"Waking Up White" Week 1 – Awareness
Main Themes, Chapter Summaries, Small Group Questions and Group Norms

Main Themes:

- Awareness / starting to wake up to white as a race / listening
- Learning an incomplete and inaccurate history
- America as a meritocracy
- Headwinds and tailwinds

Chapter 1 – What Wasn't Said: Debby Irving shares the story her mom told her about "what happened to the Indians": "they drank too much." She never questioned her mother's simplistic explanation and didn't realize that she had minimal knowledge of how white people had decimated Native peoples. Debby writes, "it makes me wonder how many lies and half-truths I've swallowed and in turn inadvertently passed along in my lifetime. Stereotypes, I've learned, are not so much incorrect as incomplete."

"On top of all of this is another critical point. Embedded in her incomplete story was a message that just one piece of information, drawn from a single perspective, was good enough to form a conclusion…I came to view history as something set in stone, painted in pictures, and taught by teachers who delivered facts.

Chapter 3 – Race Versus Class: Debby Irving shares that her story is "loaded with socioeconomic privilege" and she hopes that her privilege doesn't prevent white readers from finding their own connection to race and racism. Every white person can awaken to the impact the ideology and practice of whiteness has on our brothers and sisters of color."

"Race and class are inextricably linked. Because class has long been easier for me to understand than race, this book focuses on the more elusive role skin color has had in my life."

"Yet race stands apart from the variables listed above (income, religion, gender, sexual orientation, etc.). Not only is race visible and permanent; it's come to act as a social proxy for one's value in American society. White has long stood for normal and better, while black and brown have been considered different and inferior. Social value isn't just a matter of feeling as if one belongs or doesn't; it affects one's access to housing, education, and jobs, the building blocks necessary to access the great American promise – class mobility."

Chapter 6 – From Confusion to Shock: Debby Irving describes how she had worked on diversity committees, etc., in her professional life and yet she had a "haunting sense" that she was missing something. At age 48 she took a grad school course, "Racial and Cultural Identity" that she assumed would teach her about other races and cultures so that she could better help students of color. Instead,

the professor asked her to "turn the lens" onto herself. She had "never thought to look within for solutions to a problem I imagined as outside of myself."

"Racism wasn't about this person or that, this upset or that, this community or that; racism is, and always has been, the way America has sorted and ranked its people in a bitterly divisive, humanity-robbing system."

Chapter 7 is about the GI Bill and how white GI's benefited almost exclusively from this legislation. For example, only 4% of black GI's were able to access the offer of free education. Less than 2% of federal government housing loans went to people of color. "The game, it turns out, offers different rules and different starting points for different people. It's a drastically uneven contest in which I am among the most advantaged players… nowhere, as far as I can see, is any advantage as hard-hitting and enduring as skin color. My white skin, an epidermal gold card, has greased the skids for a life full of opportunities and rewards that I was sure were available to everyone. My notions that America offered a level playing field disintegrated… I now understood how well big government had served me through programs and policies such as those entwined in the GI Bill."

Chapter 10 – The Melting Pot: "Despite America's ideological commitment to freedom as natural right for all, through most of US history, white skin has acted as a free pass, while dark skin has impeded freedoms and rights."

"As a member of the dominant group, I can tell you how exceptionally easy it is to be ignorant of the racial forces that have shaped my life and views, and how effortless it was *not* to make the connection that much of my comfort has been built on the back of enslaved Africans, Chinese railroad workers, and other people of color, who , for much of history, were brought here or allowed here to work their tails off fueling America's growth yet not be considered full Americans."

"The melting pot never included people of color. Blacks, Chinese, Puerto Ricans, etc., could not melt into the pot."

Chapter 11 – Headwinds and Tailwinds: How I finally came to understand systemic racism – This is one of the key chapters of the book. Debby writes, "Like 'headwinds' and 'tailwinds', the terms I now use to characterize systemic racism, there are many factors in play. Until one understands each factor, it's tough to imagine how they interact. On its own, each element might not look like a big deal. The momentum takes hold when they work together." Debby proposes 3 basic elements of systemic racism:

Skin color symbolism + favoritism + power = systemic racism

"Until I got the power piece, understanding racism as something more than prejudice eluded me."

"In American society, racism acts as a barrier, a divider, allowing white people to benefit from the system in ways people of color do not. Skin color itself is not the barrier; it's the beliefs attached to it. And beliefs, compared to birth dates or other more tangible barriers, are harder to pinpoint and also much harder to change."

"What I've learned is that the system doesn't make achievement impossible for someone affected adversely by the barrier, but it makes it harder. In the case of racism, which relies on an invisible belief-system barrier and has compounded over hundreds of years, I would say it makes it not just harder but exponentially harder."

"At this point, the only thing needed for racism to continue is for good people to do nothing.

Small Group Discussion Questions:

1. Opening question – what did you "wake up" to, or what stirred in you during the reading this week?
2. What stereotypes about people of another race do you remember hearing and believing as a child? Were you encouraged to question the history you were taught and the stereotypes that history affirmed?
3. If you are white, until recently, had you given much thought to your race? Why do you think that is? Why is important for white people to perceive and understand whiteness?
4. Do you share Debby Irving's belief from her childhood that America is a meritocracy? How has your life been shaped by your belief in America as a meritocracy – a society in which everyone succeeds or fails on their own merits?
5. Consider each of these tangible and intangible aspects of your life: work, sense of belonging, social connections, choice, education, healthy food, legal protection, housing, transportation, medical care. How easy or hard has it been for you to attain each?
6. How would you describe your family's attitude towards wealth, race and power? How does faith fit into that conversation now?

Guidelines / Group Norms:

- Brave space – we intend for this to be a safe space, but we recognize that we are all human and are coming together with different perspectives, life experiences and understandings
- We will make mistakes and say the wrong things; as fellow learners, we will both hold each other accountable and offer each other grace
- We are all here to listen and learn together; no one is an expert; no one has "arrived"
- Freedom to share and not share as desired
- Confidentiality
- The expectation is that each person would at least read the summaries for the selected chapters prior to our Monday evening discussions
- Is there anything else we should add?