

Introduction:

“Only Justice Can Put Out the Fire”¹

There is fire raging across the United States—usually a series of brush fires erupting whenever conditions are right—sometimes a firestorm, always a smoldering cauldron. Whether it is major urban uprisings, intellectual debates, or everyday conflicts in our neighborhoods and schools, racism is burning us all. Some of us have third-degree burns or have died from its effects; many others live in charred wreckage. Most of us suffer first- and second-degree burns at some time in our lives. We all live with fear in the glow of the menacing and distorted light of racism’s fire.

As white people we do many things to survive the heat. Some of us move to the suburbs, put bars on our windows, put locks on our hearts, and teach our children distrust for their own protection. Some of us believe the enemy is “out there”—and we can be safe “in here.” When we don’t talk about our fears, we are prevented from doing anything effective to put out the fire.

Poll after poll shows most white people are scared. We are scared about violence; about the economy; about the environment; we are scared about the safety, education, and future of our children.² Much of the time those fears are directed toward people of color whether they are long-term residents or recent immigrants. It is easy for us to focus on them, and yet doing so devastates our ability to address critical national issues of economic inequality, war, social infrastructure, family violence, and environmental devastation which affect everyone.

Since the attacks of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon in 2001, white people are even more afraid. We have been shown our vulnerability and our complicity.³ Many of us wanted to do something, to pick up a bucket and throw water on the flames, but the size of the blaze seemed to make our individual efforts useless. Besides, many of us thought we were too far away from the cause of the fire to make a difference. Arabs and Muslims were defined as the problem; the danger was anywhere and everywhere. Unending war was declared the only solution.

In fact, there are already flames in our (all too often predominantly white) schools, churches, neighborhoods, and workplaces. Poverty, family violence, drugs, and despair are not limited to somewhere “out there” nor to “those people.” Our houses are burning too, and we need to pick up our buckets and start carrying water now. But just like the volunteer fire departments in rural communities and small towns, we need to be part of a fire line where everyone realizes that when the sparks are flying, anything can begin to burn. As a community we can be alert for sparks and embers so they can be put out before a bigger blaze develops.

We don’t need scare tactics. They just reinforce fear and paralysis. We don’t need numbers and statistics. They produce numbness and despair. We need to talk with each other, honestly, simply, caringly. We need to learn how to talk about racism without rhetoric (which fans the flames); without attack or intimidation (which separates people from one another). We need to share firefighting suggestions, skills, and experience so we can work together to end racism.

I think it is crucial each of us speaks up about issues of violence and injustice. It is true our words would have more moral credibility if we were leading a mistake-free life and were totally consistent in what we say and do. We have to “walk the walk,” not just “talk the talk.”

However, issues of social justice are not fundamentally about individual actions and beliefs. This book is about racism, an institutionalized system of oppression. Although my actions can either

support or confront racism, it is completely independent of me. In fact, even if most of us were completely non-racist in our attitudes and practices, there are many ways unequal wages, unequal treatment in the legal system, and segregation in jobs, housing, and education could continue.

This book is about uprooting the *system* of racism. You may need to reexamine your individual beliefs and actions in order to participate effectively in that uprooting. This book will help you look at how you have learned racism, what effects it has had on your life, what have been its costs and benefits to you, and how you have learned to pass it on. More importantly, this book will help you become a member of a network of people who are committed to racial justice. It offers you strategies and guidelines for becoming involved in the struggle.

Don't take it too personally. You did not create racism. You may have many feelings while reading this book. Confronting racism may trigger a range of emotions including guilt, defensiveness, sadness, or outrage. Acknowledge the feelings, talk with others, but don't get stuck. If our feelings immobilize us, we cannot strategically plan how to transform the system. I am reminded of the statement to white people by Maurice Mitchell, a leader in Ferguson Action and Black Lives Matter: "Your anxiety about getting it right has nothing to do with black liberation."⁵

This book is not about unlearning racism.⁶ Unlearning racism makes it easier for people of color to live and work with us, but it doesn't necessarily challenge racist structures. Unlearning racism may or may not be a path toward eliminating racism. In a society where individual growth is often not only the starting place, but also the end point of discussion, strategies for unlearning racism often end in complacency and inaction.

