Chapter 1

Bridging the Chasm

Starting the Conversation about Race

"Until we start talking about what we believe and why we believe it, we will continue to tiptoe around each other and get nowhere. We have seen what the silence does. We should give talking a chance."

—Claudia Rankine, discussing her play *The White Card*

Rankine is talking about the silence about race—a silence sustained by skillful evasion and indirection. She made these comments in an interview about her play *The White Card*. The play features four upper-class whites (a married couple and their college-age son, and a male friend of the couple) and a Black woman photographer whose work the couple is interested in purchasing. The play opens on a note of civility and devolves into racial animosity. After stilted back-and-forth interaction washed down with champagne, the veneer of civility cracks, exposing deep racial division. Rankine's play is an invitation to talk and break the silence about race. That invitation is ever more urgent today as support for the Black Lives Matter movement grows.

Rankine titles her play to call out a hidden, yet powerful, story about race in America. We are familiar with the expression "playing the race card." The phrase is most often used to disparage people of color or their advocates and to discredit claims of racism. When Rankine turns the expression toward whites, she exposes how some whites

promote their "good" views on race without admitting their own white biases:

- "I support police reform."
- "I work every day to do the right thing."
- "I'm not a racist. I'm color blind."

Rankine's play puts a lens up to some of the ways white people don't understand the implications of their comments, behaviors, and attitudes about race. As she says, it's now time for "giving talking a chance."[1]

This book takes up Rankine's urgent message to give talk a chance, because if we don't, we will never achieve social and economic justice. We address white people because, collectively, we have not dug deeply enough to get past our ignorance, embarrassment, and fears about race. We are writing from our perspective as two white women who are the mothers of two African American men who were adopted as infants.[2] Throughout the years of parenting, we came to understand at least some of what it means to be Black in this country and some of what it means to be the parents of Black children. We learned from books, workshops, talking with Black friends and acquaintances, and the minutiae of everyday life. We learned from how our children were treated on playgrounds and at school, from what was said about our being "such good people" for adopting Black children, from suspicious glances at our family, from unexpected stereotypes directed at our children. A white woman at a concert we attended with the boys when they were in middle school asked if they were the Lost Boys of Sudan. We learned from Black friends that our children would be subjected to having their hair touched by white children and even adults without permission. That teachers would set low expectations for their academic performance and high ones for their athletic performance. That we would have to teach our boys how to behave when they were pulled over by the police when driving. And we learned that they *would* be pulled over by the police. We also learned over and over how much we did not and still do not understand, and how easy it was and continues to be surprised by our ignorance.

We believe that talking about race is imperative but requires commitment to listen, willingness to entertain new ideas, and openness to learning that one's thinking about many aspects of race has been wrong—often harmfully wrong. If we do not talk about race, then our ideas remain private and passively influenced by media images and what we might read about race. If we do not talk about race for fear of saying the wrong thing, then the unsaid is allowed to speak for itself. Yet, before we can engage productively with one another, we need to examine why whites find it so hard to talk about race.

Racial barriers stand firm. We need to learn why those barriers exist and how we can diminish them to achieve racial justice and equity. We need to ask—and answer—why do we continue to exist in racial boxes, which set up boundaries and barriers that persist today? If I as a white person fear that I will say the wrong thing, how does that create a barrier? If I as a white person know little about the distribution of wealth among races in our country, how does that create a barrier? If I as a white person say that I do not see color, how does that create a barrier? Barriers in these examples are created by fear in the first case, ignorance in the second, and lack of empathy in the third.

The worst culprit is likely the physical barrier of separation in neighborhoods. We cannot know and understand other people if we do not have contact with them. The housing barrier creates divisions in education, occupation, lifestyle, and health. The United States continues to be residentially segregated, even though there has been slight progress in recent years. Federal, state, and local policies created a suburban-urban split, with people of color concentrated in urban areas. Large metropolitan areas in the North and Midwest, such as Milwaukee, New York, Chicago, Detroit, Cleveland, and Buffalo, have the highest levels of segregation. Within those areas, neighborhood boundaries function like signposts to show who lives where. Rural America, which accounts for slightly less than one-fifth of the US population, is close to 80% white.[3] We will discuss this topic more in chapter 4, but for now, we want to stress that the barriers between races will not be brought down until and unless we acknowledge them,

learn about them, discuss their existence, and willingly do something to diminish them.

