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JUNE 2020

Race, Privilege and Power - the Balance of Inner Work and Outer Action

When I was first invited to contribute this article, I felt overwhelmed by the responsibility. It felt so inappropriate for me to be writing on the subject of race, at this time when I am acutely aware of the need to give space and attention to the voices of black people and other people of colour, who have been marginalised for so long. And yet it is for all of us to investigate our part in this story. I am grateful for many conversations with people who shared their painful experiences and insights with me, and especially for long, touching and inspiring conversations with Clare Miller and Zenzi Hobongwana Graham, whose suggestions are gratefully included here.

I'm writing as a white woman from the UK. We have a different history and a different present from the USA, despite the parallels and similarities, and yet racism is systemic and endemic here as well. This is the country from where the slave ships set out, and the colonisers too set sail around the globe to take advantage of the riches and beauties of so many countries in the global South. Much of the infrastructure of our country was built by slaves and immigrant workers from those lands, and the privileges of our society are built on the backs of huge inequities, invisible to so many of us. But we are being asked to wake up! The world is changing, and conversations about race, power and privilege are opening up all over the place, at last. There is a powerful wave of consciousness and energy coming through and gathering momentum across the world. It is our responsibility to open our hearts and minds, to be receptive, listen, tune in... The time for change is now. There is no going back. Inspiring young people all over the world are standing up and leading the way. It is time to stand in the truth, the truth that we are One.

But how do I investigate my white privilege and educate myself about the best way to move forward into a new world of understanding, equality and respect? How can we as the Sufi Ruhaniat International be proactive in making ourselves an open and welcoming community, making connections and broadening who we are? It isn't going to happen by itself! It's no longer enough just to proclaim our Oneness while ignoring the painful truths of unconscious bias, inequality and separation.

My route seems to be tracing the narrow path (as all worthwhile journeys do), the path which balances Peace and Justice. Once again, I am being called to act, not simply to sit and meditate, sending love and healing to the situation. Look, that's always a good thing to do, but hard times call for hard dancing, and God has no hands on the Earth but ours. How do we expect change to come about, real change, except by the work and graft of each one of us doing what it takes?

And yet it's a common misconception that *I* have to do all the work, that it's all up to *me*. (The voice of capitalist individuality? A kind of colonisation of the situation?) Hazrat Inayat Khan reminds us that "the whole universe is one symphony. In this every individual is one note, and our happiness lies in becoming perfectly attuned to the harmony of the universe." In other words, my job is to play my note as perfectly as I can, for no-one else can do that, and together we become more than the sum of the parts, in the great miracle of harmonious collaboration. So, what is mine to do? How do I tune my note more perfectly? Back to the meditation cushion!

The call is for unflinching compassionate self-witnessing. Compassionate, because without compassion I can tip over into shame and numbness, feeling disempowered - what can I do anyway? I'm just one person, so weak and flawed, and this problem is so huge. (A similar situation can be encountered with the climate crisis, leading to inaction and overwhelm.) But unflinching because the route on this journey leads inward, to learning more about who I am, my experiences, my privileges, and also about the parts of myself that I have discriminated against, treated with violence and hate, rejected and cast out to wander in the darkness of ignorance. These hungry ghosts are the ones who can fuel a fear of scarcity, a fear of other, which can give rise to subtle or not-so-subtle acts of ignorance and micro-aggression.

I can also investigate with searing honesty my own experiences of being 'othered' - and extrapolate from that to a place where my desire to act with justice and kindness comes from a felt place of understanding and empathy with the one hundred times a day experiences of 'othering' which so many are enduring, which I may now begin to open my eyes to seeing.

The narrow route of balance lies between peace and justice, gentleness and power, inner work and outer action. Compassion and forgiveness of self for the mistakes and blindness that come from ignorance and privilege, balanced with a fiery determination to be the best I can be, to learn, grow and aspire to ever greater understanding and compassion for the situation others find themselves in. Listening to their stories (remember Murshid SAM, who said the secret to his success was 'Big Ears!'), reading and researching, taking responsibility for doing the work. Deep gratitude and appreciation for the advantages which have for example (however unconsciously) eased my way into education, the great doorway to opportunity; combined with the passion to make those advantages available to all.

Recently I was sharing some of these thoughts with a group of older, white people, all of great sensitivity and intelligence, great willingness and desire to act in the best way possible. "But what can we do?" they asked. Living as we often tend to here in the northern UK, in isolated communities which are not at all diverse, it can be hard to know how to change. Fortunately, there are so many resources out there now, being shared on social media and the internet. Reading lists; causes to donate to financially such as bail funds and funeral funds; letters to write to politicians; petitions to sign; online educational resources. No-one needs to be excluded from these opportunities to learn and grow, even in these times of Covid19 and isolation, lockdown or shielding. Some suggestions to start with are listed here:

https://docs.google.com/document/u/0/d/10iIz_pFB8DzPkwddc8dcmJdJ0ZMITfTs7lvs4uyusZk/mobilebasic?fbclid=IwAR0eM6Jm2hjzli0X_qD_JGBbuKT8yu4w87lJm7PFP3LOlkF9ZGynzn28w5gh<https://decolonizingyoga.com/><https://leoniedawson.com/racism/>

Book suggestions:

Natives: Race and Class in the Ruins of Empire, by Akala

Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race, by Reni Eddo-Lodge

We are so blessed with our many beautiful practices which can support our inner growth and self-understanding, working with compassion, forgiveness, strength, our essential oneness, and all the many balancing opposites, culminating in the balance of the inner work of reflection, practice and prayer, with the outer work of action, activism and education.

What is yours to do?