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LIFESTYLES

SUSAN AGER: Race Summit shows how long the road is

October 10, 2006

BY SUSAN AGER
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Before an hour passed at New Detroit's Leadership Summit on Race on Sunday, somebody got hotly offended.

On the screen in front of the ballroom were listed seven racial options. A moderator asked all 300 of us to pick one, and punch a number into a hand-held touch pad. Within seconds a computer would let us know who we were -- racially, at least.

The options were the usual: Asian/Asian-American, Black/African-American, White/Caucasian, Arab, Chaldean, Latino/Hispanic and Other.

Most of us had punched our buttons when all of a sudden, in the middle of the vast room, a woman started hollering.

I couldn't hear what she said. Nor, at first, could the moderator behind the podium. But people sitting around her helped make her point by shouting, "Native American! Native American!"

She is one. She felt miffed. She resented having to check "other," as if she and her people were a group too small to matter.

I heard her holler, "We were *first* in this country!"

A loud murmur ensued, like the humming of aroused bees. I sensed half the room blaming the organizers for forgetting Native Americans. Others groaned: Not a good way to start a two-day conversation about race relations, although we *were* encouraged to be honest.

Lack of unity

The Native American woman's explosion struck me as symptomatic of the troubles we have with each other over race: We still tend to take everything so personally. It's human nature, of course.

On Sunday evening, any time a black person blamed "white people" for this or that, I shivered. And every time somebody blamed "the media," I, too, wanted to stand up and holler.

To make progress, though, we must get over that edginess and propensity to feel wronged. We didn't wear identical T-shirts in that ballroom, but we might have: We had come together, as a loose-knit team, to pursue vague goals.

Alas, we lacked the unity and passion of the crowd at Comerica Park the night before, where everybody climbed out of their skins to embrace shared

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devotion to a big, tangible goal clearly within sight.

When other is beautiful

Finally, a few words on behalf of "other":

Those who must check "other," in any circumstance, are often those who can see the landscape most clearly and speak of what they see. They stand alone, or in small groups, without oppressive peer pressure.

Racially, "other" is an advantage for today's hot models, with faces so beautifully mysterious that no one can figure out who they are ethnically.

And a few hundred years from now, as global travel becomes routine and bigotries collapse beneath the weight of proximity, our bloodlines may become multicolored threads, braided so tightly that most of us may check "other."

In that potential future, only a minority of people would choose "white" or "black" or "Native American." They would win pity for having roots so stunted and shallow and gray.

Contact **SUSAN AGER** at 313-222-6862 or sager@freepress.com.

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