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Praise for Anxious to Talk about it

Copyright

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July 20, 2020—Preface to the Second Edition

When I wrote *Anxious to Talk About It*, I was seriously stressed out. I was “anxious” in the sense of being fearful and terrified, worried that I would say the wrong thing or hurt people with my words. I still had waves of white guilt and shame that would blast me out of nowhere, shouting over my writing voice with a roaring: “Who are you, as a white privileged woman, to talk about racism?!” I had to keep coming back to the idea of gratitude and the gift exchange (see chapter six), convinced that I was doing this out of gratitude for the opportunity, and firmly believing that I had some small contribution to make by trying to get more white people to talk about racism.

In writing this second edition, I am truly “anxious to talk about it” in the sense of being positively eager to be having these conversations. I am in awe of the many brilliant authors and speakers who have published books in the past few years, and I am thrilled to see the leaders that have risen up around the world to do this important work. And yet the need is still so immense. There are so many who still need to hear this message that racism is something we can and need to unlearn.

I was shaken, like many others, by the video of George Floyd’s murder on Memorial Day 2020. Soon thereafter, the responses that came from all corners of the globe were deeply inspiring. There are so many people—particularly white people and people of color who are not Black—who were showing up to Black Lives Matter protests, declaring “Enough is enough!” to police departments that refused to hold officers accountable when they abuse their power by using lethal force. There are many examples of white men armed with guns who have been taken into police custody alive after shooting and killing others. To attribute the deaths of unarmed Black men and women shot by the police to “fearing for their lives” or “justifiable cause” is deeply wrong and unfair. I hope you can feel that unfairness deep within you; if you don’t yet, and if you are still trying to make excuses for these deaths, I hope this book will help you reconsider how what you have been taught about race and the stories you listen to inform your feelings about these events.

I am “anxious to talk about it” at this moment, because the need has never been more clear: we have to change our ways and acknowledge the power of racism over our lives, and at the same time to affirm with all our moral conviction that we have the power to change! We don’t have to allow racism to mock our ideals of justice and fairness, and we don’t have to let it keep showing our inadequacies as people united under the principle that all people are created equal. We can come together as one human family to see how our differences are our strengths, and how we need one another to survive on this planet.

In July 2020, Chalice Press president Brad Lyons contacted me to see if I would be interested in writing a second edition to *Anxious*. So much has happened in the two years since it was published, and persons reading this book to start the conversation in their own communities may need to better understand the rapidly changing vocabulary around race talk. The phrase “Black Lives Matter” has gone from a slogan, to a movement, to being labeled by some as belonging to a terrorist organization. Recent books have popularized phrases such as “white fragility,” that may have deepened white anxiety when it comes to talking about racism. And what is all of this talk about “white privilege?”

These are some of the phrases I want to address in the first chapter to put them into the larger story of how the conversation around race and racism continues to change with time, and how our stories around these phrases also impact how we respond to conversations about racism. My goal is to help you as a reader better understand your own story around racism, and to get you comfortable entering uncomfortable conversations. We cannot work against racism if we remain silent or stay in our places of comfort. So paradoxically, I want to provide you with tools for self-comfort; soothing your own anxious responses so you can stay engaged for the long haul. There are plenty of opportunities for emotions to run high in these conversations; we need as many people as possible to be able to sit with emotions—their own and others’—without shutting down or leaving the table. We all need to be in this together.

I also wanted to say a word about why a white person is writing this book. I have a limited perspective because I have grown up white and have not experienced society’s racialization as a person of color. But I have come to see the way my own liberation is tied to becoming an anti-racist white person, someone who is committed to challenging racism in its many forms. I am a professor of preaching with more than twelve years of experience talking about racism in churches and community spaces around the country. I have seen and heard the kind of liberation that deepening relationships and challenging racist structures can lead to when we engage in this work together. I also have heard people of color say, “We didn’t make racism, white people did—so it should be the work of white people to end it!” White people have a responsibility to un-learn racism so they can work among other white people in this process. So many spaces continue to be predominantly white: it’s going to take a lot of white people in those spaces to challenge those demographics, working alongside and supportive of the people of color who are working for change throughout society.

