

Racial Healing Circles: Empathy and Liberal Education

By: Gail C. Christopher

Launched by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation and supported by several foundations, the Truth, Racial Healing & Transformation (TRHT) effort is an adaptation of the globally recognized Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) concept. However, the TRHT effort has been designed to better address the multidimensional and protracted history of racial division and hierarchy that is a hallmark of the United States. Because of this history, TRHT focuses more on healing and transformation than on reconciliation, which implies a return to good relations after a conflict.

TRHT aims to jettison the false belief in a hierarchy of human value and replace that archaic notion with a reverence and appreciation for the equal and interconnected nature of the human family. The five components of the TRHT framework are Narrative Change, Racial Healing and Relationship Building, Separation, Law, and Economy. A full explanation of each component of the framework can be found in the *Truth, Racial Healing & Transformation Implementation Guidebook* (W.K. Kellogg Foundation 2016).

The TRHT effort places racial healing as a centerpiece of its framework. I have designed an approach entitled Rx Racial Healing, which brings together a diverse group of people in the safe, respectful environment of a racial healing circle. Racial healing practitioners encourage (but do not force) participants to share stories in pairs, using tailored prompts and questions that elicit stories of empowerment and agency.

“Because of the hurt and shame and the viral nature of unhealed oppression, people don’t talk about it and may even perpetuate it,” says Liz Medicine Crow, president and chief executive officer of the First Alaskans Institute, which engages in racial healing work. Storytelling, she explains, “allows us to go deeper with our hearts and minds, which creates space to transform and to be transformed” (AAC&U 2016, 34).

Jettisoning the belief in a human hierarchy is a process of “unlearning” as much as learning. Racial healing workshops and experiences can be helpful in this unlearning process. They have been successfully used with thousands of people over several decades. Most approaches to racial healing affirm the common humanity of all people and encourage participants to recognize the absurdity of believing in a racial hierarchy.

Racial Healing and Liberal Education

As a valued TRHT organizational partner, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) is leading the creation of TRHT Campus Centers in colleges and universities across the United States, with support from Newman’s Own Foundation and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. AAC&U selected the first ten TRHT Campus Centers in 2017. (See the [box](#) below.) The centers have developed and are implementing action plans to facilitate racial healing on their campuses and in their communities. (Visit

<https://www.aacu.org/trht> to learn more.) Recent increases in public racist rhetoric, child bullying, racial hatred, violence, and scapegoating of immigrant and minority groups, coupled with increasing numbers of white supremacy groups that target college campuses for recruitment and protests, make the work of TRHT Campus Centers prescient and urgent (Levin and Reitzel 2018).

As AAC&U president Lynn Pasquerella writes, “A liberal education invites a diversity of perspectives and provides students with the skills necessary to examine their own assumptions and those of others; to propose, construct, and evaluate arguments; to anticipate and respond to objections; and to articulate with precision, coherence, and clarity a defense of their views, orally and in writing, to those who need convincing” (2016, 18).

I believe the capacity for empathy and for perspective taking are requisite skills for achieving the goals of a liberal education. Faculty and student participation in effective racial healing circles can support liberal education outcomes in the following ways:

- Racial healing circles provide opportunities to engage with perceived others in ways that enable self-reflection and nonthreatening acknowledgment of one’s own previously unquestioned assumptions and biases.
- Faculty and student participants gain direct experience sharing authentic personal narratives among diverse peers, which enhances their perceptions of human interconnectedness while increasing their capacity for empathy and understanding.
- Participants become more willing to explore the historic and contemporary consequences of adhering to the fallacy of a racial hierarchy.
- Finally, participants gain a heightened sense of responsibility for taking actions to reduce needless human suffering and promote fairness and equity for the greater good.

Truth, Racial Healing & Transformation (TRHT) Campus Centers

- Austin Community College (TX)
- Brown University (RI)
- The Citadel, The Military College of South Carolina (SC)
- Duke University (NC)
- Hamline University (MN)
- Millsaps College (MS)
- Rutgers University–Newark (NJ)
- Spelman College (GA)
- University of Hawai’i at Mānoa (HI)
- University of Maryland Baltimore County (MD)

What Effective Racial Healing Circles Are and Are Not

While there are many approaches to the racial healing process, it is important to clarify what racial healing circles are not. They are not anti-racism trainings or workshops on dismantling structural racism. They also are not the old twentieth-century race relations work, designed to promote “tolerance” of the other. Perhaps most importantly, racial healing circles are not “conversations about race.” To say that the work is about race is to reinforce the belief system based on the false idea of multiple human races. Through racial healing circles, we intend to embrace the true reality of the human family, and the myth of racism is a barrier to that intention. Rx Racial Healing helps participants move beyond that myth and immerse themselves in the commonalities of our shared human journey, while acknowledging the very real consequences of exposure to racism and honoring diverse cultures and experiences.

