

“Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person. The Palestinian poet Mourid Barghouti writes that if you want to dispossess a people, the simplest way to do it is to tell their story and to start with, "secondly." Start the story with the arrows of the Native Americans, and not with the arrival of the British, and you have an entirely different story. Start the story with the failure of the African state, and not with the colonial creation of the African state, and you have an entirely different story.”

--Chimamanda Adichie, “The Danger of the Single Story,” TED Talk, October 7, 2009

Introduction

Complicating the narrative—stories of living race in America

My parents met at a college dance at Glasgow Tech. I like to imagine their first dance was to a Beatles song, although I have no evidence to that effect; I just really love the Beatles, and they met in the fall of 1964.

My father was ten years old when India got its freedom and remembers taking turns with his classmates as night watch, sitting on the roof of the school in his village as they protected themselves against possible attacks in the wake of the bloody partition battles that broke out on August 17, 1947. My mother was born in post-war Glasgow and lived with ration coupons well into the 1950s. Interracial relationships were not much beloved when they met in 1964. My parents weren't political; and they didn't have a profound civil

rights agenda. They just didn't care about the potential controversy; they liked each other. And eventually they loved each other.

So they weathered my mother being rejected by her family for loving a man of a different race and religion, because they loved each other. And they weathered my father's family's deep ambivalence about my mother, because they loved each other. (Today the family in India say he did even better than an Indian wife, because my mother has been so fiercely loyal to them.) And they didn't worry too much about the petition to evict them from the neighborhood when they first bought a home together, because they loved each other. And 45 years since their wedding (50 years since they met), they still love each other. And better yet, they still like each other.

So, my baseline narrative for race relations is a pretty inspiring one. But it is not uncomplicated.

It's complicated by my family's religious diversity (my father is Hindu and my mother and I are Christian). It's complicated by growing up on the outskirts of Akron, Ohio where the five kids of color in my class of 200 all strove to be as standard American as we were allowed to be, and since there were so few of us, we were pretty well accepted as long as we didn't claim any sort of difference. My school existence was complicated by hanging out with the Bengali Indian community on weekends, where the kids all ate pizza and watched football while the adults ate curry and talked politics. It's complicated by finding my voice as a South Asian in a suburban Chicago high school when I made friends with other South Asians while simultaneously being light-skinned enough to be mistaken for Greek, Latino, middle eastern, eastern European and only very rarely identified as South Asian. And even

that is complicated by the fact that for those who meet me in writing first bring a whole set of assumptions about who I am before we meet face-to-face. (This can be messy both in my consulting work and in online dating—you would not believe what some American men assume about South Asian women that meeting me in person cannot seem to disrupt).

And yet my experience of race is very different than my parents'. My father, raised in a village where he was the same as everyone else, is sent to Toastmasters by his boss for not being a good public speaker, and when the head of Toastmasters says, "I don't know why you're here—you're a great public speaker," my father thinks, "Oh well—Toastmasters is fun!" instead of thinking, "that was about my accent, wasn't it?"

My mother hears a person at the luggage store where she works say, "I wish [all Indians] would go home," and she thinks it's a story worth telling over dinner but doesn't waste her time getting in the face of someone so ignorant in the moment, and doesn't give it more thought than that.

An Anglo friend of mine calls me an ABCD (American Born Confused Desi¹) and I kinda want to punch her—partly because I'm a little more radical and a little more antagonistic than my first generation parents (although my mother's not exactly polite—subtlety is not a value imparted to the middle and working classes of Scotland—she just doesn't engage stupid). But partly I get so mad because I grew up here, I grew up not being part of the norm, and I grew up—however much I tried to fight it—absorbing some of the very subtle messages that I was somehow less than.

¹ *Desi* is South Asian slang for a person from South Asia—India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Afghanistan.

I also grew up only slowly realizing that race was shaping me at all, because it's become so darned slippery—and so I'm not sure whether I'm allowed to be angry about something that may have been racial or may have had nothing to do with race at all. Did I get into that top seminary because they needed more diversity, even though my GRE scores weren't the best, or was I a more impressive candidate than I think I am? Did I get almost no calls when I was in the search and call process to find a congregation to pastor because no one could pronounce my name, even though I was looking for the church that no one else wants to pastor (dwindling urban congregation that can't afford a full-time minister), or was that just a coincidence? When I was a toddler and had just moved here, did the neighborhood kids push me in dog doo during hide and seek because they didn't like immigrants or because kids in Akron, Ohio always pick on the little kid? Part of my anger is never knowing.

One family, three different understandings of how race functions in our lives.

That's race in America—complicated and untidy. And not knowable through a single story. Whenever we catch ourselves thinking about race as defined by our own experience, or the experience of that one friend we have of another race, we might be looking at race wrong. And yet so often, if we do not have multiple relationships with multiple people from a different race, we only have one narrative for people from that race. It's usually not a complicated narrative, and it was usually constructed by someone besides us.

I think it is no accident that we as Christians in America have as our primary text a book written primarily by a people who were defined by their religion but also their ethnic heritage. The Bible is saturated with stories of racial conflict and overcoming and surviving

and claiming power amidst defeat. They are stories that talk repeatedly about power imbalances and struggles. And they talk about God shining through in the places where people are willing to hear the stories of people from the margins and to incorporate those stories into their lives.

The hardest part of doing this work of examining race is to recognize that people's stories might actually contradict our own understanding of how things work. And that God might just shine through if we do not reject those stories but pay attention to the tension between someone else's experience and our own. If Mourid Barghouti is right that we wield human power over others when we tell their stories for them, then perhaps God's power emerges when we listen to and hold multiple stories and let ourselves be changed by them rather than seeking to control the narrative.

My purpose with *The Race is Not Yet Run* is to share stories that help us look at issues of race in America through a new lens. Stories of real people today, and stories of scripture. Maybe these stories can help us reexamine our own stories, taking power away from those who seek to divide us and giving that power back to God. And in the process, maybe we celebrate that in the one race, the human race, we are made richly and gloriously and uniquely in the image of God as part of one beloved community here on earth as it is in heaven.