If I may suggest some ideas how *Anxious to Talk about It* can help us continue this conversation today, it is these:

- 1) Focus on gratitude when we begin to burn out on the struggle, looking to the many gifts this process has given us, and reminding ourselves that there are more gifts to be received;
- 2) Look for ways to highlight the gifts of persons still overlooked because of racism—making sure our list of authors, movies, TV shows, news outlets, etc., are not filled with people who look like us, and that our circle of friends becomes more and more diverse;

- 3) Diversify intentionally and strategically when we are in positions to make hires, so that we look intentionally to diversify our workplaces because differences bring us new perspectives and enrich our work life together; and
- 4) Continue to learn ways to manage our own emotional reactions to the process of learning, talking, and acting in response to racism, so that we do not project our negative feelings onto others.

I hope the additional materials and resources available in this revision will be helpful for you as you continue this work, and as you invite others into the process with you.

Blessings,

Carolyn Helsel

July 20, 2020

Introduction: Naming Our Anxiety

We need to talk about racism.

But before we do, I want you to notice something: the anxiety that arises at the first mention of the word *racism*. That part of your brain that deals with fight-or-flight responses activates, your hands start sweating, your heart begins to beat faster, and the room seems to get warmer all of a sudden. Your whole body says to you: *This is not safe! This is not a topic I can talk about!*

How does your anxiety around this topic manifest? Do you feel your body tense? Do you pick at your nails or furrow your eyebrows? Do you feel your stomach turning? Maybe you're feeling overwhelmed by an urge to put this book down, to label it as "fake news" or "liberal propaganda." How do these labels work to diffuse your anxiety? Let's sit together for a minute to see if we can work to better understand one another.

Maybe you've had an experience in the past that makes you uncomfortable—maybe you said something that someone else pointed out was offensive. Maybe you see protests with Black Lives Matter signs and you're not sure if talking about race means you will be asked to join a march—or, if you are white, whether you will be called out as a racist if you don't. Perhaps you've been to anti-racism workshops and diversity trainings, and nearly every time someone breaks down in tears, usually a white woman, and you don't have time for any of this. Aren't there other things the group should be talking about?

What are the sources of your anxiety as you think about race? What are the memories that this subject stirs up for you? The divisions in society today may suggest that a conversation as politically charged as racism is not going to go down without a fight or at least hurt feelings and strained relationships. If you are a perfectionist, perhaps the anxiety comes from past experiences of not knowing the right answer, of trying to do something good, only to have someone else misinterpret your actions. If you get defensive when this subject is raised, perhaps it comes out of an anxiety that you will be wrongly accused of being racist. If you generally think of yourself as a good person, perhaps this subject creates anxiety that you will never be "good enough" when it comes to race...because you are a white person. If you are a person of color, you recognize the different ways other people of color respond to racism, and maybe you've been charged with being not "Black enough" or still dealing with your "internalized oppression," and dismissed as not being "woke enough." Perhaps you have immigrated here from another country, where your people have witnessed violence and political conflict unknown to most Americans, and you are wondering why

talking about racism is so important when you have witnessed attempted genocide in your lifetime or have heard the stories from your parents' generation.

This book is written by a white person, originally conceived with other white people in mind, but people of color who have read this book or heard me speak have said it helped them to better understand talking about racism with white people. I also speak as a United States citizen in the context of U.S. history, knowing that other countries have their unique histories of trauma related to colonialism, sectarianism, and ethnic conflict. Because racism in the United States is a part of our history as well as our ongoing reality, it is important for those of us living in this context to understand it.

I originally wrote this book out of my own anxiety, stemming from my own experiences of learning about racism and trying to find a way as a white person to join a larger movement of people working for racial justice. It came after years of pursuing graduate education in the field of religious studies to help me in my context of teaching white preachers to preach about racism. At first, I wasn't very good at it. But I have to tell you, while the conversations haven't gotten easier, I have experienced less anxiety around them.

I've spoken at churches across the country, in college settings and denominational meetings, to students, public school parent meetings, and on public radio and podcasts. Since the first edition of this book, I have published two more books: *Preaching about Racism*, which goes deeper into how racism impacts our faith, and *The ABCs of Diversity: Helping Kids (and Ourselves!) Embrace Our Differences*, a book I co-wrote with a Black mom and professor of speech communication at Princeton Seminary. She and I wrote about our experiences in talking about our differences—including race, but also gender, and religion—with our kids, as well as how to better manage our grown-up anxiety in conversations about our differences. My goal throughout these books and in my work as a professor of preaching is to help people have hard conversations—to move beyond our anxiety and experience the good news that we can build relationships with one another across our differences.

