

THE GIFT

Mark McConville

Several years ago, I sent a gift to a new friend. We had met at a Gestalt writers conference, and she had been very supportive and generous with her feedback. I wanted to say thank you, and hit upon the perfect way to do so. We shared, it turned out, an affection for baseball, and I could think of no more perfect gift than a baseball cap representing my home town team, the Cleveland Indians. It's a terrific looking hat, I thought to myself, with the smiling red face of Chief Wahoo, the team's mascot and logo, looking out from above the brim. I bought the hat and sent it on its way, and then enjoyed that feeling of inner warmth that comes when you have found the perfect gift, and given it straight from the heart. I was pleased with myself.

Weeks passed, and then several months, and I heard nothing back from my friend, which perplexed me. When you give a gift from the heart, you like to know how it is received. And then finally, after three months, came her note. Thoughtfully written, carefully, even affectionately worded, it concluded "and so, even though I know you sent this gift with the best intentions, I cannot bring myself to accept an article whose logo is so offensive and demeaning to so many Native American Indians. I hope you can understand."

Understand? UNDERSTAND? Hell no, I don't understand. I sent you a gift, a thank-you, not a political treatise. Whatever Chief Wahoo symbolizes to you, to us Clevelanders he's a symbol of civic pride, a baseball team and a community that has come back from the ashes. I resent being re-cast from a caring friend to an insensitive bigot. I'm angry, and hurt, and No, I don't understand.

More than anything, I was bewildered. Yes, bewildered. That's exactly the right word, especially because as my initial reaction began to fade, I became aware of a nagging, uncomfortable itch on the underside of my awareness. I recalled seeing the American Indian protesters outside the stadium during the Baseball World Series, with their placards reading "We're a People, Not a Mascot." And I remember my discomfort then, knowing in my heart they were right.

WIW Bewilderment

In the politico-socio-racial subset to which I have assigned myself, Well-Intending-Whites (WIW's), this experience of bewilderment is not entirely uncommon. I have had the experience before, and have heard it described by other WIW's. In its typical form, it goes something like this: Some sort of social situation is unfolding. A conversation perhaps, a group session, a faculty meeting, a parent conference. People are interacting with one another, and the interaction seems to be going along fine. People are making sense, perceptions are being expressed, ideas articulated, differences are being aired. And then someone, inevitably a person of Color, brings up race as an issue, a current issue, **present** in the room as we speak. "You wouldn't be saying/doing that if I were White..." the person might be saying. Racism is *here*, I'm being told. But I am bewildered, because I don't see it.

This experience of bewilderment, I believe, admits of two components. The first is some degree of defensiveness, often fueled by anger or hurt at the implication of bigotry. It may be openly expressed, or may be silently harbored. It can take various forms, but usually includes a perception of the offended other as overly sensitive, and therefore as *responsible* for being offended.

Why are they making such a big deal over a logo, when the real issues -- jobs, education, political representation -- would be more legitimate targets of their energy. For heaven's sake, I don't get bent out of shape over that insulting Notre Dame

University logo that depicts us Irish as angry, brawling midgets. I could get upset every time someone alludes to us Irish as rigid, or combative, or alcoholic, but I choose not to. Why do they choose instead to be offended?

This defensiveness is often supported and bolstered by some sort of comparison, inevitably unfavorable, to one's own reference group. And it is here, it seems to me, in this space of bewildered defensiveness, that White experience often closes down. This is the familiar stopping place, where subjectively at least, people are inclined to throw their hands in the air, shake their heads, and walk away. It is essential, I think, that we recognize this, and that we become more public about our struggles to push through the stuckness to a fuller awareness of what happens at the racial boundary. And at least one way to do this, as a White, is to stay more fully with the experience of bewilderment, to hold it open to the scrutiny of examination.

For bewilderment contains a second component hidden within its folds, a component less clear and more deeply embedded in the ground of the experience. It is a vague disquiet, a confusion. It is a sense of something in my ground, just beyond the borders of my awareness, something I may be *missing*. It is a dawning sense of my own ignorance, and with that, a realization that I am not as innocent as my good intentions claim. Beyond my intentions, there is an *impact* of my behavior on others, and an uncomfortable realization that I'm not owning enough responsibility for that impact, and worse yet, that I am not owning up to my responsibility for this ignorance.

