INVITATION TO THE SCHOOL’S ANTI-RACISM MISSION

Presented at the SSW Orientation

June 6, 2010

Each year, the School’s orientation includes a presentation on our anti-racism mission. And it’s fitting that we do this since we have made undoing racism a central part of our work here at Smith. When I spoke at this event last year, it was in the context of the truly remarkable election of Barack Obama, an event that I never imagined I would live to see. You could say that I, and, I imagine, many, if not most, of you were filled with the audacity of hope.

This year, I come, still hopeful, but with that hope tempered by the year’s lessons in the harshness of politics and the difficulty of translating hope into reality. And, as with so many difficult lessons, what we learn from them is the most important part. I’d suggest that one of the most critical is that inspirational leadership must be complemented by a committed activism on the part of people who share that leader’s vision. The enormity of the challenges facing President Obama requires that those of us who want change we can believe in must be that change, live that change, and work for that change.

And we must recognize what hasn’t changed. For example, some have suggested that his election marked the beginning of a “post-racial” era, a period when race no longer is a defining fault line in society. To me, it’s absurd to think that the consciousness and consequences of race will now suddenly disappear; that we are now, in some magical way, free of the stain of racism. Race continues to matter and matter deeply. The ugliness that characterized the health care debate, when racist characterizations of the President and other reform supporters as well as the homophobic slurs directed at yet others are evidence of what is simmering below the surface, and on the surface, in this country.
The cry of many in the Tea Party movement to “take our country back” makes explicit whose country they think it is and whom they want to take it back from. And, yet, there is an inevitability of change – demographically, culturally, and politically that no backward-looking movement can halt. Building walls along borders, as those in Arizona wish to do, will not and cannot keep out the future. But, if the future is to be one we can all flourish in, then leaders and those who support them must work together. And, it is in that spirit that I call upon your commitment and energy to take steps here, this summer and beyond, to work against racism.

I believe that this still is a time of tremendous hope and possibility. There is hope that President Obama, this extraordinary man of African descent, will succeed in meeting the extraordinary challenges facing the country and there is the possibility that we will finally be able to talk and work across the lines of race in authentic and respectful ways. And, perhaps, if our hopes are met and we can make that possibility a reality, we might begin to undermine the assumptions of White supremacy and the toxic beliefs and actions that flow from that ideology.

So, we begin this summer session at the School for Social Work at a challenging time in our country’s history when the trials of the economy, international violence, and environmental threat loom exceedingly large, when restoration of the rule of law and an overdue acceptance of gay rights are on the horizon, and a humane and sensible response to the crisis in health care has finally begun.

And at this extraordinary time, I have the exciting task of inviting you to join in our School’s long-held commitment to working toward an end to racism. As part of that, I’d like to share with you the lessons we have learned over the approximately sixteen years that the School has made its commitment to anti-racism manifest in its public statements and internal practices.
And we have learned a great deal. The biggest lesson, though, I believe, is that this community is born anew each year and that each class makes its singular contributions and its singular missteps in making the anti-racism mission its own in its own way. And, to acknowledge that this work, as with most of the work you will be called upon to do, is complex, I want to suggest that even the missteps are and have led to important contributions. So, this is an opportunity for you, the class of 2012, to add your contribution to the legacy of those who have come before you.

What has been consistent, though, over the years, is that each summer’s experience is in great part a product both of our history and the ways in which we engage the present. This talk, then, is part of an effort to share the School’s history and to invite you, over the course of our time together here, to add to that history while offering some ideas about how we might shape the present.

And, while it is true that we “make the road by walking” in the phrase of Myles Horton of the legendary Highlander School, our actions must be informed by reflection. In that spirit, this community has spent considerable time and energy taking stock of what we’ve done and reevaluating our approach to the mission in light of each year’s experience. And, upon reflecting, we act yet again and, in doing that, move the mission forward,

Another thing we’ve learned over the years is that it is vital that we do two things: first, provide you with an explanation of how we came to the decision to adopt that mission so that it makes sense to you and then invite you to participate in working to make it come to life. That is necessary because the School’s mission can only become a reality if all of us find a way to embrace that goal and join in the work of achieving it.

We owe you that background because it is possible to see the focus on anti-racism as divisive, as pitting groups against each other or as disrespecting the experience of other oppressed groups. Therefore, I’d like to take some time today by talking about how we came to choose this mission and how we understand the meanings and implications of that choice.
The most important thing I can say is that the decision to embrace an anti-racism mission was not made lightly. It was the culmination of a great deal of thought and dialogue and reflected an appreciation of the history of both social work and our country.

