

What if I say the wrong thing? Is race really something that I need to talk about (I'm white)? Shouldn't I let people of color be the ones to bring it up? I don't want to offend anyone. I don't think I'm racist, but what if I say something that sounds racist? It's on the news all the time, but I don't know how to talk about what's going on. I'm worried someone will call me a racist. I don't see color. Why do we have to keep talking about this? I feel stupid when we talk about race. I realize there's a lot I don't know. But it's not my fault! I am not a racist. I work with people of color and I'm respectful and friendly to them like I treat anybody else. I have friends who are people of color and who don't want to talk about race, so why should we? I get angry thinking you're trying to make me more politically correct. Leave me alone already. What does this have to do with faith? The Bible doesn't say anything about race. Let's leave it alone. But what I saw happening on the news... some people are crazy and racist. But that's not me. But how do I stop something like that happening in my town? I don't know. It makes me anxious.

Helping White Christians Talk Faithfully about Racism

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CONTENTS

Introduction: White and Anxious

1

Chapter 1: The Way We Think about Race

7

Chapter 2: Feeling White

21

Chapter 3: Mapping Racial Identity Development

39

Chapter 4: Listening to Different Stories about Race

61

Chapter 5: Expressing Gratitude

85

Chapter 6: Spiritual Practices for Race Talk

109

Conclusion: The Anxious Bench

123

Recommended Resources

127

What if I say the wrong thing? Is race really something that I need to talk about (I'm white)? Shouldn't I let people of color be the ones to bring it up?

Introduction

WHITE AND ANXIOUS

We're talking about *what?* Race?! If you are a white person, perhaps the anxiety of talking about race begins even with the first mention of the word *race*. 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!* 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 on the streets about #BlackLivesMatter and you're not sure if talking about race means you will be asked to join a march—or, if by simply being white, you will be targeted as a racist. 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 we should be talking about?

What are the sources of your anxiety as you think about race? What are the memories that this subject brings up for you? 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 wrongfully accused of being racist. If you generally think of yourself as a good person, perhaps this subject creates anxiety that you will never be able to be “good enough” when it comes to race...because you are a white person.

This book is written by a white person to white people. I write this book out of my own anxiety, out of 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. I’m not very good at it. I lead other white people in conversations about race; I don’t lead anti-racism trainings. One of my friends works for Crossroads Anti-Racism Training Ministries, and she goes around the country meeting with organizations that want her to come and talk to them about how to become anti-racist. I don’t do that. I teach preaching at a predominantly white institution in Central Texas, less than a hundred miles from where I grew up. I am not a radical.

But the movement toward greater racial justice needs more than just radicals. It needs people like you and me—people who may not consider ourselves to be very radical—to reconsider where race continues to operate in our society and in our lives, and to make a difference in the areas where 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, to stay in the conversation long enough, so that when the opportunity for you to act comes, you will know what to do.

So this is a book about helping you stay in this conversation, even amidst the anxiety you may feel when talking about race. This is a book to help you talk about it with other white people.

There are plenty of people of color who can tell you about their experiences of racial discrimination, but it often comes at a great cost to them. If your own anxiety is too great when someone shares with you about experiences of racial discrimination, you may be tempted to defend rather than just listen. Also, white people—you and me—need to be responsible for our own learning and education about this subject that we've been able to avoid most of our lives.

And of course, we *could* continue to avoid it. If the anxiety is too great, we could simply walk away. You could close this book, put it down right now, and leave it on the bookshelf. You could say to yourself that you have enough problems of your own to worry about the problems other people experience because of racial discrimination. You could say all of these things and not talk about race until someone at your work or place of worship brings in somebody else to talk to you about it.

But I hope this time will be different. I hope you will read this book, and, by reading it, you will feel yourself honored and cared for, your emotions attended to, and not feel shamed for getting it wrong. I want you the reader 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.

I also write as a Christian, and my faith is one of the reasons 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, these have been moments of grace unfolding. When I have heard people share about their experiences of suffering, and they feel I am listening and honoring their experiences, 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 in 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 like we have been allowed to join. I hope you will accompany me on this journey.

In this book, I've included stories others have shared with me. Sharing these stories is a way in which I am bearing 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 in which 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 can 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 be in a setting in which you can answer these questions with someone else. Perhaps as part of a Bible study or a Christian education class or a leadership training event, you could read this book together and have these 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.

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 emotions, and I ask that you attend to them. If you can keep a journal while reading this book, write journal entries in which you name the feelings you are experiencing. 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 that it is hard to talk about race and racism. This is a long journey, so be prepared to give yourself some grace.

