

On Life and Meaning

MARK PERES

Episode 9 – Henry Rock II – A New Class of Entrepreneurs

Having the Conversation on Race

And now a personal word,

The discussion you heard was the second one I had with Henry Rock. The first one did not record. This is what you did not hear about race and discrimination.

I asked him if City Startup Labs only accepted African Americans into the program. He said yes. I asked him if he would turn away someone interested in CSL who was not black. He said he might mentor the person personally but that the program itself was for young black men and women. I asked if he would turn away other ‘people of color’ like Indians and Asians and persons from the Middle East. He said he objected to the phrase ‘people of color’ because he stopped being colored a long time ago.

I asked Henry about terms he had used to describe himself including being ‘race conscious,’ ‘grounded in his blackness,’ ‘a black nationalist’ and being ‘unapologetically black.’ He said all of that was true.

I asked him if a funder or underwriter of CSL ever expressed concern that CSL was exclusively for African Americans. Henry said no one had ever asked him the question. I asked him if his exercise of authority limiting access and opportunity to others based on a person’s skin color troubled him. He said it did not. He said the program was ‘doing for self, the self of the black community’ and that CSL was by and for black people.

The exchange might sound confrontational. It was not. It was part of the flow of an hour-long discussion about his work and life that in tone was very similar to the one you just heard. Although some of it was pointed. After Henry left my home and I checked the computer, I realized nothing recorded. Not a sound. I had forgotten to turn on the microphones I had set up on my kitchen table. I closed my eyes and grimaced. It was not the first time I screwed up the technical side of this podcast. I’m not very smart when it comes to pressing buttons. Paper and pencil and words, yes. Software and hardware and keyboard commands, not so much.

When I realized I did not have a word on tape, or no audio converted to os and 1s as it were, I apologized to Henry and asked if we could give it another go. He generously agreed to come by my home a week later to record again.

In the days between I thought a lot about his position that City Startup Labs was only for black folk, especially in light of recent events of white nationalists and neo-Nazis marching in the streets and what we owe each other in society. Could we get past race division if his program divided the races? I prepared to push him harder on his thinking in a way a friend of mine once described as ‘warm and cheery confrontation.’ That can be me in a discussion: ‘warm and cheery confrontation.’

Here’s the thing you should understand about me and conversations about race. I grew up in Queens, New York in the early 1970s. My family lived in apartment buildings in ethnically diverse neighborhoods from Lefrak City to Rego Park. My closest friends were Takashi Tanamora, Japanese American, Robert Narva, could-have-been Finnish-American, Christopher Carr, African American. I was the boy from the Portuguese speaking half-Jewish, half Catholic immigrant family from Brazil. My classmates at PS 139 were Italian and Irish and Jewish and Black and Puerto Rican. That was New York. The photos from my birthdays when I was 8, 9 and 10 years old all look like they were taken in the U.N.

Growing up I was far more relaxed with ‘people of color,’ a phrase we never used or heard of back then, than with wealthy white suburban Protestants who were completely alien to me.

There is more to the story about me growing up with people different than me; living overseas, moving to Miami, being with all sorts of folk in all sorts of neighborhoods, but that’s a story for another day.

One result of it all is I have talked and explored and have had conversations about race with all sorts of folk my whole life. Discussions I have had about race are real and nuanced and pointed and sometimes very funny. Yes, I go there.

I am sensitive to language about race because words have historical weight and words convey meaning and intent that matter, but I don’t fake what I think or feel, or use politically magic terms to pose or posture. I seek to understand. I arrive at my own conclusions. I have the conviction of what I think. I don’t pull any punches and I think that is appreciated by the people with whom I speak. I assess people on their integrity and their values and their work ethic and compassion and humanity and that’s it. There are folks I like and folks I don’t like. And folks who like me and who don’t like me.

All of which brings me back to my second conversation with Henry. On the morning of his second visit to my home it struck me that I would not question him along the lines I had previously. Maybe that's what you want to hear, for me to intellectually spar with my guests. Maybe that's the fire and energy and pop that you have an appetite for and that you expect of me, especially those of you who know me, waiting for me to be Socratic or contrarian, as I often am with friends over coffee or with my students in the classroom, to bring all the verve and wit and whatever incisive intellect I might have to this podcast, and maybe I will as I get better and more relaxed with having a microphone in front of me, and maybe I should to entertain and reveal more of who I am and to grow an audience, but not in this instance, not in this instance for two reasons: 1) I've made a choice on this show, at least so far, to ask simple and direct questions of my guests and to get out of the way. I want to give my guests the room to reveal themselves and the complexity of who they are and to discuss deep and profound questions in a respectful and thoughtful way; and 2) how Henry chooses to respond to 400+ years of enslavement, segregation, discrimination and oppression that has dismantled his community is his choice. The space and education he is providing young black men and women to learn and realize their dreams in a society that otherwise lines up everything against them calls for us to listen, to listen carefully to understand, and to support him and his work if we so choose.

He is doing his work with love to uplift the next generation of his community and to integrate them into society. That is something to honor. The only moral judgment we should have are for those who wish to divide society based on hate.

And so the conversation you heard with Henry. Thanks for listening.

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