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In Dealing with Racism and Anti-Semitism, Coffee Cups Can't Replace Action

Matt Towery

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It didn't take a genius to predict that the idea of promoting discussion about race between baristas at Starbucks and their customers would come to a rapid and certain end. However well intended, the concept of entering a coffeehouse and having a protracted conversation about race while holding up lines and diverting customers from their usual routine just sounded juvenile.

Credit Starbucks leaders for good intentions and even better sense in halting the program abruptly.

Consider two men who are more about action when it comes to race relations and fighting other forms of discrimination, including an alarming rise in anti-Semitism both here and more aggressively in other parts of the world. Both men would hardly qualify as conservatives, nor would they want to. But that is of no significance. In both cases, their calls to action are steeped in an understanding of history and a real desire to do what is right.

Everyone, regardless of politics, race or religion should take heed of what each of these two men are doing, because in their own way they are articulating what many believe to be true.

Tom Houck is a white man who started his adult life as the personal driver for Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Over many decades, he remained an activist in Atlanta, helping with the careers of civil rights icons such as Congressman John Lewis and former Ambassador Andrew Young.

Incredibly, Atlanta, with its nearly 6 million people and hugely successful African-American leaders and entertainers, such as Tyler Perry, has no full-time tour it can offer of the many sites in the city related to the civil rights movement. Houck has taken it upon himself to raise funds to create such a tour. And he has done so through old-fashioned free enterprise, not a hand out.

It hasn't been easy for him. There have been no investments from the likes of a Starbucks. But many people of good will have come forward to put time and resources into what will be an invaluable set of videos containing personal interviews from Young, former NAACP President Julian Bond and members of the King family, among others. Houck's tour teaches a history that should not be forgotten. And his effort, which has real elbow grease support from conservatives, liberals, Democrats and Republicans is an example of turning words into action.

While Houck is of relatively humble means, Harvey Weinstein, arguably the most powerful person in the world of motion pictures, has amassed a financial fortune and in doing so has brought us many of the greatest films in modern years. As noted earlier, Weinstein would never, ever be known as a conservative and certainly not a Republican. But again, I would suggest that the most conservative and partisan of readers consider his recent speech in accepting the Humanitarian Award at the Simon Wiesenthal Center's national tribute.

In accepting his award, Weinstein argued for more than a note on a coffee cup in confronting what is a very clear and frightening rise in anti-Semitism, particularly in Europe. Weinstein went well beyond the lip service some give this new trend and bluntly stated that those who want to fight it, particularly those of the Jewish faith, must get organized and plan to get as well-organized as "the mafia" in fighting back against those who would bring the world back to the days of Nazi Germany.

Weinstein made it clear that there should be no problem working with others, including those with good intentions of the Islamic faith. But, as is the case in Houck's efforts, Harvey Weinstein seeks to rally people to remember the dangerous past and to "stand up and kick these guys in the ass."

For the politically correct world we live in, Weinstein's words might be considered out of order. But with threats to Jews rising all over the world, his message is much needed.

Both men prove that understanding history and true actions speak louder than coffee cups. And solutions to problems often come from those with knowledge, age and a sense of history. It would be a shame if Houck's efforts and Weinstein's call to action were ignored.