The following 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 together. The next chapter focuses on the feeling of “being white,” and how white people are racialized in this country in different ways. Chapter 3 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 4 presents many different stories about race that people have shared with me, and these stories present challenging emotions. Chapter 5 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 6 I’ll present several spiritual practices for continuing to engage in difficult conversations about race.

This book is several years in the making. As I prepare to “give birth” to this book of ideas, I pray that it will meet you where you are, encouraging you to embrace hard conversations. I have read *a lot* of books, and have written a scholarly dissertation on the subject of preaching about race in white congregations, but in many ways I had to let all of that go in order to write this book. I do not write this to prove to you that I have read some important figures in the field of critical race studies or to impress you with fancy words. I 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 even deeper opportunities of sharing and gratitude with the people in your community and across your city. As you engage in these conversations, know that I am praying ahead of you that they may be fruitful.

Carolyn Helsel

March 15, 2017

I feel stupid when we talk about race. I have friends who are people of color and who don't want to talk about race, so why should we? But it's not my fault! I am not a racist.

Chapter 3

MAPPING RACIAL IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

Have you ever come across an idea that helped you make sense of the world? Can you remember learning something from a book or in school that gave you a sudden “aha!” feeling? Sometimes, particular phrases stick with us, putting things into perspective when we encounter stressful situations. For me, one such “aha” moment came when learning about racial identity development theory.¹

All of us go through different stages as we learn to see ourselves as someone of a particular race, and understanding these stages can help us move into greater awareness of ourselves as racialized by society. Such awareness helps us identify areas for personal growth.

This theory emerged from developmental psychology, which considers how a person’s inner life matures and develops over

¹ See Beverly Daniel Tatum, “Talking about Race, Learning about Racism: The Application of Racial Identity Development in the Classroom,” *Harvard Educational Review* 62 (Spring 1992): 1–25 and Janet Helms, ed., *Black and White Racial Identity: Research, Theory and Practice* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1990).

time. Erik Erikson, Jean Piaget, and Lawrence Kohlberg are among the earliest developmental psychologists, who studied how persons mature from infancy to late adulthood, marking crucial moments of identity formation. Teachers and parents may learn about developmental theories to help teach children more effectively and understand what child developmental stages look like. Similarly, from this, there has grown a “faith development” theory to talk about how a person’s faith and images of God change over time.²

Racial identity development focuses on how each individual comes to see him- or herself as racialized by society. I use the word *racialized* intentionally, which refers to how persons are categorized into separate races, since how society categorizes persons changes over time. For example, Eastern Europeans were not “white” when they first immigrated in great numbers to America in the early 20th century. At some points in history persons from Arab countries have been considered “white,” and at other times “not-white.” Laws at times have deemed persons with “one drop” of African blood to be “black,” even if a person was white-appearing.

The way we talk about skin color is a social construct—people with different skin colors are not separate races, but considered part of different groups by a history of racialization. A person has no power over how society racializes him or her, but one’s own “*racial identity*” refers to how that person internalizes and responds in society as a result of being racialized. In other words, “being racialized” and “racial identity” come from two different directions. When persons are *racialized*, society has told them they are of a particular race, but a person’s *racial identity* is something he or she personally claims.

A woman who grows up in a home where her mother is white, and her father is a light-skinned African-American may unconsciously

² James Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995).

identify as white. Later in her childhood, someone may ask if she is black or tells her she is black. So the young woman has been racialized by being told she is black. Meanwhile, her racial identity goes through changes. At one point, she sees herself as white, and later, as black. Racial identity has more to do with how an individual views his or her own race, and racialization has more to do with how *other* people view your race, how society has categorized you.

Similarly, white people who have grown up “colorblind” may not see themselves as white. They may view themselves as not having any color, of just being “normal,” of not having a race. But in society, they are racialized as white. They are seen as white by others, and they are treated as white, which historically has given them greater advantages and benefits than persons who are seen as not-white and who are treated differently as a result.

Of critical importance here is recognizing what racial identity can help you understand about your own emotions as you learn about race and racism. If you can better understand what you are going through, you can have a better sense of where these conversations are going and what you can expect. Racial identity development lays out a map of sorts—not that it tells you how to get from point A to point B, but it will tell you what kinds of territory you may pass through on your way toward anti-racism. This is a journey. It is not a matter of waking up and saying, “I am not a racist.” It is a process of learning more about how we got to where we are now, paying attention to the subtle ways we already notice race without realizing it, and having an idea of what we can do to keep learning and growing as white anti-racists.

