometown, when I was in fifth grade. I went through a segregated public school system here. I recall separate water fountains in grocery stores and rest rooms in cafes. I remember wondering what it must feel like to be told you weren't good enough to drink from the same fountains as white people.

Attitudes on race in our all-white, working-class suburb were less than enlightened. Racist language was routine. My own father wasn't especially prejudiced in that setting but he said things like, "But that doesn't mean I have to have one of them in my home."

I went away to college and then lived in Kansas City and Chicago for a time before returning to Houston in 1975. I'd like to tell you about some changes I've seen.

My only grandchild, Caleb, is 13. He attended a public school in an outer suburb for a few years and I went to some assemblies there. I saw large numbers of white, black, Latino, East Asian and South Asian kids. It looked like a Junior United Nations. He is now in his fourth year in a private Christian school where I serve on the board of trustees. It is less diverse, but in his class of 17 there are three African-American youngsters.

Our school has a number of other African-Americans, in addition to Africans, Latinos, Russians, Filipinos, Dutch-Chinese, Chinese, Korean-Americans and Lebanese. Our headmaster, Mr. Zeal, is Welsh and his assistant, Mrs. Raad, is Lebanese.

Caleb has invited some of his friends to spend the night at our house. The boy who has come most often is African-American. Another who has visited is Lebanese.

One of my fellow board members is a Korean married to a white American woman who grew up on the mission field in Central America and whose parents were killed while serving as missionaries in Iraq. Another is a Dutch woman who

came to Houston to complete her medical training at Baylor College of Medicine. She married a Chinese man who grew up in Australia, came to the U.S. to attend MIT, joined a major oil company and moved to Houston.

We live on a short street in a middle-class neighborhood not far from the Texas Medical Center. There are 18 houses on our street. On one side of us is an Indian family and on the other a single Mexican woman. Directly opposite us is an African-American family, flanked by Indonesians on one side and another black family on the other. On our street we also have a Filipino family and some others whose ethnicity I don't know. It's a quiet street. Most of us seem to keep to ourselves but that's not due to any hostility as far as I can tell.

For six years, my wife and I attended an integrated church less than 10 minutes from our house. We had a few Asians and Latinos but the membership was almost 50 percent black and almost 50 percent white. In six years, our black pastor never mentioned black grievances against white America from the pulpit. He never ventured into the political arena. Like your Rev. Wright, Pastor Smith is a gifted speaker and an engaging fellow who is in demand around the country, but he just preaches the Bible – Do not repay evil for evil, things like that. It's a church of about 200.

Somebody there decided once we should have some men's meetings on racial reconciliation. We had a few but they died out before long because nobody could come up with anything pressing to reconcile. It was pretty dull.

For more than a year, I have been preaching the English service at a Korean church. One of its Korean members has a Dutch husband. They met while she was studying violin at Julliard. He grew up in Barcelona, took his doctorate at Columbia and came to Houston to teach Latin American literature at Rice.

At the prison where I have ministered for almost a decade, we have black guys, white guys, Latino guys and even the occasional Vietnamese guy. Of the several men I have taught and mentored, the one I've grown closest to is an African-American. The program director, also African-American, has become a good friend.

Senator Obama, my world is awash in diversity. We're so diverse that we pay very little attention to how diverse we are. Things are happening organically out here in the real world that can't be engineered by government and don't come about when people hole up in monotone enclaves. The rainbow coalition of kids scampering around Veritas Christian Academy pay as much attention to race as I do to astrology.

I am a white American male and as such a member of one of the most privileged classes that has ever lived. I don't presume to tell people of color how they should interpret a history of slavery and segregation or how they should feel. But we're swapping thoughts here so I wanted to get mine on the record.

You have represented yourself as an agent of change. I wonder how you reconcile your stated purpose with your membership for 20 years in a church pastored by a man who has done his utmost to nurture the grievances of the past in thousands of people. I've heard your talk about context but I don't understand what context could justify making up lies about the U.S. government intentionally infecting our black citizens with HIV/AIDS. May I say that you are a Muslim, which I know to be untrue, and then say that I was entitled to say it because you're a member of a church that was pastored by a race-baiting friend of Louis Farrakhan? Would spreading a vicious lie be justified by other, positive things I have done in my life?

If your agenda is truly one of change, why would you lend your considerable prestige and influence to keeping old wounds open? When you were called out, you mentioned that white people have race-based grievances as well and branded your grandmother a racist. Are these acts likely to promote the change you advertise? The reaction I've heard and read from many African-Americans suggests something quite different, a bunker mentality that insists on justifying the sentiments Rev. Wright expressed. Some southern whites could respond that they grew up in a racist environment and can hardly be expected to break with their forefathers, but I hope they don't.

It's important that you know that some of us are indeed changing. I don't imagine that none of my neighbors nurses a race-based grievance and I would hardly pretend that we have stamped out racial prejudice in this country. The change, however, has been unmistakably real in my lifetime. Encouraging a climate of victimization won't facilitate more of it. Preaching that we haven't advanced and citing our perfection deficit as evidence doesn't engender hope; it destroys it.

I read in the Houston Chronicle that E. Ethelbert Miller, described as an Afro-American studies expert, spoke of blacks hearing Wright's words in terms of looking in a mirror to get a better self-concept. He added, "You have to turn away; if you look too long, it's narcissistic. Sometimes you have to be radical and smash the mirror. And then you go outside and take your rightful place in the world." Mr. Miller sounds like a smart fellow. Narcissism corrodes the soul. A person will never take his rightful place in the world until he moves beyond it. Besides, our Lord tells us to die to self so we might live for him.

That's the fundamental problem with liberation theology. Biblically, all worship is eucharistic, an expression of gratitude to God. The person who is consumed with the wrongs he has suffered, whatever his color, cannot put his focus on God and give thanks to him for all that he has. He is instead consumed with what he believes he has been denied. In the Bible, Joseph blesses beyond measure those who sold him into slavery.

One of my fears concerning the course you are charting is that you will expand the culture of victimization and entitlement beyond race to class. You and others are bombarding the middle class in our country with messages about how deprived we are. If the economic downturn lingers, people accustomed to buying a new car every two or three years may have to wait four or five. Those who got greedy and bought a house they couldn't afford might have to live in an apartment. Some who lose jobs might have to take more training and learn other skills. What a scandal.

Whatever you say or do in this area, I won't vote for you because of your stands on abortion, homosexual unions and other issues. You may become president, however, and if you do you could do a great deal to improve race relations. You could say that slavery was a terrible chapter and that both the blacks who sold their fellow Africans into bondage and the whites who bought those slaves did inhuman things. That no one today is responsible for the actions of his ancestors he never met. That it's time to emulate Joseph and overcome hate with love. That unity does not issue from festering wounds but from the balm of Gilead, which heals the sin-sick soul:

*If you can't preach like Peter,
If you can't pray like Paul,
Just tell the love of Jesus,
And say He died for all.*

In a city the size of Chicago, I believe there must be a church such as the one I described in Houston, where the gospel is preached and integration has happened. You could join a truly integrated church that exalts Christ, rightly divides his word and proclaims that all who confess him are one in him. So doing, you would exhibit the courage of unifying leadership.

Those are my thoughts. I'm glad you opened the discussion.

In Christ,

Ed Fowler