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A New Paradigm for Improving Race Relations

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Transcript of Remarks

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I'm deeply grateful to President Bendapudi and to all of you for this opportunity to share some thoughts that I hope will inspire a sense of optimism that transcends the racial tensions that are so prevalent in today's news. Please observe that 1) I am profoundly unqualified to do this. I head the School of Music; that's my job 2) My perspective as an African American is not authoritative, but I do believe that my perspective is typical; and 3) Whether you are white or a person of color, racist systems harm us all, despite the differing degrees to which we are aware of this fact.

In August 2010, celebrity talk radio host Dr. Laura Schlessinger (popularly known as "Dr. Laura") took a call from the black wife in an interracial marriage who was distressed at her husband's dismissal of his friends' racist remarks. Dr. Laura derided the caller for being hypersensitive, pointing out that black comics on HBO, and famous black rappers and other entertainers, use the N word all the time. To make her point, and to ask what the big deal was, Dr. Laura repeated the N word several times in rapid succession for her national radio audience to hear. She asserted that if black people could use the N word, then she should be able to use it as well, and why should anyone find this offensive. It was 2010, and Dr. Laura further lamented that even with a black president, there was "more complaining than ever" from black people. That broadcast went viral, sparking quite the

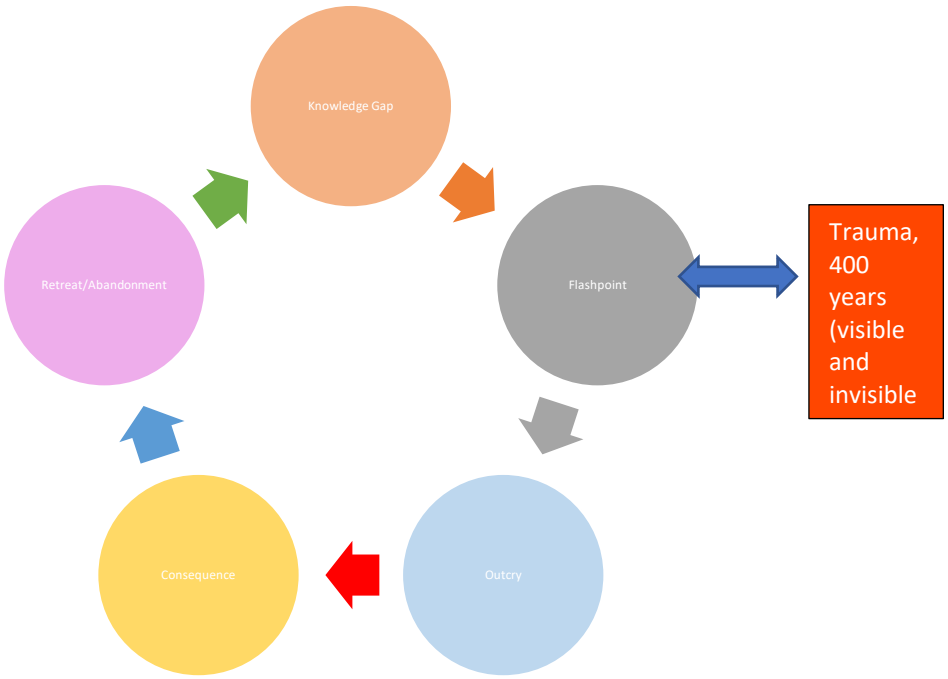
firestorm. Dr. Laura lost sponsorship, and within days, resigned from her radio show.

The flashpoint around Dr. Laura's use of the N word underscores a common dysfunctional pattern when we attempt to communicate, across our differences, about race. Buried within her offensive remarks, and hidden within its painful impact, was a very legitimate question, and I suspect that somewhere in her heart, she really wanted to know the answer: "If the N word is so offensive, why do black people themselves use it?"