To begin with, the field of social work itself has had an historic commitment to opposing racism. At times, it has done that vigorously and wholeheartedly; at other times, that commitment has been more tentative and timid. But, even in times when social work’s response can be fairly characterized as lacking vision and courage, the recognition that racism must be eradicated never fully disappeared. Beyond the historic and uneven commitment of the profession and its major organizations – NASW and CSWE – there have been periods of pressure from the grass-roots of social work that have energized the institutions of social work to move forward. The founding of the National Association of Black Social Workers in the late 1960’s was one such moment. The push from both Students of Color and White students here at Smith in the 1990’s was another.

It was students here at Smith, pointing out what they perceived as a lack of commitment to opposing racism on the part of the School, who took actions that led to a series of faculty-student-administration dialogues. And, as you will come to learn about the culture of Smith, when I say “dialogue” I mean frequent meetings filled with seemingly endless explorations of issues and feelings and ideas. There were moments of incredible frustration and anger; there were moments of breathtaking honesty and compassion; and there were moments of utter confusion and startling clarity. All of that was to be expected and our expectations were met.

Central to the discussion was the question of whether our commitment to justice should be expressed as an anti-racism mission or one devoted, more broadly, to anti-oppression work. As you can imagine, there were compelling arguments on both sides of this question – I hesitate even to call it a debate because the competing world views were so similar and the intentions were so compatible.

The most fundamental recognition we had in this process was that there was no answer that would be “wrong” and also that there was no answer that would be “right.” It was a matter of choosing from
between two equally compelling alternatives and acknowledging that whatever choice we made would generate problems of one sort or another. As with any decision, we were merely choosing which consequences we were most willing to tolerate. I want to underscore this: we knew that choosing either alternative would be right and that the question we ultimately faced was which inevitably resulting problems were we more willing to live with.

Ultimately, we chose to focus on becoming an anti-racism institution. We did that with a full recognition that this could well be seen as stating that other forms of oppression were less significant, destructive, hurtful, and painful to experience. That wasn’t our intent at the time and still isn’t. Plainly and simply, we made the decision that we did at the time because we believed that racism has a unique legacy in this country with our history of slavery and Jim Crow laws, the internment of Japanese residents during World War II, race-based immigration laws, the denial of entry to Jewish refugees from the holocaust, and the near genocide of Native people, and it seemed critical to us to afford that legacy a place of primacy in our overall work against oppression. In this country’s current climate, in which having a Muslim name was enough to raise question about the fitness of someone to be President and immigrants are regularly targeted both for physical violence and mean-spirited legislation, it is clear that racism is still very much with us.

Because race is such a difficult issue to talk about, one that generates uncomfortable emotions like anger, sadness, shame and guilt, we saw it is a topic that, left to itself, would be avoided, as it is in the larger society. It was, in that context, that we believed that focusing instead on oppression in general would exacerbate a dynamic in which students would compete to have that portion of their identity that is not of the dominant culture become the focus of discussions on oppression. In essence, competing to establish what Toni Morrison called a “hierarchy of evil” where our respective hurts are placed in opposition to each other’s to argue about whose is worst. It was our concern that, given the discomfort with talking about race and the potential competition for “air time,” race and racism would receive little focused attention.
So, we came to the decision to become an anti-racism institution. Actually, we initially identified the mission as being “anti-racist” but quickly came to the realization that the critical issue was the systemic nature of racism and not merely the behavior of racist individuals. Over time, I hope, we will come to view the work not in oppositional terms but rather as an effort to assert a positive vision of the world we want to live in. For me, the idea of “liberation” comes closest to capturing that intent.¹

But, we came to the decision we did, as we conceived of it then and still conceive of it now, because it seemed right. And, we did so because the work we will do with our clients and in our agencies and communities will be greatly enhanced – in terms of our ability to enter into people’s lives as competent clinical social workers – if we understand racism and the ways it affects their lives and ours, White students and Students of Color alike. Furthermore, entering the field of social work involves joining in a social work tradition grounded in a commitment to social and economic justice, following in the footsteps of Jane Addams and Ida B. Wells, of Bertha Reynolds and Whitney Young, of Congresswomen Jeanette Rankin and Barbara Lee.

