

I work every day with bright, talented, idealistic young people. From my point of view, they have a healthy and positive attitude toward life. Instead of being ambitious just for themselves, they are ambitious for the society as well. They are more practical than hippies and more idealistic than yuppies. They come from very diverse social and economic backgrounds.

They took their education seriously. They know how to work hard and how to ration their time. Because they have all been student leaders as undergraduates, they are realistic -- but not cynical -- about getting things done.

They happen to be white.

Thirty years ago, it was such young people who joined with black leaders in the civil rights movement. In those days there was much emphasis on "integration" -- bringing blacks and whites together in a joint effort to break down the barriers of racial segregation. To build coalitions and alliances, both blacks and whites began to learn new ways of dealing with one another. There was action as well as talk about "racial harmony," about people getting along despite their differences.

Two things happened. The first was a breaking up of the coalition of blacks and whites and a shift to a rhetoric of anger and resentment. Blacks and Jews, who had shared oppression and who had worked together in the civil rights cause, were forced apart. Racial harmony yielded to racial primacy and ethnic identity. A new black leadership forced the breakup, to the dismay of blacks and Jews who had worked together in a common cause for decades. Ugly talk about "Jews and other white liberals" drove out the irenic persuasiveness of Martin Luther King.

The second thing that happened was that voluntary action to achieve racial harmony was supplanted by legal action to guarantee rights. The measure of all progress in race relations was reduced to federal legislation confirmed by the courts and backed by federal funding. Along with encouraging anger, blacks were urged to be resentful. According to the new black leadership, blacks were to attribute all of their problems to an underlying and persistent racism among whites.

A generation after having shot itself in both feet, the civil rights movement faces a new assessment of its mission. It is glaringly apparent once again that we cannot legislate new attitudes and social values. Morality changes as individuals change -- that is, slowly and painfully. Those who would change the public morality must help the public to learn both the benefits and the limits of tolerance. Bored as we are with the triteness of it, people must learn how to work together. Anger, for example, has to be disciplined and focused rather than spewed out indiscriminately. Mutual respect must be based on earning respect rather than on claiming it as a right of race or social position.

Blacks and whites must learn again how to talk with one another. In some ways we are back where we started, before the civil rights movement began its great flowering in the 1950s. We have to adopt a no-fault starting point. We have to learn how to be candid and

honest in what most deeply concerns us before we can hope to negotiate honestly to resolve our differences.

Many whites of my generation will begin with a bitterness that new black leaders shouldered aside the more moderate leadership of King and others. Many blacks will disagree entirely with that white interpretation of what happened. We both might agree that somehow, along the way, our hopes for a racially integrated and enlightened new society were derailed. Begrudgingly, we might agree that our agreement about the importance of a new beginning is more important than who wins the debate about the past failure.

We will probably have to be firm about excluding from our conversation those who would rather fight than switch, who would rather indulge their destructiveness than search for a better way.

I want my young white friends to be part of a new coalition that would include the rich along with the poor, the educated along with those who want to be educated, the physicians along with those who want to find health. The true leaders of a generation ago set out to achieve that goal, and it was the right goal. Those who would reduce us to conflict based on narrow self-interest have betrayed us. We don't need their help. Moderate blacks and whites who are educated and effective are the best guides to the good society -- working together voluntarily, patiently, without intimidation.

With our eyes on the prize, as before.