



**THE FERGUSON BRAND MACHINE HAS A BROKEN SPIN CYCLE: IS
THERE A 21ST CENTURY FIX?**

By: Jacqueline Dyer, Ph.D.

**Presented at:
NACSW Convention 2015
November, 2015
Grand Rapids, Michigan**

The Ferguson brand machine has a broken spin cycle:

Is there a 21st century fix?

Jacqueline Dyer, PhD, MSW, LICSW
Director of In-Ministry Programs

Overview

- About the presentation
- Shalom
- Absence of Shalom: open hunting season?
- Roles of the media, politics & the justice system
- Shalom & the broken spin cycle
- The fight then & now: challenges to sustained change
- A path toward shalom: opportunities for Christians in SW
- Invitation to dialog

About this Presentation

What it is:

An exploration of the contexts created in media, politics, and the justice system & community policing in relation to incidents like the Michael Brown shooting in Ferguson, Missouri.

What it is not:

A discussion or critique of the resulting movement(s) that emerged from the collective pain and outcry, like Black Lives Matter.

Shalom

Shalom means more than peace. It also encompasses completeness, soundness, and welfare

(Strong, 1890)

Shalom

- The incidents highlighted in this presentation are incidents that exemplify the absence of shalom.
- The coverage of these incidents exemplify the absence of shalom.
- The seemingly marginalized or minimized faith response exemplifies the absence of shalom.

“Come now, let us reason together, says the LORD.”

(Isa 1:18)

Absence of Shalom: Open hunting season?

February 2014

- Yvette Smith (4 yrs), unarmed and murdered by police in Bastrop Texas—policeman fired

July 2014

- Eric Garner (43 yrs), unarmed and choked to death by police in New York City, NY

August 2014

- Michael Brown (18 yrs), unarmed and murdered by police in Ferguson, Missouri
- Ezell Ford (25 yrs), unarmed, lying on ground, murdered by police in Los Angeles, CA
- John Crawford III (22 yrs), had air rifle, murdered by police in Dayton, Ohio

Absence of Shalom: Open hunting season?

September 2014

- Levar Jones (35 yrs), unarmed and shot, not murdered, by police in South Carolina—policeman arrested

November 2014

- Tamir Rice (12 yrs), had toy gun and murdered by police in Cleveland, Ohio
- Akai Gurley (33 yrs), unarmed and murdered by police in New York, NY
- Tanisha Anderson (37 yr, mother), died after slammed to ground and kned in back by police in Cleveland, OH

April 2015

- Walter Scott (50 yrs), murdered via 8 bullets in back as he ran away with hands cuffed to back, by police in North Charleston, So Carolina—policeman charged with murder
- Freddie Gray (25 yrs), died of spinal cord injury while cuffed, in police custody in Baltimore, MD

Absence of Shalom: Open hunting season?

July 2015

- Samuel DuBose (43 yrs), unarmed and murdered by U of Cincinnati police in Cincinnati, OH—policeman charged with murder
- Sandra Bland (28 yrs), found hanging in her cell 3-days post arrest for a traffic violation in Waller County, TX; (suicide?)

October 2015

- Corey Jones (31 yrs), shot 3 times by plain clothes policeman in Palm Beach Gardens, FL; assumed dangerous but gun found was never fired; policeman on paid leave

Shalom

“Come now, let us reason together, says the
LORD.”

“to break every yoke”

(Isa 1:18, Isa 58:6)

ROLES OF THE MEDIA, POLITICS & THE JUSTICE SYSTEM

Washing Machine

3 components of the 'machine'?

- Media
- Politics
- Justice system

Faith community action response:

- includes clergy speak outs, prayer vigils, and community meetings calling for change

Faith activism—slow build to visibility, has spotty mass media coverage

Washing Machine

- The justice system manifests evidence of race bias against African Americans (13.2 % of US population). Representatives :
 - Disproportionately jail (28.9%) or kill (31.8%) African Americans*
 - Take long to investigate police aggression, and investigations may not result in murder convictions

*Mullainathan, S. (2015). *Police killings of Blacks: What the data says*. The New York Times: NY. October 18, 2015, p6.

Washing Machine

- After these incidents the media begins to disseminate specific histories, perspectives & impressions about the victims (**water & wash**)
- Politicians use the media frenzy to increase face-time but not necessarily to delineate justice for the victims or to demand positive systemic changes for community policing (**rinse cycle**)

Washing Machine

The spin cycle:

- a) Recurrent features of the story get cycled
 - The murder incident itself (man, woman, child—African American)
 - Policeman perpetrator
 - Victim is unarmed or not a threat
- b) Repeated media portrayals
 - Victim is defamed
 - Policeman: affirmed as having had cause, as generally beyond reproach in tragic situations, is usually given paid administrative leave during incident investigation (vacation?)
 - Attempts to disprove &/or to minimize racism accusations
- c) Continually marginalized faith response

Broken spin cycle

The spin cycle is broken:

- Each incident is turned into versions of the same incident over & over; the repeated patterns in the media coverage or politician sound-bites of these incidents doesn't change much from one to the next
- Community responses are versions of prior responses
- Systemic change is frequently temporary rather than lasting change

Difficulty with the spin:

- Just because some incident features / issues are continually recycled doesn't mean that they should not be repeated

Spin problems

Each component of the machine contributing to the spin appears independent; but each is slave to the societal scourge of racism.