Having made the decision to focus the School’s anti-oppression work on racism, there still must be and there is room in this community for other forms of oppression to be acknowledged and challenged, especially since, more and more, we are incorporating an approach that looks at the intersections of racism and other oppressions into our awareness. The curriculum is one source of this and we continually work to strengthen our efforts to address oppression based on identity. The student community is another such vehicle. Student groups organized around various identities proliferate on campus, their concerns are very visible here and they increasingly work together to address issues that reflect that intersectional analysis. Individual students, doing their community practice projects and theses, have yet more opportunities to add their voices to those opposing oppression in its many forms.

¹ The importance of thinking, talking and acting in non-oppositional terms was driven home to me by the thesis project of Katie Hornowski A’08 who makes an intellectual, spiritual and political case for framing our response to racism in terms that promote a positive vision of the world we would like to see.
And, it must be said, it's just not possible to address all the forms of oppression with as much depth and care as they deserve.

Oppression is something a great many of us experience in very personal ways. Virtually all of us have some aspect of our identity that places us in a dominant position in society, while other parts of who we are have been the basis of some form of oppression. For example, as a White, heterosexual man, I come to this institution with levels of unearned privilege that certainly have brought me benefits in this world. On the other hand, as a Jew coming from a working-class refugee family that escaped the Holocaust, being at Smith, this place that exudes wealth and a New England Protestant sensibility, is a stark reminder of how much of an outsider I am.

So, like virtually all of you, there are aspects of who I am that benefit from being part of the dominant culture and there are other elements of my identity that sometimes leave me feeling vulnerable and unsure of how safe and welcome I really am in this country. Ultimately, though, if we choose to integrate all of who we are, it seems to me, we then are in a position to challenge the hurts that may have played a large part in shaping how we see ourselves and what we do in the world. And then we can use what privilege we do have to challenge the assumptions and structures of privilege.

I raised this personal note to suggest that the structures of oppression impact all of us and, that feeling like our particular experience doesn't get acknowledged here, can limit our capacity to feel the hurt of others. And yet, it is the very personal experience of oppression that we ask you to draw on to allow you to empathize with others whose oppression is different from yours.

In doing so, I am reaching for your capacity for empathy and your willingness to join in a struggle that is about all of us. But, as I call on you to make a personal commitment to the School's mission, I want also to acknowledge the complexity of the commitment we ask you to make.
It’s important to recognize, for example, that choosing one oppression and making it our focus does ignore others and also, at the same time, to recognize that engaging one source of oppression is the doorway through which we can walk to truly feel and challenge others. It is this “both/and” position that, I believe, allows us to focus on racism for its own sake and, at the same time, for the lessons it can provide in dealing with sexism, heterosexism, anti-semitism, ableism, classism, and all the other –isms that are such destructive forces in our lives, whether we are targeted or not.

And drawing on that empathy, I’d like to invite you to consider a fairly common experience for those of us who are White: many times, we use our personal experience of our own oppression as a way to grapple with and enter into the experience of oppression based on race; and, many other times, talking about our own oppression is used as a way of staying focused on our own experience and not considering the meaning and impact of racism. And, for people who have experienced racism, I recognize that not all such experiences are identical nor do they have identical meanings to you across different targeted groups. My hope is that we will all use our passion and empathy and intellect to make the connection between our own oppression from whatever source and racism as experienced by others.

So, here you are at Smith, ready to begin what I hope you will find a challenging and exciting educational experience. I imagine that, as you considered applying here and read this mission statement in the School’s application materials, you might have had a range of reactions. For some of you, it was a positive factor in your decision to apply here; for others, it played little role. For some, it may have been an affirmation of your own values; for others it might have seemed somewhat frightening or intimidating, as in “what will be expected of me?” However you reacted to the School’s mission statement, though, you made a decision to be here.
And, now that you are here, it’s important, I believe, to acknowledge that here at Smith, we aren’t an oasis of racial peace and harmony. We bring our country’s and our own histories to this time and place. And, as James Baldwin wrote in *The Fire Next Time*: “History does not refer merely...to the past. On the contrary, the great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us, are unconsciously controlled by it in many ways, and history is literally present in all that we do.”

So, given our histories, who we are and where we are, how might we think about this mission? First, we don’t and can’t commit to *being* an anti-racism institution, but we do commit to work toward *becoming* one. For the reality is that in a racist society it just isn’t possible to get there. Becoming an anti-racism institution – as with becoming anything – is a constant work in progress. And we call on you to join us in the difficult and exhilarating and worthy work of becoming what we aspire to be.

