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## TRUTH IN LOVE

### Malignant Normality: White Men in Leadership Refuse to Change

By Parris J. Baker  
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As we mark the 60th Anniversary of the celebrated August 28, 1963, March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s historic "I Have a Dream" speech, there are many freedom fighters, social and political activists, and generations of oppressed and disenfranchised communities who are asking the question: "What progress has America made in the struggle to achieve civil and human rights?" This is not a novel question, and depending on who you're talking with, the responses are very predictable, stale, and most times utterly useless.

Trite and antediluvian responses, which blame the victimized and shamed and indict the oppressed and disenfranchised; apply overused cliches of "personal responsibility" (which intimates immoral character and indolence); or approve of social and political policies that reinforce structural and institutional barriers that inhibit civil and human rights progress, are not new. Ironically, our nation has always been, and continues to be, in the pursuit and acquisition of civil and human rights – "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." The Founding Fathers of our embryonic democracy, white men in very powerful positions, were the intellectual donors toward the development of our U.S. Constitution.

Who were these carefully chosen concierges, gatekeepers, and guardians of America's collective morality, civility, justice, and democratic values, and what were the criteria used to choose or appoint them, given that at times, they behaved as tyrants? Moreover, an equally important question: Who are today's

democratic concierges, “the servants of the people” – and what criteria were used to choose or appoint them, given that many of them continue to behave as tyrants?

Perhaps a more meaningful and effective response to the question regarding the progress toward achieving civil and human rights is to offer the basic historic truth. Interference with the progress to acquire civil and human rights has happened, many times, at the hands of white men.

Throughout America’s amazing democratic experiment, white men have attempted repeatedly, to exercise and abuse power by designing and building entire political, judicial, education, and social networks and institutions that sanction segregation, promote deceptions, or revise American history to fit their narrative. Dr. Brandy Lee<sup>[1]</sup> asserts, “The mind is considered tyranny’s battleground because thought reform occurs through milieu control or the control of information in the environment” (p.11).

Democracy<sup>[2]</sup> as a political system of government remains, developmentally, in its infancy. It is a fragile framework that attempts to achieve a balance between the rights of the governed and the demands of its government. In a democratic society, theoretically, it becomes the role of elected representatives to advocate for the predilections of the citizenry. Practically and politically, it has been the proclivity of many policymakers to represent their self-interests or their group-interests above those of the electorate.

Historically, the Office of the President of the United States; our Congressional representatives in the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives; statewide officials, countywide officials; Fortune 500 CEOs; owners of sports and entertainment institutions; school district superintendents and school board administrators; university presidents<sup>[3]</sup>; judges; law enforcement chiefs and most of their patrol officers; sheriffs; the leadership of the NRA; and hospital and healthcare administrators have been predominantly white men. Members of these self-interest groups occupy positions of power and prestige and control the access and distribution of human and natural resources. In the past, members of these selected self-interest groups concealed themselves, protected by white hoods, white robes, and white collars. Today, members of these elite groups are public figures who wear black robes, fly private jets, and anchor primetime political talk shows.

White men have an enormous capacity to conceal and protect their self-interests. Any threat to the status quo is met with stout resistance, verbal threats, psychological and physical intimidation, and overt violence. The acute increase in the incidence of hate crimes, domestic terrorism, and white supremacist activities across America bear witness to their capacity. These behaviors – examples of extreme cruelty, capricious criminal activities, and

routine involvement in unethical and immoral conduct, accompanied by ways of perceiving and thinking that validate, support, and normalize the behaviors are referred to as malignant normality. We are in a season where right is wrong and wrong is right, and this is ideology is considered normal.

In this season of existential and constitutional crisis, it is too easy to blame former U.S. President Donald Trump alone (though Mr. Trump has been impeached twice and criminally indicted four times). Currently, America's problems have been defined by numerous white men: the "Woke" culture, affirmative action, critical race theory, immigration, and access to reproductive healthcare are a few. Previously, the problems within America ranged from the constitutionality of slavery, citizenship rights (voting, ownership of property, and equitable opportunities), integration of schools, communities, healthcare, and racial, ethnic, and gender representation in government. Malignant normality is reinforced by the constant rhetoric from religious and political leaders, news outlet celebrities, and national personalities that are perceived as credible. These individuals scapegoat marginalized groups, routinely present untruth as reality, and, at times, use scientific methods to support lies.

White men have never acknowledged the possibility that the real problem might be them. And before some of you get in a tizzy and mention the Honorable Byron L. Donalds, U.S. House of Representative for Florida's 19<sup>th</sup> Congressional District and Associate Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States Clarence Thomas, as African American power brokers, slow your roll. If pigmentation is not causality, but power and position, then both Byron Donalds and Clarence Thomas are conceptually white<sup>[4]</sup>. Their articulated ideologies and voting records clearly identify their identity and their allegiance.

Most white people do not occupy social or political positions of power. However, white people, along with members of marginalized groups, must directly address those white men who do occupy positions of authority – who behave unethically and immorally and speak truth to power. Trust me, I know this task appears daunting, exhausting, scary. But what is the alternative – to give up? Frederick Douglass informs us:

If there is no struggle there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom and yet deprecate agitation are men who want crops without plowing up the ground; they want rain without thunder and lightning. They want the ocean without the awful roar of its many waters. This struggle may be a moral one, or it may be a physical one, and it may be both moral and physical, but it must be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will.

Douglass spoke those words on Aug. 3, 1857, during a speech he delivered on West India Emancipation.

On April 12, 1963, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Rev. Ralph Abernathy, in defiance of a court-ordered injunction banning all anti-segregation protest activities, were arrested. While confined eight days in a Birmingham, Alabama, jail Dr. King wrote the well-known "Letter from a Birmingham Jail." Below is an excerpt from his letter that is prescient to America's present-day struggles:



I must make two honest confessions to you, my Christian and Jewish brothers. First, I must confess that over the last few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in the stride toward freedom is not the White Citizens Council or the Ku Klux Klanner but the white moderate who is more devoted to order than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says, "I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I can't agree with your methods of direct action"; who paternalistically feels that he can set the timetable for another man's freedom; who lives by the myth of time; and who constantly advises the Negro to wait until a "more convenient season."

Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection.

Sixty years later, King's writing remains as relevant now as it was then. If Americans want to achieve the nation's ideals – the ones of life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness – we cannot continue to draw from a lukewarm well of progress.

[1] Lee, B. X. (2020). Profile of a nation: Trump's mind, America's soul. NY, NT: World Mental Health Coalition, Inc.

[2] Democracy, first used in ancient Greece, is a combination of two terms: demos – citizen of a city-state and kratos – power or rule. Democracy is guided by the principles of free will, justice, legitimacy, and power.

[3] College/University presidents are predominantly white and male: 70% male. Less than 20% are a racial minority, though the percentage of women and racial minorities is increasing.  
<https://www.aceacps.org/summary-profile/>

[4] White or whiteness is a complicated concept with conflicting histories. Nancy Isenberg, T. Harry Williams Professor of History, Louisiana State University, asserts that whiteness is a cloak for class privilege and power. She argues that all people who identify as white do not have access to the same sources of privilege and power.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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