Our book calls on white people to talk with one another and with people of color about race and to explore why whites have such a difficult time in conversations about race. If we can't talk among ourselves, how will we ever be able to talk constructively across racial boundaries? We, as white people, need to talk frankly, respectfully, and without defensiveness. We view talk among white people as essential to gaining the courage and skill to talk across the racial divide. And we view talk across race as essential to building the trust, understanding, and relationships essential to achieving racial equity.

We imagine that some people will respond to this call by thinking that we're already saturated with talk about race. It's true that news, politics, social media, TV shows, and movies prominently focus on race, but that's not the same as talking deeply about race. Researchers who explored race relations in office settings remarked that "Americans talk about race all the time but usually through code and allusion."[4] To talk about race means more than simply saying something about the topic, lumping everything together with blanket terms like "diversity" and "multicultural," or alluding to "problems" that involve those who are somehow marked as different from whites. For us, talking about race means to engage, to probe, and to have respectful and sustained conversations that focus on what, why, and how we think about race and our experiences with it. Talk in this sense is a personal and social responsibility to probe questions such as: Why are we reluctant to get too deeply into race talk, or to even broach topics related to race? What are our personal and family histories with race? What is okay or not okay to say when talking about race to other white people and to people of other races? What don't we know about race, and why don't we know it?

The context for writing and talking about race is continuously reshaped by current events. President Bill Clinton, for instance, called in 1997 for Town Halls around the country to address issues of race and promote racial understanding. Over twenty years later, the national call remains, but in a different and ever more urgent context.

We are writing this book during Donald Trump's presidency. Had we written about the difficulties that whites experience in broaching deep and sustained conversations about race after Barack Obama's election in 2008, the context would have differed. Many held the then-popular belief that race was receding as a significant social problem, and that the election provided evidence of a "post-racial" society. (We never believed this to be the case.) The post-racial idea gave comfort to many whites and provided a kind of relief that the worst of racial injustice was history and a new era was beginning.

At the same time, however, Obama's election unleashed virulent racism that many whites in the US thought no longer existed. Ugly cartoons of the president and first lady circulated on the internet, racist graffiti could be found in most cities and in many schools, and those who claimed the illegitimacy of Obama's birthright as an American never ceased in their assertions. Racism, it seemed, became more rather than less prevalent in our society. Then the startling succession of Black men being shot by police officers galvanized national attention. These shootings, more than anything else, opened a wide chasm in white and Black viewpoints.

It's impossible to pinpoint an exact starting date, but February 26, 2012, stands out. On that day, Trayvon Martin, a seventeen-year-old African American boy, was shot and killed in Florida by George Zimmerman, a mixed-race twenty-eight-year-old. The killing became a subject of controversy when it was reported that Trayvon Martin was unarmed, and George Zimmerman had a history of calling police to report suspicious activity in the gated community where he lived—increasingly identified by Zimmerman as the activity of Black persons. After Zimmerman was acquitted on all charges, protests occurred in many cities, and the racial chasm widened. The *Washington Post* concluded that "the verdict did little to close the stark divisions the case opened up among Americans along the jagged fissures of race and personal safety."[5] The Martin case firmly anchored what was to become all too common news of events in which Blacks were killed by police at the time of an incident or died while in police custody. A narrative of

division in how Black people and white people viewed the role of race in the shootings also unfolded.

Signs of racial division intensified following the shooting of Michael Brown on August 9, 2014, in Ferguson, Missouri, and the riots that followed. Shortly after Brown's death, the Pew Research Center released polling data that showed a sharp racial divide in views about what happened and its implications. One finding revealed that 80% of Blacks who were polled thought the shooting raised racial issues, while only 37% of whites held that opinion.[6] The survey also found that more Blacks (76%) than whites (52%) had confidence in the investigations of the shooting. Three points about such survey data deserve comment. First, none of these statistics shows a complete dichotomy between races. Some whites express viewpoints similar to the majority of Blacks, just as some Blacks see things similarly to the majority of whites. Second, answers to any polling question reflect what people think in the particular moment that they answer a question. New events, interactions with others, and personal reflection might lead to a different viewpoint at a different time. Third, none of the statistics are conditioned by probing why a person believes one thing or another or if they hesitated about how to answer.

