

Racial ideals pale before life's reality

In "Race Matters," Cornel West argues that significant pockets of black Americans suffer from a collective clinical depression characterized by "horrifying meaninglessness, hopelessness and lovelessness."

While West admits that the attempt by blacks to adapt to a market mentality has resulted in low self-esteem because it "attacks black intelligence and character daily in not-so-subtle ways," he does not view self-imposed segregation as the solution. Instead, he argues that a "misguided attempt to define an African identity in a white society perceived to be hostile" not only ignores the "basic humanness and Americanness of each of us," but also the "common good that undergirds the national destiny of both blacks and whites."

It is a convincing argument. That is, if you are a white Quaker schoolteacher who tries to promote among his students a sense of colorblindness that emphasizes individual character rather than race. But for many of my gifted black students, West often sparks a heated response.

"It's difficult to put aside your differences with white people when the rest of society only seems to emphasize them," said Lenee, one of my black students. "It all comes down to haves and have-nots. For so long, blacks have been relegated to the latter category that we find greater security among our own race."



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She was persuasive. But I wasn't completely convinced until she threw the proverbial ball back onto my own court.

"I realize that Friends' schools try to teach their students to be colorblind, emphasizing that we all have 'that of God in us,'" she said, "but did you ever ask yourself why so few black Americans belong to the Society of Friends?"

It wasn't that Lenee was trying to defend friends who were more comfortable in a separate culture, or the self-imposed segregated lunch tables in our school cafeteria, or even to criticize the pale complexion of my church, as much as she was trying to explain them.

In fact, Lenee has a special gift for building bridges between black and white students. As a founding member of an integrated gospel choir and a tireless volunteer in a growing service program that has transcended racial differences, she inspires some profoundly mixed feelings for me.

On one hand, she gratifies me by taking me into her confidence. On the other, she humbles me by reminding me how far we need to go before we can do justice to the vision of Martin Luther King Jr. and judge each other by the content of our character rather than the color of our skin — as well as to the Quaker ideal of honoring that of God in everyone. ■

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PHILADELPHIA DAILY
NEWS
THE PEOPLE PAPER

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 18, 1997