

Tackling the R-word

By Mike Moore

Today, I need you - the reader - to do me a favor. I'd like you to stick through this entire column.

Yes, I have full faith in my ability to make you stick around - by written hypnosis, if necessary. It's the topic I'm worried about.

I want to avoid what Pam Oliver said usually happens.

"The typical white audience often shuts down and stops listening when you use the word 'racism,'" she said.

Whatever your race, don't be typical. Please read on.

The comment came Friday during a "Town Hall on Race" meeting at the Racine YWCA. Oliver was one of the speakers. She's a sociology professor at UW-Madison.

I need to put it in context, because Oliver did not come to attack. She came as a number cruncher, providing the ammo for those better able to attack problems.

Pages and pages of statistics detailed the gap between the various races in prison population - a gap Oliver said, while still troublesome, isn't as bad in Racine County as in other parts of the state.

Thing is, the numbers were nothing new. Everybody knows there are too many African-Americans in prison, and that drug charges are the main reason they're there.

That's why a few people got frustrated with Oliver's presentation, and why I was inclined not to write about the meeting. It's getting old. Time to move on to the fix.

Except Oliver was onto something. We can't move on.

We can ski down mountains of statistics. It'll do squat as long as we're still afraid to talk about it.

Most of us, community leaders included, hear the word "racism" and freeze. Negotiations are cut off. Defensive barriers are erected and fortified. Discussion closed.

Keep the walls down as you read on. Think of it as your Presidents' Day obligation to Abraham Lincoln, whose openness to change made history.

Too bad everybody points to somebody else as the one who's got to take the first step. For our part, white residents see our integrity being questioned. Because we live good lives and do our best to treat people fairly, we figure there are plenty others who deserve the criticism ahead of us.

In this case, that's prisoners. Law-abiding citizens aren't the ones who got nailed for selling drugs. Why should we be the ones getting the societal spanking? And we're partially right. Changing policy won't matter if entire generations of African-American men continue to see it as a "rite of passage to spend some time in the joint," as state Supreme Court Justice Louis Butler said during the lunchtime speech.

Still with me? Good.

Because what the rest of the community has to do is stop tuning out these issues. The baggage of the R-word prevents us from seeing that maybe, as Oliver said, "I enact racist structures, despite my best intentions."

For some reason, even considering that possibility is considered proof of wussiness.

I disagree. Takes some serious strength to shove aside all of the PC garbage and grab racial issues by the throat. What better time than now, a year when the normally dreamy Oscar voters might be too startled by the no-holds-barred race-relations movie "Crash" to stop it from stealing the statue? If we have to put the R-word aside, so be it. All of the silliness of fumbling for the politically correct word of the day to avoid offending each other has just pulled us further away from any real change.

A bunch of ideas were presented at the town hall meeting for how to proceed, and a committee will work to refine them.

Some of the ideas might end up sounding radical. Still, I hope we and our leaders who see ourselves as the voices of moderation will listen to the ideas before shoveling out the trenches.

Because Oliver, though she claimed to be more mousy intellectual than political hound, seemed to have a pretty good grasp of how radicals fit into the political system.

"They don't win, but they keep the heat on so the moderates win," she said.

Meaning, until the day we stop shutting down when the topic of race comes up, any chance for progress will be shut out.

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