Circle processes, including racial healing circle processes, are rooted in the spiritual and community-sustaining models of many Indigenous cultures. During the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Europeans and Americans appropriated and popularized the idea of using circles to gather groups together for healing and growth (Baldwin 1998). Self-help circles, addiction recovery circles, restorative justice circles, conflict resolution circles, peacemaking circles, and disease support group circles are just a few examples.

People have used circles for healing engagement over sustained periods of time because of a few inherent qualities:

- Circles temporarily suspend real and perceived hierarchies. Everyone is equal in the circle.
- Circles meet basic human needs for connection through eye contact, proximity to others, and the experience of belonging.
- Circles support focus and attention away from distractions.

In addition, the racial healing circle process emphasizes empathy. Empathy and tolerance are very different outcomes. Rather than simply tolerating another person’s existence, empathy involves the art of perspective taking and requires awareness and understanding of the experience of another. Sharing authentic stories in a deftly facilitated circle of engagement helps increase empathy for individuals and collectively among all circle participants. The Rx Racial Healing approach makes story an action. The focus, attention, and deep listening generate powerful changes in perception that help break down biases. Neither TRHT work nor a liberal education can be limited to cognitive work alone. Both must also engage the heart. Making story a verb, an action, is a way of engaging the heart.

I have been incorporating the circle process into social program design since the 1980s, including in the educator support and training program Appreciative Learning and the national multicultural education program Americans All (Brown McCracken,

Christopher, and Sreb 1991; Christopher 1991). Beginning in 2008, I adapted this healing circle model and approach for the W.K. Kellogg Foundation's America Healing annual convenings and for the TRHT national convening in 2016. Approximately seventy-five racial healing practitioners from diverse backgrounds were engaged to support these convenings.

In addition, I recently worked with AAC&U, the American Library Association, and racial healing practitioners to conduct a two-day Preparation Process to begin to cultivate a new cohort of racial healing practitioners. Representatives from the ten TRHT Campus Centers, five additional campuses, and five libraries participated in the process, which was held at Duke University. Participants reviewed the core elements of racial healing circles and had the opportunity to design and cofacilitate a practice circle. The Preparation Process was aimed at building capacity for TRHT partners to sustain their own localized efforts.

Imagining Transformation

The broad goals of a liberal education – to increase students' analytical and critical thinking skills – are necessary to understanding truth. TRHT's transformational goal involves racial healing and requires the imagination. We must envision a future United States that no longer believes in the fallacy of a racial hierarchy, a nation that truly celebrates our equal and connected humanity. As John Paul Lederach of Humanity United says, this work requires us to “nourish and foster the creative imagination that permits [us] to bring into the world something that does not now exist” (Ferrera, Lederach, and Tippett 2018).

In response to increasing gun violence and police violence, student and youth protesters are using “die-ins.” So many Black, Latino, Native American, Asian American, immigrant, LGBTQ, and White young people are dying needlessly that protesters are lying down in the streets to simulate death in solidarity. It is a variation on the “sit-ins” at segregated lunch counters and elsewhere. There is one striking symbolic difference, however. Sit-ins portrayed the “desired state” of the right to be treated equally. The die-ins do not. Instead, they dramatically illustrate the crisis and, in some ways, align with the truth-telling aspect of social change. I applaud the courage and creativity of these protesters. Social change always requires multiple interventions. However, as a holistic health care provider turned social change agent, I feel compelled to share four relevant lessons that I have learned over the decades about change-making, which I have incorporated into the Rx Racial Healing methodology:

1. There is power in first imagining the desired change. We must see and be the change and find ways to practice the desired state or “just future.” Effective racial healing circles emphasize diversity among participants, modeling the desired state of coming together as one community.

