

Letter to a White Associate

By Henry Ford

October, 1995

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Letter to a White Associate

Another Call for Respect: A Response to the Backlash of the O.J. Simpson Murder Trial

THIS I KNOW AND PROCLAIM!

ANYONE who is convinced that they are superior to ANYONE ELSE, based upon their race or gender needs to understand that they have been misinformed. For approximately nine months (plus or minus a number that is not relevant), you simply laid around in your mother's belly, and then you just "popped out." You cannot take the credit and you are not to blame for anything that occurred up until that time! INSIST that others judge you by your works, and knowing they will often judge in error, realize that they judge in ignorance and they alone are the owners of that ignorance!

DEDICATION

Dedicated to those whose lives have been lived and sometimes ended to further the belief that in the eyes of God and in the words and spirit of the Constitution that all men and women are created equal.

When will Americans be justifiably comfortable and secure walking upon The Bridge of Understanding? When will that bridge, designed by the word of God, built upon the foundation of freedom and maintained by the dignity of good men and women of all races, cease to be constantly and dangerously eroded by the actions of such an very few?

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I chose to communicate with you in this manner for several reasons. The written word carries with it the opportunity for review and reflection by both the writer and the reader. In verbal communications, we often begin preparing a response to something that has not yet been completely expressed. This letter does not allow you that opportunity. The issue at hand requires that I completely and accurately express what I feel and believe, without the possibility of becoming engaged in heated emotional and later misquoted rhetoric. Should you choose, you have the opportunity to consider my position in the surroundings and at the time you desire. You can choose to reread, analyze, confer with others, reflect upon or implement any of many techniques available to you to aid in your consumption and evaluation.

Before you continue reading, let me assure you that this letter contains no negotiable points. I will not debate nor will I discuss its content with you. This letter is the complete expression of what I offer to you on this subject at this time. These are my experiences, thoughts and reflections, untarnished by the media and undaunted by the possibility of reprisal. If and when something you read becomes offensive to you, consider that you have been notified that such a probability exists. If that occurs, my suggestion is that you place the letter in the garbage and continue with your life,

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undisturbed by the possibility that what I have written might have any value whatsoever.

Regardless of your decision, thousands and perhaps millions of individuals will eventually read this letter and hopefully benefit from its content. Over thirty years ago Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote the historic "Letter from The Birmingham Jail." One might ask how I can even remotely equate this letter to that historic and eloquent document. When Dr. King wrote the "Letter from The Birmingham Jail," America's conscience was asleep. Today, more than thirty years later, it still has not fully awakened. The reality is that in some respects, America is drifting toward a comatose state.

There are no doubt many that would ask who I think I am, and what gives me the nerve to believe that I can help shed light on a sometimes dark world. The answer is simply that I have decided that I am going to do what I can, with what I have, right now! I have not been supplied with a list from God of individuals that appoints them to, and excludes me from being the partial solution to our challenges. Therefore, if such a list does exist, I entertain the possibility that my name might be on it. And if I am not the one to help bring that light, let those critics and more highly qualified individuals step forward and be heard. I will not shrink from the responsibility of bringing positive change, because of the possibility that I might fail.

I am certain that someone somewhere, perhaps many people in many places might write their own "Letter to A Black Associate." That is certainly permissible and encouraged. I would hope that if any of us are as smart as we sometimes believe, that with our capacity to walk on the moon and live in a world of microchips and lasers, we just might be able to find peace and understanding on earth.

What I have written is not about what someone said on their corporate supported, special interest, character assassinating talk show. What I have written is not the master plan for fixing the problems of some statistical and mystical two-thirds of an individual. What I have written is personal and factual. I have personally long endured the status of token, the assumption of affirmative action recipient, and the mouthpiece of welfare, crime, and incompetence. How Long? Too Long!

Over 2500 miles from where either of us live or work, an event has occurred over the past few months that has immobilized the thought process and chilled the blood of millions of potentially sane Americans. The tragedy of Nicole Brown-Simpson and Ron Goldman was devastating to all involved.

