an overdue apology

The meeting was not off to a good start.

Twenty people—half of them descendants of slaves, the rest descendants of slaveowners—had gathered around a table at Chicago's Roosevelt University for a four-day discussion. Their objective: to explore ways of healing the racial rifts that still plague the United States 130 years after slavery ended.

On that first day, though, healing was in short supply. And the prognosis seemed all the worse when a slaveowner descendant justified his forebear's actions by noting that slavery was legal at the time. "That triggered a lot of anger on the other side," says Mona Weissmark, Ph.D., the Roosevelt psychologist who hosted the meeting with her husband, psychiatrist Daniel A. Giacomo, M.D.

But the mood changed late that first day when a slaveholder descendant apologized for what his ancestors had done. "It was unbelievable the impact those words had," Weissmark recalls. "One descendant of slaves said, 'I have never heard any white person say that.'"

"I Have Given the World My Songs," by Elizabeth Catlett. From a series of prints, *I Am A Negro Woman*, 1947.

COURTESY OF SRAGOW GALLERY, NYC

Weissmark thinks that a formal apology from the U.S. government for slavery—not unlike former South African president F.W. de Klerk's expression of regret for apartheid—would do wonders for race relations, even though the apology wouldn't come from those responsible for the suffering. Says Weissmark: "I don't think the United States has really faced up to its past at the national level."

While many see slavery as a long-dead issue, Weissmark says psychic scars from the era remain. And that's true for whites as well as blacks. For one participant who grew up on his family's Louisiana plantation, a graveyard preserving the remains of slaves who worked the family fields was a shameful reminder of his ancestor's deeds.

"When a great injustice occurs, the stories get passed down," notes Weissmark, who has also organized joint gatherings between the children of German Nazis and Holocaust survivors. "And with the stories come anger and hate. The feelings perpetuate themselves. If your great-grandparents were victimized, it's normal for some people to feel resentment."

While the meeting's discussion was often painfully frank, those involved say the payoff was mutual understanding. Reports participant Darlene Williams: "Eventually we stopped generalizing and started dealing with each other as individuals."