Uprooting Racism begins with the understanding that racism exists, it is pervasive and that its effects are devastating. Because of this devastation, we need to start doing everything possible to work for racial justice. The first step is for us to talk together, as white

people. For as white Southern civil rights activist Anne Braden reminded us:

In a sense, the battle is and always has been a battle for the hearts and mind of white people in this country. The fight against racism is not something we're called on to help people of color with. We need to become involved as if our lives depended on it because, in truth, they do.⁷

PART I

What Color Is White?



Let's Talk

I AM TALKING TO YOU as one white person to another. I am Jewish, and I will talk about that later in this book. You also may have an ethnic identity you are proud of. You likely have a religious background, a culture, a country of origin, and a history. Whatever your other identities, you may not be used to being addressed as white.

Other people are African American, Asian American, Pacific Islanders, Native American, Latinx, or Muslims. Other people have countries of origin and primary languages that are not English. White people generally assume people are white unless otherwise noted, much as humans can assume people and animals are male.

Read the following lines:

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- *This new sitcom is about a middle-aged, middle-class couple and their three teenage children.*
 - *They won a medal on the Special Olympics swim team.*
 - *He did well in school but was just a typical all-American kid.*
 - *They didn't know if they would get into the college of their choice.*
 - *My grandmother lived on a farm all her life.*
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Are all these people white? Read the sentences again and imagine the people referred to are Chinese Americans or Native Americans. How does that change the meanings of these sentences? If you are

of Christian background, what happens when you imagine the subjects as Muslim or Jewish?

White people assume we are white without stating it because it is “obvious.” Yet there is something about stating this obvious fact that makes white people feel uneasy, marked. What’s the point of saying “I’m white?”

White people have been led to believe racism is a question of particular acts of discrimination or violence. Calling someone a name, denying someone a job, excluding someone from a neighborhood—that is racism. These certainly are acts of racial discrimination. But what about working in an organization where people of color are paid less, have more menial work or fewer opportunities for advancement? What about shopping in a store where you are treated respectfully, but people of color are followed around or treated with suspicion?

People of color know this racism intimately. They know that where they live, work, and walk; whom they talk with and how; what they read, listen to, or watch on TV—their past experiences and future possibilities are all influenced by racism.

For the next few days, carry your whiteness with you. During the day, in each new situation, remind yourself that you are white. How does it feel? Notice how rarely you see or hear the words white, Caucasian or Euro-American.

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- *Where is it implied but not stated specifically?*
 - *Who is around you? Are they white or people of color?*
What difference does it make?
 - *Write down what you notice. Discuss it with a friend.*
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Particularly notice whenever you are somewhere there are only white people.

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- *How did it come to be that no people of color are present?*
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- *If you ask about their absence, what kinds of explanations/ rationalizations do people give?*
 - *Are they really not there, or are they only invisible?*
 - *Did they grow some of the food, originally own the land, build the buildings, or clean and maintain the place where you are?*
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"I'm Not White"

I WAS ONCE doing a workshop on racism in which we divided the group into a caucus of people of color and a caucus of white people to elicit more in-depth discussion. Immediately some of the white people said, "But I'm not white."

I was somewhat taken aback because although these people looked white, they were clearly distressed about being labeled white. A white Christian woman stood up and said, "I'm not really white because I'm not part of the white male power structure that perpetuates racism." Next a white gay man stood up and said, "You have to be straight to have the privileges of being white." A white, straight, working-class man from a poor family then said, "I've got it just as hard as any person of color." Finally, a straight, white, middle-class man said, "I'm not white, I'm Italian."

My African American coworker turned to me and asked, "Where are all the white people who were here just a minute ago?" I replied, "Don't ask me. I'm not white, I'm Jewish!"

