

For an inclusive society, teach our children a new story (Commentary)

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Ralph Singh, pictured Oct. 3, 2017, at a sunset candlelight vigil for the Las Vegas shooting victims along Onondaga Lake's West Shore. Singh is founder and CEO of the Wisdom Thinkers Networks. (Michael Greenlar | mgreenlar@syracuse.com) SYR

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By Ralph Singh | Wisdom Thinkers Network

Ralph Singh, founder and CEO of the Wisdom Thinkers Network, has spoken and written about, and been actively involved in efforts to link human consciousness and human rights for five decades. Wisdom Thinkers is now a recognized partner of the Fetzer Institute.

As our country experiences the trauma of the killing of yet another black man by police, and the nationwide fallout and polarization arising from it, we must ask ourselves: How is it possible that a people who can harness boundless energy, spirit and collaboration to conquer outer space can struggle and fail to eliminate the racial and economic chasm that plagues our country? We have failed to explore our *inner space* — our human consciousness.

To change our future, we must change our story about ourselves. We are a country of conflicting narratives: Among many white Americans, there is a faith that our great, striving, American character is girded by our indomitable human spirit. But when we think about that same (hopefully) human spirit inside a black body, or that of other minorities and poor whites, we instead see people who we are meant to dominate, and fail to recognize that we have created a construct and a system to keep “them” there.

For all the programs, conferences, meetings, regulatory bodies and money thrown at the issues of race and poverty, we’ve failed to enable and mobilize our most critical resource: our inner selves. Until we are able to look inside and realize that there is a different story — a different voice — we will not change the story in the world around us.

That inner voice of truth and justice has spoken from time immemorial to those who take the time to listen. If we look within, through meditation and prayer, we will see that we all have the same light inside that radiates throughout the cosmos, that “we

are all part of one human race,” as I learned from Baba Virsa Singh ji that the great Guru Gobind Singh ji and other Holy Lights have taught us.

Three hundred years ago in India, the common people had no rights and were buried under layers of oppression. The Gurus awakened their spirits and taught them a different story – that God alone determines their position and no worldly power can determine their fate. From the dregs of society, they raised a social movement, *Khalsa*, that defended everyone’s right to pray without fear of persecution, to work hard to earn an honest living, and proclaimed their moral obligation to share with those in need. They built a Sikh Empire where peace reigned and all were respected, until the British

subverted and “subjected” them to feed the greed of the “civilized world.” The impact of colonization still colors our world today.

Generational poverty and the systemic injustice that has mutated must be solved. It’s the greatest debt on the world’s collective balance sheet and we will pay several times over if we don’t pay it off. We have created a permanent underclass. Millions of young Americans see no hope of ever rising out of poverty, of even reaching the starting line. We must remove the constraints and allow them to fly if we are to progress and prosper as a nation.

The greatest constraint that impacts black people, rich and poor alike, is the dehumanization by the police, which literally kills them. For those who are “officers of the peace,” it must be incredibly painful to watch the trend of “militarization” and movement

away from community policing. Intentionally or subtly, in too many cases, we've trained our police to intimidate rather than protect, and trained our children to fear them.

As one who lived through the pain and riots following the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., I remember asking the sole black student in our class at the University of Rochester, "How do you feel?" Sitting alone in the cafeteria, obviously stunned, he just shook his head. Ironically, the dining hall was in the "Frederick Douglass Building," where a white marble bust of Douglass greeted people. Who knew Douglass was black? It must have seemed like a major concession or demonstration of compassion for university leadership to replace it with a black bust shortly thereafter. And perhaps that black student felt some satisfaction. Things have changed since then, but "The Change" is still to come. And if that means we might have to share some more power, we will end up with a more prosperous country, for the pie will expand.

It's not easy to change people's hearts and minds, but I have devoted the past few decades of my life to ensuring we raise young Americans with core values that embrace equality, inclusion, collaboration and love as essential parts of our American identity. In dozens of classrooms in New York state and elsewhere, "Stories to Light Our Way" multicultural wisdom stories Social Emotional Learning program helps overcome bullying and intolerance and plants the seeds for compassionate, engaged citizens.

We must help our children understand that the world they see is Virtual Reality -- that all the poverty and injustice – the disrespect and bullying – is man-made, and they are the avatars born to change that artificial reality. We can help children find their own