

White Awakening



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I am still struggling on my journey to becoming antiracist. As my friend and mentor, Debra Nell Brittenum, reminds me – the struggle is lifelong. And, the struggle needs to be done in community with others. Therefore, I share a snapshot of my journey towards becoming an antiracist with the community of Corpus Reports readers.

As a White person, I need to work with intentionality at understanding White culture and White privilege¹, and then, take action in partnership with people of color to dismantle racism. No longer is indifference an option.

As Ibram Kendi states in *How to Become an Antiracist*, there is no place for neutrality in the struggle against racism.

One either believes problems are rooted in groups of people, as a racist, or locates the roots of problems in power and policies as an antiracist. One either allows racial inequities to persevere, as a racist, or confronts racial inequities as an antiracist.²

The choice is clear. One needs to decide. Is one a racist, or antiracist? There is no in-between.

¹ There is considerable debate as to whether or not to capitalize “White” in the way the word Black is capitalized. I am choosing to capitalize the word White. Lower case White suggests racial invisibility and a lack of accountability. Capitalizing White shows the term as a created racialized identity with power and privilege embedded in its definition.

² Kendi, Ibram X. *How To Be an Antiracist*. New York: One World, 9.

My journey began when I was 10 years old with a powerful memory after Catholic Mass, that I ignored.

The Wake-Up Call I Ignored

The irony is etched into my mind so clearly despite the event having happened over 35 years ago. The Sunday readings included a passage from Galatians.

Now, in Christ Jesus, all of you are children of God through faith. All of you, who were given to Christ through Baptism, have put on Christ. Here, there is no longer any difference between Jew or Greek, or between slave or free, or between man or woman; but all of you are one, in Christ Jesus. (Gal 3:26-28)

For me, this passage speaks of dismantling all that separates us – from one another, and from God. A dramatic shift away from a world where there are those with more power over those who have less power. No one is superior, no one is inferior.

Shortly after Mass, as parishioners slowly made their way out of the sanctuary and toward their cars, I overheard some members of my family talking to some other parishioners about the interracial couple that sat a few rows ahead. A White woman and a Black man.

“I was surprised to see that couple back at church this week” said one Sunday regular as they walked. Just the question made me uncomfortable. The phrase “that couple”

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landed in my gut, making me anticipate the harmful talk that was sure to follow.

My family member replied, “I don’t know, this may sound like a bigot, but I think people should stick with their own kind.”

The juxtaposition of those comments being made less than one hour after the Galatians passage at mass has and will stay with me forever. I experienced what would become a familiar feeling when someone I love and care about said such offensive things.

*Here, there is no longer any
difference between Jew or Greek,
or between slave or free, or
between man or woman;
but all of you are one,
in Christ Jesus. (Gal 3:26-28)*

“You’re right, that does sound like a bigot” I barked at my family members as I got into the car.

While I knew what I had witnessed was wrong, I confess that on that day, and for so long after, I believed that such racism existed in them, but not in me.

As I reflect, I now view this experience as a wake-up call to the racism within me and a racist system that operates to grant me privilege while it marginalizes people of color. But it was a wake-up call that I ignored.

My internalized White supremacy was rarely challenged for I lived in a White world. My neighborhood, schools, and social circles were overwhelmingly White, with only a handful of exceptions. When topics of race occasionally surfaced, discussions were superficial as we affirmed one another’s worldview.

A worldview which held that racism was largely a thing of the past; that everyone was equal and was treated the same.

In *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*, author Beverly Daniel Tatum presents a powerful and useful metaphor to describe how racism works and why action is so important to becoming antiracist.

I sometimes visualize the ongoing cycle of racism as a moving walkway located at large international airports. Active racist behavior is equivalent to walking fast on the conveyor belt. The person engaged in active racist behavior has identified with the ideology of White supremacy and is moving with it. Passive racist behavior is equivalent to standing still on the walkway. No overt effort is being made, but the conveyor belt moves the bystanders along to the same destination as those who are actively walking. Some of the bystanders may feel the motion of the conveyor belt, see the active racists ahead of them, and choose to turn around, unwilling to go in the same destination as the White supremacists. But unless they are walking actively in the opposite direction at a speed faster than the conveyor belt—unless they are actively antiracist—they will find themselves carried along with the others.³

I may not have been actively racist, but I was certainly a bystander on the walkway that was headed in the same direction as White supremacists.