Those of us who are middle-class are more likely to take it for granted that we are white without having to emphasize the point, and to feel guilty when it is noticed or brought up. Those of us who are poor or working-class are more likely to have had to assert our whiteness against the effects of economic discrimination and the presence of other racial groups. Although we share benefits of being white, we don't share the economic privileges of being middle-class, and so we are more likely to feel angry and less likely to feel guilty than our middle-class counterparts.

In the US it has always been dangerous even to talk about racism. "N***** lover," "Indian lover," and "race traitor" are labels that have carried severe consequences for white people. You may know the names of white civil rights workers Goodman, Schwerner, and Luizzo who were killed for their actions. Many of us have been isolated from friends or family because of disagreements over racism. A lot of us have been called "racist."

I want to begin here—with this denial of our whiteness—because racism keeps people of color in the limelight and makes whiteness invisible. *Whiteness* is a concept, an ideology, which holds tremendous power over our lives and, in turn, over the lives of people of color. Our challenge as white people will be to keep whiteness center stage. Every time our attention begins to wander off toward people of color or other issues, we must learn to notice and refocus. We must not try to escape our white identity.

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- *What parts of your identity does it feel like you lose when you say aloud the phrase "I'm white?"*
 - *When they arrived in the North America, what did members of your family have to do to be accepted as white? What did they have to give up?*
 - *Has that identification or pride ever allowed you or your family to tolerate poverty, economic exploitation, or poor living conditions because you could say, "At least we're not colored?"*
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I realize there are differences between the streets of New York and Minneapolis, Vancouver, and Winnipeg, and between different neighborhoods within each city. But in US and Canadian society, there is a broad and pervasive division between those of us who are treated as white people and those of us who are treated as people of color. If, when you move down the streets of major cities, other people assume, based on skin color, dress, physical appearance, or total impression that you are white, then in US society that counts for being white.

Several studies have shown that young people between the ages of two and four notice differences of skin color, eye color, hair, dress, and speech and the significance adults give to those differences.¹ This is true even if parents are liberal or progressive. The training is too pervasive within our society for anyone to escape. Anthropology and sociology professor Annie Barnes recounts the following interview with a parent who noticed how early in their lives white children learn racism.

I experienced it [racism] through my three-year-old daughter. One day at preschool, the students had a “show and tell.” All the students had brought their toys to school. My daughter forgot her toys, so I had to go home and get them. My daughter told me specifically what to bring. She wanted her pretty black Barbie doll with the white dress. She loved this doll and thought that it was pretty and often said, “When I grow up, I want to look just like my Barbie.”

All the other children were white. While my daughter brought out her Barbie during show and tell, they screwed up their faces and said, “Yuck. That’s not Barbie. She’s ugly.”... She cried for hours and never carried her doll to school again, I couldn’t believe those little children’s actions. That was racism by babies, so to speak.²

Say “I am white” to yourself a couple of times.

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- *What are the “buts” that immediately come to mind?*
 - *Do you try to minimize the importance of whiteness (“We’re all part of the human race”)?*
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White people are understandably uncomfortable with the label white. Being white is an arbitrary category that overrides our individual personalities, devalues us, deprives us of the richness of our other identities, stereotypes us, and yet has no scientific basis. However, in our society being white is just as real and governs our

day-to-day lives just as much as categories and labels confine people of color. To acknowledge this reality is the first step to uprooting racism.

When I'm in an all-white setting and a person of color walks in, I notice. I am slightly surprised to see a person of color, and I look again to confirm who they are and wonder to myself why they're there. I try to do this as naturally and smoothly as possible because I wouldn't want anyone to think that I was racist. Actually what I'm surprised at is not that they are there, but that they are there as an equal. All of my opening explanations for their presence will assume they are not. "They must be a server or delivery person," I might tell myself. I think most white people notice skin color all the time, but we don't notice race unless our sense of the proper racial hierarchy is upset.

