

## Race and Rest

Presented by Kimberly Gonxhe '07, Director of the Metro-Urban Institute  
in conversation with  
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at the Jubilee Professional Conference  
Feb. 23, 2018

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Maya Angelou once said that “there is no greater agony than bearing an untold story.” And in mainstream arenas in America the story of race relations is whitewashed, sanitized, and hushed, leaving it to be forgotten or modified into a folklore that could not be further from actual truth.

As I was in recent conversation with a colleague regarding our topic of Sabbath, I mentioned that as black people we are always working as we step into our predominantly white society. Sabbath regularly eludes us in many regards.

Just last week I and several others from Pittsburgh Theological Seminary had the privilege to visit the National Civil Rights Museum in Memphis, Tenn. While there were so many experiences which were naturally jolting, one really stuck with me. We’d approached the area which showed the actual last room in which Martin Luther King Jr. slept and the balcony on which he was assassinated. There was an older black man, arms wrapped around his body, standing there weeping. As black people we are always aware of race and faced with the consequences of enslavement and the realities of racism and white privilege even in 2018. Dr. Joy Degruy articulates the condition of today’s black community in her book *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome*. The black community as a whole suffers with PTSD, but it has never been properly diagnosed and subsequently not adequately treated. This is needed if we are to advance healthily. One of the other ways for our society to advance as a whole is through all of us having racial awareness.

As I look at the situation of black people in America, we didn’t come here of our own volition. We were kidnapped and savagely tormented by white systems. We were stripped of our culture, violently denied educational opportunities, sold and torn from our family members again and again. Post-slavery, we have been disenfranchised and then denied meaningful employment opportunities. American enslavement lasted 246 years, segregation 89 years, and post segregation just 60 years. Although untold, despicable violence was dealt upon us, we were then projected upon as being violent. White systems have devised structures of subjugation and control which perpetuate to this day in myriad ways inclusive of implicit bias, mass incarceration, and wage and opportunity gaps.

Racism is a white issue just like sexism is male issue. And it is the ultimate responsibility for white people to deal with it in healthy and constructive ways.

As I think of some actions which I deem meaningful toward improvements in race relations, for black people, we truly need to rest. Sabbath often greatly eludes us while living in dominant white society. I would urge us black people to:

- Learn about our history and heritage.
- Take breaks from white society. Anyone who has traveled abroad can tell you how exhausting it is to translate culture all day. Add to that the dimension of explicit and implicit racism (combined for me with sexism), and one just needs rest from mainstream American society.

Here are some ways I feel white people can engage and help rectify this wrong:

- Go into racial settings where you are not in the power position (this does not include foreign mission trips to poor black communities), and always be aware of the privilege that comes worldwide because of your whiteness.
- Have your organization partner with a black organization addressing black needs; undergird each other in an egalitarian way.
- Work within your own white circles and then check back in with black systems to make sure you're doing things right. The worst "allies" are those who think they know all the answers but in actuality have no clue and end up harming as opposed to helping the situation. Trust that we black people know what's best for ourselves, and undergird those efforts.
- Ask yourself, With whom am I eating dinner? Spending my free time? Worshipping? Remember, you may need purposefully to expand your circle into black peer groups in order to have relationally equal black peers. In business, we all know the key is who you know. What black people do you know? Challenge yourself to diversify your pool of confidants and friends to employ strong diversity in your networks.
- In your hiring practices, promote people of color to power positions—and don't just hire or promote people who are less experienced or inferior in skillset. Embrace black strength, intelligence, and capabilities.
- Prioritize racially marginalized voices and then act on what they have to say.