These half formed awarenesses are fueled by my knowledge that bigotry indeed exists, that it is all around us, that it permeates the air we breath. It is, in other words, the simultaneous prehension of my innocence *and* my guilt, my non-racist intentionality *and* my immersion, and participation, in an atmosphere saturated with inequity and bias. This is bewilderment.

Figure-Bound Experience

Confusion has always been a most powerful motivation for me, and I have been wrestling with the confusion of this, and similar, experiences, for years now. As a Gestalt therapist, my response to confusion lies with phenomenology, the careful description and explication of experience. Understanding the organization of an experience has always held the power to release me from it's grip. It feels natural therefore, to turn to the tools of Gestalt therapy's phenomenological method in order to make sense of this bewilderment. In particular, as pointed out by Barbara Thomas (1997), the Gestalt notion of figure and ground is especially helpful in understanding the nature and power of "ism" experience.

In the earliest research and theory of Gestalt psychology, ground was shown to exert powerful, silent contextualizing forces on aware, figural perception. This principle has been demonstrated experimentally at every level of experience, from the most simple forms of visual ground to the most complex phenomena of cultural and historical context. In every case, ground serves to shape figural perception, and to do so in a manner that co-constitutes the apparent properties of the figure itself.

In a laboratory situation, when an upright focal object is placed within a tilted framework, it will eventually appear mis-oriented itself, relative to the orientation of the context. The more the framework itself is out of awareness, i.e. the more it becomes an invisible organizing aspect of ground, the more dramatic the figure's 'mis-orientation' becomes. The effects of ground, in other words, are intensified as they recede *qua* ground and are "collapsed" onto figure. Another way to say this is that when ground is silent, invisible, figure ends up *bearing the weight of ground*, in so far as a perceiver attributes to figure the forces emanating from context. When a painting in a gallery is given just the right frame, and the lighting and location are perfect, it is the painting itself that gets the

credit, while these contextual influences remain hidden from the untrained eye.

Blaming the Victim

The effects of this simple principle in everyday perception are everywhere, and nowhere more dramatic than where matters of culture and race are concerned. One example that comes to mind is the death of Edmund Perry in 1985. Perry, an eighteen-year old African American youth, grew up on the mean streets of Harlem, but in spite of this had attended, on scholarship, the nation's most prestigious prep school, Phillips Exeter. In the summer of 1985, about a month after graduating with honors from Phillips Exeter, with the world at his feet and full scholarship offers from Yale, Berkeley and Stanford in hand, Edmund Perry was shot and killed while robbing a New York City undercover police officer.

I remember the reactions of several of my White friends at the time:

This kid had everything, opportunities the rest of us only dream of. How could he make such a stupid decision. What was he thinking?

There is a tendency for Whites, taking for granted our ground conditions of empowerment and support, to focus exclusively on the figural phenomena of choice, personal decision making, and individual opportunity. Like the subjects in the tilted framework experiments who lose awareness of context, we tend unconsciously to collapse ground onto figure. In other words, when evaluating the likes of Edmund Perry, we are inclined to psychologize the sociological ground, to interpret its organizing influences as emanating solely from the individual person. We remain simultaneously ignorant of the powerful influence of his ground in shaping his options and possibilities, and ignorant of the disorienting effects of our own ground in shaping our perception and evaluation of him.

To evaluate Edmund Perry out of context, as if his fateful, mis-guided choice that day were *nothing more than* a matter of individual choice and decision making, is to heap upon the figure -- in this case, a young man who may as well have journeyed from his home in Harlem to the Moon -- the extraordinarily complex and convoluted weight of ground. And ground, in this case, included the invisible effects on this young man of becoming an outsider *simultaneously* in an alien, racially hierarchical culture, *and* on the streets of his own neighborhood. When we miss the ground from which such decisions arise --and let's face it, as Whites, we miss it all the time -- we are prone to amplify the role of figure in organizing the field, and this creates a skew in our thinking and perception.

Horatio Alger

I'm proud of my success. I had to overcome a lot to get where I am today. I saw the opportunity, and I made the most of it.

