**Jay Smooth - How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Discussing Race**

TEDx Hampshire College

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I want to talk a little bit about race tonight. Or to be more precise, I want to talk about how we talk about race, how we engage in race conversations, and how we might get a little bit better at it in some ways. And that's a topic that I have always enjoyed. Most Americans avoid race conversations like the plague, and we often take our ability to avoid it and use it as a measure of our progress and enlightenment, which I think is kind of telling in and of itself.

But I've always been drawn to those conversations and fascinated by them in part because, growing up as a very light skinned black man of mixed descent, I often find myself in sort of peculiar race-based conversations. You know, oftentimes, when I'm meeting someone for the first time, rather than making small talk, they'll immediately present me with a philosophical conundrum. They will ask, what are you? I'll have to explain, I'm not a philosophy major. My father's black, my mother's white. What are we?

So, I've always so I've always had a passion for studying and observing how we communicate about race and how we might get a little better at certain aspects of that communication. And I made a video commentary named how to tell someone they sound racist, which talks about a particular type of race conversation, which usually doesn't involve any explicit racist intent. There's no blatant racism involved. Usually involves well intentioned people, but it's a situation where one of us feels a need to tell someone that something they said may have had connotations they weren't aware of, or they may have done something that had a hurtful impact so that they might not have been aware of. And that's a conversation we all find ourselves in from time to time, and it's a conversation that usually goes horribly.

Because no matter how clear you try to be in conveying that you're not attacking the person, you're just trying to offer a specific critique about something that just happened, when we are receiving that sort of critique, we tend to deeply personalize it and take it as personal attack, and we tend to respond by saying, are you saying that I am racist? How can you say that I am a good person? Why would you say that I am a racist? And you try to respond, I'm talking about the particular thing that you say, no, I am not a racist. And what started out as a what you said, conversation turns into a what you are, a conversation or what I am, conversation which is a dead end that produces nothing except mutual frustration, and you never wind-up seeing eye to eye or finding any common ground.

So, in my video, I offered some suggestions for how we might stay focused on the what you said conversation and find some common ground. And that video, most videos on YouTube die off after 48 hours, but this video really struck a chord, which I think shows how hungry many of us are to find better ways to communicate on these issues. And the two types of feedback I get most commonly on that video are, one, I really appreciated the perspective you gave about staying focused on the what you are conversation, and the second type of feedback I get is I tried these strategies you suggested about staying on the what you are conversation, and they actually never work.

And this is true. Unfortunately, no matter what angle you take, as far as voicing that critique, the vast majority of the time, it’s still going to lapse into a defensive what I am conversation. I think framing it as clearly as you can in that what you said form is still valuable, because it makes the substance of your beef as clear as possible to other people observing the conversation, especially in public discourse, and it gives both of you the best shot at finding common ground and seeing eye to eye. It's worth going for that 10% but generally, the success rate might be higher here at Hampshire College, but where I live on the internet, the success rate tends to be around 10%.

So since I made that video and took in that feedback, I've been thinking about what other approaches we might be able to take. And I think since we can never entirely fix that conversation by changing how we voice the critique, I think we might be able to also make it budge a little bit by considering how we receive that critique, and how we might be able to take a suggestion that we may have said or done something racist and take it in stride, and not completely freak out and assume that the world thinks that I'm a bad person.

So, the first thing that makes it difficult to accept that critique that you may have said something racist is simply that it involves the possibility that you made a mistake, and none of us takes that too well. None of us enjoys that. But in most other situations, when the possibility arises that we made a mistake, we are usually able to take a few deep breaths and tell ourselves, I'm only human, everyone makes mistakes. But when it comes to conversations involving race and prejudice. For some reason, we tend to make the opposite assumption. We deal with race and prejudice with this all or nothing, good person, bad person, binary, in which either you are racist, or you are not racist, and if you're not batting 1000 then you're striking out every time. And this puts us in a situation where we're striving to meet an impossible standard, and if anything less than perfection means that you are a racist, that means any suggestion that you've made a mistake, any suggestion that you've been less than perfect, is a suggestion that you're a bad person. So, we become averse to any suggestion that we should consider our thoughts and actions, and it makes it harder for us to work on our imperfections.

