

Alchemy and the “N” Word

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The “N” word is the third rail of all discussions of race in America. To say it publically, particularly if the “sayer” is white – is to invite immediate, acrimonious censure. 300 years of history has loaded the word with emotional and political dynamite, which detonate with even a whisper.

However, just imagine what might happen should the “N” word be transformed by a strange alchemy from verbal pariah into a banner of positive identity. The result could be the affirmation: “I’m a Nigger and proud of it.” The thought is shocking, outlandish, unthinkable – but something very much like it has happened before. It could happen again, confirming Dr. King’s affirmation, “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.”

Alchemy, of course, is the ancient practice of transmuting the dross of the world (lead) into gold. There is substantial question as to whether the practice ever produced gold, but no question that the alchemic powers do operate effectively in other realms, such as the signs and symbols of personal and group identity. Consider the case of the Christians.

2000 years ago, or thereabouts, a smart talking peasant from Nazareth, with a propensity for saying the right thing at the wrong time/place ... crossed the line and they killed him. His followers scattered, and many denied ever having known him. The local authorities didn’t pay much attention to this rabble group, considering them embarrassing scum of the earth best forgotten... until they did not go away.

Somehow this scabby group continued to tell their strange tale, and worse, appeared to be attracting new followers. The establishment made ongoing efforts to stamp them out. Some members were disappeared, others enslaved, and more than a few met their end as lion food. For 300 years the saga continued when suddenly a most remarkable thing occurred. In 325 AD the scum of the earth became the religious leaders of the largest power of the western world – and the Roman Empire became the Holy Roman Empire.

Through an alchemy of the profoundest sort, the mark of the rabble’s destruction – The Cross -- became the blazing symbol of their movement. Their name of shame – Christian – was claimed with pride. How this occurred, I don’t have a clue. That it occurred is an undisputable, historical fact. It could happen again, and Nigger might be transformed by the same alchemy.

Actually, I think the transformation may already have started. In every language I know anything about, Black is the color of evil. Black moods, black times, black days, dark, nefarious people. And suddenly a ray of light – or is it blackness? BLACK IS BEAUTIFUL – appeared in the Negritude Movement amongst french intellectuals, and spread quietly in the United States

until it became a Civil Rights battle cry of the 60's. I have no idea who to credit for this outbreak, but my memory of the days calls out the names of Stokely Carmichael and SNCC along with The Black Panthers. The alchemic transformation has been aided and abetted by the print media (Ebony), professional sports (Jordan), Hollywood (Sammy Davis Jr), The music industry (Motown) and the political world (Obama). The journey has been far from smooth, but there can be no question about the direction taken and the progress made. "Black is Beautiful" is no longer an unthinkable oxymoron.

What about the transformative possibilities of the "N" word? Given the tenor of the times such possibilities would appear limited to non-existent. However, it might happen that a Kennedy-esque moment lights the global stage, as when JFK proclaimed, "Ich bin ein Berliner." Suppose he had said, "I am a Nigger and proud of it?"

Wild flights of fantasy for sure but definitely less fantastic than the reality of a scruffy Jewish group providing their shame-name (Christian) and symbol (The Cross) to the religious leaders of Rome.

A foretaste of the impact of the transmutation of the "N" word happened in a small way in the 1960's. At the time I was the director of a Poverty program in Washington and had dropped by the house of the president of our youth council. Junior was very large, very black, and became a very good friend. Together we accomplished many good things, made all the sweeter by the fact that we enjoyed working together – in a rough and tumble sort of way. We spoke our minds to each other and engaged in no small amount of good natured kidding.

We were passing the time with the help of a little Thunderbird – solving all the problems of our world. The conversation became delightfully heated, and in response to my most telling point, Junior smiled at me and said, "Nigger." And then he smiled again and said, "I guess you are a white nigger." We had another glass of Thunderbird.

In the moment and for the moment, the fangs were pulled from the beast. No one else saw it and for sure it was not a world changing event. But for the two of us it was a moment of surprising intimacy. The pain and shame of two hundred years was acknowledged, owned and transmuted into a badge of freedom. We were both niggers and proud of it.

The burden of the "N" word upon all parties is disastrous. Like a festering boil it spreads pain and infection. And the more this festering sore is contained the greater the pain. To say the word is to invite acrimony. To be called a "N" conjures up 300 years of pain. Lose-Lose... Big Time.

It could be different. A badge of honor, shared pride, and suffering...