Heaped upon that tragedy was the O.J. Simpson trial, which has warped the minds and poisoned the hearts of many Americans. The trial has created back seat lawyers from individuals, many of whom prior to the trial didn't even know when to stop for a school bus. It has turned politeness into lack of courtesy, turned friends into acquaintances and threatened to turn back race relations another twenty years. It has caused many to seek and focus upon their differences, while ignoring and minimizing what common beliefs they share.

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The hours that many spent in front of the television would have been sufficient time to obtain a college degree. The time that many spent listening to the trial on radio would have been sufficient opportunity to digest hundreds of self-development tapes, or relax in soothing, mellow music. The occasions that many spent critiquing, criticizing, finger-pointing and rationalizing might have been better used to raise the level of consciousness and compassion of those around them. If the children in our schools or the elderly people in our nursing homes could have received the time and attention given to the trial, just think what a better country this might be. We have ample time to criticize the system, but not enough time to improve it.

One indisputable fact about the O.J. trial is that regardless of how many times we looked at and listened to the news, we saw the same selected excerpts at 11:00 P.M. that we saw at 10:00 P.M. that we saw at 7:00 P.M. that we saw at 6:00 P.M. that we saw on all the "Stay Tuned" messages. None of us ever saw or heard what was supposed to be ALL the relevant testimony. None of us except the jury.

You said that you would be offended if you were a black person and someone was trying to pressure you to vote for acquittal. I would be offended if I had been a juror and voted for acquittal, and someone presumed that I did it because I was black.

During only a small portion of the time that America was preoccupied with events in Los Angeles, events they could do nothing about, I was engaged in writing my second book. Ironically that book, entitled *The Power of Association*, speaks directly to the issue of which you have been misinformed. The book challenges, encourages, coaxes and directs all Americans, yes even African Americans to be a part of positive associations.

The Power of Association does not tell the fairy tale of Cinderella, nor does it recall the All-American Family of Dick and Jane, but it relates the experiences of positive association of an African American male. It relates the growth that took place in that individual, working within both predominantly white and predominantly black organizations. It relates a story of the individual who sat in your office and listened as you decided the mindset of thirty million African Americans, most of whom you have never met.

You see, I am not the Black Lone Ranger. I am mentor or mentee to hundreds of African Americans who still visualize ripples of possibilities in an ocean of improbabilities. Much of the support I enjoy in sharing the message of hope, responsibility and accountability, is the support of African Americans. I am not relating what I read or heard, I am sharing what I know. I personally know many of these people, including an individual voted one of the top five motivational speakers in the world. And no one I know has ever heard him coddle a radical, but millions have listened as he shared the beliefs of individual accountability and responsibility.

Contrary to what you might have read and heard, the people who taught me the qualities which have brought me this far are primarily African Americans because they

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are primarily the ones who believed that I could rise above mediocrity. In disguise, I am one of the best friends you have, for while many preach and teach 'get over' and 'get even,' I bring the message of hope, individual responsibility and peaceful co-existence.

Having known me personally for over fifteen years, you have had ample opportunity to develop some understanding of my beliefs. That understanding does not need to rest on the often-questionable basis of personal disclosures. Our sometimes close relationship afforded you the chance to witness my firm foundation of demonstrated character, competence and commitment. That makes it all the more painful for me to listen as you share a belief that all African Americans in this country think within the narrow confines of a philosophy which typically is opposite your own. If amid claims of understanding, you can believe that "good" white Americans distant themselves from radical whites, yet "good" black Americans do not distance themselves from radical blacks, then what do the "bad guys" believe.

The mental illness of radical thought which has infected the American belief system has incubated for almost four hundred years. The prognosis for improvement lies in the ability of all of us, black, white, red, yellow and whatever else, to rise above this sickness. There is no first aid kit or vaccination that will cure the dreaded diseases of racism and discrimination, whether those diseases affect race, religion or gender. One of the antibiotics necessary for recovery is effective leadership. You are in a position of leadership. If you expect positive change, then you must help lay the groundwork for that change. Even though my training and experience is not in the field of structural design, let me assure you that the house of brotherhood cannot stand on the weak and shallow foundation of accusations and generalizations.