I want to encourage you, no matter what your level of anxiety is around talking about racism, that the movement toward greater racial justice needs people like you and me—people who may not consider ourselves to be radical or perfectly trained as experts—to speak out when we see racism operative in our society and in our lives, and to make a difference in the areas we can. Not everyone can drop everything and become a full-time activist. Not everyone can work full-time doing anti-racism work. However, everyone *can* learn how to talk about race, and to stay in the conversation long enough that when the opportunity to act comes, you will know what to do.

This is a book about helping you stay in this conversation, even amid the anxiety you may feel when talking about race. This is a book to help you talk about it with other people—whites and people of color. If we are to develop better relationships with one another across our divisions, we need to be able to talk about the racist experiences people of color have endured. We also need to recognize that sharing these experiences often come at a great cost. It feels vulnerable and risky to

share one's story, because the other person may try to minimize the experience or say "It's all in your head."

If your personal anxiety is too great when someone shares experiences of racial discrimination with you, you may be tempted to defend the action or give another interpretation of the event rather than simply listen. Because of this, it is really important that you learn about your own anxiety and deepen your capacity to listen to the difficult stories people of color have to share. Becoming more comfortable with personal anxiety can also help us become more comfortable with the feelings of others. Connecting with one another through the sharing and "bearing with one another" in the midst of these feelings can go a long way in building trust.

Because these conversations bring up so many feelings, it is tempting to avoid them: both the conversations and the feelings. And unfortunately, many of us still try to avoid the conversation, or at least deny that it is important to talk about racism. For those of us who are white, if our communities are mostly white, we can get away with not talking about how race impacts our lives or the lives of others. We may say to ourselves that we have enough problems of our own to worry about the problems others experience because of racial discrimination. We may tell ourselves racism is not an essential conversation and avoid talking about race until someone at our work or place of worship brings in somebody else to talk about it. Some of us may deny the very existence of racism in the 21st century.

But I hope this time will be different. I hope you will read this book, and by reading it experience a change in yourself, becoming more aware of your unique journey and not feel shamed for getting it wrong. I want you to feel as though I understand what you are going through, and that we are going through it together. I want to walk with you so you can feel encouraged to continue on this journey wherever it may take you. If you have been part of this journey already and are worried about whether talking about the feelings of white people is against the principles of anti-racism, I explore this deeper towards the end of chapter one.

I also offer this writing as a Christian, and my faith is one of the reasons why I feel compelled to write about race. When Jesus Christ came and lived among humanity, he was said to have "broken down the dividing wall" (Eph. 2:14). Two thousand years later, we are still trying to live into that world of greater unity. But the moments when I have experienced unity with others—when I have felt blessed by the gift of someone else sharing with me a bit of who they are—have been moments of grace unfolding. When I have heard people share their experiences of suffering, and they feel I am listening and honoring their truth, there is a sense of communion present in these spaces. I believe God is working in the midst of these challenging conversations, and it is a gift into which we have been invited to participate. So I write out of a deep sense of gratitude for what I believe God in Christ is already doing, and what I feel we have been allowed to join. I hope you will accompany me on this journey.

For persons who are not Christian, particularly persons whose religious identity has made them a target of racism and bigotry, I hope you will feel welcomed in this conversation. Several of the

spiritual practices I speak about in the seventh chapter draw from traditions outside Christianity or share similarities with values held in common by multiple religions. For this work to be effective, it has to be ecumenical, drawing people from different religious backgrounds and no faith backgrounds to work together for justice. And to those who have experienced hate and bigotry from Christians because of your faith, I share in your justified skepticism of people who call themselves Christian yet perpetuate racism, and I recognize that you possibly are skeptical toward me as well. That is totally fair. I can only hope to live in ways that demonstrate my values and work to regain the trust that Christians like me have broken time and again.

