

Guess Who's Not Coming to the Environmental Dinner? By Fred Tutman

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As a career environmentalist who happens to be African American, the single most common question asked of me by white environmentalists is: How come more black people aren't involved in environmental causes? How come we aren't hiking the Appalachian Trail, working to save the Chesapeake Bay, recycling, planting trees and doing all that other stuff that our white counterparts are doing to save the planet? Interestingly, and by contrast, the most common question I get from black people is: How can I find one of those Green Jobs white people keep talking about?

The ironic counterpoint between these two separate worldviews and disconnected priorities seems to me to be an apt way to portray how an almost invisible color line in the environmental movement has resulted in stark divisions and different realities. Some of us disappointed that the material rewards of a promised green economy seems to have passed us by, and the rest of us just trying to clean up the trash without disrupting the underlying social-economic order. These divisions in perspective are sometimes about as black and white and as starkly divided as the line to buy suntan lotion at the beach. Whites on one hand are building affinity groups and social movements around environmental causes that benefit them disproportionately, and blacks are experiencing environmental hardships on very different terms due to inherent social and economic divisions in our culture that they can neither ignore nor escape. But it is not only people of color who seem to be stuck in the parking lot for the leading environmental issue/cause movements in America.

The deafening silence of sameness:

In fact, a quick glance around the room at virtually almost any gathering of “environmentalists” reveals the absence of at least three very distinct interest groups whose inclusion ought to be essential for any cause movement seeking to succeed in America. Namely, ethnic minorities, people of faith and labor. It is hard to imagine how we could have an environmental movement at all without significant representation from these three influential groups. They would be the heart and soul of any movement that seeks to engage the America's conscience. And yet, why aren't more of these folks at our trash cleanups, Green Expos, Earth Days and so forth? Far and beyond, ethnic minorities experience egregious environmental disparities in the communities where they live that are unlike those of white counterparts. Meanwhile, people in almost any religious faith or stripe typically have doctrinal connections to raw nature, stewardship and connection with a creator generally found in the unspoiled outdoors. And lastly, America's working class grinds its proverbial fingers to the bone for hourly pay in our factories, sweatshops or substandard workplaces fraught with environmental health hazards which threaten their longevity and risk their occupational safety. How can we as environmental change agents possibly be serious about protecting the planet if we cannot even raise a posse of the dispossessed? I'll focus more on the black/white divide in this essay because it is the one with which I have experienced the greatest intensity firsthand.

As I travel and interact all over the country with environmentalists from many different backgrounds, the more the image of a white defined environmental movement trying without success to get engagement from a disinterested and uninformed black populace appears. This phenomenon is downright insulting. I frequently find black people who suffer the greater majority of environmental hardships and disparities fighting bitter battles in their communities over the environmental things that matter to them while whites are doing likewise—but in separate communities. The sad truth is

we simply don't live in the same neighborhoods, suffer the same environmental problems, nor enjoy the same level of access and involvement from large funded environmental cause movements who substantially define the environmental agenda. Think race doesn't matter in the environmental world? Sure it does if the "environment" we are talking about is in America within its racially obsessed heritage and invisible caste system.

Let's face it, environmental justice is generally an afterthought in a movement with a decidedly stronger gravity well towards the environmental concerns of America's most well-off citizens: Namely, those with disposable income, who donate money to non-profit groups and who participate in popular outdoor hobbies while wielding the greater share of political or social influence. How about those living in the preferred communities where environmental conditions are among the amenities marketed by the real estate agent? Those with the particular education and training to not only grasp the underlying causes of pollution but who also have the social standing to speak out about these things without fear of reprisal from the authorities? In sum, those members of society with every expectation that the very same pollution establishment that oppresses the rest of the world is actually an ally of those who live in the best places (property values are up!); or who are invested in the powerful institutions (where did you go to college?) and who have sufficient mobility to live where the environment pleases them (why don't those people in the ghetto just clean up that place?). I am merely trying to point out that in America, factors such as race and class greatly influence your very concept of what the environment is in the first place. This has hindered our efforts. Your zip code says quite a bit about whether you have fresh air, clean water, open space and access to trails, parks and other amenities which fundamentally affect not only your quality of life but also your longevity. For most of us, the quality and circumstances of the environment around us is so fundamental to our understanding and appreciation of what the environment is that we virtually take for granted the environment is generally no more than we perceive it to be based on our experiences.

Whose Bandwagon is it anyhow?

Now don't get angry because this is not intended to be a mean-minded rant about racism, or an attempt to call anybody out. Instead I want to raise awareness and point out inherent circumstantial differences that deeply influence our individual notions about what an environment actually is. In fact it is commonly said to me by whites that "we" are all part of the problem as though environmental problems are at least in part self-imposed. This is an amazing concept to most people of color! A young Latino immigrant once patiently explained to me that he could not personally be part of the environmental problems because such issues existed long before he arrived on these shores, and besides, how could I expect those with the least power in the society to be responsible for solving anything? But I would never argue that environmental cause movements intentionally exclude or discriminate against others (I don't think they do); surely everyone is free to join these causes...just as long as they let the majority members define the issues and control the resources. I think there is a commonplace insensitivity to how environmental causes represent their members, while failing to do much at all for the rest of society. The tragedy is that we have made inadequate attempts to widen the circle of the direct beneficiaries of our environmental activism. Sometimes we are seen as know-it-all folks eager to tell everybody else how to live but without actually standing in their shoes.