As news about the shootings exploded, the story of yet another divide emerged, this one of deepening animosity between police advocates and Black community members and their supporters. The deaths of Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown along with the growing unrest about policing launched the Black Lives Matter movement. Signs appeared on buildings and in yards in support of the movement, but opposition also arose with counterclaims that "all lives matter," "white lives matter," and "police lives matter." Whatever a person thought about the events at issue or the Black Lives Matter movement, the names of dead Black people dotted conversations, news stories, and social media:

> Tamir Rice—Cleveland, Ohio, 2014
> Michael Brown—Ferguson, Missouri, 2014
> Eric Garner—Staten Island, New York, 2014

Akai Gurley—Brooklyn, New York, 2014
Walter Scott—N. Charleston, South Carolina, 2015
Freddie Gray—Baltimore, Maryland, 2015
Sandra Bland—Prairie View, Texas, 2015
Philando Castile—Falcon Heights, Minnesota, 2016
Stephon Clark—Sacramento, California, 2018
Antwon Rose II—Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, 2018
Jimmy Atchison—Atlanta, Georgia, 2019
Elijah McClain—Aurora, Colorado, 2019
Ahmaud Arbery—Brunswick, Georgia, 2020
Breonna Taylor—Louisville, Kentucky, 2020
George Floyd—Minneapolis, Minnesota, 2020
Rayshard Brooks—Atlanta, Georgia, 2020

And the list goes on.

The names became flash points in arguments about racism and justice. Expressions of sympathy and outrage at what was happening were countered by pushback rebutting the contention that Blacks—especially Black men—are more likely than whites to be victimized by police. One such rebuttal in the *National Review,* said: "This narrative [that Black men are overly victimized] is false. In reality, a randomly selected black man is overwhelmingly unlikely to be a victim of police violence—and though white men experience such violence even less often, the disparity is consistent with the racial gap in violent crime, suggesting that the role of racial bias is small."[7] The author continues by offering evidence for his assertions. One might accept or reject the argument or the sources for his evidence, but we can see from his argument where the friction exists.

Replies to the pushback against the Black Lives Matter movement sought to make the point of the movement more exactly. Ronald Sullivan, a Harvard Law School professor, put it this way: "The meme, 'All Lives Matter' is yet another effort to undermine legitimate calls to end antiblack police practices that characterize far too many interactions between police and citizens of color…. All lives, self evidently, matter. That is not the point. The point is that this country has been

silent for decades, as citizens of color have been killed by those sworn to protect and serve. The Black Lives Matter movement is an attempt to shed light on a problem that has existed in the shadows."[8]

The pile-up of events and the increasingly polarized commentary that grew around them pointed to a need for better racial understanding and improved race relations. This need was not new, but the accelerated pace of news and social media conveyed an urgency. National leaders spoke out, among them James Comey, then the director of the FBI. Speaking at Georgetown University in 2015, Comey focused his remarks on the strains between Black Americans and law enforcement, saying that the country was "at a crossroads…[where] we can choose to live our everyday lives…hoping someone, somewhere, will do something to ease the tension, to smooth over the conflict. We can roll up our car windows, turn up the radio and drive around these problems, or we can choose to have an open and honest discussion about what our relationship is today—what it should be, what it could be, and what it needs to be—if we took more time to better understand one another."[9]

The ongoing incidents of yet another Black death in a situation involving police sparked more and more calls for a "conversation about race." Cities, organizations, schools and colleges, places of worship, and media outlets ramped up efforts to answer that call. Many of these conversations were probably productive, especially those held in small organizations such as churches and ongoing groups. Yet, what occurred on a larger scale often sounded more like sequential turns at speaking, or perhaps back and forth airing of disagreements among panelists selected by media outlets mainly because they would agree to engage in a point-counterpoint debate-style format—with license to raise their voices. Debate has its purpose and place, but its objective is to win, to dominate, to show superiority of reasoning. This style of discourse seldom brings people together but, rather, moves them apart by accentuating their differences.

An example of a well-intentioned "conversation" event occurred in Boston, where Mayor Marty Walsh launched a series of citywide conversations on race in November 2016. With its fraught history of race, the Boston location was sure to draw interest. Expectations were mixed

with promise and cynicism. Held in one of the city's large theatres, a diverse audience packed the space. We recall the local news video footage of people lined up behind the microphone waiting for their turn to speak. The *Boston Globe* characterized the event as "marked by frank and emotional remarks, intense…but also civil."[10] Individuals made their points, and some responded to what had been said previously, but there was little opportunity for true conversation in such a large venue.