The title of the book includes the word “faithfully” because to talk about racism in the way I’m proposing requires a degree of faith. For persons who are Christian, to talk “faithfully” means to do so in line with the ideals of our faith—to talk in a way that brings honor to God. It also refers to the way that faith requires a leap of trust. To talk about racism by first acknowledging our own feelings requires that we allow ourselves to be vulnerable in tending to our emotions. I’m not even talking about sharing our feelings aloud with others: the experience of letting ourselves feel our own feelings requires vulnerability, breaking our habit of keeping it “cool,” or looking professional, or the pressure to “have it all together.” It takes trust and faith to feel our feelings about race and racism and to see them for what they are, which may also make us uncomfortable. That discomfort makes us feel vulnerable and may make us want to halt the process. My hope is that this book will give you strength to sit with your discomfort more and more, and that you will see over time what I mean by “talking faithfully” about racism.

What to Expect

This book includes stories others have shared with me. Sharing these stories is a way I bear witness to what is going on in their lives, both the pain and the joy. I will share stories from people of color and from white people, and for the most part I have kept their real names because they have expressed their willingness to have these stories shared with others. In cases where I have not directly received someone’s permission to share their story, then the experience I relate will have identifying markers removed so that they may remain anonymous.

In addition to stories, this book contains questions for reflection and discussion. Because this is a book about talking and not simply reading, I ask that you find a way to read it in conversation with someone else. At moments when I ask questions of you the reader, I hope you will position yourself answer them with someone else. Perhaps as part of a book club, small group, or a leadership training event you may read this book and have conversations as a group. Let others know you are reading this book and invite them to join you. The more people joining in these conversations, the greater the possibility for understanding and change. I’ve included at the end an Appendix with a study guide for how to read this book as a group.

Finally, expect to feel emotions while you read and talk. That is the whole point of this book: to notice the emotional toll of having these conversations so the emotions do not derail the conversation or cause you to avoid it altogether. Expect to feel your feelings. Acknowledge them,

respect them, and if you can, attend to them. If you can keep a journal while reading this book, write journal entries that name the feelings you are experiencing. Ask yourself questions about where the feelings come from and write down your answers. As you do this, keep in mind that no feeling is “bad” or “wrong.” Feelings just *are*. If we ignore our feelings or try to deny them, they eventually have a way of sabotaging our efforts. So as you are reading this book, take a moment—as you need it—to check in with what you are feeling, writing down your thoughts and feelings, if you can, and trust that this is part of the process. Remember, it is difficult to talk about race and racism. This is a long journey, so be prepared to extend yourself some grace.

The chapters invite you to consider your own emotions and stories about race, and how those stories impact how you interpret the world around you. The first chapter will talk about how these three things—emotions, stories, and interpretation—are linked. The next chapter focuses on the history of how we got to this place, looking at the role of both religion and politics in bringing us to our current situation. Chapter 3 looks at the feeling of “being white” and how white people are racialized in this country in different ways. Chapter 4 looks at racial identity development theory, a way of understanding the story of how white people come to see themselves as white in a positive and anti-racist way. Chapter 5 presents different stories about race that people have shared with me; these stories present challenging emotions. Chapter 6 moves into the work of interpretation, and I suggest that gratitude is the lens through which we can best interpret these difficult conversations. Finally, in Chapter 7, I present several spiritual practices for ongoing engagement in difficult conversations about race. The appendix that follows the conclusion offers suggestions for having these conversations in a group study format.

This book was several years in the making. As I prepare to “give birth” to this book of ideas for a second time, I pray that it will meet you where you are, encouraging you to embrace hard conversations. I continue to write out of a heart of gratitude, a sense that God has called me to talk about the difficult topic of race among other white people, and it is a gift I want to share with you. If you choose to receive this gift, I believe you will be led into deeper opportunities of sharing and gratitude with the people in your community and within your circles of influence. As you engage in these conversations, know that I am praying in advance that they may be fruitful.

Carolyn B. Helsel

March 15, 2017, Revised October 23, 2020

Chapter 1: The Way We Talk About Racism

Anti-racist. Melting pot. White privilege. Post-racial. White supremacy. Reverse Racism. White fragility. Colorblind. Police brutality. Black Lives Matter. Critical Race Theory. Reparations for American Descendants of Slavery (ADOS).