That was the most helpful insight from racial identity development for me: that shame and guilt were not the end goals. Every time I learned about racism, and as I began to see myself as white, I kept feeling guilty and ashamed. And that was not a pleasant feeling. I knew I wanted to be able to talk about race and racism

with other white people, but I did not want to perpetuate the same feelings these conversations had left with me. And racial identity development says those feelings are not the stopping point. Those feelings may be something you experience along the way, but noticing them and paying attention to them and saying to yourself, “This is not the goal; this is not where I stop,” can help you persevere in learning and growing into greater awareness of and compassion for people who experience racial discrimination.

So just what are the stages that racial identity development lays out? Well, it depends if you are a “person of color” or “white.” Persons of color have their own stages that are different from those of white people. Because persons of color have been racialized as minorities and as non-white, their experiences of coming to see themselves as being a particular racial identity will be different from those of whites coming to see themselves as white.

Rather than tell you what all the stages are, I often find it more helpful to tell a couple stories. One is about a young black girl, and the other is about a young white boy—how each of them comes to see themselves as “black” or “white.” You may be able to relate to some of what they go through, but you do not necessarily need to have had their experiences to go through these stages. These stories are both made up, but I have pulled details from real stories I have witnessed. Listen as a way of understanding the processes.

Ashley’s Story

The first story is about a young black girl I’ll call Ashley. Ashley is a beautiful and happy girl, raised in a bi-racial family in which her mother is white and her father is black. She lives with both her parents and is an only child. Her parents live in a predominantly white neighborhood in a wealthy suburb, so most of her classmates at school are white.

STAGE 1: PRE-ENCOUNTER

This beginning stage of her racial identity development is known as “pre-encounter,” which means she has not yet had any encounter in which the color of her skin makes her someone of a particular “race,” or any negative associations with being someone with brown skin. But she may unconsciously receive negative messages about having brown skin from the culture in which she is growing up. Because of these often-subtle messages, she internalizes negative stereotypes about people with brown skin from the dominant white society without anyone yet communicating these negative stereotypes directly.

Before she is three, she has already noticed her skin color is different from her mother’s, and her parents both celebrate her and talk to her about how differences in people make them beautiful. Even though her parents have told her she is beautiful, Ashley has picked up in subtle ways from her classmates in pre-school that being brown is *not* beautiful.

One day, as her Pre-K class is coloring a picture of a girl, the children all pick colors from the available markers and crayons on the table. Ashley is left with a brown crayon that another child has passed over in order to reach for the peach-colored crayon. Ashley says aloud: “I hate brown. Brown is ugly. I don’t want to use brown for my girl.” No one may have said anything to her directly about brown being ugly, but she has internalized this value judgment. The teacher tries celebrating all the lovely things that are brown: chocolate and cinnamon, hot cocoa and good soil. But Ashley remains determined to color the girl in her picture a shade of pink.

STAGE 2: ENCOUNTER

Ashley is now in kindergarten at the local school. One day after school, a group of girls are jumping onto a rotating merry-go-round on the playground. Ashley runs around and tries to jump on with them. All of the girls are white, and one of them pushes

Ashley off the merry-go-round, telling her, “Only white girls allowed.” Ashley ignores the girl and tries again, unsuccessfully, to join the group. She gets tired of this and runs away to do something else.

Ashley’s father, who is black, sees this and is unsure what to do. He is angry and wants to tell the other little girls’ parents what he has just seen, but he does not want to call attention to Ashley if she has not brought it up to him. He is also the only black parent on the playground, and he doesn’t want the other parents to stereotype him as an “angry black man,” so he tries to let it go.

Ashley runs over to her dad a little while later and says she wants to go home. She seems sad, and her father asks if anything happened on the playground that made her sad. She tells him about the girls saying she couldn’t join them because she wasn’t white. Ashley’s dad experiences great sadness and shares with his daughter some of the things he heard growing up from other kids. He tries to explain to Ashley why some groups of people think they are better than other people, and how she is not alone in what she went through.

This stage of racial identity development for people of color is known as “encounter,” and it begins with the experience of racial discrimination. There may be other experiences of discrimination that are not obviously racial, but at some point the individual realizes the discrimination is taking place because of the color of her skin. The person realizes they are part of a targeted racial group. Rather than just seeing herself as an individual, Ashley begins seeing herself as part of a larger group of people who are “not white” and learns she is seen as part of this other group even though she shares much in common with the white girls.

Ashley may go back and forth between these two stages, in that she may forget about these encounters and return to a kind of unconscious acceptance of the subtle messages about race that she receives every day. She may continue to internalize negative feelings about herself. On the occasions that she again

experiences explicit racism, she remembers she is not alone, seen as part of this group of “others.” Each time this happens, she gets angry and sad but does not have a way to deal with her feelings, and so she develops a poor self-image.

