

This piece was written for a local newspaper, *The Olympian* while serving as a member of the Diversity Panel from 2007 through 2008.

## **Powerful, misunderstood four-letter word is divisive**

By David Whitfield | The Olympian • Published February 02, 2007

There's a four-letter word that divides families, churches, communities and sometimes nations. I believe one of the main reasons it is so powerful is because it is misunderstood; it is misunderstood because we dare not talk about it; we dare not talk about it because it evokes emotions, frustration, anger and often violence.

The four-letter word is race.

What difference does race make and what are its effects on us?

In 1849, Benjamin Disraeli argued, "The difference of race is one of the reasons why I fear war may always exist; because race implies difference; difference implies superiority; and superiority leads to dominance."

Disraeli had prescience about race as you'll see below in a few historical examples. But first, let's look at the origin of race.

During workshops, I ask, "Where did race come from?"

The silence is deafening.

According to the literature, such as Robert Jensen's book, "The Heart of Whiteness," race is a social construct invented by white people for the purpose of dominance and control. Jensen adds, "Race is a fiction we must not accept and a fact we must never forget."

In L. C. Dunn's "The Race Question in Modern Science: Race and Science," he wrote, "The modern view of race, founded upon the known facts and theories of heredity, leaves the old views of fixed and absolute biological differences among the races without scientific justification."

Historical examples abound regarding dominance and control. Hitler's ideas of racial purity led to unprecedented atrocities in Europe. Other historical examples are the Balkans, Rwanda and South Africa.

Coming home to the United States, on the one hand, race has been a source of restraint, dominance, friction, animosity, frustration and sometimes murder. On the other hand, race has been a source of privilege, abuse of power, advantage, gain, denial and superiority, leading to social and economic injustice.

We all participate in this social construct, as social beings in perpetuating the effects of race knowingly or unknowingly. So, I ask you, "How can we challenge our status quo in thinking, our attitudes and beliefs in our communities about race?"

I believe, first, by understanding it more, its origin, its implications and consequences, with the goal of starting a dialogue among us - dialogic civility.

Second, challenge ourselves by shifting our attitudes and beliefs consistent with suggestions left by an anonymous author: "You and I - we meet as strangers, each carrying a mystery within us. I cannot say who you are. I may never know you completely. But I trust that you are a person in your own right, possessed of a beauty and value that are the Earth's richest treasures. So I make this promise to you: I will impose no identities upon you, but will invite you to become yourself without shame or fear. I will hold open a space for you in the world and allow your right to fill it with an authentic vocation and purpose. For as long as your search takes, you have my loyalty."

Finally, if just for a moment, we could open our mind to everything and close it to nothing.