Allow me to shift momentarily from the micro to the macro. Allow me to move the focus from myself to the larger, more universal, more dynamic and less controlled national scene.

Currently there is a gathering being planned for Washington, D.C. called "The Million Man March." Its purpose is to raise the awareness and responsibility among African American men. Even with that very noble agenda, African American leaders and followers are not in agreement regarding participation. The concern relates to the very inaccurate and inappropriate accusation you brought forth.

Some African American leaders feel the organizers are too radical, so they PUBLICLY disassociated themselves from the march. This action fails the test of the theory of the "single interconnected mind." These facts are not locked into any "black inner circle," unavailable for your consumption. These disagreements are in Cleveland's daily newspaper, but you have to look past the O.J. trial to find them. This is a primary and timely example of how African Americans 'forgot' that they are all expected to think alike.

During the 1960's civil rights movement there were highly publicized ideological differences between Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X, both of whom enjoyed

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a large following. Again, African Americans 'didn't realize' that they should all think alike.

You know of my experience as a part-time newspaper reporter. Some African Americans didn't care for what I wrote, but many others did. We 'kept forgetting' that either we all had to be radical or we all had to be conservative. It's almost as though we have brains and feelings and concerns like other people!

It is amazing how many self-proclaimed 'liberal' white Americans continue to lack the ability or the desire to open their minds to the possibility that all African American minds are not interconnected. Victimized by the media of radio, television and newspapers which are almost entirely white-owned, operated and controlled, listeners and readers continue to focus upon the perceived differences of race. Consider that when the general media reported the difference in how blacks and whites felt about O.J.'s guilt, they didn't highlight differences of educational level, profession or age. Unbiased surveys will ask these questions, but forgive me for regressing into reality, I almost forgot that unbiased surveys don't sell newspapers.

It is not surprising that these same newspapers carry stories of dissension and disagreement between African Americans. Within those stories is the underlying but valid evidence that proves all African Americans do not think or act or live alike.

I call your attention to the disagreement between factions of the NAACP that debated the direction of that organization during 1994-1995. The debate related to radical versus conservative viewpoints. This debate was in Cleveland's daily newspaper for weeks. It wasn't hidden away in a "black only" secret meeting place. I know some white Americans read it, because some of them asked me to explain it, which is additional proof of the inaccurate perception that my mind is interconnected with thirty million others.

I don't even belong to the NAACP, but maybe that's why I should. I don't expect my white friends and associates to know of the disagreements in all white organizations. I never expected my white friends and associates to explain the Emmett Till murder, or the rapid acquittal, or the callous remarks of several jurors. I never asked them to explain the four young girls blown to bits while worshipping in a church in Birmingham, or the young black man chased to his death while trying to purchase an automobile in Bensonhurst. I never expected my white friends or associates to explain the Florida tourist doused with gasoline and set on fire because he was a black man.

You may not have seen that article. It was not on page one with the senseless killings of white tourists.

African Americans have not received credit for many of the things they did discover and do. It is both incredible and ludicrous that so many are so willing to give us exclusive ownership to the undesirable actions of violence, jury threatening and ignoring evidence.

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Speaking of justice, you might ask yourself how an African American congressman from Illinois was recently sentenced to a five-year jail term for having sex with an underage female, while a white Oregon legislator who imposed himself upon dozens of females over a period of several decades, simply resigned.

You obtained from me a copy of my book *Success Is You*. I invite you to look within the pages of that book for any support of radical people or positions. I invite you to locate any two consecutive pages that do not address the issues of accountability, responsibility, education, training, motivation, inspiration, dedication, work or similar concepts. Ask yourself if these are the attributes related to African Americans as reported on the six o'clock news, and if not, ask yourself why not. Ask yourself if a country which has been spreading propaganda for almost four hundred years is likely to stop and tell it like it is.