My parents were both second generation Irish Catholics whose ancestors arrived in this country in flight of the Great Famine and Anglo-Protestant oppression. My ancestors were virtually penniless when they arrived, and had made a life for themselves by dint of hard work and perseverance. I remember my father telling me that any man (sic) could make his way in life if only he took responsibility for himself, took hold of his bootstraps and pulled himself up. This is what he had done, and it was what he expected me to do. Accordingly, when I look at my personal history, at my educational, occupational, and economic accomplishments, I am inclined to see them as psychological, rather than as sociological or historical phenomena. My accomplishments seem to me the consequences of personal choice and hard work, matters of *figure* in other words, not ground. The problem with this line of thinking is not that it is false (because it is not simply false), but precisely that it is *figure-bound*, which is to say, blind to the silent contextual factors which either support or impede achievement.

Harlon Dalton (1995) has spoken of this type of thinking as exemplifying the myth of Horatio Alger, the author whose stories celebrated the rags to riches opportunities of American life. The myth, Dalton points out, conveys three basic messages: first, that we are all judged on the basis of merit. Second, that everyone has an equal opportunity to succeed. And third, that life is ultimately fair, if only one is willing to work at it. It is not difficult to see why this myth appeals to those of us in this culture who operate from a ground of support and empowerment. Like plants whose roots soak up the nutrients of their surrounds, we blossom and fulfill our potential. To the extent that we have done so, and being blind to the influences of ground, we tend to exaggerate our personal responsibility for our development.

Both of these situations -- blaming the victim, and buying into the Horatio Alger myth of success -- share in the same perceptual distortion of collapsing (thereby denying) the effects of ground into figure, and holding figure responsible for factors which far exceed its intrinsic being and behavior.

Figure Bearing the Weight of Ground

Recently, I attended a diversity workshop where a fellow student, a white woman, inadvertently confused the names of two African American women also participating in the workshop. The White woman was sharply rebuked by the woman whose name she misspoke, who pointed out that she had spent a lifetime of "invisibility" in a culture where Whites often do not see Blacks in their individuality. The White woman hung her head in shame, and slowly dissolved into tears.

Was she guilty of failing to see the other women in the full dignity of their individual identities, of reducing them, in racist fashion, to perceptual categories? This was the spontaneous interpretation of her behavior acknowledged by many people in the room. But was this

interpretation an accurate assessment of *her* individual personhood? I think not. Her participation up to and following that moment was exemplary for Whites wishing to do the work of diversity, a model of open-mindedness and authenticity. And in her wider life (I happen to know this woman fairly well), she doggedly lives out her commitment to these principles.

So, how are we to understand this momentary transaction, this "bloopers," (as the leaders of the workshop labeled it)? Certainly this White woman did not deserve rebuke. Does this mean that the African American woman was "over-reacting," making something out of nothing? Some people might be inclined to say so. But if we write off the offended woman's challenge as an over-reaction, are we guilty of minimizing and rationalizing the cultural sediment of racism? Some people might be inclined to say so. How are we to escape this conundrum of interpretation?

It seems to me, that when Whites and people of Color come together to do this work, to interact and learn in contexts of openness and vulnerability -- then moments such as this are inevitable. And in these moments, it is figure which does, and indeed must bear the weight of ground. It is the momentary interaction, innocent by itself, which picks up the embedded forces of ground, invisible in their own right, gathering and reflecting them as a lens gathers and focuses diffuse ambient light. We could argue the correct interpretation of the White woman's behavior, but that would be to miss the point. The point is that we live in a culture and in a history where our ground is shot through with the sediment of racism. And as Ralph Ellison (1994) showed so brilliantly, this ground has conspired to deprive African Americans of their visibility, to reduce them to a nameless, faceless, 'They.' And however innocent a figural behavior, it is always from this ground that its full meaning emerges. Our bloopers are not so much to be defended and rationalized, as accepted as opportunities to make ground visible.

What To Do?

As a White person, I have struggled to identify in concrete terms what I need to do to dis-embed myself from the ground into which I was born. And my objectives in doing so are more than a little self serving, for I am convinced that any system of privilege not only oppresses the disenfranchised, but poisons the spirit and diminishes the humanity of those who are advantaged.