STAGE 3: IMMERSION

In this third stage, Ashley’s parents become more intentional in talking to her about the Civil Rights Movement. She reads books about Martin Luther King Jr. and Rosa Parks, and she learns about the struggle for social justice. Her mom helps her to see that not all white people were against Civil Rights, and there are white people today who are working against racism. Her dad tells her about the leaders of several social justice movements, including Caesar Chavez and Ida B. Wells-Barnett.

Ashley begins seeing a lot more of the struggles that people who look like her have had to endure, and seeing their experiences makes her feel braver, knowing others have gone through what she is going through. She is starting to internalize a sense of pride in who she is—knowing she may have to endure people’s racism, but she has the strength of women and men who have come before her. Ashley feels proud of being brown, and she sees lots of examples of beautiful brown people in the books and videos her parents share with her.

Ashley also begins to notice the negative self-image she had as coming from this history of racism. She realizes she does not need to believe the messages that come across in subtle ways. She can feel proud of who she is and know she is beautiful and smart. She also realizes she has to actively remind herself of this when she spends time with her white friends who can say things that hurt her feelings.

Her parents have raised her in this predominantly white neighborhood because the schools were rated the highest in the city. But because of her experiences with some of her white friends, Ashley’s parents are wondering whether they should

move to a part of town that has more diversity. They look for ways to surround her with people who look like her so she does not have to work so hard to feel good about herself. Having positive examples and messages about who she is can help her develop into the strong and healthy young woman she is becoming.

Ashley eventually decides to attend a Historically Black College or University (an HBCU). She surrounds herself with other black people who are passionate and smart and who never make her feel like she is “other.” Her time in college is full of happy memories and a growing awareness of who she is. She participates in rallies in the local city when an unarmed black man is shot by the police. She shares her experiences of racial discrimination with others to educate them that racism is still very real in the 21st century.

STAGE 4: INTERNALIZATION

This next stage is called “internalization” because it involves an individual’s racial identity becoming internalized through the positive experiences of being with others of a similar racial background. Ashley has a clearer sense of her identity even when she is not surrounded by people who look like her. She is able to develop close relationships with people from different backgrounds and sees how their struggles are similar. At this stage, she is also able to begin building coalitions with members of other oppressed groups.

After college, Ashley goes to law school to become a civil rights lawyer. Her law school is very diverse, and she finds she has a different set of friends than she had either growing up or during her college years. Some of her friends are queer, some of them have disabilities, and the racial make-up of her group includes whites and blacks, as well as Latino/as and Asian Americans.

Among this new group of friends, she is aware of other issues facing oppressed groups in society. One of her queer friends, who is white, shares with her the struggle he had gaining acceptance

from his family when he came out as gay. Her Latino/a friends tell her about their fear of the discrimination their parents' face. One of them has parents who are undocumented, and, under the new president, they are afraid that one day they will be gone and have no idea how to get in touch with them if their parents are deported by Immigration and Customs Enforcement officials. Another friend who is Asian American relates to Ashley how frequently she is asked: "Where are you from?" and, "Are you an international student?" even though she and her family have lived in the United States for several generations. Another friend of hers has a disability; she struggles with mental illness and worries she will be discriminated against at work. All of these friends remind Ashley that the struggle for equal protections and respect is a long and wide one. As she begins her work as a civil rights lawyer, she takes these lessons she has learned from her colleagues and her studies to make a difference in the world.

STAGE 5: COMMITMENT

This marks the last stage of racial identity development for people of color, and involves an internal commitment that all persons are equal and deserving of respect and fair treatment. The individual seeks to make a difference by committing to address injustices that are experienced by one's own racial group as well as by other oppressed groups. The person is able to translate into action the positive understanding of one's own racial identity in order to work on behalf of others. The person sustains this commitment over time.

Ashley pursues her career as a civil rights lawyer and finds a deep sense of fulfillment in being able to help people feel valued. She finds her work very rewarding, though also very draining at times. It takes an emotional toll on her to listen to the stories of what others have experienced, and it is discouraging when she loses some of the cases she takes on. However, by attending to her own emotional well-being and caring for herself, she is able to sustain a long career. She raises her own children aware of the

injustices some people experience, and in both her family and her work life she feels she is fulfilling her vocation to love and serve others.

Ashley's story is not unique. It tells us that people need to be able to feel positively about themselves, and, when they are in touch with their own pain and struggles, they are more able to connect with the pain and struggles of others, even those very different from them.

I share Ashley's story to demonstrate that people of color do not automatically wake up aware of their need for a positive racial identity or with a positive racial identity already intact. It can take years of suffering through racial discrimination before someone finally is able to stop internalizing that hate and/or negativity. People of color have to work at a positive racial identity when they are constantly bombarded with the history of negative stereotypes about themselves.