Even Starbucks tried to start the race conversation with a campaign launched by its CEO Howard Schulz in 2015 to have baristas write "Race Together" on their customers' coffee cups. The idea was to prompt conversations about race among Starbucks patrons. The campaign met with criticism for being gimmicky, and it ended abruptly.[11] Perhaps the problem was as much the commercialization of the call for conversation as it was the particular gimmick that was used. Yet, the gimmick of writing the invitation may have been a sign that a well-meaning CEO simply did not know how to talk about the topic but felt a responsibility to do something. Fast-forward to an incident on April 12, 2018, that put the company back in the news—this time because two Black men, who had arrived early for a meeting with another person at a Philadelphia Starbucks, were handcuffed and arrested in the store for asking to use the bathroom without ordering anything.[12] The incident brought a vigorous apology from Schulz and a commitment to diversity training for staff in many of its stores. The men settled their case with the City, and Starbucks agreed to pay for their college degree programs and to run diversity training sessions at 8,000 of their locations. (By policy, Starbucks does not require people to make a purchase when in their stores.)

Recent research makes clear that whites and Blacks across the country continue to view race differently. A 2019 Pew report revealed the significance of these differences.[13] The percent of respondents saying that Blacks are treated less fairly than whites is as follows.

- in the workplace: 82% of Blacks and 44% of whites
- when applying for a loan or mortgage: 74% of Blacks and 38% of whites

- by police: 84% of Blacks and 63% of whites
- in the courts: 87% of Blacks and 61% of whites
- in stores or restaurants: 70% of Blacks and 37% of whites
- when voting in elections: 58% of Blacks and 30% of whites

Blacks and whites also differ on the reasons why Blacks have a harder time getting ahead.

- racial discrimination: 84% Blacks and 54% whites
- lower quality schools: 72% Blacks and 60% whites
- lack of high paying jobs: 76% Blacks and 51% whites

Finally, 71% of Blacks compared to 56% of whites believe that race relations are bad. These statistics may not surprise many white people, but others probably wonder why the differences of opinion can be so great. A white person, with no conscious racist intentions, might think that a Black person has an outdated point of view or that they are over-generalizing from personal experience. Or the white person might have no idea whatsoever why Black people feel as they do.

A survey conducted for CNN in early June 2020 provides information on differences between Blacks and whites in the wake of George Floyd's killing and the protest movement that followed.[14] Most of those in the random survey, regardless of their race and ethnicity, believed that peaceful protests were valid, but stark racial differences were recorded about what it means to live as a Black or a white person in the US. Black and white respondents differed substantially on their personal experience. Blacks were less likely than whites:

- to believe that the criminal justice system treats Blacks and whites equally: 6% compared to 29%
- to say that there were times when they felt their life was in danger: 54% compared to 14%
- to believe they were denied a job they were qualified for: 38% compared to 6%

We believe that the dramatic differences in how Blacks and whites view race and report on their personal experiences prove the need for whites to talk more deeply among themselves about race so that we can talk more productively across race. We absolutely need to talk with and learn from people of races different from ours, but there is much work to be done among ourselves to make interracial conversation possible. In our own experiences teaching, conducting workshops, and giving talks, we have heard many Blacks and other people of color express frustration with whites because they repeatedly ask the same questions rather than find answers for themselves, tend to move conversations about race to broader topics that shift the focus away from race, and minimize the significance of personal testimonies by presenting counter examples. We have also found that whites in these contexts often clam up or deflect comments made by people of color. Whites need to talk frankly about how they react when the topic of race comes up when people of color are present, and we need to learn how to keep the conversation on race when that is the focus, rather than shift to wider issues such as class or gender that so easily move the conversation away from race.