Like many people, I keep a personal journal. Over the years, I have written to myself on this subject of race and racism, attempting to define the concrete nature of my personal Work to be done in this area. Though I am naturally reluctant to share thinking that reveals my ignorance, my occasional bewilderment, and indeed, my ground of privilege, it seems worth the risk. But in advance I feel compelled to admit that I am more than a little embarrassed at my own naivete, and know full well that many readers are miles ahead of my personal learning curve. Following are some of my notes to myself, culled from my journal, and edited slightly for the present context.

Learn to see the invisible

As a White man, many of the problems of empowerment have been solved, both by me at the level of figural existence, but more importantly, for me by the ground-tradition into which I was born. Power achieved, at least for the well-intending, is power forgotten, power which has receded to ground, power which has become invisible as an organizing context of perception. This is true in any interpersonal field. If you want to know where the power is, or more importantly, where it isn't, dont ask those who have it. Ask those who don't. Children, for example, often have a much more accurate perception of where the power exists and how it is used in a family system than do their parents. They know what they can, and what they can't get away with, far more accurately than do the adults in the system. The same thing obtains in larger levels of system, in our culture and society at large, for

example, where race is concerned. The eventual product of this sort of figure-bound enculturation is that, whatever its intentionality, it spawns for the empowered an ignorance of racism as a *structure of ground*. And insofar as I permit myself to remain confluent with my ignorance, as long as I fail to push myself to see the ground structures of my, and others' experience, I am part of the problem.

Explore the historical ground.

Specifically, read. I am embarrassed to admit, for all of the reading I do, I have read relatively little history concerning the development and perpetuation of racism in this country. My historical knowledge has been about on par with the average ninth grader. I knew the American Civil War ended over a hundred years ago when the Northern states (the Good Guys) freed the slaves (the Unfortunate Victims) from the Southern states (the Bad Guys). I was relieved to be part of the good guy camp (I recall my parents speaking proudly of our hometown, the Lake Ontario port of Rochester, New York, as an integral part of the Underground Railroad which sent escaped slaves to Canada).

What I didn't know, or perhaps had forgotten, was the extent to which White America systematically conspired to keep free Blacks "in their place" during the years both preceding and following the Civil War. When a Black 'artisan class' of skilled workers emerged in the mid 1800's, in the time when American labor was beginning to organize itself, systematic (and successful) efforts were made to deprive them of the opportunity to practice their trades (Ignatiev, 1995). This is just one small example, but what shocks me the most is the extent of my own complacent ignorance of historical ground, in light of the fact that it is precisely this sort of ignorance that fuels the 'blaming the victim' mentality of so many White Americans.

Learn the meaning of being White

As a White man living in a White culture, the meaning of my race has been largely invisible to me. The feminist historian, Peggy McIntosh (1989) has challenged this nescience successfully with her description of white privilege. McIntosh writes, reflecting an experience that is common among WIW's, that she had become accustomed to seeing the various ways that people of Color are dis-advantaged in this culture. But then it occurred to her to reverse the figure -ground organization of her experience; "As a white person, I realized I had been taught about racism as something that puts others at a disadvantage, but had not been taught to see one of its corollary aspects, white privilege, which puts me at an advantage," she writes.

I recently had a simple experience that highlighted for me the blindness of Whites to White privilege. Together with an African-American colleague, I was facilitating a "diversity roundtable" discussion with the faculty of a school where I consult. The participants included fifteen teachers, fourteen of whom were White, one of whom was African-American. In the course of the discussion, one participant raised the following provocative hypothetical question: if each person had to choose between changing their gender or their race, which would you change? The participants wrestled uncomfortably with the dilemma, agreeing that this was a most provocative and difficult question. Except for the African American woman, who stated flatly "for me, that's an easy question. I'd choose to be White." An embarrassed silence fell over the group. "But why?" asked one of the White participants finally, adding "you seem so proud, so confident, as a Black woman." "It has nothing to do with pride," she answered. "Why would anyone choose to stay perpetually in the one-down position?"¹

In the silent moment that followed, the obvious was revealed to me. As well-intending Whites we were thinking "you [singular] are as good as we." As a minority, she was saying "you [plural] have advantages we don't have." Specifically as well-intending Whites, we miss the

¹Of course, the same statement could be made across the gender boundary, but this apparently was not the point she wished to make.

forest of racial inequity for the trees of our individual good intentions. In the card game of life (if I may permit myself such a pithy analogy) I have no difficulty making a space at the table for a person of Color, and for regarding that person with the respect and honor he or she deserves. I am likewise comfortable enough speaking up and challenging other Whites at the table who would seek to bar that individual from the game, or conspire to deal them fewer cards than the rest of us. But I am pained and ashamed to admit that despite my good intentions, the deck itself is stacked in my favor. But this is undeniably the case, and it is time for me to say so.