Since I was taught to relate differently to people who are African American, Latinx, Asian, or Arab American, I may need more information than appearance gives me about what kind of person of color I am with. I have some standard questions to fish for more information, such as: "That's an interesting name. I've never heard it before. Where's it from?" "Your accent sounds familiar, but I can't place it." "You don't look American. Where are you from?" And the all-too-common follow-up "No, I mean where are you really from?" It took me a long time to realize that despite my benign intention, these kinds of questions, regularly asked of people of color by white people, are harsh reminders that white people see people of color as outsiders.

Sometimes I ask these questions of white Americans who have unusual names or unfamiliar accents. But I have noticed that most often I use these questions to clarify who is white and who isn't and, secondarily, what kind of person of color I am dealing with.

Occasionally I hear white people say, "I don't care whether a person is black, brown, orange, or green." Human beings don't come in orange or green. Those whose skin color is darker are treated differently in general, and white people, in particular, respond differently to them. As part of growing up white and learning racial

stereotypes, most of us have been trained to stiffen up and be more cautious, fearful, and hesitant around people of color. We can notice these physiological and psychological responses in ourselves and see them in other white people.³ These responses belie our verbal assurances that we don't notice racial differences.

There's absolutely nothing wrong with being white or with noticing the differences that color makes. You are not responsible for having white skin or for being raised in a white-dominated, racist society in which you have been trained to have particular responses to people of color. However, you are responsible for how you respond to racism (which is what this book is about), and you can only do so consciously and effectively if you begin by realizing it makes a crucial difference that you are perceived to be and treated as white.

"I'm Not Racist"

WHETHER IT IS EASY or difficult to say we're white, the phrase we often want to say next is "But I'm not racist." There are lots of ways we have learned to phrase this denial:

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- *I don't belong to the Klan.*
 - *I have friends who are people of color.*
 - *I do anti-racism work.*
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Uprooting Racism is not about whether you are racist or not, or whether all white people are racist or not. We are not conducting a moral inventory of ourselves, nor creating a moral standard to divide other white people from us. When we say things like "I don't see color," we are trying to maintain a self-image of impartiality and innocence (whiteness).

The only way to treat all people with dignity and justice is to recognize that racism has a profound negative effect upon all of our lives. Noticing skin color helps to counteract that effect. Instead of being color-neutral, we need to notice much more acutely and insightfully exactly the difference skin color makes in the way people are treated.

Of course you're not a member of the Klan or other extremist groups. Of course you watch what you say and don't make rude racial comments. But dissociating from white people who do is not helpful. You may want to dissociate yourself from their actions, but you still need to challenge their beliefs. You can't challenge them or

even speak to them if you have separated yourself, creating some magical line with the racists on one side and you over here. This division leads to an ineffective strategy of trying to convert as many people as possible to your (non-racist and therefore superior) side. Other white people will listen to you better, and be more influenced by your actions, when you identify with them. Then you can explore how to work your way out from the inside of whiteness together.

Since racism leads to scapegoating people of color for social and personal problems, all white people are susceptible to scapegoat in times of trouble. Notice the large number of white people who blame African Americans or immigrants of color for economic problems in the US. Visible acts of racism are, at least in part, an indication of the lack of power a white person or group has.

More powerful and well-off people can move to segregated neighborhoods or make corporate decisions harder to see and analyze as contributing to racism. Those of us who are middle-class can inadvertently scapegoat poor and working-class white people for being overtly racist. For example, in the 2016 presidential election, those who voted for Trump had a mean income of \$72,000 per year and nearly half had college degrees—they were solidly middle-class. Yet many people assume Trump's supporters are uneducated working-class and poor whites who were unable to really see what he stands for.¹

We do need to confront racist words and actions because they create an atmosphere of violence in which all of us are unsafe. We also need to understand that most white people are doing the best they can to survive. Overtly racist people are scared and may lack the information and skills to challenge racism. We need to challenge their behavior, not their moral integrity. We also need to be careful we don't end up carrying out an upper-class agenda by blaming poor and working people for being racist when people with wealth control the media, the textbooks, the housing and job markets, and the police. Staying focused on institutions and decision-makers challenges societal racism.