If I were white, I would likely find it profoundly confusing, as did Dr. Laura, that black entertainers use the term and make money, while whites use the same term and lose, their credibility and their jobs. If I were white, I would also likely suffer from a sort of blindness intrinsic to the privilege that characterizes my very existence. It would be enormously difficult for me, as a white American, to comprehend how my own critical knowledge gaps help to fuel the racial discontent that fills our news and makes race so hard to discuss.

Today, I want to talk about two paradigms, the first of which fails us repeatedly; and a new paradigm, that I believe holds promise for moving us all closer to the Table of Brotherhood that Dr. Martin Luther King described in his dream in 1963.

This graphic represents the current paradigm, which illustrates why conversations about race are either repeatedly stalled, or are difficult to have at all.



These phases of the cycle are 1) Knowledge gap, 2) Flashpoint, 3) Outcry, 4) Consequence, 5) Retreat/abandonment, which takes us back to the Knowledge gap.

The case of Dr. Laura matched all five phases of this cycle. Here is a white woman who meets every metric for membership in this country's elite. Yet, she suffers from an acute deficiency in her knowledge about the dynamics of race. In speaking with her caller, she exposes her knowledge gap, expresses her curiosity, and asks, albeit offensively, a very legitimate question about the racial disparity in usage of the N word.

Curiosity about race often comes from a genuine place with all good intentions and a simple desire to know. However, because there have never been any educational structures to inform white people and equip them with the interpersonal and conversational skills necessary to present their curiosity, or to formulate or contextualize their questions, or to otherwise safely and appropriately expose gaps in their knowledge, many white Americans with even the best and

noblest of intentions have no way of gauging the impact of what they express, however innocently that query may have been originally formulated. This is exactly what happened when Dr. Laura expressed her confusion and curiosity about why she couldn't use the N word.

When her radio audience heard her defiant, repeated use of the N word, black listeners–not exclusively, but in particular–experienced her discourse as an attack, a flashpoint that triggered a reaction, not just to that particular broadcast, but a reaction grounded in a broader context of centuries-old trauma with which that particular word has long been associated.

There was an outcry, followed by the consequence that Dr. Laura's show lost General Motors as a sponsor; finally, she retreated by quitting her show and, in public at least, abandoning her curiosity, which brought us right back around to the knowledge gap she started with in the first place. The tragedy here is that if Dr. Laura is brave enough to expose her knowledge gap again, or even if she does it unintentionally, sort of in the run of conversation, unless something changes, this cycle is likely to repeat.

When we speak about race-based educational disparity in this country, the traditional assumption is that people of color are exclusively on the losing end of the spectrum. We usually reference the historical denial of educational access and opportunity to people of color, an inequity that the *Brown v. Board* decision of 1954, for example, was intended to help correct.

The troubling racial and political polarization in our country today, however, makes it abundantly clear that deficiencies in education have impacted our country

in much more widespread and complex ways. Until now, relatively little attention has been given to race-based educational disparity from the opposite lens:

While black Americans begin to study, learn, and practice the histories, norms, expectations, and worldviews of whiteness from birth, an immersive, multidirectional education that we get from nearly every type of consumption, from school, to popular culture and mass media, and from the experience of navigating through every dimension of upward mobility, white Americans, in turn, get virtually nothing of a comparable education about blacks and people of color.

Our country's power structure makes it not only possible, but in some ways, advantageous, even, for white Americans to ascend to the most prominent levels of educational, political, economic, and military achievement with little to no exposure or experience that properly informs them about people of color.

The problem, therefore, isn't simply racism. The problem is acute and widespread ignorance. Through no fault of their own, many white Americans are born into and suffer for much of their lives from a state of educational bankruptcy when it comes to understanding the histories and perspectives of blacks and other people of color, and moving beyond stereotypes to make real sense of why black people do the things we do. To fix this, let's embrace a new paradigm.