I note the “never-endingness” of this task not to generate despair but rather to elicit a sense of challenge and of humility, of hope and realism. And that’s because of a second important reality. We each come to this moment at different stages of our own racial identity development and consciousness. For some of us, this is an old battle that we have engaged in for years, perhaps for much of our lives. For others, the systems of privilege that virtually all of us live in – at least in the parts of our identity as White or male or heterosexual or Christian or able-bodied or economically secure – have sometimes allowed us the luxury of not considering how that privilege has permitted us to ignore injustice and oppression based on identity. So, for virtually all of us, not having to think about one or more aspects of who we are is a privilege. But, consistent with our anti-racism mission, it is important to acknowledge that it is a manifestation of White privilege to not be conscious of racism and we assert that those of us who are White must be willing to examine, recognize and give up that privilege.
As I say this, I can imagine that some of you might ask why is it so important to examine the ways that racism has affected you and, more pointedly, for White students, why would I want to give up privilege that has served me well. Privilege, after all, in this context, is an unearned benefit that one has because of their identity.

Acknowledging our own racism and the unearned privilege of Whiteness, can be painful. It can induce a sense of fear, guilt or shame or, even, anger. While that certainly is a possibility, it isn’t especially useful to stay there. Recognizing the ways in which Whiteness confers unearned privilege can also be a catalyst to growth and liberation. Freedom for all of us is, I believe, inextricably bound together. And, since we are in this together, it is my hope that the School is a setting within which you feel supported to do the work.

In that context, in the wish that you will feel supported in your efforts, it is important to remember that we are in a community that has come together with anti-racism work as part of its purpose. Whatever missteps we make, however we show our ignorance or feel our rage or sadness, we are among people who are trying to get it. In contrast with the virulence of the racism outside the gates of Smith College, we hope that the racial conversation here can be conducted with respect, as among friends and colleagues, comrades and allies. For that to happen, we need to understand that, in this relationship-based profession, we are in relationship with each other and building and sustaining those relationships is part of what allows us to grow together. And when those relationships get strained, when we turn on each other or, sometimes, ourselves, that is when those who truly profit and benefit from racism, are the real winners.

With that in mind, part of our work together is to learn to recognize racial privilege and to understand that someone’s beginning awareness in this area deserves acknowledgment and support. For social work is a profession that values self-awareness and growth. We don’t think that having to grow should be a source of embarrassment or shame. Growing is another word for becoming and we, individually and collectively, are always in that process. So, whether that process of recognition began, for some of you, long ago or, for others, begins here at Smith, the important thing is that the
process has begun and, I’d point out, we all have work in this area to do that will outlast our time together here.

Allow me, then, to suggest roles for all of us as we come together to create the anti-racism experience that this class of 2012 will share.

For White students, it will be important to take responsibility for your own learning about racism and not expecting Students of Color to teach you or cheer on your efforts. As with other parts of your experience here, learning is your job and you need to take it on. But, as you do that, I urge you to respect your classmates’ efforts and not view their mistakes and awkward statements as an opportunity to demonstrate your own “racial correctness.” For that can be just another form of oppressive behavior. Not talking about race is worse than talking about it badly and nothing stops the conversation more quickly than being shamed for not being perfect.

For Students of Color this may mean bearing witness to your White classmates’ learning and for owning your own reactions to that process as well as to the racial content and context of your experience here at Smith. We hope that you would challenge us all directly and compassionately to live up to the School’s mission.

For faculty – as part of this learning community – it means that we need to find ways to promote and support learning about racism. This requires us both to work on our own awareness of racism and to engage students who are trying, however imperfectly and clumsily, to grapple with hard questions by finding what is positive in their efforts and gently challenging what needs to be confronted. In short, we, as faculty, need to model the kind of dialogue we are asking students to have with each other.

And it’s important that, as entering students, you know that the School has made a substantial commitment to supporting faculty efforts in that direction. Our resident faculty have had an ongoing monthly anti-racism dialogue and training since the mission was adopted. Our adjunct faculty have had numerous training sessions on anti-racism work at its annual meetings, the School sponsors an ongoing group for faculty each summer dedicated to anti-racism pedagogy and we have inaugurated an on-line anti-racism course for
adjunct faculty. Finally, the School’s Anti-Racism Task Force meets each week during the summer and we invite you to join faculty, staff and students in using that forum to explore racial issues on campus and work together to address them.

The intent of suggesting roles we all might play – White students, Students of Color, faculty, and the institution itself – is to underscore that we all have a collective and shared responsibility for implementing the School’s – our – anti-racism mission. That is why, for example, I, a White faculty member, am talking to you about the mission today. And, all of us joining together – each of us doing what we can – in this worthy enterprise will ultimately strengthen this community.