Which words do you associate with racism? Which words are new to you? Which words make you cringe?

Depending on when you read this book, what has been on the news recently, and what people closest to you are saying about racism, you will talk about racism using the words that you know and are most comfortable using.

The way we talk about racism is impacted by how we hear other people talking about racism, and we may or may not know the same words or the same “language.”

Words have a history. They have an origin and a story. Words communicate with a purpose.

Let me be clear: the words I am using to write this book convey a distinct purpose or goal. I want to motivate you to talk about racism with others so that you can build better relationships with people who look different from yourself. To do this, I will be using words I assume you already know, explaining other words that may be new to you, and helping you see the larger stories and histories behind these words.

When I wrote this book in the spring of 2017, I had been speaking frequently with churches about racism, and in those conversations, I heard the phrases “melting pot,” “reverse racism,” “post-racial,” and “colorblind” as ways some people explained to me why we no longer needed to talk about racism. So I tried to understand what was behind these words. When I would ask persons about their rationale, I would often hear a story. Our stories about the words we use have a powerful staying effect. So rather than simply telling people to use different words, I realized I needed to understand their stories behind their words. The words we use often connect with our personal stories, but they also connect to our larger social and political stories as well—the stories we tell about our country’s history.

In preparing a second edition of this book in 2020, I recognize that more white people are aware of other word associations: phrases that accompany discussions of race such as “white supremacy,” “white privilege,” or “white fragility.” Because of the political environment, critics of anti-racism

have charged that these terms flow from an anti-American ideology called “Critical Race Theory,” another term that may be new to you. During the summer of 2020, with the number of protests around the country and the world in the name of “Black Lives Matter,” opponents have blamed this group for riots and destruction of property. Black Lives Matter supporters, on the other hand, have highlighted the infiltration of far-right groups who join these protests to sow chaos and incite violence. While some organizations have posted large signs on their buildings or on social media indicating their support of Black Lives Matter, persons who believe Black Lives Matter is an extremist anti-government group see these signs as problematic.

In the midst of our challenging times, emotions run high, and how we talk about events and the words we use seem to be charged with controversy. The words themselves become a part of the battleground. Because more of our communication is posted online with more potential viewers than our intended audience, the words we use become ways other people judge us, interpreting whether we are liberal or conservative, whether we are “woke” or “racist.” How do we begin to have conversations around such an important topic when we do not know whether our words will be taken out of context or used against us?

Take a deep breath. Listen to your body. As I stressed in the Introduction, from the get-go we need to name our anxiety and the way it impacts our conversation. So start now by taking deep, slow breaths and asking yourself, “What is my goal in this conversation?”

Naming Our Goal

Try to answer this question for yourself: What is the goal in talking about racism?

Is it to make us feel better? Is it to make us look better to others? Is it because the conversation is trendy and we need to be kept up-to-date? Or is it because we are being forced to have these conversations by our school, employer, or organization?

If our goal is to make ourselves feel better by trying to get all the answers right, then the way we talk about racism will fail. There are other ways we can feel good about ourselves. There are other trendy topics and other matters on which we need to stay up-to-date culturally. And if we are reluctantly taking a class or training required by someone in power over us, we will show up already irritated that we have lost control over our time.

How we talk about racism matters as well as *why* we talk about racism.

So I want to encourage you to consider a different starting point, with a different goal in mind: What if we made love our goal?

What if we saw in these conversations a way to better love others and even how to love ourselves? What if these conversations about racism are aimed at helping us love one another better in our society and help our country mend its deep divisions? What if we saw these conversations as giving us chances to share in relationship with persons across racial lines? What if the learning opportunity our workspace or school is giving us to have these conversations will mean that we are more successful in engaging with our colleagues and co-workers?

But even if our goal *is* love, our strategies still may fail. We still may be at a loss for words or unable to understand where another person is coming from. Conversations about racism change over time, but our goal of love should stay the same. Motivated by our goal, we look to new strategies and ways to talk about racism in order to reach more people about how to heal from our racist history.

The goal we set for ourselves in having these conversations impacts what words we use to describe racism. If we think about our goal consciously as we engage in these conversations, we may reconsider our strategy for which words to use when. I use the word “strategy” intentionally. Because our words *do* things. As human beings, we are strategic in how we use our words. We have goals, and our strategies are the ways we work towards those goals.