In my mind's eye, I have replayed the scenario with Dr. Laura again and again, and I've imagined a different kind of exchange and, as a result, a different outcome. I imagine, that through some weird and unlikely turn of events, I'd actually have the opportunity to meet Dr. Laura, face to face. In reality, there is no way or reason that our paths would ever cross, but work with me here; I'm using my imagination. Maybe I'd run into her at the airport and our flights are cancelled,

and we're both trapped there with lots of time, drinks, and snacks, and no place else to go. I imagine myself striking up a conversation with her because, despite her debacle of 2010, I actually like her as a person. I see her humanity.

I'd introduce myself, put her at ease, buy her a cup of coffee, and I'd gently guide her back to her unanswered questions from 10 years ago. "So, Laura, what I heard you saying is that you'd really like to know why black people get away so easily with using the N word, right?" I'd gently touch her shoulder, reassuring her that curiosity is a good thing, and that it's safe and okay to ask. And I'd take my time with the good explanation that she deserves, because race is a topic too sensitive and complex to address in a sound bite, a factoid, or a in a few politically correct cliches. As her newfound friend, I would give her a clear, thorough, and nonjudgmental explanation to resolve her confusion as to why African Americans use the N word, while she cannot.

And I would give her an explanation, using this analogy: Imagine that your two legs are exactly the same, except that one is encumbered and the other is not. One leg is free and flexible with the ability to bend and move and dance however it wills. The other leg, however, is bound by a 400-lb ball and chain that is excruciatingly painful to drag along. Every effort to move that leg is a reminder of all that burdens, oppresses, and constricts it.

The N word is linguistically unique in this country in that it derives its meaning most powerfully, not from its etymology, nor from context, nor from vocal inflection, but it derives its meaning most strikingly from the person who utters it. When African Americans use the N word, it is completely deracialized; that is to say that the sting and the poison are absent. When used by blacks, the N word can have a range of meanings and can even be a light-hearted term of endearment. It is a norm of African American culture to redefine and repurpose,

and this is evident in our cuisine, in the way we do religion, certainly in our music, and in our use of language--whatever is at hand to serve creative or expressive function. In the same way that we have transformed pig intestines into a coveted delicacy, language has also been at our disposal to flip on its head, turn inside out, and make it mean what we want. That freedom and versatility in African American expression is like the flexibility and fluidity of the unencumbered leg in our two-leg analogy.

I would explain further to Dr. Laura that when someone white utters the N word, by contrast, its meaning instantly transforms. When spoken by a white voice, the N word automatically triggers the history of oppression at the hands of white hegemony and the resulting inequality that persists through to the present day. Upon white utterance, the N word connects to the brutality of bondage and the heartbreak of families splintered and spouses and children bought and sold as chattel during slavery, to Jim Crow segregation that persisted through the 1960s, to redlining in real estate, to lynching, to mass incarceration, police brutality, voter suppression, and other painful realities of the past four centuries, the impacts of which are felt today. That's the other leg in our two-leg analogy, the one bound by the heavy ball and chain. "So you see, Laura," I would explain, "this is why your use of the N word was so problematic. But I forgive you, because you were disadvantaged by a system that did not properly teach you, and therefore, you simply didn't understand."

I imagine that over coffee, both of our cups now refilled for a second and third round, Dr. Laura and I are continuing our conversation. We are beginning to let our guards down and she feels free to follow up on another one of her comments during her infamous radio rant. She feels that our discussion is safe, so she asks: "In 2010, Barack Obama was president. I thought black people would be

satisfied, but they seemed angrier than ever. Instead of complaining, why didn't black people just celebrate such wonderful progress?"

Some questions may appear so naive as to sound insulting. It may take effort for me to resist the pattern of perceived attack that activates the other phases of the dysfunctional cycle, thereby threatening to abruptly end our conversation, derail our newfound friendship, and stall the progress of dialogue in a pothole of hurt, anger, distrust. That old pattern simply gets us nowhere.