The Importance of Genuine Conversation

Before elaborating on the reasons why it is difficult for white people to talk about race, we need to consider why race is important and why we need to talk about it. People take in information and perspectives about race by reading, listening, watching television and movies, and engaging with a range of social media. We also make passing comments about race that we might not think much about, and we have our own private thoughts about race. Most of us do have at least brief conversations about race with others, but these are usually in the context of a problem that has arisen or a dramatic event. Yet, actually talking—by which we mean face-to-face, back-and-forth conversation—is the only way for us to fully understand what we and others mean when we are talking about race. We need genuine conversation in which people clarify their ideas, review and agree on facts, share opinions that they

may or may not agree on, and express their feelings. So much of what we say about race is coded and remains hidden without fuller explanation and exploration. We also need to hear each other's stories. Talking about race is often fraught with fear of saying the wrong thing and fear of hearing something hurtful. Conversation allows us to develop trust in others and helps alleviate our fear.

Without getting into an overly technical discussion of conversation, it is useful to distinguish this form of communication from others. Dictionary.com defines *conversation* as "informal interchange of thoughts, information, etc., by spoken words; oral communication between persons." Several key words and aspects of this definition highlight the unique nature of conversation.

First, *conversation is informal*, meaning that it's less bound by prescriptive rules about how to form sentences and use words than are some other forms of speaking. That doesn't mean that anything goes. We do learn conventions for expressing ourselves in even the most casual conversations. For less casual conversations, even if we think through what we are going to say and how we would like to say it, the expectation is less formal than it would be if we are reading a prepared statement. We expect some spontaneity from conversation, and we do not expect it to be governed by an overly formal agenda.

Second, *conversation is an interchange*, meaning that there is back-and-forth, give-and-take, movement from one person to another person—what is called turn-taking. We've all been in situations where conversation is stifled because one or more persons dominate, while the others fall silent, or where those involved seem to be speaking only to hear themselves rather than linking what they have to say to what others have said. Neither of these is genuine conversation because conversation is *between and among people*, rather than being a monologue or a sequence of statements ordered only by a change in who the speaker happens to be.

Third, *conversation occurs through the use of oral language.* Although "verbal" is often used to mean "oral" (as in "we had a verbal agreement"), the distinction between verbal and oral often gets lost. Verbal means

"words" and can refer to both written and oral communication. "Oral" means spoken—saying something aloud.

Fourth, *conversation has diverse content.* Interchanges made possible through conversation might be of thoughts, information, and—to fill out the "etc." in the definition—opinions, directions, proposals, questions, answers. Sometimes we focus conversation on very specific content, and sometimes we let our interchanges roam free. The content distinctions are especially important when talking about complex matters such as race. In our technological era, we tend to refer to everything as "information," but that glosses over important distinctions. Information (and misinformation or lack of information) might lie in the background of perceptions, opinions, and biases. Information is often important to clarify things, but it's only one element of conversation. If, for example, I say that a comment someone made "was racist" or "wasn't racist," that's not information. It's my opinion and perspective on what was said.

Conversation offers several advantages for interpersonal understanding compared to other forms of communication. In addition to what is said (the oral component), face-to-face communication provides a broad range of nonverbal cues (facial expressions, gestures, body postures) that help us interpret what others are saying and how they are responding to the comments of others. Seeing someone nod in agreement or stiffen up in response to what has been said adds substantially to the meaning we interpret. Vocal aspects such as tone of voice, tempo, pitch, and intonation also shape what is said and how it is interpreted. The role and significance of nonverbal elements are substantial. Even for those with visual or hearing difficulties, nonverbal aspects of communication carry meaning. For a person who sees but does not hear clearly, gestures and facial expressions are magnified. For a person who hears but has compromised sight, tone of voice, tempo, pitch, and intonation will take on added importance.

Another advantage of conversation is that the informal back-and-forth nature of it allows us to modify what we've said. Although we cannot take back the words we utter or undo our facial expressions or tone of voice, we can retrace, modulate, and even dramatically change

what we said a few minutes ago by saying something different. For example, you might state "a fact" that another person replies to with conflicting information or an alternate interpretation. You then might say, "I've never thought of that," "You're right," or "You seem to know more about this than I do." The point is that our statements, even though we cannot take them back, are not frozen in the way they are when we write them. We can clarify, change what we say, and add to prior statements.

To talk about race, then, involves more than making statements about the topic. To break our silences productively, we must learn to trust, to listen, to explore with others through respectful conversational interchange. These are mutual responsibilities, and there is no more important key to advancing understanding than the building of trust and respect for each other and each other's viewpoints. No one wants their experience denied or diminished. When that happens, the possibility for trust and respect diminish.

