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**DIANE R. HERSHBERGER COMMENTARY  
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Understanding cultural perspectives IS key

**By DIANE R. HERSHBERGER  
Special to The Star**



Because of the work that I do, I am often asked by people of my race what I think is the biggest barrier to achieving better race relations in the Kansas City region.

It is an important question on which to reflect as we approach the one time of the year when the collective conscience of our country pauses to commemorate the life of Martin Luther King Jr. and all those who worked and gave their lives for the civil rights of Americans, regardless of the color of their skin.

My answer to the question is twofold.

First, a significant barrier is that most whites and people of color do not share the same definition of what racism is. The second barrier is that whites and people of color, particularly those persons whose family members were enslaved in this country, do not view history in the same scale of time. Bridging the gap in understanding these two crucial perspectives is imperative to finding common ground in the day-to-day manifestations of racial inequity.

It is often said that Martin Luther King Jr's. last presidential address to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference contained some of his most radical thoughts.

King talked about the direct relationship between keeping people in slavery for 244 years by "making them into things" and the economic oppression systematically imposed on blacks by white individuals and various levels of our government for another 100 years.

He talked about the chasm between those who are economically impoverished and the true promise of the American dream. King was naming the form of racism commonly understood by blacks to be the most pervasive and pressing form of racism today — structural racism.

The Aspen Institute Roundtable on Community Change characterizes structural racism as the different "contours of opportunity" shaped by the social, economic and political structures of American society with "whiteness being the default setting for race in America."

The image of whites, blacks and other people of color moving through life in different contours of opportunity are powerful. Structural racism is a social order in which public policies, institutional

practices and cultural norms result in predictable racial disparities that are otherwise counterintuitive given the repeal of racially discriminating laws in the last 50 years.

The concept of racism as something other than overt discrimination is a reality that white people need to examine closely and take responsibility for changing in all aspects of society but in particular in the areas of access to educational, housing and economic opportunities.

Then, the vastly different scale of time that whites and blacks in our country use as reference points in assessing race relations is also a major point of dissonance. Several years ago, an African-American co-worker shared with me her childhood memories of touching scars on her great-grandmother's back left by whippings inflicted by a slave master.

I was numbed by the stark contrast of the relevance of a part of this country's history so distant and unconnected to my reality, yet deeply embedded in the present-day reality of my friend. I caught a glimpse of a different historical timeline by which solutions to past wrongs were measured on a much different scale than the one from which I operated.

The 2007 Martin Luther King Jr. commemoration theme, "If you don't know from whence you come, you have no idea of where you are going," speaks to the need to gain a shared understanding of the face of racism today as well as the decisions facing our country and region in the future to make the possibility of the American dream a reality for all.

It is particularly important for our youth to understand where our country has come from regarding matters of race. One opportunity for children to begin their learning journey is at the 12th annual Martin Luther King Jr. Youth Day Celebration to be held next Monday.

Interactive activities will offer children an opportunity to learn the history of the civil rights movement and the life of King. It is sponsored by HarmonyNCCJ and is hosted by Rockhurst University. Additional event information can be obtained at <http://www.kcharmony.org/> or by calling (816) 333-5059.

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*Diane R. Hershberger is the executive director of Kansas City Harmony.*

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