So I make a different choice, and I make this choice because it is only for myself that I have the power to choose. And, at times, it may feel counter-intuitive and may take purpose-driven effort.

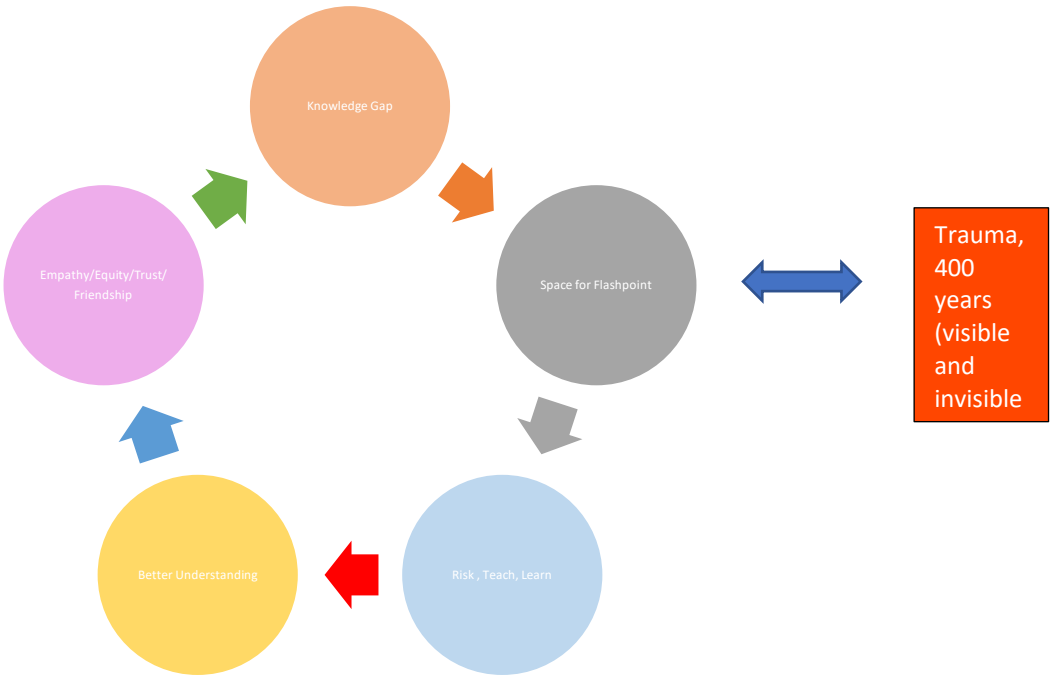
I then explain to Dr. Laura that, while we certainly celebrated this important first, Barack Obama was also distinguished as the only president whose American citizenship was challenged in a series of ongoing, highly publicized legal and political gestures that predated his presidency and continued for nearly his entire time in the White House. In 2004, Illinois politician Andy Martin became the first to suggest that Obama was not an American. In 2008, Clinton supporters circulated emails questioning Obama's citizenship, which ultimately forced Obama to publicly release (for the first of at least two times) his birth certificate. That same year, a series of lawsuits were filed challenging Obama's eligibility for the presidency, based upon doubtful citizenship. In 2009, a highly-publicized Kenyan birth certificate, purported to be Obama's, appeared in the media and on Ebay. In April 2011, Obama released his long-form birth certificate. Despite this, from 2011 to 2016, Donald Trump led the birtherism charge, questioning Obama's citizenship repeatedly during televised interviews, and encouraging his base to do

the same. Finally, in September 2016, Trump sheepishly conceded that Obama was born in America.

I would say to Dr. Laura, "So you see, Obama's presidency was both an important first and a painful reminder that if you are brown in this country, you can ascend even to the presidency and still be viewed by many as unworthy, inadequate, and an imposter."