This realization comes painfully to me, particularly in light of my own cultural and racial heritage. My people were Ulster Catholics, and before they fled the Irish famine of the mid 1800's, had lived under as harsh an economic and civil enslavement as the Western world has ever known. According to Ignatiev (1995) "eighteenth-century Ireland presents a classic case of racial oppression. Catholics there were known as native Irish, Celts, or Gaels (as well as "Papists" and other equally derogatory names), and were regarded, and frequently spoke of themselves, as a "race," rather than a nation." Indeed, the historian W.E.H. Lecky noted that "the most worthless Protestant, if he had nothing else to boast of, at least found it pleasing to think that he was a member of the dominant race." (in Ignatiev, 1995). And as a race, Irish Catholics were systematically deprived of every human right imaginable by their Anglo-Protestant oppressors, eventually surrendering a million of their numbers to genocidal starvation in the years 1846-1850.

When they arrived in this country, my ancestors were by no means "White," because in that era White privilege was extended only to those of Anglo-Saxon, Protestant heritage. Irish Catholics, particularly the desperately poor immigrants of the famine years, were reviled and excluded from the body politic. Together with free Blacks, they occupied the bottom rung of the socio-economic ladder. (One common racial slur of the era was to call Blacks "smoked Irish;" and black-

faced minstrel shows sometimes denigrated African Americans as "no better than common Irishmen.")

The immigrant famine Irish, having themselves been the victims of relentless and cruel racial oppression, should have been natural allies of America's oppressed free Blacks and slaves. Indeed, the great Irish leader Daniel O'Connell orchestrated a potent appeal to all Irish Americans to join forces with Black Americans on behalf of their freedom and dignity. Treat them, he wrote "as your equals, as brethren. By your memories of Ireland, continue to love liberty - hate slavery-... and in America you will do honor to the name of Ireland" (Ignatiev, p.10).

But it wasn't to be. The Irish turned their backs, and even worse, their boot heels on America's Blacks, climbing over them as they clawed their way up the racial ladder. In the end, the Irish became White, and in so doing, re-located the color boundary to roughly its present day position. As a race, my people were given an opportunity to change the face of America for centuries to come. And we blew it.

This is not the sort of history I enjoy reading. It is not what I want to teach my children and grand children. But read it and teach it I must.

Don't overestimate the importance of good intentions

In those situations where I have witnessed a person of Color become offended by well intended White behavior, my first impulse has always been to focus on the innocence of the intentions. In the case of Chief Wahoo, the Cleveland baseball logo, I detect no intention to malign or demean. Its meaning, for those of us who count ourselves among Cleveland's baseball fans, has more to do with civic pride, with our city's recent history as the butt of national jokes, now rebutted as our team, like the city itself, fights back and establishes itself among the winners.

But good intentions, I am quickly learning, are not enough. And insofar as they blind me to the *impact* of my behavior on the other, are indeed part of the problem. For every behavior is defined *both* by its intentionality and its impact, and the impact of my behavior on the other is every bit as real as the intentionality with which it is launched. Whenever I find myself bewildered by someone's response to an action of mine, it is because I am blind to the ground of their experience. My advice to myself here is simple: get interested in the impact, particularly when it surprises me.

Don't underestimate the importance of good intentions

The other side of this coin is that if I am going to wade into the sensitized field of diversity, of gender and race and sexual orientation, and particularly as a white male, my good intentions are the only thing I can count on, the only thing that disembeds me from the racist, sexist, heterosexist ground into which I was born. I have met too many entitled, empowered, Whites *without* good intentions to believe for one minute that good intentions don't count for something. My advice to myself: hold onto my good intentions for dear life. There will be moments when they are all I will have to keep me from drowning.