While the struggle is not the same, white people also need to develop a positive racial identity. This is not because white people experience racial discrimination, but because they do not know how to be "white" apart from this negative history of inflicting racial discrimination onto people of color. It is important for white people to be able to address racism by understanding first what it means to be white, and then be able to understand other ways that a person can be "white" within this history. There are plenty of examples of terrible white people, and there are plenty of examples of white people who allowed things to happen by being silent or standing by while terrible things happened.

But white people also need to know that there have been and still are white people who actively work for justice alongside those who have been discriminated against. It is important for white people to have positive role models for what it means to be white. That is the only way that white people can see themselves in a positive way apart from the white supremacist view that says white people are superior and good. To counteract that narrative,

white people need to know about ways that whites can resist the narrative of white supremacy and still feel good about being “white.”

This feeling good about being white has nothing to do with the illusions of racial superiority, and everything to do with how we can use what gifts and influence we have to make a difference on others’ behalf. Let’s look at what that process might entail by learning about Max.

Max’s Story

Max grew up in the same neighborhood as Ashley. They were in some of the same classes in elementary school, but besides the few birthday parties to which all the kids in the class were invited, Max spent no time with Ashley outside of school. Besides Ashley, there were a few other children of color in Max’s class, but he did not spend time playing with any of them.

Max had a few close friends through elementary school, and all of them looked like him: white, blond, and blue-eyed. Max didn’t consciously hold any racist beliefs; he didn’t choose his friends just because they were white. They merely all had things in common. They all loved baseball and biking and Pokemon cards. Their parents were all friends, and they lived just around the block from one another. At home, none of these boys’ parents talked about race. It never seemed an important issue to address. Max and his friends all had parents who grew up thinking it was impolite to talk about race, and they brought up their children without reference to race in the hopes of raising them to be colorblind.

STAGE 1: CONTACT

At first, Max and his friends were in the earliest stage of racial identity development for white people, a stage known as “contact.” At this stage, the white person does not have any real engagement with people of color. If they know someone of color, they do not have a close relationship with that person, or that

person may be employed in the home as housekeeper. Because there is no discussion of race at home, the white person does not see “race” as a significant category for him or her. They may be aware of some of the history of racism in the United States, but largely assume that this part of history no longer has any meaning for the present.

If Max hears about a person of color expressing racial discrimination, he may wonder whether the person of color is misinterpreting it. Max may feel that persons of color are just more sensitive and would be better off if they were less sensitive. If asked if he is “white” or has a race, he most likely says, “I’m just American.” He may avoid conversations about racism, assuming that such discussions have no significance for him.

Because of the unconscious way in which Max is white, he is unable to engage in meaningful conversations with persons who experience race as a label that impacts them on a daily basis. He doesn’t feel race impacts him directly, and, because of that, he’s not likely to engage in conversations about race. He senses it is a challenging subject, and to prevent himself feeling uncomfortable, he avoids the subject altogether and hopes that by ignoring race, racism will lessen over time.

STAGE 2: DISINTEGRATION

Max spends most of his growing up years in this first stage of “contact.” He knows a few non-white students, and he plays on sports teams with them, but at the end of the day, he never invites them to his house or vice-versa. As a high school student, he notices many of the black students sit together in the cafeteria, and he sits at a table with his all-white group of friends. In his classes, he has students from a number of different racial backgrounds—some who are Indian, others who are Korean American, and another who is Chinese, he thinks. The guy he thinks is Chinese is sitting next to him in class one day, and Max tells him a joke: “What do you call it when an egg goes down a hill? An egg roll.” Max smiles, thinking his classmate will think

his joke is funny. Instead, the guy gets up and moves to another seat. Max is confused—what did he say? He was just trying some small talk. Max avoids talking to that student again.

Later in the school year, the counseling office hosts a diversity education event for students who apply. They get to miss a day of school to meet off-campus for a day of learning about diversity. Max is all for missing regular school, so he signs up. When he gets there, the presenter starts talking about “white privilege” and the way racism benefits white people even without their knowing it. It is a long day and Max learns a lot, but he feels really conflicted. Max was not sure what he’d signed up for, but this was not going well. The things he was hearing were making him uncomfortable—like all of a sudden he was a bad guy. He thought back to the egg roll joke he had made in class the other day. Was that racist? He hadn’t thought so. After all, he loved Asian stuff. He grew up on Asian manga cartoons and Pokemon cards. How could he be racist?