In short, we need to jump on other bandwagons if we want to succeed as an inclusive, diverse movement capable of galvanizing a rainbow of participants. Those absent from our ranks don't always need to be educated by us in order to see environmental issues our way, sometimes the other way around will do.

By virtue of doing very little to close the reality gap, we have only ratified and institutionalized the disenfranchisement faced by these absentee stakeholders (absent from our environmental clubs and associations) who wear environmental injustice every day. These stakeholders live in a society where they have lesser influence over the issues and agendas formulated on behalf of the environment. To make matters worse, many of us in the professional environmentalist community sometimes actually seek grants and funding from some of very same institutions oppressing minorities and the working class through their business practices! These arcane corporate partnerships break faith with underserved communities and help greenwash some of America's worst corporate citizens (i.e. often buying trash bags, tee shirts or squeeze bottles for our cleanups). It sends the message we want corporate dollars perhaps more than we want justice for all. As a result, our movement has lost its core connection to the real problems that impose suffering and hardship on others. For a movement busily trying to save the planet for future generations, there are plenty of folks in the here and now who need our help getting some plain old environmental fairness and decency. People who need relief from aged environmental infrastructure, blighted communities, contaminated wells, environmental health issues, little or no access to our rivers, and countless other privations imposed by an uncaring economic system. Conversely, if you have money and influence these things are not much of a problem at all. We could have a far more diverse movement by embracing alternate worldviews about our surroundings that circumstantially may be far different from our own, but could make for a much stronger and inclusive conservation movement. Frankly, the only sort of environmental movement with a prayer of retaining its social conscience and relevance is one that is compassionate and responsive to the needs of those among us with plenty to lose in the event we were to fail in our endeavors.

The cyclone of change:

So, we do not need wider participation simply in order to swell the size of our own ranks, we actually need it to authenticate our cause: to prove we are on the level, to convey to the world and to ourselves we are not just a "Green" clique talking the talk while ignoring the walk. We need to prove our lofty aims for the planet are not solely to retain our classist control over the natural resources perks like birding, hiking, swimming, sailing (while patting ourselves on the back for our deep well of knowledge about nature), but truly are to assert a new culture of equitability and fairness in our dealings with the whole planet and the people on it. The civil rights movement of the 1960's had a certain energy to it. Fueled by a moral fervor and a sense of solidarity, people of many walks linked arms over the idea of overcoming societal wrongs. Activists were captivated by a dream of a better society, a dream that captured and fused the hearts and spirits of many. The "green" movement quite frankly lacks this comparable spirit. We are at times a movement of people with great ideas shared by far too few to create the whirlwind or cyclone of change desperately needed by our wounded and sick planet.

We can do quite a bit to change this. I have come to the conclusion the deeper problem to be faced is not that the rest of us lack concern or interest in relieving the environmental hopelessness that abounds among people we never meet, but that our collective deeds and aims need to reflect meaningful compassion for the suffering of people caused by environmental degradation. Just maybe we are so busy fighting to reverse global warming that we have overlooked intervening on behalf of (or join hands with) the black community that lives less than a mile from a nasty coal burning power plant. We are so busy "educating" school kids in underserved neighborhoods that we lose perspective more needs to be done to ensure these same youngsters will someday have decent jobs and be able to afford to buy some land in a community with relatively clean air or water. In our zeal to save the

environmental things we love, for ourselves, we can easily forget our core goal should be to ensure everyplace will be a good place to live someday. Our goal is obviously a much bigger job than recycling or picking up trash. Indeed considerably much bigger than our own neighborhoods. The politics of privilege in America have blinded many to the absolute reality that environmental problems are the spoils of social and economic activity that rips off people who are powerless to stop it and who suffer as a result. In this inadvertent way many of us have become advocates for preserving the environmental privilege of the people who have the most to gain and the least to lose from the loss of our natural resources.

Fred Tutman is a water quality advocate who serves as the Riverkeeper for the Patuxent River, Maryland's longest and deepest intrastate river. Fred is a lifelong native of Prince George's County's rural boundary along the Patuxent in the historic hamlet known as Queen Anne.

See: www.paxriverkeeper.org

Fred Tutman will speak on November 21 at the New Deal Café located at 123 Centerway, Greenbelt, MD 20770, as part of the Reel and Meal at the New Deal Café - a monthly social justice documentary series. The event, held every third Monday of the month, begins at 6:30 pm with an optional vegan buffet (\$13.00). November's event features a screening of environmental short films and excerpts starting at 7:00 pm. Mr. Tutman will lead the discussion.

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