And this is not a black issue. Remember the Indian, who used to roam this entire continent until over 95% of the treaties they signed had been violated. Remember the smallpox-laden blankets given to their women and children by those in search of freedom from oppression. Ask yourself how those who go back on their word had the audacity to coin the term 'Indian Giver.' Ask yourself why it was so easy for Boston police to round up hundreds of black youths based upon the word of one white man, the same man who turned out to be the real murderer. Ask yourself who the first people were who Susan Smith thought to involve in her kidnapping hoax. Try to remember if I came into your office to discuss any of these events.

You need to understand that the longer and harder you persist and insist in believing all the propaganda that you are presented with, the more difficult it becomes to actually learn and reflect upon your experiences. African Americans, European Americans, Asian Americans, Native Americans, all of us are tired of bearing the time worn burdens of yesterday. Unless and until we can become a part of the solution, we will continue to be a part of the problem.

Be assured that my experience, my memory and my research would make me a formidable opponent to anyone who wishes to point fingers and become involved in racial accusations. Let me assure you however that I will not be a party to that demoralizing and unproductive process.

I recall shortly after becoming a teenager, being chased from East 109th and St. Clair Avenue by older teenagers and their parents for the 'sin' of riding my bike in the wrong neighborhood.

Later I remember being detained by a Maple Heights, Ohio police officer and told "We don't want your kind here." I recall going to the old Cleveland Trade School in a protective circle formed to ward off racial attacks, seven African Americans at a school of hundreds.

I remember the father of an acquaintance who was beaten with baseball bats until he became a near vegetable, living his final years with grotesque facial distortions from

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the beating. His crime was being a black man walking his dogs in the peace and serenity of Gordon Park.

I experienced being turned down for jobs which went to academically less qualified white classmates who easily admitted that even they didn't understand. I remember after taking the test to join the military, being called into an office in the old Standard Building and being asked "How could you have done so well on this test, with your aaahbackground?"

It was I who sat on the back of the bus in several southern states, proudly wearing the clean, crisp, highly decorated uniform of the U.S. Army. Yes I, squad leader in basic training, attendee of Non-Commissioned Officer's School, expert rifleman, member of an award winning drill team, soldier of the month . . .but STILL on the back of the bus. Yes I, Specialist Fourth Class Ford, with Cryptosecurity duties and interim top secret clearance, drawing P-1 professional pay based upon job performance . . .but STILL on the back of the bus.

I was the one fired from a job for, according to enlightened management, "Not having enough interest in my work." This startling discovery was made by management after 105 consecutive days of absent-free, tardy-free employment and attendance without any reprimand or warning, and ironically the day after I allowed a shivering white female employee to sit in my car until the door to our West Side employer's manufacturing plant was opened. It was the same plant where workers cheered the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, and one co-worker asked me "Well, what are you people going to do now?"

It was I who watched my younger sister suffer the mental trauma of having bricks thrown at her through bus windows near Collinwood High School, while she was trying to get the education many whites claim we don't seek. I was the one who sat in a meeting with tie wearing, 'educated' staff members at the very place you and I know so well, and experienced the pain of the words "Let the niggers in the shop do it." I was the one who tried unsuccessfully to explain to my then twelve year old son why some West Side Cleveland parents threatened him the first day of class, before he could even get off the school bus. And at the same time I was trying to teach him to respect all adults.

In the very department you supervise, I am reminded of one particularly unproductive and inflammatory comment from an otherwise valuable and hard working employee. That comment was "Henry, since you're black, maybe you can tell me why Kevin Mack took drugs." We lost this remarkably diplomatic individual during the ravages of downsizing. That part of her does not need to be replaced. Suppose I had run to you for you to straighten her out. Given our recent conversation, I suppose you might have asked, "Well, why did he?"

Today I am the one in a virtual prison of isolation as I walk down the grocery store aisle at age fifty-four, somewhat respected and always respectable, nationally recognized, retired with several sources of income. Yet I am also the one who simultaneously

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marvels and suffers as brainwashed, misdirected, educated, 'broadminded' Americans suddenly frown and close and tightly clutch their pocketbooks.