The Wake-Up Call I Heard

About 20 years ago, things started to change when my spouse Jaimy and I started dating. We were watching a story featured on ABC’s news program 20/20 about a Vietnamese family being reunited after having been separated during the fall of Saigon. I could sense Jaimy’s discomfort with the report. I thought it was an inspirational story but as the news report described the home life and conditions in Vietnam as being inferior to what their

³ Tatum, Beverly Daniel. “Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria? and Other Conversations About Race.” New York: Basic Books, 1999.

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family members experienced in the U.S., Jaimy grew more irritated. “The home in Vietnam only had a dirt floor” said the reporter as he contrasted life in Vietnam with life in the United States.

“Only in American culture would we judge a Vietnamese home as inferior because it doesn’t look like what people in this country think it should look like!” said Jaimy.

This unexpected comment sent my mind racing. My impulse was to defend the reporter, “he’s only reporting what he sees” is a thought that immediately went through my mind. But I instinctively trust Jaimy to know that she’s seeing something that I’m not seeing. I didn’t see it clearly then, but this was the first important lesson of the danger of seeing the world through norms established by, and for the benefit of, White people.

I started to understand that racism was indeed in me and that for so many years, I denied this fact, because I am a White man operating in a society established by White people to preserve White privilege -and, to marginalize people of color.

Returning to Tatum’s airport walkway metaphor – I realize that I have been a bystander who, while not actively racist, was still racist by inaction and lack of awareness. While I wasn’t actively walking fast on the moving walkway, my lack of action and awareness makes me complicit in perpetuating White supremacy.

It is a painful lesson to realize that neutrality and inaction is racist and that both stances harm people of color. I am responsible for the oppression of others. A wake-up call, now heard. Coming to this realization, and struggling to find a healthy path forward, it is my experience that White people benefit from a framework that outlines the journey from racist to antiracist.

Awakening

In *Race Talk and the Conspiracy of Silence*, Derald Wing Sue argues that the development of a healthy White identity is critical for White people. Without it, White people are likely to exhibit higher levels of racism, deny the racial reality of people of color, maintain that they are “colorblind”, and find talking about race excruciatingly uncomfortable.⁴

Sue argues that achieving a healthy White racial identity (for Americans) occurs in seven developmental phases.⁵ I have found this framework extremely helpful in my search for a path forward in my own antiracism work. I’ll offer a brief summary of Sue’s framework and offer some personal reflections as I explore those seven developmental phases.

The first phase is **Naïveté** which describes a period of development when we as young children (ages 3-5) are innocently curious about racial differences but do not yet attach any social meaning to those differences. I relate to this stage as I recall being 5 years old, wandering off from home. I was lost (despite only being a few houses away!) and I was upset. Randy, an African-American teenager from one street over saw me upset. Upon learning I was lost, Randy picked me up, positioned me on his bike handlebars, and took me back home. While riding with him, I couldn’t take my eyes off his hands and arms – how dark they were compared to mine. “Do you lay out in the sun a lot?” I asked Randy as he lifted me down to my driveway. “Yeah, Jimmy, I lay out in the sun” he replied with a smirk.

As we get a little older, Sue maintains that while we maintain that same innocence of differences, phase 2 called **Conformity** introduces us to two contradictory belief systems that have long lasting implications. On one hand, we learn the value of democracy and the belief that everyone is equal, that our country’s formation is based on freedom, discrimination is wrong, and equal access and opportunity are indisputably at the core of who we are as U.S. citizens. However, at the same time, another belief

⁴ Sue, D. W. *Race Talk and the Conspiracy of Silence: Understanding and Facilitating Difficult Dialogues on Race*. Hoboken: Wiley, 189-190.

