



August 19, 2020

Truth and Reconciliation in Chicago

Too often, I have heard people get confused when they use the term “racist”. They use the term to describe a person as racist if that person has hatred for a person because of their race, in a very personal way. But, racism is much more than that.

In her recent book Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents, Isabel Wilkerson defines racism as “the combination of racial bias and systemic power, seeing racism... as primarily the action of people or **systems** [my emphasis] with personal or group power over another person or group with less power.” The emphasis is on the **system**. And, the emphasis is on the **power** differential.

Similarly, in his book How to be an Antiracist, Ibram X. Kendi notes that “the consistent function of racist ideas...[is] to manipulate us into seeing people as the problem, instead of the **policies** [again, my emphasis] that ensnare them.” Kendi emphasizes again and again that “One either believes problems are rooted in groups of people, as a racist, or locates the roots of problems in **power and policies**, as an antiracist.”

What do we say to people who feel powerless against “the Man”; who feel that everything is set up against them; who feel that no matter what they do, they will be pushed down; who feel that there is a plan that will determine their fate if they are arrested for a crime, no matter what their defense is?

How do we deal with the overwhelming problem of structure and power, and especially structural racism?

Nelson Mandela was arrested and was thrown in prison for 27 years because of his fight against the system of apartheid in South Africa. But, he did not give up. When he was finally released, Mandela emphasized reconciliation between the country's racial groups and created the Truth and Reconciliation Commission to investigate past human rights abuses. Economically, Mandela introduced measures to encourage land reform, combat poverty and expand healthcare services.

With all of the structural racism; violence in our neighborhoods, need for police reform; need for economic development in our communities; need for treatment of trauma, mental health, and substance use disorder issues - don't we need a Truth and Reconciliation Commission in the United States? We could start right here in Chicago. We continue to see the truth in the videos of the murder of George Floyd and of too many of our Black brothers and sisters. I'm sorry to say that George Floyd died because he was black. The police didn't mean to kill him. He just didn't receive the same respect that others receive.

We need to continue to hear the truth in the stories, to continue to hear that Black Lives Matter, and to work to completely change the structure of systems and policies that lead to continued hopelessness and despair which often ends in violence. One very important way to help end structural racism is to end biased and racist

history teaching in our schools. Schools have a major impact on the social development of students and parents.

Only when we truly learn about and deal with structural racism will we make significant progress toward that More Perfect Union to which we aspire.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'LSK', with a stylized flourish at the end.

La Shawn K. Ford
State Representative-Eighth District