Strategies for Talking about Racism Past and Present

How we talk about race and racism changes over time, and it changes because of events that take place in time. How we speak about racism also changes because our realities, goals, and strategies change.

For example, during the so-called “separate but equal” era of “whites only” or “Colored” signs above bathrooms and water fountains, refusing to use racial identifiers seemed to be a positive strategy to whites who wanted to challenge the racism they witnessed. To be “colorblind” meant that a person refused to acknowledge the relevance of race. If we didn’t use race to describe people, and we tried to be “colorblind,” then the idea was that people no longer would discriminate based on race. But in the decades since those signs were removed and segregation became illegal, persons of color are still discriminated against even if race is never named. The words we use to talk about racism matter because they are used strategically to declare that racism is a problem, and define what kind of problem it is exactly.

It is important to acknowledge that persons who do *not* have love as their goal also have strategies. For instance, persons who believe non-whites to be inferior to whites have strategies for making sure society stays segregated. These strategies have included fear, such as the rise of Ku Klux Klan to intimidate people—both Black and white—so that persons would not try to change the social order. Fear and intimidation continue to be a strategy used by people who do not want to address the long-term and ongoing harm that racism has inflicted upon our society.

There continue to be people who say that talking about racism is divisive. The country already is divided on a number of different issues, and there are still large segments of our population segregated by race. Persons who feel talking about racism is divisive want to avoid talking about race issues, hoping that avoiding these complex, controversial conversations will enable us to get along with one another.

My experience with talking about racism has been the opposite of divisive. While it has not been easy, I found that talking about racism enables me to have conversations with persons who do not

look like me and get to know them in deeper and more meaningful ways than if I had avoided talking about race.

You may think this is easy for me; it is not. I'm an introvert who prefers spending time alone. I feel socially awkward in spaces where I do not know people, or when I know people only by acquaintance. Talking about racism has given me the opportunity to get to know people on a deeper level, to hear their struggles and challenges, as well as their hopes for a better future. It truly feels like a gift to have these conversations.

So if you hear someone say talking about racism is divisive, ask them about their experience. Do they say that it is divisive based on their experiences when talking about racism? Or is their wish to avoid the topic rooted in fear? Or does it from a desire to avoid difficult conversations?

There have been a number of strategies for talking about—or *not* talking about—racism in this country. The phrases such as “melting pot,” “colorblind,” or “post-racial” have been ways to target either the problem or the solution to racism. *Melting pot* implies all the ethnic differences among immigrants to the United States have “melted” into one citizenry, and it conveys the expectation that this is how things should be in order to end racial and ethnic bigotry. The word *colorblind* refers to the ideal of not seeing color as it relates to racial difference, as in, seeing everyone “just as people.” *Post-racial* refers to an era when talking about race is no longer necessary or useful, a term evoked often to describe America shortly after Barack Obama was elected the forty-fourth president of the United States. *Reverse racism* is what white people say they have experienced when being white seems to put them at a disadvantage, naming what they see as the primary example of ongoing racism. Each of these phrases represents a world of meaning: a way of interpreting race and racism that connects to our way of seeing the world. These phrases are also part of our history; they are related to how people are talking about race and racism in particular moments in society.¹

Melting Pot

In an online course I teach on worship and preaching, a textbook I use focuses on diversity within one of its chapters, and a student took issue with the concept. The student felt the chapter lifted up positive elements from non-white worshipping traditions, but then disparaged the contributions of so-called “white” churches. I asked him to write out his concerns, since I had not experienced the reading the same way he had. His response included a story about race: a narrative that explained his own frustration with the current conversations around race and diversity. He said that the United States used to be a country of immigrants, where each person came and contributed the

¹ For more information on how race language changes over time, see the book Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States, third edition*. (New York, New York: Routledge, 2015). It also helps to know that as race changes, we have the power to change it. They write: “To recognize that race is historically and politically constructed is not only to see it as a ‘moving image,’ as something we make and remake over time, it is also to acknowledge our power, both collective and individual, to transform the meaning of race. We created this meaning-system and the social order it supports. We can change it as well.” (16)