

Internalized Oppression: The New Slavery

By Logan Lynn

This past weekend my partner and I went to see a performance of *A Lesson Before Dying*, Romulus Linney's play set in a small Louisiana bayou town in 1948. It was based on the 1993 novel of the same name by Ernest J. Gaines and is about a young black man who has been wrongfully accused, convicted of murder, and awaits his death in the parish courthouse. While in court the convicted man's life is compared to that of a hog, and this becomes his truth. His godmother enlists the unwilling aid of the town's young plantation teacher to carry out her mission of teaching her godson to walk to the electric chair like an innocent man rather than the animal the white man has made him out to be throughout his life. Questions of racism and morality are confronted in visits between the two men for the duration of the piece and, in the end, the lessons shared and learned transform them both — along with the entire town.

After the very moving, emotional performance ended, founders of the August Wilson Red Door Project (an organization that “uses the arts as a catalyst for creating lasting, positive change in the racial ecology of Portland”) took the stage for a dialogue about the experience we had just collectively emerged from. Their organization posits that “all people, regardless of personal, cultural, and social history, internalize values and beliefs of the world they have been raised in. While some of these values and beliefs enable creative achievement and success, others create a sense of profound limitation and self-doubt. This doubt can be described as internalized oppression — a process by which people come to accept and internalize the inaccurate myths and stereotypes they have been exposed to.” The idea is that “no one is immune from having to wrestle with a sense that something is holding them back, regardless of background or privilege”, and they founded their organization on the belief that “with the right education, exposure, and support, everyone is capable of growing their capacity to create, to achieve, and to thrive.”

At one point during the very emotional post-performance chat, while illustrating how this particular story speaks to a universal human rights issue and making a correlation between the civil rights movement in the United States and some current world affairs and battles being fought in the name of race and religion in other lands, someone in the audience said the following four words about Americans: “*We are past racism.*” The room fell silent, aside from a few gasps. I could feel the sting in the air and could see the pain that one sentence had caused in the faces of many others in the room.

Traditional slavery may be over in America, but most of us know that racism is still alive and well in this country and the rest of the world. I agree that oppression is a universal issue that extends beyond race, but to say that we are beyond racism is just simply not accurate. This internalized oppression is its own form of slavery, so in some respects even slavery lives on; it just looks different these days than it used to. This brand of slavery imprisons the mind and poisons the spirit. It keeps us shackled to an idea someone else has about our worth and tells us we are wrong to feel human, that we are not equal, and that we are, in fact, nothing but a hog being fattened up for the kill.

The fight for civil rights continues to this day around race, gender, sexuality, class; many of us are still being told by our country that we are animals, undeserving of the same rights and protections granted to our fellow citizens, and we too often believe them. We accept the limitations put upon us by the world around us, and we perpetuate the dehumanizing messages being drilled into us because, on some level, over time, we have taken them to heart and made them our truth. In the end, *we become the stereotype*.

My dream is that we can transform; that we are brave enough to identify the inner oppressor and cast him out; that we are able to break free from the prisons we have been placed in by fear and hate and instead, honor who we are as people. We are all human beings with voices that deserve to be heard, and we all have the power to change the world.

Your life is just as valuable as anyone else's, and you can be free if you choose to be, no matter what your mind is shackled to. *No one has the ability to take your humanity from you*. They can sure try (and, believe me, they will try), but it is only theirs if you give it to them.

Internalize *that!*

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