OVERVIEW

LEADER PREPARATION

Obtain a copy of the 1998 (1999 DVD/video) release of American History X. Preview the movie before participating in a group activity, to decide if the content is appropriate.

**NOTE: This movie is rated R for graphic brutal violence including [homosexual male] rape, pervasive language, strong sexuality and nudity. In a setting where young adolescents will be present, it is recommended that permission is obtained from the parents/guardians. For a fair moral/ethical breakdown of the movie, including its use of violence, profanity, and sexuality, see this rating/review.**

If time or appropriateness is an issue, then consider showing the following clip and adapting the group discussion questions which follow.

DVD scenes 3 – 4 (time [in hr:min:sec] 0:06:26 – 0:10:57), which is the dialogue between the principal and history teacher at Danny’s (Edward Furlong) school regarding his troubling paper, as well as the conversation which follows between the principal and Danny about his new paper assignment.

INTRODUCTORY GROUP PREPARATION

Show the film in a group. Before viewing the movie together, prepare the group with the general story: Derek Vinyard (Edward Norton’s character) is the leader of a neo-Nazi young white supremacist group, which embraces prejudice, racism, and violence against blacks, immigrants, Jews, Hispanics, and many others. Danny (Edward Furlong’s character), his younger brother, grows up witnessing this racism and hatred, and begins to follow in his brother’s ways. After being imprisoned for murder, Derek undergoes transformation and changes his prejudicial attitude and damaging behavior. Upon his release, he strives to save his brother, Danny, from the pattern of racism and destruction so pervasive in their family, before it is too late. (adapted from New Line Home Video, Inc., box notes, 1999)

GROUP DISCUSSION

* After talking with Danny’s History teacher about his troubling paper, his principal says, “He learned this nonsense…and he can un-learn it, too.” Do you agree that learned racial stereotypes (and other racist beliefs) can be un-learned?

* Derek’s Father played a significant role in his racist beliefs. In turn, Derek influenced his brother, Danny, to believe certain things about other people. Who have you been influenced by (in a positive way and a negative way)? What have you been taught about other people of different races/ethnicities based on these influences?

* Derek was in a racist group which openly acted out racism and hatred. However, racism can be demonstrated through hidden means. What are some examples of hidden (also known as “covert”) racism?
* Is racism only seen through violence, hate groups, or racial slurs? What are some other ways that racism is evident today?

* Danny does a lot of reminiscing about his brother’s prejudice and racial hatred throughout the movie. When you think back through your own life and experiences, what examples of racism do you remember? (These can even be covert instances of discrimination against those of another race, etc.)

* When Derek took a stand and exclaimed to Cameron (the white supremacist group leader/organizer), “I’m out! And Danny’s out, too,” he received a lot of flak from those of his same race/identity group. When have you taken a stand against prejudice, racism, or discrimination, and how did you feel?

* Derek’s black workmate in prison stuck up for him and kept him safe. How has someone stuck up for you? How have you stuck up for someone else?

* The movie ends with a quote from Abraham Lincoln: “We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory…will [yet] swell…when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.”[1] How does this quote speak to you?

WRAP-UP / CONCLUSIONS

* Much of hatred and prejudice is learned, and can therefore be un-learned.[2]

* There is a sense of urgency to end racial prejudice in your own life and the lives of others.

TAKE-AWAY

* Write down on a notecard any harmful or faulty things you have learned or been taught about people of other races/ethnicities.

* In large text, write “I will un-learn” on top of what you wrote.

* Commit (to God, to yourself, and to others) that you will live to reject all prejudice.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What weaknesses in an individual contribute to racist thinking and actions?

2. What influences around a vulnerable person contribute to his or her growing racism?

3. How can peer pressure or groups contribute to racism?

4. How can people who do not seem themselves as racist, still harbor subconscious racial prejudices? Do the outbursts of celebrities in our society illustrate such covert racism?

5. What can contribute to the breakdown of racism, systemically and individually?

IMPLICATIONS

1. Racism is definitely present today.
2. Racial prejudice and racism is not only open (overt), but is also hidden (covert).

3. We must recognize that we learn many things from those who have gone before us, both for good and for evil.

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