What Is Racism?

I DEFINE RACISM, also referred to as white supremacy, as pervasive, deep-rooted, and long-standing exploitation, control, and violence directed at people of color, Native Americans, and immigrants of color. The benefits and entitlements of racism accrue to white people, particularly to a white, Christian, male-dominated ruling class. Racism is an uneven and unfair distribution of power, privilege, land and material goods favoring white people—a system in which people of color as a group are exploited and oppressed by white people as a group.

Often white people think of racism as prejudice, ignorance, or negative stereotypes about people of color. In this thinking, the solution to racism is challenging people's misinformation about people of color or other marginalized groups or convincing white people to be more tolerant and accepting. In fact, prejudice, ignorance, and stereotypes are results of racism, not the cause. Every one of us in this society—growing up with the lies, misinformation, and stereotypes found in our media, textbooks, cultural images, and every other aspect of our lives—carries deep-seated and harmful attitudes toward many other groups. It is our responsibility, as people with integrity, to unlearn the lies and misinformation we have learned and to replace them with more truthful and complex understandings of the people and cultures around us.

Racism operates on four different levels.

Interpersonal Racism

When a white person takes their misinformation and stereotypes toward another group and performs an act of harassment, exclusion,

marginalization, discrimination, hate, or violence, they are committing an act of *interpersonal racism* toward an individual or group.

When we move beyond talking about prejudice and stereotypes in our society, we generally focus on acts of interpersonal racism. These are the kinds of acts we hear about in the media—a hate crime, an act of job or housing discrimination, negative racial comments about people of color, racial profiling or violence by a police officer toward a person of color.

These acts are definitely damaging. But the system of racism is much larger than these personal acts. And racism would not be eliminated by ending them. If we limit our discussion to acts of interpersonal racism, it seems like racism is limited in its impact to specific individuals and perpetrated by the acts of individual “rotten apples.” All we need to do is punish/censor/screen out these particularly racist individuals and things would be mostly pretty good.

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- *What are a couple of examples of interpersonal racism you have seen personally or heard about from the media recently?*
 - *What harm do these kind of acts do on a personal and collective level to people of color?*
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Institutional Racism

Racism also operates within the institutions in our society. It is built into the policies, procedures, and everyday practices of the health care and education systems, the job and housing markets, the media, and the criminal/legal system to name a few. It operates both systematically and without the need for individual racist acts. People can be just following the rules and produce outcomes benefiting white people and harming people of color because the rules are set up to reproduce racism. For example, during most of the history of the US, it was illegal for white and black people to marry across racial lines, eat together in public, travel together, or shop together

on an equal basis.¹ Therefore shopkeepers, bus and train conductors, public officials, and others weren't unusually racist to enforce segregation—they were just following the law, acting as law-abiding white citizens.

Similarly a white schoolteacher could be teaching their students equally, addressing the needs of each individual student and helping every single one advance to the next grade level. But if they were teaching in a school or school system where there were no teachers of color, where white students were tracked into higher-level courses than students of color, where students of color were disciplined more harshly than white students, and/or the curriculum did not reflect the contributions of people of color to our society, then the school would be racially discriminatory despite the efforts of the “color-blind” teacher.

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- *What are a couple of examples of institutional racism in our society?*
 - *What harm does institutional racism do to people of color?*
 - *How does it benefit white people?*
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Structural Racism

The cumulative impact of all of the interpersonal and institutional racism within our society creates a system of structural racism. The racism of different institutions overlaps, reinforces, and amplifies the different treatment people of color and Native Americans receive compared to that which white people receive, ensuring different life outcomes.