I sense that Dr. Laura is neither malicious nor hateful, and she may not even be a card-carrying racist. Instead, Dr. Laura's dilemma, Dr. Laura's problem, simply put, is ignorance that she inherited from the condition of her privilege. And sitting here with her over coffee in a quiet space, I have the power, if I am willing, to begin to address her ignorance, and to help guide her in filling her knowledge gap.

My imaginary exchange with Dr. Laura, where her knowledge gap is not ignored, but it is addressed, and curiosity is resolved, realizes the phases in the new paradigm that I propose.



Here, the cycle begins the same way. A knowledge gap is exposed. Space must be retained for this to be a flashpoint, because after all, there is a 400-year history of trauma here. But instead of going to outcry, we go to Risk, Teach, Learn. Risk/Teach/Learn then leads to improved understanding, which then leads to empathy and, ideally friendship where trust and equity prevail and the exchange of knowledge can continue in an ongoing and meaningful way.

And this is how we begin to chip away at racism for good.

Many of you have read the letter that I shared with my School of Music family that described a way forward on race. Since then, we've been meeting for what I call "Safe Saturday Sessions" each Saturday morning from 9--10:30am on a zoom call, where anyone in the School of Music and other interested friends can safely ask anything about the black experience and receive a nonjudgmental response. I usually begin with some framing conversation, then we open for free dialogue, and I conclude each session with a list of bare facts that afford participants points of departure for doing further investigation on their own. There

are other African American colleagues from the School of Music on the call, and we share our perspectives and the information we have. Maybe I'll never get to have that conversation with Dr. Laura, but I can certainly get to "Risk/Teach/Learn" with those in the unit that I serve. In your email, all of you here today were sent a zip file that contains materials from our first three weeks of Safe Saturday conversations.

So, where do you go from here? If you are someone white who finds yourself ready to access the information and the education about the black experience that you never received, what can you do?

- First, be okay with not knowing. It's not your fault. You must recognize that racist structures depend on two things for their survival: The perpetuation of inequity, and the perpetuation of misinformation. A racist system works both by denying opportunities to people who look like me, and by denying education about me to people who look like you.
- Notice the black people in your circle. If there are no black people in your circle in 2020, ask why that is. But notice the black people in your circle, and assume, whether it's apparent or not, that there is some degree of trauma there. Black communities and black people suffer today from long-standing, deeply entrenched inequities established during slavery. Most recently, the national news has reported on the killings of unarmed blacks. Just two weeks ago, however, property was vandalized with racist graffiti near my sister's neighborhood here in Louisville, a neighborhood that I pass at least weekly. Whether the trauma is from something widely reported, or from the microaggressions we experience in the course or more routine activities, many African Americans learn to hold it inside and keep moving. Like our parents, grandparents, and their ancestors before them, we have learned to

suppress trauma and move forward with our lives, achieving what we can however we can, often drawing motivation from something greater than our individual selves, like family, community, and faith. I finished undergrad 33 years ago, and my parents still don't know what it was like for me to be black at an all-white university. They don't know, because their example, and my grandparents' example, and my great grandparent's example of holding it inside and moving forward taught me to do the same. But you should assume that some type of trauma is there.

- Recognize that, more than anything else, black people simply want to be understood. If we are understood, then we won't have to convince anyone that our lives matter.
- Courageously recruit the black people in your life to be your teachers and facilitators by saying these words: "I don't understand. I want to understand. Please help me to understand." In so doing, you destroy a wall, you create a friendship or deepen an existing one, and you change the world.

I started this talk with the story of a white woman, and I'll end my talk today with the story of another white woman, one whose life and work illustrates the power of daring to engage a worldview that differs from one's own.

The year 1850 saw the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act, a terrifying law that criminalized harboring escaped slaves, even if they lived in free states. This law incentivized not only the capture and re-enslavement of blacks who made it to freedom, but also the abduction and sell into slavery even free-born blacks who had never been slaves at all. Outraged by this law, a white woman and New England native, whose family members were outspoken abolitionists, picked up her pen to write. Part of her inspiration came from the slave narrative of Josiah Henson.