Why We Need to Talk about Race

What exactly makes talk about race an imperative for white people? There are many answers to that question, and the reasons why conversations about race are important will vary in priority from person to person. Here we offer five points as a framework for why it is important to talk about race.

1. We need to talk about race because racial thinking and racism undermine the common good. There's wisdom in the adage that "the whole is greater than the sum of its parts." If people of color are either not trusted—even if only because they are not known—or excluded, there is an enormous loss to the whole. There have been unjustified prejudices against many types of people over the years that have been exposed for the falsity of their claims—left-handers; those with physical disabilities; those of Irish, Japanese, and Jewish descent; and Native Americans. In each of those cases, changes in social attitudes have proven that the prejudice

was unfounded and served to disqualify or undermine those who differed from the norm or were perceived as a threat to the majority. The most enduring case of prejudice in the US has been the belief that people with black skin are less intelligent and less human than whites. The implication for the common good of sustaining that prejudice is to limit the potential in every facet of life by arbitrarily lopping off a section of the whole. Think of what it means to deprive the common good of contributions from over 13% of the US population because they are Black, or 18% because they are Latinx, or 6% because they are of Asian ancestry.[15] And think of the implications for any part that is excluded from the whole. The point is not that we are all the same but that we bring diverse perspectives and experiences to bear on every aspect of life. The greatest common good depends on the whole, and the greatest good for any part requires recognition of its worth and contributions to the whole.

2. We need to talk about race because people of different races tend to experience the day-to-day world in distinctive ways. More often than not, most of us know little about those distinctions and, even more important, why they exist. We can't improve racial understanding and race relations unless we confront and address what we think we know and where the gaps are in our understanding of other perspectives. It is often said that we learn from history. What that means is not that we aspire to repeat history, but that we draw new ideas and understanding from what happened in the past as a way of advancing. Similarly, knowing more about others can be both a corrective to our unquestioned beliefs and an addition to our understanding of how others conduct their daily lives; develop their ideas, tastes and beliefs; and build family and interpersonal relationships.
3. We need to talk about race because talk about race allows us to give voice to our thoughts and to ask questions. We

need to talk to help articulate and discover what we feel and think about race. In this sense, talk tests what we believe and why we believe it. Reciprocally, we need as part of true conversation to listen to others who give voice to their feelings and thoughts. We can begin with talking more purposefully with other white people—not only when we face a racially related "situation." We are not suggesting that talking about race with other white people will be easy or tension-free. Disagreements and disparate points of view will arise, as will the temptation to edit comments that we feel might be taken wrong or sound insensitive. But in same-race conversations, we won't be editing our comments for fear that a person of a different race will react badly or be evaluating our every word as a white person. We do, however, also need to talk across racial differences, to ask questions respectfully, to admit what we do not know, and to listen carefully without planning what we will say next.

4. We need to talk about race because conversation helps bring "white normalcy" and "white privilege" into consciousness. What is it that white people, just because we are white, *do not have to think about* that people of other races, just because they are not white, *do have to think about*? For example, do white people as a general group need to be concerned about surveillance when they enter a large store? Do white people as a general group have to worry that everything they do might be judged through a racial filter? Do white parents have to worry that their white sons who are old enough to drive will be followed by police just because they are white? In most cases, the answer to these questions is "no." Reverse the race, and the answer is "yes." Only through exploring exactly what white normalcy and privilege bestow on us can we begin to grasp the pervasiveness of discrimination and explore with others why we persist in approaching the world through white normalcy.

Some would contend that we can only know about the benefits of being white when people of color point out these benefits to us. There is definitely something to be gained from that. Yet, it is also true that we do not recognize these benefits because we do not have to focus on them so we take them for granted. Conscious thinking and focused observation about the benefits of being white can bring to our realization many taken-for-granted aspects of living our lives with "white as the norm." When we probe, we bring to our conscious awareness how race works to grant benefits. Both of us still often catch ourselves in the perspective of white normalcy when we might least expect it. As such, we experience a kind of protective barrier that is not available to people of color. What makes this not only embarrassing to us but also personally shocking is that both of us for many years taught and wrote about white privilege, and we parented Black children from infancy to adulthood. As part of a mixed-race family, we have learned to be aware of the racial composition of people wherever we go. But we still sometimes miss the obvious. For example, we participated in the 2018 Boston March for Our Lives to support gun control efforts of students from Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, after the shooting rampage at their school. We were well into the march before Fern saw a Black Lives Matter sign, prompting her realization that few Black people were marching. It simply didn't occur to her amid the throngs of people, the chanting voices, and the sea of posters. The "normalcy" of whiteness in our country is so deeply ingrained that unlearning it is never-ending and requires that we work together. We will say more about this in chapter 3.

