

“Practical Steps toward Racial Harmony”: A Way to Educate Bahá’ís about Racism

Course: Racism in America: The Most Challenging Issue February 2018

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*Katharine Key, who lives in Washington, D.C., USA, became a Bahá’í in 1996. She is a white musician and has two albums to her credit: *Intone* and *what the fire is*.*

*Below she tells us why she signed up for the course **Racism in America: The Most Challenging Issue** and what she is planning for a final teaching project. Check her out on her website and her Facebook page. We hope that Katharine’s project will challenge you to create a project to open discussions on racism in your community.*

—THE EDITORS

Why I Took the Course on Racism. I am working on putting together a “musical fireside” about race, and I took this course *Racism in America: The Most Challenging Issue* in an effort to see what other Bahá’ís were doing to educate members of our own communities. I believe that we need to strengthen understanding and application of racial justice within the Bahá’í community, having heard from so many Bahá’í friends of color how they have felt alienated, disrespected, and shut down in their majority white and Persian Bahá’í communities. The first place for us to practice the Bahá’í teachings on race is within our own Bahá’í communities, and we are not doing that, in many cases from a misguided notion that simply believing in equality/unity is enough or that we have already dealt with this issue, neither of which are true.

The audience for my presentation is essentially white and Persian Bahá’ís and their friends from the community of interest. As a Bahá’í musician, I hope people will come to hear my music. My experience in giving musical firesides is that the majority of folks who show up are Bahá’ís. Hence this seems like a good format to introduce these ideas. The objective of the presentation is simply to convince the white and Persian Bahá’ís to listen with open hearts to Bahá’ís of color when they wish to speak about race issues, rather than shutting them down, as too frequently happens. And if any seekers learn something about the Bahá’í teachings on race, that is great, too. I don’t think Bahá’ís of color will learn anything new from my presentation, but perhaps it will open up conversations in their communities that have become stalled.

My Half-Finished Fireside for Teaching White and Persian Bahá’ís about Racism. Here is, as far as I have gotten, my outline for a musical fireside called “Practical Steps toward Racial Harmony.” I have already shared it with a few friends and gotten feedback, and I intend to continue to do so as I develop more material (writing the songs).

- **Title:** “Practical Steps toward Racial Harmony”
- **Opening prayer:** Unity prayer song, music by Shelley Swanegan Hamalian
 - “O my God! O my God! Unite the hearts of Thy servants, and reveal to them Thy great purpose. May they follow Thy commandments and abide in Thy law. Help them, O God, in their endeavor, and grant them strength to serve Thee. O God! Leave them not to themselves, but guide their steps by the light of Thy knowledge, and cheer their hearts

by Thy love. Verily, Thou art their Helper and their Lord.” —Bahá’u’lláh, Bahá’í Prayers
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- **Introduction**
 - Setting the tone: humbly sharing what I’ve learned. I’m still learning.
 - Request people to hold comments and questions until the end.
- Unity of humankind is the central teaching of the Bahá’í revelation. Here are two quotations from Bahá’u’lláh about unity, set to music.
 - Song: **“Unity of Mankind,”** music by Jason Cohen
- “The progress of the world, the development of nations, the tranquility of peoples, and the peace of all who dwell on earth are among the principles and ordinances of God.” —Bahá’u’lláh, Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh 129
 - “The well-being of mankind, its peace and security, are unattainable unless and until its unity is firmly established.” —Bahá’u’lláh, Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh 286
- **Unity and justice**
 - Song: “The purpose of justice is the appearance of unity among men.” (Bahá’u’lláh, Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh 66; music not yet written)
- **Humanity like the human body**
 - If one part suffers, it affects the entire body.
- Song: **“Thought of Peace,”** music by Katharine Key
 - “I charge you all that each one of you concentrate all the thoughts of your heart on love and unity. When a thought of war comes, oppose it by a stronger thought of peace. A thought of hatred must be destroyed by a more powerful thought of love.” “Ye are the fruits of one tree, the leaves of one branch, the flowers of one garden, the waves of one sea.” “Thoughts of war bring destruction to all harmony, well-being, restfulness and content. Thoughts of love are constructive of brotherhood, peace, friendship, and happiness.” . . . “the Most Great Peace shall come. . . .”
- **Consultation:**
 - It is important to be humble about our perspectives, listen to others, and affirm dignity.
 - Role of consultation in establishing unity.
 - Quickly mention principles of consultation.
 - Now let’s consider the example of the black and white races in the U.S. and how these principles apply.
 - Note: speak from “I,” personal perspective from here out
 - This issue is important to me—my journey
 - First thing: Shoghi Effendi’s quotation about the need for extra tact and wisdom when discussing race.
 - “It is difficult for the friends to always remember that in matter[s] where race enters, a hundred times more consideration and wisdom in handling situations is necessary than when an issue is not complicated by this factor.”—A letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to individuals, March 25, 1949, Microfilm Collection of the Original Letters of Shoghi Effendi, National Bahá’í Archives, Wilmette, IL
 - Quotation from The Advent of Divine Justice par. 58: “Let the white make a supreme effort in their resolve to contribute their share to the solution of this problem, to

abandon once for all their usually inherent and at times subconscious sense of superiority, to correct their tendency towards revealing a patronizing attitude towards the members of the other race, to persuade them through their intimate, spontaneous and informal association with them of the genuineness of their friendship and the sincerity of their intentions, and to master their impatience of any lack of responsiveness on the part of a people who have received, for so long a period, such grievous and slow-healing wounds.”

- Discuss how this applies. Some examples with songs that are stories that touch the heart (to be written)
- Mention that there’s also a part directed toward black people, but I’m not going to cover that, because I am going to stay in my lane and focus on what I should be doing, not what others should be doing. I’ll leave it to the black folks to present about and discuss that part.
- **Humorous song** about staying in your lane (to be written)
- **The script** (song about the stereotypical things white people say in conversations about race—to be written)
 - Note: make it personal: my script.
- **How to listen** and how to know when you are not listening to black people.
 - Song: “Speak Free” (about creating safe spaces for people to express themselves)
 - The importance of listening to understand and to affirm dignity, not to convince.
- End with uplifting song about working together for justice and unity (“**Closer to Life**”)
- **Discussion:** What did you hear?
 - Note: Model behavior by saying I am open to feedback, especially from people of color. I do not care how the feedback is delivered because I understand a tiny bit about how difficult it can be for them to discuss these issues, especially in a mixed group. (No tone policing.)