

Time to look in the mirror

This is a grave time in American history. Both the public health and economic problems of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) were foreseeable. But even more predictable is the racial tension gripping the United States in the wake of the brutal killing of George Floyd. It is easy to think that the problem is isolated to individual racists in the community and in the government, and that the scientific enterprise is immune to racism. Scientific inquiry produces knowledge, and that ultimately leads to justice, right?

Not so fast. The U.S. scientific enterprise is predominantly white, as are the U.S. institutions that *Science's* authors are affiliated with. The evidence of systemic racism in science permeates this nation. Why are so few *Science* authors from historically black colleges and universities? Why are the scientific areas studied more frequently by people of color continuously underfunded by the government? Why do students who are people of color have to remind society that they are almost never taught by someone who looks like them? Why has the United States failed to update its ways of teaching science when data show that people of color learn better with more inclusive methods? If there had been more diversity in science, would we have the painful legacy of the Tuskegee syphilis study and the shameful nonrecognition of Henrietta Lacks's contribution to science?

Dr. Lisa White, a professor at the University of California, Berkeley, and chair of the American Geophysical Union's Diversity and Inclusion Advisory Committee, pointed out recently that environmental racism wouldn't be such a problem if there were a more diverse science professoriate. For example, only 4% of tenured and tenure track faculty in the top 100 geoscience departments in the United States are people of color.

Not surprisingly, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. described this problem in 1963 in his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail":

"First, I must confess that over the past few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Counciler or

the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to 'order' than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says: 'I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action'; who paternalistically believes he can set the timetable for another man's freedom; who lives by a mythical concept of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait for a 'more convenient season.'"

The reckoning Dr. King calls for has not happened in the intervening 57 years. The failure of the white moderates to heed the call of the Birmingham Jail is just as integral to today's systemic racism as the racist actions of some law enforcement. It's not just abusive police that need to be reminded that Black Lives Matter.

"...scientists finally need to listen to, and make space for, people of color to lead..."

It is time for the scientific establishment to confront this reality and to admit its role in perpetuating it. The first step is for science and scientists to say out loud that they have benefited from, and failed to acknowledge, white supremacy. And then science and scientists finally need to listen to, and make space for, people of color to lead laboratories that publish great science and produce influential scientists, run institutions and their scientific units, and propel *Science* and other journals to promote structurally underfunded scientists and areas of science.

Someone I turn to for wisdom and leadership on this issue is Dr.

Valerie Sheares Ashby, the Dean of the Trinity College of Arts and Sciences at Duke University. As an African-American woman, she claims that she is leading today only because a few people decided to let her into this exclusive club—something she says hardly ever happens. "How much creativity are we leaving on the table," she asks, "because science repeatedly fails to come to terms with our narrowly defined processes and our limited ways of determining success?"

As in the past, the scientific community is expressing anguish, outrage, and renewed commitment to promote equity and inclusion. But when the protests wind down and disappear from the headlines, science will be at a familiar fork in the road. Let's have the courage to take the right path this time.

—H. Holden Thorp



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Science

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