Efforts to find other possible underlying issues besides racism, are still bound by US race dynamics.

Example: alternative factors to explain the disproportional African Americans killings

Spin problems

Alternative factors contributing to African America killings?

1. The rate of killings of African Americans by police (31.8%) aligns with their arrest rates (28.9%)
 - The murders are realistic correlates of the rate of police contact, this can rule out police race bias.
2. Poverty—correlates with increased crime rates and disproportionate numbers of African Americans live in poverty ridden areas.
 - This increased rates of African American police contact are explained by poverty.

SHALOM & THE BROKEN SPIN CYCLE

Shalom & the spin

1. The spin is designed to obscure the many manifestations of racism, but the broken cycle actually reveals racism.

Perhaps racism is the brokenness.

2. Racism conflicts with Shalom (*peace, completeness, soundness, welfare*), and has societal impact contrary to the values of social work.

Shalom & the spin

3. Social work values, which are reflected in the definitions of Shalom, conflict with racism.

When shalom is considered a qualitative factor of social work best practice, racism, then conflicts with social work on multiple levels (values & practice).

4. Shalom is also a foundational value in Christian faith.

In faith terms, the word 'brokenness' has negative spiritual connotations that are contrary to Shalom.

Shalom & the spin

5. Christian social workers find that racism contradicts the values of their faith and their profession, as well as their best practices.

In faith terms, racism can be viewed as representing and enhancing the brokenness of this world.

6. The problem of racism triggers a mandate for Christian social workers to intentionally counteract and ultimately eradicate it

THE FIGHT THEN & NOW: CHALLENGES TO SUSTAINED CHANGE

The fight then & now

21st century efforts mimic 20th century civil rights movement activity yet don't seem to be as effective.

The fight then & now

Effective strategies from 20th century include:

- Marches
- Protest
- Meetings of key movement leaders with governmental leaders

These strategies seemed to have more lasting impact in 20th century

- changes achieved, i.e. equal rights & affirmative action, from the 60s didn't begin to experience 'undoing' for better part of 20 years

The fight then & now

21st century issues that confound effectiveness:

1. A critical broad-based strategy is needed to sustain public awareness and maintain energy for any movements in light of 21st century plethora of media alternatives permitting people to tune out of unpleasantness
2. 21st century leadership is decentralized—a single galvanizing leader may not be able to emerge in 21st century
 - social media diffuses focus on specific leader
 - different people are trying to enter the spotlight using the issues

The fight then & now

21st century issues that confound effectiveness:

3. Self-limited awareness of social issues is more broadly acceptable in the 21st century
 - there seems to be greater acceptance of passivity and of self-absorption
 - reduced desire to expend the necessary energy to know about the issues (especially among people with privilege and comfort –*anecdotal*)

The fight then & now

What about Christians?

Increasingly negligible distinctions between Christians and those in 'the world'

Not all, but enough Christians, don't want to become entangled with some of the messier issues either directly or indirectly

- the prophetic voice calling for justice is becoming increasingly isolated

A PATH TOWARD SHALOM: OPPORTUNITIES FOR CHRISTIANS IN SW

Opportunities for Christians in SW

In the 20th century, movements could tolerate a single galvanizing leader.

21st century opportunity: the strategic direction is building coalition support across groups, with council-leaders and their constituents toward a common cause

Social workers are conversant with building coalitions.

Opportunities for Christians in SW

Social workers can

- facilitate the process for how to distinct groups can work together collaboratively
- influence what issues their aligned collaborations tackle by prayer; then
 - Identify the moral center of the issue to increase agreement about the most urgent actions to pursue
 - Facilitate the systematic build-up of momentum needed to bring about lasting change

Opportunities for Christians in SW

Intentionally facilitate:

- Multilevel coalitions—i.e. church, police, community, media, law/government
- Time—we've become oriented to short time & quick fixes because of other societal changes, but our adaptation to those changes has been detrimental.

A path toward shalom

How, then, can we synthesize a path toward true Shalom?

Intentional and strategic collaborations:

- From out of the faith community
 - designed to influence the workings of 'the machine'
 - for the purpose of lasting change
- With social workers and clergy, working together toward the change that Shalom can build