This stage is called “disintegration” because it presents a challenge to a person’s previously unchallenged positive view of oneself. Before this stage, the white person did not consciously think he or she was racist. Now, he or she is confronted with the message that they may be perceived as being racist even if that was not their intent. This confrontation creates a number of difficult emotions, including anger or defensiveness, as well as guilt or shame. The person feels conflicted by the reality that something he or she said was perceived as racist. This creates internal confusion and distress. There is a feeling of cognitive dissonance between how the person views him or herself and the way they are perceived by others.

STAGE 3: REINTEGRATION

After attending this event on diversity at his school, Max feels several different emotions. One is that he feels overwhelmed by all this new information. He did not know about the experiences

of people of color or persons from other religious faiths who have been targeted for their faith or appearance. He feels overwhelmed and unsure of what he can possibly do about it all. He also feels a bit guilty, since as a white person who is a Christian, he does not experience discrimination on the basis of his skin color or his religious faith. Based on the things he heard in the diversity meeting, he has a lot of privilege to not experience these things, and being privileged in that way feels bad.

But Max does not like feeling bad about himself. Max has had healthy self-esteem growing up, he has been confirmed in his church, and sees himself as a moral guy. He resents the idea that somehow he has been “complicit in injustice” as the diversity training told him. How could he be getting it so wrong when he has been such a good person his whole life? Instead of feeling bad about himself, he starts to have bad feelings toward the people who presented this diversity event. “The student leaders and workshop facilitators are the ones who don’t know what they’re talking about,” he thinks to himself. “Sure, bad things have happened in the past, but I’m no racist.” He finds himself avoiding anything that has to do with the word *diversity* in the future. He thinks it is a waste of his time and that it’s just trying to make him feel bad about himself. “That’s not for me,” he says. “I’m sure there are other people who need to hear that, but not me.”

This stage of white racial identity development is known as “reintegration” because the individual reintegrates previously held understandings about themselves, ignoring messages they have heard about ongoing racism. The individual cannot hold onto the negative feelings that such conversations bring up, so he or she avoids the conversations and turns the negative feelings outward onto others. The white person may notice that he or she now has conscious thoughts about people of color that are negative. The white person may think that people of color are too focused on being the victims, or aren’t taking enough responsibility for themselves. These ideas allow the white person to maintain one’s prior understanding of oneself: “I’m a good

person. There's no reason why I should feel bad on your behalf. If you want me to feel bad, then it's your problem, and something must be wrong with you."

The stage known as reintegration is obviously not a positive step. It's not a move forward. This stage is included within the process of white racial identity development because white people should expect to feel it. It is difficult to feel the feelings that come up when talking about race and racism, and there is a tendency to project those negative feelings about ourselves back onto other people. Those not aware of this stage may end here and avoid further growth. But knowing this is a predictable part of the development toward a healthy and positive white racial identity can help us stay engaged and have compassion for ourselves. If we can recognize our own tendencies to push our negative feelings onto others, rather than acting on those feelings, we can accept them and keep them to ourselves, trusting that as we stay engaged in the process they may transform into something else.

STAGE 4: PSEUDO-INDEPENDENT

The name of this stage captures the tentative nature of this forward movement. As the person gains a bit of independence from the earlier understanding of oneself as "normal" (not racialized), the person begins to learn more about what it means to be white in today's society. The stage includes the prefix "pseudo-" because it is a false independence. One is still stuck in understanding whiteness as the former innocence and ignorance one grew up with. The person is not yet fully ready to have genuine relationships with people of color, and the symptoms of racist beliefs still are present. But the person begins to think through what racism looks like today and understands it on an intellectual level. The person begins to accept that they are "white," even though this does not come easily or comfortably. Let's look at what is happening with Max at this stage.

Max goes away to college and, while he is there, a police officer shoots and gravely wounds an unarmed black student. The

entire college campus is upset. The Black Student Caucus is out protesting on the streets in front of the school, and students of all colors have joined in the march with signs and solidarity. Max sees all of this happening and is not sure what to do. He hears his white roommate talking to a black friend, and the white roommate is saying, “I know—I’ve never been pulled over by the police and treated that way. There’s no way that would have happened to me.” His white roommate seems aware of the different treatment he receives from police than the black student. The fact that the victim of the shooting did not have any weapon makes Max incredulous. *How could this happen?* He wants to think the victim did something wrong or acted aggressively toward the police officer. He wants to believe there is some justification for the shooting. But the more he hears about the event and sees the grief of the students on his campus, he starts to wonder. He thinks to himself, “I have a lot to learn.”