On June 5, 1851, the first installment of Harriet Beecher Stowe's story appeared in a newspaper called *The National Era*. Published in serial form in the newspaper over the next several weeks, her story became a powerful anti-slavery message, the impact of which she could not have not possibly fathomed. In 1852, the completed work was published as the novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

Written in the parlance of its times, the book certainly contains language and perhaps stereotypes that, without question, would be unacceptable according to modern standards. This notwithstanding, there is absolutely no way to argue against the fact that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* spoke powerfully to nineteenth-century sensibilities about the evils of slavery in a way that no other book did. This book became, not only the single most important anti-slavery publication of the antebellum era, but perhaps the single most important American literary work of the nineteenth century period, selling, in the United States, fewer copies than only the Bible. Harriet Beecher Stowe's commitment to freedom for black people, as expressed in *Uncle Tom's Cabin,* was her most important and impactful legacy.

Uncle Tom's Cabin changed the entire national discourse on blacks in America. It exposed the horrors of slavery and sparked new critiques of the slave-holding South, igniting new arguments in favor of abolition that, before her novel, did not exist. The defenders of slavery hated Harriet Beecher Stowe, and they went to great lengths to discredit her work.

Nonetheless, the essential message of the book--that slavery is wrong--was delivered with resounding success to a public ready to hear it. And *Uncle Tom's Cabin* inspired a bevy of other artistic creations, from plays, to other literary works, later, to movies, and to songs, including, this one--widely considered in its

day to be an anti-slavery ballad. Its lyrics depict a scene in the novel that every 19th century listener would have immediately understood as having been drawn from Beecher Stowe's book. You might have heard it. It goes like this:

The sun shines bright on my Old Kentucky Home
Tis summer, the people, are gay
The corn top's ripe, and the meadow's in the bloom
While birds make music all the day

Drawing inspiration from Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel which, by the way, was set in Kentucky, Stephen Foster composed "My Old Kentucky Home" in 1853, the year following the publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

The original lyrics of the song included the term "darkies," which, in its day, was considered more polite than the much more widely used N-word. Be warned: If you read anything from the American literature or popular culture of a century or more ago, you will find a wealth of racist language. As scholars and historians, we view these works in the context of their times. We no more expect Harriet Beecher Stowe or Stephen Foster to meet our standards of diversity, equity, and inclusion than we would expect for King James to have translated the Bible into 21st century American English.

Yet, we know that images and words have power, and we are careful to avoid glorifying and perpetuating that which contradicts our values as an enlightened society. Recognizing this, in 1986, the State of Kentucky approved an adaptation of the song that removed the archaic term "darkies," from its lyrics. Let us not forget, however, how Frederick Douglass himself, described and praised "My Old Kentucky Home" and other songs inspired by Harriet Beecher Stowe's work as ones that "awaken the sympathies for the slave and in which anti-slavery principles take root and flourish."

In Harriet Beecher Stowe's day, it was popular literature that had the power to expose societal evils and sway public opinion in the direction of justice. Here was a white woman of education and means who could have easily enjoyed a life of leisure and blissful ignorance, safely sequestered within the boundary of her privilege, but she took a risk and changed the world.

In the 1950s and 1960s, it was television that had the power to expose societal evils and sway public opinion in the direction of justice, bringing us images of peaceful protestors stumbling beneath the weight and force of water hoses and vicious attack dogs.

In 2020, it is the smart phone that has the power to expose societal evils and sway public opinion in the direction of justice, bringing us images of unarmed African Americans gasping for breath beneath the weight of an officer's knee.

Let's join together to create new images for our descendants. Let's tackle our knowledge gaps together; let's be brave in the face of our flashpoints, our triggers, and our trauma, let's adopt a new paradigm, get to Risk/Teach/Learn, and let's create a better world.