2. Human beings are wired for connection. I believe the deepest and most enduring wounds come when people thwart this biological and psychological imperative by “othering” through discrimination, exclusion, minimization, and oppression. The resulting stress – and sometimes trauma – increases vulnerability to disease. Chronic stress can impede the creative and cognitive capabilities that people need for resilience (McEwen and Gianaros 2011). Spending time in racial healing circles can interrupt negative exposures (temporarily, at least) and model a space of welcome and belonging. This experience helps to generate countervailing physiological responses through feelings of relaxation and healing.
3. To be human is to “story” – to create and express an authentic personal narrative that our brains are wired to embed, understand, and share. Effective racial healing circle design invites story sharing between two people in a safe and affirming manner.
4. Thanks to advances in neuroscience and imaging and scanning technologies, scientists have gathered data that indicate how experience, attention, and focus can generate measurable increases and changes in neural cell connections (Schwartz and Begley 2002). Scientific research now supports what masters in music, dance, art, athletics, and literature have espoused for centuries: practice makes perfect. Or, certainly, practice increases human capacity for specific behaviors. Translating this idea to racial healing work, we see that when we learn counterstereotypes in an attentive, focused effort, we can individually and collectively reduce bias and avoid automatically acting upon our stereotypical perceptions.

A wise mentor of mine used to say, “Child, if they knew better, they’d do better.” But life has taught me not to equate simply knowing with doing. Unlearning is more complex. Ultimately, our feelings motivate us and our fears can inhibit us. I would alter her wise saying to, “Child, if they both knew and felt better – if they believed better – they’d do better.”

Looking Back, Moving Forward

The United States’ foundational economic, governmental, religious, educational, health, social, civic, and philanthropic institutions practiced acceptance of a hierarchy and taxonomy of our diverse human family. The system of assigned value and assumed character traits was based on superficial physical features (such as skin color and facial features) and on continents of origin. American University scholar Ibram X. Kendi (2016) has compiled the most thorough history of these ideas in *Stamped from the Beginning*, which won the 2016 National Book Award for Nonfiction.

There have been episodic movements and significant progress toward equity in the United States since the end of the Civil War, but that progress has been subject to dramatic reversals when political leadership has changed. When we examine the reversal of gains made during Reconstruction and the Civil Rights era and the shifts in

racialized immigration policies over the decades, we come face to face with the reality of a persistent insistence, by some, on the idea of a racial hierarchy.

In a 2013 *New York Times* book review of Craig Steven Wilder's *Ebony and Ivy: Race, Slavery, and the Troubled History of America's Universities*, reviewer Jennifer Schuessler praises Wilder for taking a broad look at the role of slavery in the development of US universities. She quotes James Wright, former president of Dartmouth College: "Slavery was deeply embedded in all our institutions, which found ways to explain and to rationalize slavery even after the formation of the American republic" (2013). The deeply held belief in a hierarchy of human value fueled those explanations and rationalizations.

It should come as no surprise that this country's system of higher education was intimately immersed in the ethos of the times of its formation. Enslavement of and discrimination against people of color was the norm in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The United States was conceived not in liberty but in slavery and dominated by the belief in a hierarchy of human value. In his award-winning 2014 book, *The Counter-Revolution of 1776*, author Gerald Horne argues convincingly that the Revolutionary War was fought primarily to preserve slavery as abolitionist sentiments grew in Britain.

The false biological and philosophical construct of a taxonomy of humanity has long since been debunked by anthropology, genomic science, and social science. Yet its legacy and destructive consequences remain, as do the remnants of the belief itself. It is expressed primarily through unconsciously motivated behaviors, but sometimes through overt, conscious, and even hateful actions. What is surprising and unacceptable is our ongoing state of denial and subsequent failure to thoroughly grapple intellectually and morally with the facts, consequences, implications, and feelings generated by this shameful aspect of American identity.

June 6, 2018, marked the fiftieth anniversary of the assassination of Robert F. Kennedy. In a television interview about her 2018 book, *Robert F. Kennedy: Ripples of Hope*, Kerry Kennedy describes her father's message for the country: "You have to think of your enemies as your brothers and sisters" (2018). This belief helped him during the Cuban missile crisis and in working with diverse communities.

I believe that the ability to take the perspective of the other and to empathize is the cornerstone of a stable democracy. Empathy is as foundational to democracies as free and fair elections. While the United States has some systems in place to foster free and fair elections, we have no systems to foster the individual and collective capacity for empathy. Effective racial healing circle experiences are designed to help participants increase their capacity for empathy.

I applaud the colleges and universities that have begun to examine their past relationships to slavery and to the decimation and colonization of Indigenous people and the confiscation of their lands. The process of looking back and moving forward requires that all people hone their abilities to both understand and begin to see themselves in the experiences of the perceived other. Racial healing circles, when effectively implemented, can enable this capacity.

As Robert F. Kennedy said, “What we need in the United States is not hatred . . . but love and wisdom and compassion toward one another, and a feeling of justice toward those who still suffer within our country” (1968).

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