STAGE 5: IMMERSION

Max signs up for a class the next semester on Black Literature. He reads novels he never read in high school by Toni Morrison and Zora Neal Hurston, James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison, Frantz Fanon, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, and Chinua Achebe. These books make him learn of a life so different from his own. He reads Ta-Nehesi Coates and learns how far we still have to go when it comes to giving everyone a fair and equal chance to succeed. He watches PBS specials on *The Freedom Riders* and sees the white men and women who also risked their lives and well-being to sit at lunch counters with black or brown sisters or brothers. He watches the James Baldwin documentary *I Am Not Your Negro* that came out in theaters, and Max notices how similar things are between the things Baldwin wrote about and the things Max is seeing on the news today. Max begins to sense that he can get involved in some way, though he’s not sure how.

This stage of white racial identity development involves immersing oneself in a historical understanding of the events

and attitudes that led up to where we are today in terms of continuing racial inequality. The white person begins to read about other whites who also fought for civil rights and who continue to fight on behalf of all people who are oppressed. The white person begins to see that they can be part of this bigger story—not because they are needed as a “white savior,” as is so often presented in the movies—but because they are called to be an ally, a coworker, a fellow human working for all of humanity to be recognized as fully human. The person at this point may realize the need to return to their own white community to raise awareness of ongoing racism there.

STAGE 6: AUTONOMY

This stage is called “autonomy” because the white person is no longer tied to traditional expectations of what it means to be white. They do not refuse the label “white,” and it does not cause discomfort to claim their racial identity as white. The person is aware of the unfair advantages given to whites in this country, and also aware that simply being aware of white privilege does nothing to change the system that unfairly advantages whites. Because of this, the white person finds ways to actively raise awareness of racial discrimination and inequality, using what influence they have to try and widen the circle of people who will commit to addressing ongoing racism. The person at this stage also sees how whiteness and racism are interconnected with other forms of oppression involving gender, class, ability, citizenship status, sexual orientation, etc., and the person works to build coalitions with others who are also working on addressing injustice. The person seeks to learn about other cultures and communities, and values diversity in their place of work and neighborhood. Diversity of any kind no longer poses a threat.

At the same time, with any of these stages, this is not a finished project. It is not something that the white person is “done with.” Instead, future experiences and opportunities challenge the

person and require going back through earlier stages to accept these experiences in a growth mindset. For instance, the person may be criticized for saying something offensive, and again the person experiences the earlier stages of disintegration and reintegration, until finally accepting the accusation and learning from it. There are plenty of opportunities for persons to make mistakes in the work for justice! The goal is to continue to have humility and to be aware that none of us have “arrived,” so that we can keep learning and growing from one another.

After his experiences in college, Max decided to go to graduate school to study literature written by people of color. He teaches classes at a local community college that look at issues of identity and resistance within oppressive systems. Many of his students cite his classes as having the most impact on their learning and leadership development.

Racial Identity Development Is Different for Different People

Why are these stories important? These characters are made up, but they demonstrate what racial identity development might look like in different people. Granted, these two individuals had a lot of other things in common. Neither had to deal with other parts of their identity that would have been difficult to navigate: neither is gay, both came from economically secure families, neither struggled with mental illness or other forms of disability, they both grew up in the same white neighborhood that had good schools and abundant resources, and both of their families had been living in the United States for several generations and were not viewed as “foreigners.” Racial identity development does not just take place in a vacuum—it is related to a number of other factors that make persons who they are. How a person views his or her racial identity is impacted by these other factors as well.

In fact, any of these factors can increase the challenge exponentially.

In the television drama series *When We Rise*,³ documenting the gay liberation movement and based on real persons, one of the characters is a black man named Ken. Over the course of the movement, we see Ken's attempts to bring awareness of the crisis of the AIDS epidemic to the black community. Ken appears before a city council board and speaks about the need to address the problem of AIDS in the black community. One of the members of the council looks at Ken and tells him: "This is a gay problem. No *real* black men are gay."

Ken takes a deep breath, and then tells the room that he is standing there as a proud black gay man, and that he served his country through several tours during Vietnam in the Navy, and he is proud of who he is. He urges the council to pay attention to this plague killing men, women, and children by acknowledging the presence of gay members of the black community. The council member turns away from Ken and calls on the next presenter.

This scene depicts a real struggle for members of communities of color in which being LGBTQ means you have to pick your community. Ken faced racism from the gay community in San Francisco, and he faced homophobia from the black community. Most of the people Ken associated with were white people and people of color who accepted his sexual orientation and the color of his skin, often because they were also members of the gay community. He gets involved with a church called "City of Refuge" that welcomes persons of different sexual orientations and gender identities, and also provides a food bank and soup kitchen for the local community.