So let me make this as clear as the scriptures and as pointed as a sword. Each day of my life I and millions of African Americans live what others only read and hear about, and often times simply ignore. Ironically what they read and hear is often based on information from those who will never have occasion to "walk a mile in my shoes." The life story of many African Americans is an unending nightmare of gigantic proportions, the magnitude of which you cannot envision. There is a reason that I do not normally dwell on what I have shared with you in the last nine paragraphs. It is because I do not hold you or any white person accountable for the actions of others. Not one time have I entered your office and expected you to be able to explain why these things occurred or why this mindset prevails. In fact, I wrote an entire book about my experiences, and only shared two of these very negative and disturbing situations. At the rate of two negative situations per book, I could write another half-dozen and still have books to write.

I am typically not on the same page as those who dwell upon the negative. I have temporarily turned to that page with the hope that you might awaken to the world as it is. I chose to be your news reporter for just a few minutes, just to strike some balance into what you are exposed to on a daily basis. I have spent more than sufficient time being the victim.

Some time ago, I made the decision to try to help educate and motivate my brothers and sisters by going into schools, churches, organizational meetings and other places and sharing positive messages and experiences. Part of that message is to encourage them to rise in the face of adversity. Part of that message is to work on the individual and not blame the system, even though the system has plenty of faults. My efforts are known to you and I suppose if there were any white people who needed uplifting, you would be involved trying to educate, train, motivate, inspire and calm them. I will not take part on a journey into the past, except as it relates to the process of moving ahead.

I am paid and rewarded in other ways to bring positive messages. I am the one with two motivational self-help books produced by a major publisher. I am the one who has self-published three booklets. I am the one with over twenty-five letters from grateful students, parents, teachers and administrators. I am the one who earned national recognition for bringing investment education into the African American community. I am the one with more awards, plaques and trophies than I have walls or tables upon which to place them. I am the one who has gone on radio programs three times in two months sharing what I know of success with grateful listeners. I am the one who has spoken with audiences as diverse as a North Carolina Chapter of the NAACP, and a group of all white workers in a remote section of Northwest Ohio - and received referrals and endorsements from both groups. And even with all that, I am not the one to explain the actions of thirty million African Americans with a variety of experiences, ambitions and beliefs.

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Your worst nightmare is that you should wake up tomorrow morning and find that all African Americans are like me. Then the United States would need another scapegoat. Incidentally the deficit in the United States would be much greater today were it not for the 4.1 trillion dollars of value contributed by slave labor between 1619 and 1865. And the balance of payments would dramatically improve if some of the labels stating "Made in Taiwan," were replaced with "Made in Watts."

I consider the unsolicited opinions of race, politics or other social issues to be extremely detrimental to the very fragile relationship that exists between us. You have a considerable number of options at your disposal should you feel the need to further discuss these issues. I suggest that attempting to impose your values, thoughts and beliefs upon me is the very last of those numerous options. I would further suggest that you thoroughly investigate all other options before again confronting me with regard to the actions or the inaction of others.

If you are still with me, please consider the amount of pain and discomfort that was necessary to cause me to take the time and effort to compile and produce a forty-three hundred, seventy-two word response to what I consider a lengthy series of inappropriate comments and conversations. Let me assure you that I no longer intend to bear this pain and discomfort alone. You hold the key to a peaceful coexistence between us. The good news is that there is no effort required on your part to bring about this coexistence. I have closed the door on our dialogue except with regard to official business. Be assured that I will not reopen it, and I pray that you will not reopen it. I ask that you have the common decency to now, henceforth and forever, share your beliefs and opinions only with those who seek them or welcome them.

I ask that you use the time you would have allotted to our narrowly focused discussions to exercise the single word but ultimately valuable motto of the IBM Corporation, "THINK!" If that process fails to relieve the very obvious distress you experience with African Americans, I respectfully and passionately suggest that you seek professional help.

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