Talk to other whites

I have discovered in myself the curious tendency to turn to people of Color for support in my own work around the diversity issue. It usually takes the form of a silent request for acknowledgement and confirmation that I am on the right track. And from time to time, I have encountered a response, usually politely offered, which says in essence, "this is your work; you figure it out." It has dawned on me recently that Whites don't talk enough with other Whites about these issues, that we become cognizant of diversity concerns only when there is a person of Color somewhere in the field. But this isn't right, clearly, if we are truly committed to the work. My advice to myself:

promote White on White dialog about racism and diversity issues. We must do our part of the Work, and this includes offering and giving support for this business of making ground visible.

Remember the wisdom of Gestalt

I have wasted a lot of my own energy trying to "do it right" when interacting at the color boundary. I've labored under the illusion that if I try hard enough, if I am attentive enough, I can avoid the sins of our racist society. I am beginning to see that this is nonsense, and it is nonsense because it flies in the face of Gestalt wisdom. Gestalt therapy tells us that the road to change is through heightened awareness of what we already are. I have found myself, like so many of my therapy clients, trying to make myself into something better than what I am before cultivating a rich awareness of what I am to start with. My advice to myself: the work is not, paradoxically, to make myself a paragon of racial blindness; the work is to discover how I participate, and how I have participated, in the racist culture that blinds me.

The Gift

So, now I am ready to complete the circle. So long ago it seems that I sent that hat, and received that note, and found myself bewildered, hurt and angry by my friend's rejection of my gift. I would rather brush aside the incident, to leave it buried in my journal, than to reveal this whole business of discovering my participation in the racist structures of our common ground. But staying with experience, sifting it and making it public, has always proven itself the most powerful tool for growth. For isn't this what Gestalt Therapy, with its paradoxical theory of change, teaches us?

And bewilderment? Bewilderment, it seems to me, contains in miniature the very essence of this phenomenon --WIW racism -- the blindness to

the structures of ground, but also the seeds of curiosity that can lead us to uncover these same structures. Of course, this all seems obvious to me as I write this, and, as I said before, I am more than a little embarrassed by the labor required to see it. But so be it. This was my friend's gift to me, and for this I remain in her debt.

Personal Account

Writing this piece, *The Gift*, was wildly different from any other writing experience I have ever had. First of all, it is more a story than a piece of professional writing, and it is a very personal story at that. It began in the mid 90s, and emerged most directly from my experience at the Gestalt Institute of Cleveland, where I am a member of the faculty. At that time, we were, as an organization, beginning to deal head-on with tensions rippling throughout our community related to race relations. From time to time, students of color would speak about their experiences of racism and racial insensitivity within the training programs. I recall two recurrent themes in my own experience at the time. The first was that whenever I witnessed or was involved in one of these incidents, I couldn't see any racism at all. I privately felt, in most instances, that the students involved were deflecting away from their own growing edge issues by framing the interactions as racist. Crying "racism" seemed to me like playing a trump card that interrupted the process of examining ongoing contact process.

The second recurrent theme, and the one that most intrigued me was that I found myself completely unable to voice my experience openly. I was mute. Paralyzed. Why, I wondered? I began to explore my lack of voice in a series of conversations with Diane Nichols, an African American woman who was in my psychology practice at the time. Those conversations proved to be transforming for me, and led to the writing project that became *The Gift*. What I came to realize was that I was locked in my individual, egoistic perspective, failing to grasp the wider context and the experiential point of view of the "Other." This failing, I soon realized, is the essential structure of racism. And I myself, I realized with a dawning sense of sickness and shame,

participate in racism in spite of my intentions and beliefs to the contrary. This writing project was my therapy. It took me months to complete, and documents my journey from shame and defensiveness to ownership and openness. And with this shift, of course, I found my voice. I am honored to have this piece included in the present volume. Post script: my writing was triggered by a very specific incident - a reply from a colleague informing me that in good conscious she could not accept a gift I had sent her, on account of its racially offensive nature to American Indians. I have long admired this women for many reasons, but none more than her courage in making this reply. She is Lynne Jacobs.

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