At one point, a minister of Ken's church, a black trans-woman, is killed in a car crash. The brother and mother of the woman come for the funeral, and Ken meets them to tell them about her and what a lovely person she was. The brother reacts angrily to Ken, telling him not to call his brother "a her" and that it was disrespectful to their mother. Ken has to walk away and find

3 *When We Rise*. Created by Dustin Lance Black. ABC Studios, 2017. Miniseries available online.

support from a more conservative white pastor to help convince the woman's brother and mother to honor the woman's identity and the community with which she served in ministry.

For Ken, racial identity development looked different than it would have for someone such as Ashley. He grew up in an earlier era, serving in the Navy during Vietnam, facing racism in the military and silence regarding sexual orientation. Over the course of his life, he witnessed the plague of the AIDS epidemic and the passage of the Defense of Marriage Act and "Don't Ask, Don't Tell." He also lived through the Supreme Court decision that made it possible for LGBTQ persons to get married in every state across the country. His racial identity was different not only because of the era in which he grew up, but also because of the community that most significantly impacted his identity. Being gay for Ken meant he was marginalized from the black community. At the same time, being gay did not spare him from racism in the gay community.

Similarly, a white person who has other aspects of their identity emerge in a significant way will also have different experiences of being white. As I will share in a later story, a white person who grows up in poverty will have a different experience of race than Max. Similarly, a white woman who has a mental illness or who experiences domestic violence will also experience race differently. This is not to suggest that these other experiences related to one's identity will make it easier to see one's race as significant; in fact, it could be that these other aspects make it harder for a person to build connections across races for solidarity. Sometimes people feel the need to focus on only one issue, so they resist feeling pulled to support other causes.

The following are only some of the differences that can impact how you as an individual experience racial identity: age, where you grew up, current neighborhood and places you've lived, gender, sexual orientation, class, education level, working environment, the ideas and values expressed by your parents, if you have a

physical or mental disability, or if you are discriminated against because of your religious tradition, nationality, or immigration status. Black persons from Puerto Rico or Cameroon will have different experiences and understandings of being “black” than a black person born and raised in New York City or a small town in Texas. Similarly, imagine being a white person who has immigrated from Serbia or is a Jewish descendant of Holocaust survivors and how very different your understanding would be of what it means to be white, compared to a white Christian born and raised in Phoenix or Milwaukee.

Noting the ways that racial identity development can be different for individuals, what important lessons can these stories of Ashley and Max and the stages they demonstrate help us to learn? Simply knowing the progressive stages of racial identity development can help us understand what stage we are currently in, which one we’ve recently emerged from, and which stages we have to look forward to in our movement toward racial justice. If we can recognize they have common markers and experiences, we can better listen to our feelings and our experiences, and determine how we can best move forward in working for justice for all. Ken’s idea of working for justice meant accepting his black identity and his gay identity and being proud of both. Because race has been such a significant category in the history of discrimination and division in this country, it is a category we need to attend to in order to address the continuing injustice of racism. Racism is not the only form of oppression that impacts persons with intersecting identities, but neither can we ignore race if we’re to work for justice in these other areas as well. They are all connected.

Also, it is important to notice stages such as the “reintegration” stage of white racial identity, when we may be projecting negative feelings onto someone else. When we find ourselves becoming angry or feeling defensive, we need to pay attention to what those feelings are. We do not need to deny them, but we can sit with them before we act on them. Letting yourself

become more aware of your feelings can help you stay engaged and move forward, rather than projecting your emotions onto persons around you by feeling negatively toward them.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion:

Before moving on to the next chapter, take a moment here to check in with yourself. Take a deep breath. What thoughts and feelings did these stories of racial identity development bring up for you? Write them down in your journal. Circle the feelings that are the strongest for you. Maybe you are experiencing anxiety or resentment, sadness or irritation. Perhaps reading this chapter made you nervous and stressed out or left you feeling guilty at times. I have noticed myself feeling skeptical at times, wondering whether this theory is accurate or helpful. If you have any of these feelings, even doubt or suspicion or any other emotion, write it down. Spend a moment looking at your list, then cover the words you have written, and see if you can name all those feelings and where they come from. Say a prayer over those words and feelings. Ask God to help you honor what you are experiencing and help you experience peace. Thank God for already knowing your heart before you knew yourself.

Afterward, look back over the stages of racial identity development. Turn to the elements you found most helpful. Are there any you felt a strong connection to? Did you find yourself nodding at a particular place? Where do you find you've grown within these stages? What kind of experiences have brought you to where you are now? Have you ever been angry with someone, only to eventually realize that your feelings toward them were outward signs of what was going on inside of you? When are you most likely to feel negatively about someone? What can you do to remind yourself next time to first sit with your emotions and investigate why you may be feeling the way you do? Share with another person your discoveries and decisions, naming the stages of racial identity development that best describe your own life experiences.

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