And, speaking of community, I want to note a particular challenge and, of course, opportunity in living this commitment at Smith. We are a residential program in which we live and work together intensively for ten weeks and come back and do that again and yet again. There’s no way for me to adequately describe what that will be like for you – after all, it’ll be your experience. But, over the years, we’ve come to understand a few things about what can help make this intentional community work.

One is that the totality of the institution – our sharing dorms and dining facilities, along with classroom and extra-curricular learning - makes this a pretty intense place. And that would be true even if we weren’t intentionally dealing with a pretty intense issue like race. Adding our anti-racism commitment to the mix means that the lack of personal space and the constant need to interact can become even more challenging. After all, you could very well find the person whose careless or angry words left you feeling hurt or furious brushing their teeth at the sink next to yours in the dorms or eating dinner at the same table as you. There really is no way for us to avoid dealing with each other
And, since we have little choice but to interact with each other and since the reality is that building an anti-racism community is hard, we need to remember that we will do it imperfectly but there’s something truly important in our making the effort anyway. And one solution to this clearly difficult project lies in the wisdom of an elderly Midwestern woman.

A number of years ago, my wife went to Minnesota to attend her friend Kay’s wedding. The festivities coincided with Kay’s grandparents’ 50th anniversary. My wife – about to begin her career as a couples therapist - got to talking with the grandmother and asked if she had any secret to making a relationship work for that long a period of time. The profoundly simple answer was: “Just keep talking.”

And, to tell you the truth, I don’t know of any way to build a community and maintain relationships other than to follow that advice. When an ignorant or thoughtless remark wounds you, just keep talking. When you are tempted to retreat into hurt or bitterness, just keep talking. When you’re unsure of how to say something important but difficult, just keep talking anyway. You don’t have to be perfect. And you certainly would want to avoid oppressing yourself or others with standards of perfection that are, by definition, unattainable.

But, in recognizing the challenges of living so closely and intimately together in this community, please also respect what little personal space people have. So, the injunction to keep talking should be tempered with a sensitivity to the need to make sure that the person you want to keep talking with may not want do so at that moment. The conversation needs to continue but at a time and place that works for the parties to it.

Let me add another dimension to this. Included in the idea of “just keep talking” is the responsibility to be in dialogue with yourself about why you might not want to talk. What is that about for you? Is the wish not to talk related to that specific moment or is it a desire to not be in the conversation at all? In essence, we want to build a culture of conversation here and that requires a willingness to stay connected – to keep talking while recognizing that this conversation requires respecting the needs and feelings of others and yourself.
In recognizing this, I want to offer a perspective on what we can reasonably expect to accomplish here. Remember that racism is a system of privilege and oppression grounded in racial identity. It is embedded in virtually all of our societal structures and affects, in a pervasive way, so many aspects of our lives that it is practically impossible to fully comprehend. I make this statement to suggest that the journey we ask you to join in today is a lifetime’s journey. Whatever we are able to accomplish here, in our 27 months together, is only a start to the work that we hope to accomplish.

Finally, I’d suggest there is a pragmatic basis for calling for unity behind the School’s decision to focus on racism in its commitment to opposing oppression. We are all up against pretty much the same forces. For example, there are people out there who don’t care if you’re Black, Asian or Hispanic, Jewish or Catholic, gay or lesbian, an immigrant, legal or illegal - they hate you. They’ll bomb your abortion clinic, attack your right to marry and burn your Black church or desecrate my synagogue. There probably isn’t a person in this room who would not be targeted in some way by groups or individuals who share their views. So, in the time we spend here arguing about who got more air time for what identity, people who wish us all harm are organizing and mobilizing.

Our response has to be to stand and work together for a vision of a country in which: we all have a right to be who we are and not fear that our identity is an invitation to violence directed against us; that an injury to one is an injury to all; and that the things we have in common are much more important than what divides us. If we can find a way to stand together, there is little we can’t do.
In that spirit, let us see the School’s anti-racism commitment as a commitment to the truly important work of building justice and recognize that opposing racism is a way to oppose all oppression. As then candidate Barack Obama put it: “I believe deeply that we cannot solve the challenges of our time unless we solve them together – unless we perfect our union by understanding that we have different stories, but we hold common hopes; that we may not look the same and we may not come from the same place, but we all want to move in the same direction.”

He said that in his masterful speech following the Rev. Wright controversy. And, if a political figure could have enough confidence in the American public to address race and racism in a nuanced, adult way, then, surely, we, members of a community of social workers, can do the same.

Fred Newdom