For example, people have described the school-to-prison pipeline in which young people of color are pushed out of our schools and into the criminal/legal system.² Racism within the school system, the welfare system, child protective services, the foster care system and at all levels of the criminal/legal system interact to produce

a society which disproportionately limits the educational opportunities of young people of color and disproportionately disciplines them and locks them up.

In another example, lack of affordable health care and access to affordable healthy food options, coupled with higher exposure to toxic chemicals and other forms of pollution, coupled with job discrimination and housing segregation produces greater health problems, shorter life spans, lower wages, and greater levels of poverty for communities of color.³

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- *What are examples of structural racism—the interplay between different forms of institutional racism?*
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Cultural Racism

Structural racism is reinforced by the many layers of *cultural racism* in our society. Systemic and pervasive images, pictures, comments, literature, movies, advertisements, and online media consistently portray people of color, Native Americans, and immigrants of color as inferior, lazy, dangerous, sexually manipulative, infantile, and less smart than white people. These cultural stereotypes hold up white people in general as capable, honest, hard working, patriotic, safe—the heroes, leaders, and builders of our country. Cultural racism can be explicit or implicit, subtle or obvious. Every institution produces forms of cultural racism, but some, such as the media, educational systems, and religion, are particularly active in producing and maintaining a dominant white worldview that binds together the entire system of structural racism.

The anthropologist Audrey Smedley has described racism as a “world view” and as “a culturally structured, systematic way of looking at, perceiving, and interpreting various world realities... [that] actively, if not consciously, mould... the behavior of their bearers” and generates racializing meanings and associated discriminatory actions.⁴ Anthropological linguist Jane Hill added that this

worldview or frame “generates racialized meanings and associated discriminatory actions . . . [and] endows a racialized world with commonsense properties that exist below the level of consciousness. They are invisible to us, and yet constitute our world.”⁵

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- *What examples of cultural racism have you seen recently?*
 - *What do you imagine is their cumulative impact on people of color, Native Americans, and immigrants of color?*
 - *What do you see as their cumulative impact on white people—what attitudes and expectations do they produce in us?*
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Anti-Jewish and Anti-Muslim Oppression

As we have witnessed many times in European and US history, the fires of racism include flames of anti-Jewish oppression and anti-Muslim oppression (Islamophobia).⁶ Historically, dominant Christianity has always treated Muslims and Jews with suspicion and hostility—the external and internal enemies of Christendom. Most of the Jews in the United States are of European background.⁷ Sometimes these Jews are considered white and sometimes not, just as Asian and Arab Americans have sometimes been considered white or not.

Jewish people have experienced the same kinds of violence, discrimination, and harassment most people of color have experienced; at the same time, Jews who are of white European descent are buffered from racism’s worst aspects by the benefits of being white. In this book Jews of European descent will be referred to both as white *and* as targets of anti-Jewish oppression. Jews of color are always targets of racism from white people and even from white Jews of European descent. They are also vulnerable to anti-Jewish oppression.

Originally called Moors or Saracens, Muslims have been labeled the unrelenting foe of the Christian West since the first Crusade was declared in 1095 CE. A European Christian identity was first established in this period by uniting people against the Moors as a

common enemy. Muslims, like Jews, were one of the many groups treated as dangerous by Christians.⁸ Even though there are white Muslims in the US, they have never experienced the acceptance white Jews have received. White people who are Muslims do retain some of the benefits of being white while being vulnerable to many of the penalties for being a person who is not Christian. Muslims of color experience racism and anti-Muslim oppression.

Anti-Jewish oppression and anti-Muslim oppression are similar to, different from, and intertwined with racism. European Christian ruling classes have exploited, controlled, and violated other groups of people based on religion, race, culture, and nationality (as well as gender, class, physical and mental ability, and sexual orientation) for many centuries. There is tremendous overlap in the kinds of violence that have been directed at these groups and the justifications used to legitimize it. Racism, anti-Jewish, and anti-Muslim oppression are primary, closely related tools the powerful have used to maintain their advantage.