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system is being implanted into our psyche through everyday interactions that over and over teach us that people of color are inferior. This happens when a White child sees the hesitation of their parents when their child asks if a Black classmate can come over for a playdate. It is reinforced when the White parent quickly locks the car door when driving through communities of color.

For me, it was bolstered when a family member saw an interracial couple and said “people should stick with their own kind.” This phase provides a critically important foundation where White people are conditioned to believe that society is color-blind and everyone has access to the same opportunities and therefore lack of success is due to the deficiencies of the group. Here, White culture is viewed as superior, while non-White cultures are inferior. This is what Jaimy saw in the 20/20 news report about the Vietnamese family that I did not. Engrained in my psyche was the message planted long ago – Whiteness is superior.

When something happens to force White people to realize a disconnect between one belief system that says there is equal opportunity for all, and another belief system that says Whites are superior, the third phase of **Dissonance** is ignited. Dissonance is followed by a fourth phase – **Resistance and Immersion**.

My experience of these two phases occurred while I was in college, when riots broke out in Los Angeles and in other U.S. cities in response to the acquittal of four police officers who were charged with beating Rodney King. Like the demonstrations that followed George Floyd’s murder, it shined a spotlight on not only police brutality but the overall structural and institutional racism that permeates every level of U.S. society by which White people benefit, and people of color are oppressed. Cross-racial conversations during college classes put in plain view how I both benefit from my Whiteness but I am complicit in an oppressive system that marginalizes people of color. I felt guilty, ashamed to be White, and embarked on a new understanding that I needed to change. But I didn’t know how. I lin-

gered within these two phases for almost 10 years. Then, my spiritual community, Call To Action, boldly put forth an initiative to make the organization an antiracist organization.

Around 2005, Call To Action embarked on the long journey to become an antiracist organization. While the initiative analyzed Call To Action as an institution, it rightly called all individual members into a time of deep, personal self-reflection. This phase, called **Introspection**, invites Whites to pose painful questions and engage in soul searching of their White identity. As Sue describes, “There is a realization that their Whiteness has been defined in opposition to people of color, by standards of White supremacy.”⁶ Through this experience, me and many other White Call To Action members were wrestling with questions about what it means to be White. As I engaged deeper with this initiative, I found a number of my sibling Call To Action members resisting such antiracism work – and distancing themselves from me as well. As I look back, I understand this was a necessary phase, but at the time, I felt isolated and lost.

I’m profoundly grateful to have been part of Call To Action’s antiracism team for so long. Without that community, I think I would have remained feeling isolated. It was hard, at times painful, and rewarding work. The blunt honest sharing of experiences and struggles nurtured my own antiracism work in unforgettable ways. Phase 6, **Integrative Awareness**, forms because a White person’s emerging antiracist identity needs to be nurtured to withstand a culture and social/political environment that is organized to attack a White person’s antiracist identity and make attacks on White supremacy synonymous with attacking White people specifically. Sue describes the Integrative Awareness phase is demonstrated when White people do not take personal “attacks upon White supremacy and can explore issues of racism and personal responsibility without defensiveness.”⁷

⁶ Sue, 198.

⁷ Sue, 199 – 200.

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Through Call To Acton's antiracism team, I learned that it is important to engage in antiracism work in community. Community allows one's own beliefs and ideas to be challenged and held accountable, while at the same time, the community sustains and supports each individual's antiracism work going forward.

Call To Action's antiracism team conversations made one thing very clear. The previous six phases are not sufficient without action. Phase 7, **Commitment to Antiracist Action** is an absolute requirement to obtain a healthy White antiracist identity. Whether such action includes objecting to racist humor, working to change public policy, or creating antiracist structures where one works, such actions will undoubtedly place antiracist

White people in direct opposition with White racist/White supremacist individuals and power structures.

Gratitude

I am so grateful for the opportunity to share this snap shot of my continued awakening and struggle to become antiracist. It is with hope that this reflection and the framework that I find so helpful will spark meaningful self-reflection and conversation. And, elicit criticism to inspire further learning. When we struggle in community with one another, we take a significant step forward in co-creating God's kin-dom. May it be so.

