

Malcolm X was asked by an interviewer what he thought about all the progress towards healing that had been made in the civil rights movement. He answered, “If you stab me in the back and pull the knife out three inches, that is not healing. If you pull the knife all the way out, that is not healing. Healing is pulling that knife all the way out and saying ‘I stabbed you in the back. I am sorry, how can I help?’”

Healing. That is what we need in this world, healing.

I am white. I am very white. I grew up in Boxford; white; I am Episcopalian, quite white; I went to elite universities, extremely white,; and I now live in West Newbury, blindingly white. So I am no authority on race relations because I have lived a very white-centered life.

What I have learned, though, is that by being white, I have privileges simply because I am white. I am also male, straight and from the upper middle class, so my privilege is pretty extreme, but whiteness is a particularly sticky privileged because it is invisible to us who live surrounded by other white folks.

Here’s the bottom line: even if you are not a racist, you don’t discriminate, no matter what you or your parents do, we, white folks, benefit from the oppression of black folks. We do. All of us. We are more likely to finish high school, go to college, get a job, where we will get paid more, we are less likely to go to jail or be beaten by our husband or sexually abused as a child or have asthma, simply because we are white. We will live longer because we are white. We get these privileges as a society, in part, by stealing from black folks. Broken people and communities are easy prey.

Slavery, lynching and Jim Crow broke people and communities, institutionalizing racism, leaving poverty, drugs and violence as the norm. The sin of institutional racism is ours, it is our responsibility because we benefit from it. And we can’t avoid benefiting.

We need to admit the truth. “We stabbed you in the back.” Nothing will change, no healing will happen, reconciliation is impossible, until we admit our actions to ourselves, and we say it publicly.

Martin Luther King, Jr. said that the only balm for the wound of racism is love. It is hard for us white folks, who have had the power so long, to really get that. If we, or our family, or people like us somewhere were treated one tenth of one percent as unjustly as black folks are treated almost everywhere, there’d be a world war over it. We wouldn’t stand for it. We’d hit back. Our devastation of Iraq in the wake of 9/11 is a case in point. King said the same thing about Viet Nam. Think about Gaza.

Having power that is founded in violence, like white power, leads us to believe that violence is the only solution. So I, we assume that black folks must be angry at us. As angry as we would be at them if the roles were reversed. I do not think that is true.

Sure there is anger. Goodness yes, but nearly across the board, from Martin Luther King, Jr. to WEB Dubois, to Katt Williams, even to Malcolm X, there is an understanding that even with all the hurt, everyone needs to be at the table to make things better, to heal. White folks are good and black folks and Latino and Asian and native folks and gay folks, we are all good and all needed. This is King’s love. It is a hopeful love walking with confidence and courage, and it is powerful medicine. That hopeful love is alive in the black community.

Tomorrow, Barak Hussein Obama will become President. I am proud of this country. I am hopeful. I am hopeful for two reasons. First, race has been talked about widely in a public forum for the first time since civil rights. This is an opening for an honest reckoning of our past and continuing sins regarding race in this country. Bring it on.

Second, now I am not super-optimistic that President Obama’ policies will be truly progressive. He is entrenched in a dynamic of power and corruption. That’s the corporate-government reality. But, but President Obama talks with words of hope.

Words, words and the ideas that they represent are powerful. Very, very powerful. We have seen what fearful ideas have done to the world over the past 8 years. We are now seeing what the ideas of excess and not taking responsibility from the Clinton era are doing; that's the financial crisis happening now. Barak Obama is a man of ideas, hopeful ideas. It is just what the doctor ordered.

Ideas matter. Hopeful ideas led Martin Luther King, Jr. and the millions he inspired towards the promised land. Hopeful ideas led Mohandas Gandhi and the billions he inspired to freedom from Empire. Ideas, ideas about white people's part in racial oppression, about the power of love over violence, about the real, concrete things we can do to heal... they just might be found in the hope Barak Obama teaches. We are all ready for healing. I know I am. Let's hope, and not forget to have fun doing it.