When you believe that you must be perfect in order to be good, it makes you averse to recognizing your own inevitable imperfections, and that lets them stagnate and grow. So, the belief that you must be perfect in order to be good is an obstacle to being as good as you can be. So, it would make our conversations with each other a lot smoother, and it would make us better at being good if we could recognize that we're not perfect and embrace that.

So, I want to offer a couple of things that you could keep in mind when you need to remind yourself that I'm not supposed to be perfect when it comes to navigating race. And the first thing is that anytime we're dealing with race issues, we are dealing with a social construct that was not born out of any science or reason or logic. We are grappling with a social construct that was not designed to make sense and to the extent that it is the product of design, the race constructs that we live in in America were shaped specifically by a desire to avoid making sense. They were shaped for centuries by a need to rationalize and justify indefensible acts. So, when we grapple with race issues, we're grappling with something that was designed for centuries to make us circumvent our best instincts. It's a dance partner that's designed to trip us up. So just based on that alone, we should be able to keep in mind that you will never Matt 1000 when it comes to dealing with race issues. And the other thing that we need to keep in mind is as we are all imperfect humans, and as has been laid out in some of the other talks this evening, we all have unconscious thought processes and psychosocial mechanisms that prop up there are many things in our day to day lives that lead us towards developing little pockets of prejudice, that lead us towards acting unkind to others without having any intent to do so, these are things that will just naturally develop in our day to day lives.

So, the problem with that all or nothing binary is it causes us to look at racism and prejudice as if they are akin to having tonsils. You either have tonsils or you don't, and if you, if so, if you've had, if you've had your prejudice removed, you never need to consider if someone, if someone says, if someone says, I think you may have a little unconscious prejudice. No, my prejudice was removed in 2005, I went to see that movie Crash, it’s all good. But that's not how these things work. When you go through your day to day lives there are all of these mass media and social stimuli, as well as processes that we all have inside our brains that we're not aware of, that cause us to build up little pockets of prejudice every day, just like plaque develops on our teeth. So, we need to move away from the tonsil’s paradigm of race discourse towards the dental hygiene paradigm.

So, I offer one piece of advice, and in general, I think we need to move away from the premise that being a good person is a fixed, immutable characteristic, and shift towards seeing being good as a practice, and it is a practice that we carry out by engaging with our imperfections. We so we need to shift from, we need to shift towards thinking of being a good person the same way we think of being a clean person. Being a clean person is something that you maintain and work on every day. We don't assume that I'm a clean person, therefore I don't need to brush my teeth. And when someone suggests to us that we've got something stuck in our teeth, I have something stuck in my teeth, I'm a clean person.

So I know that this is no small task, but if we can shift a little bit closer towards viewing those race conversations the same way we view a conversation about something stuck in our teeth, it will go a long way towards making our conversations a bit smoother and allow us to work together on bigger issues around race, because there are a lot of beyond the persistent conversational awkwardness of race, there are persistent systemic and institutional issues around race that are not caused by conversation, and they can't be entirely solved by conversation, you can't talk them away. But we need people to work together and coordinate and communicate to find strategies to work on those systemic issues. Because despite all of the barriers that we've broken, all of the apparent markers of progress, there are still so many disparities. If you look at unemployment rate, infant mortality rate, incarceration rates, median household income, there are so many disparities on the various sides of the color lines in this country that it is worthwhile for us to iron out these conversational issues, if for nothing else, so that we can get a little bit closer to working together on those big issues.

So, I hope that we can, if I could add one wish, it would be that we would reconsider how we conceptualize being a good person, and keep in mind that we are not good despite our imperfections, it is the connection we maintain with our imperfections that allows us to be good. Our connection with our personal and common imperfections, being mindful of those personal and common imperfections, is what allows us to be good to each other and be good to ourselves.

So, I know that this is no easy task, and race may be the most difficult sphere in which to apply this concept, but I think it's where it could also reap the most rewards. So, I hope that bit by bit, if we consider that and are mindful of it, we can shift away from taking it as an indictment of our goodness and move towards taking it as a gesture of respect and an act of kindness when someone tells us that we've got something racist stuck in our teeth.

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