First Clean the Inside of the Cup
Anita Parrott George

Tonight, I am writing because I feel it’s all I can do right now. At stressful times I frequently find myself alone with my thoughts and having prayed, I often just write. For much of the last several weeks, I have been stressed and have not been sleeping well. Although there may be other ways of expressing the thoughts raging in my soul, I choose to write....

For weeks now, the events of Ferguson, Missouri have played out right in my living room in large-screen, living color. I am sitting in the same chair I sat in 2-1/2 years ago as we all learned about the Trayvon Martin tragedy. It is also from this chair and same television set that I followed the news of the murder of Renisha McBride in Detroit less than a year ago. These tragic events have all been splayed across our laptop computers, digital tablets, large screen media, print media, radio and countless other forms of modern communication. We have been given data that document hundreds, if not thousands, of similar murders of African Americans—men, women and children. Such data do not reflect the times of slavery or Jim Crow but right now in our own time, right before our eyes, here in our United States of America.

And so as an African-American woman, I am writing.

Over the years since the civil rights era, Americans of all colors have participated in T-Group encounters, diversity training, anti-racism workshops, interracial prayer groups, and countless memorials for slain civil rights heroes. Laws have been passed that overruled Jim Crow practices. Yes, we have been busy with efforts toward racial reconciliation and eliminating racism, and much has changed, many have been transformed. Yet, glaring statistics point to alarming trends, suggestive of the resurgence of our troubled racial past. Many have urged that there is more work to be done—deeper exploration—if we will even begin to eradicate racism and the violence it arouses. I agree. We must go beyond the very necessary outer work of training and enactment of laws and programs to the solitude of our inner work of formation, transformation, and re-formation.

First, we must clean the inside of the cup...

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Racism, overt or subtle, conscious or unconscious, individual, institutional or internalized, seems to be deeply embedded in our lives. Its roots extend widely across and into our family, social, religious, and political activities. If it is difficult to discern, it is even harder to extinguish and root out. Many of us have been transformed and changed as a result of laws and education; we have altered some of our thinking and behavior. But many of us have reached conclusions about race, class, gender and sexual orientation that are dissonant with our Christian beliefs and our expressed moral and ethical standards. For some of us, rational thinking and Christian principles totally elude
us when current-day issues involving police brutality; racial profiling; or unemployed, crime-ridden, medically deprived, and isolated districts of American poverty are discussed. I won’t attempt to describe what I see on some of Christ’s faces when the subject of reparations for slavery enters the conversation. It seems to me that recognition of such dissonance between and among strongly held standards and the resulting resolution is our only hope for what I am tentatively calling RE-FORMATION. Such re-formation—the resolution of our dissonance, clarity of our beliefs, and living lives that reflect such resolution—conceivably, could lead us all to saner and healthier relationships with each other and with our God. It would be like cleaning the inside of the cup.

From large and powerful political groups—local and national—we hear defense of the castle doctrine or stand-your-ground laws, subjectively described as when one feels threatened, one has the right to shoot first. Such laws have been passed in over 30 states. The overwhelming majority of these killings, upheld by laws, were committed by those we usually think of as ordinary citizens and neighbors.

In addition to stand-your-ground laws, there also abound stop and frisk practices used by law enforcement officers that disproportionately intimidate and imprison young men of color—African American and Latino. Michelle Alexander observes that “Like Jim Crow (and slavery), mass incarceration operates as a tightly networked system of laws, policies, customs, and institutions that operate collectively to ensure the subordinate status of a group defined largely by race.” Parents of young men of color over the years have had to add an additional, ominous layer to the already awesome responsibility of child-rearing, that of what to say and how to act with police officers when stopped and frisked—and how to avoid being killed by those very protectors of the people.

Research—historic and current—reveals that prejudice and bias are instilled in us as early as infancy. This occurs not necessarily by what we say to our babies, toddlers, and older children, but also by what they observe us DO or fail to do. “Do what I say, not what I do” comes to mind. Our children do not obey that dictate; instead, they take it all in, our words and our actions. This was evidenced in the doll preference studies by Drs. Kenneth and Mamie Clark (1940’s). Recent replications of their studies revealed similar results, such as those by then high school student, Kiri Davis (2005), creator of the award-winning video, A Girl Like Me, and by a study reported by CNN's Anderson Cooper (2010) in Black or White: Kids on Race. Racism is alive and well.

It is a matter of record that while people of color account for 30 percent of the population, they make up 60 percent of those imprisoned. Incarceration rates reveal that one in every 15 African American men and one in every 36 Latino men is incarcerated, compared to one in every 106 white men. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, one in three black men can expect to go to prison in his lifetime. Even the boys and young men. Black and Latino students represent more
than 70 percent of those involved in school-related arrests or referrals to law enforcement. After arrests, many are found to be innocent of suspected crimes, yet carry with them the stain of arrest records throughout their lives.

*The Atlantic Review* cited research studies findings that various forms of racism, such as racial profiling, should be considered social determinants of health. Such studies conclude that racial profiling may produce health problems resulting from discrimination and the fear of discrimination. Nancy Krieger purports, “Race may be a social construct, but racism materializes in poor health. When conditions of social injustice affect this many people, and prompt poor health outcomes, risk passes down generations.” This statement struck a nerve with me, personally.

It brought to mind an instance when symptoms of an elevated blood pressure prompted me to seek immediate medical care. The physician on call that day queried me on medications taken, recent diet, and stress levels. As often happens, there seemed to no apparent reason for this frightening blood pressure spike. I will never forget that doctor’s brilliance in reviewing my entire day with me, from early morning to late afternoon. I had totally forgotten being stopped earlier in the day by a police officer and asked for insurance papers and how condescendingly and threateningly I had been interrogated. By habit and experience, I had bitten my tongue, produced the papers and slowly continued on my way, dismissing it as just another of the many insults that people of color experience so frequently that it becomes ordinary. That day, I was totally unaware that my blood pressure was soaring until, fortunately, I developed symptoms and began to feel sick. That doctor of another race figured it out right away. In his practice, he has come to understand how much people of color experience racism and suppress healthy responses on a daily basis and the resulting health consequences. My Native American colleague has expressed it succinctly, “There are real health outcomes for many people of color. Life expectancy can be fairly accurately predicted based on one’s zip code!”

We, the people, make the laws and participate individually and collectively to enact and repeal them. We also have the power to uphold just and fair societal practices as well as to name and bring an end to those that harm us all. And so, Christians, I believe that we must think deeply, talk openly, pray humbly and join hands to stand with each other as we give thanks for the gifts that allow us to be introspective even as we analyze the disturbing events all around us.

I am ready.

If I have difficulty sleeping again tonight, I will turn off the lights and disconnect all electronic devices. But I will not count sheep. I will repeat to myself and to my God:

*With God’s help, I will strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being.*
With God’s help I will seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving my neighbor as myself. With God’s help, I will show the young what I have learned—by word and deed.

With God’s help, I will love my neighbor as myself.

With God’s help, I will find forgiveness in my heart.

With God’s help, I will open myself to be transformed and re-formed.

With God’s help I will clean the inside of my cup.