5. We need to talk about race to air our feelings of guilt, embarrassment, and frustration. Embarrassment is a powerful blocker to conversation. It's often easier to push it aside

> rather than to say, "I can't believe I just said/did that." Sometimes we feel reluctant to express views about race because we know they will sound racist to others or perhaps be racist. Even when whites talk with whites about race, there can be moments of embarrassment and guilt for what we express, and we can be called out for saying something that someone else finds racist. We need to learn to talk about race so that we can express what might make us feel embarrassed or guilty and talk it through with others.

In this chapter, we hope to have established the imperative for deep and probing talk about race. The imperative is a moral responsibility rooted in the need for greater social and economic justice. We know that some people who are reading this will say that they are tired of talk and it's time for action. We appreciate and often feel the same concern. But we believe that we cannot confront systemic racism and develop policies that will lead to racial equity until whites and Blacks are able to talk with each other about race. The fact that racism in the US appears more virulent today than it was several decades ago, that public schools in Boston are more segregated today than they were before busing in the 1970s, that reparations to the descendants of the enslaved is not only a divisive issue, it's also barely recognized as a legitimate issue by many whites—all speak to our inability to address racism at the macro level. We believe that the work must start at the micro level—with conversations that set the foundation for building understanding, trust, and the relationships necessary for us to work together to achieve racial equity. We need to start with talk because our words have consequences, and they can affect action. Our conversation, when thoughtfully developed, also helps us focus action more productively.

What's to Come

Chapters 2 to 5 lay out why it has been so difficult for white people to talk about race and what might help us move forward in our conversations. Each chapter explores one reason that it is difficult for whites to

talk about race and to sustain conversations in a thoughtful, productive manner. We delve into the issues and sources involved for each specific topic. You will find "Personal Prompts" to stimulate your thinking and "Conversation Prompts" to focus conversations with white people and in cross-race situations. At the end of each chapter, we offer suggestions for how to approach the conversation, and for what we, as white people in this country, can do to improve racial understanding. These suggestions are organized into "dos" and "don'ts."

It is not our intention to guilt-trip whites or purposely touch a nerve that leads to defensiveness. We all start in different places, and each of us brings personal sensitivities and defensiveness to the topic of race. As authors of this book, the "we" absolutely includes us.

Chapter 2 provides context by considering the different forms of racism that exist in our society. Some have accumulated over a long period of time as sedimentary layers of history. Like literal sediment, we can't see down to the very bottom, but the bottom impacts everything above it. The more general forms of racism that we describe involve broad social and cultural practices, specifically *structural* and *institutional* sources of racism. Other forms of racism are more immediate and personal, specifically *individual, interpersonal,* and *internalized* racism. Unless we identify how these forms of racism work together to create a society where racial meaning is ever present one way or another, it will be difficult to move beyond racial talk that is stymied, superficial, and off-point.

Chapter 3 addresses white normalcy and white privilege. We explore the difficulties that many whites have in recognizing how important race is for personal experience and social identity. If we do not learn about, confront, and accept our white status, then we will continue in the erasure of race from our everyday consciousness. Our aim in this chapter is to reduce defensiveness about the idea of racial privilege and to open more channels for developing racial empathy.

Chapter 4 takes on the topic of white ignorance about the consequences of living in a racialized and often racist society. Ignorance is a conversation stopper as well as a powerful force in shaping what gets discussed. Whether structural or personal, the effects of racism need

to be better known and understood—by both whites and people of color. For understandable reasons, most whites neither think about nor probe how race affects the key areas of society where "an even playing field" is supposed to be available. For that reason, we start chapter 4 with a sampling of historical information. The other areas covered in the chapter highlight four wide gaps between whites and people of color: unequal education, racialized patterns of health and health care, differential justice, and income inequality. Whites rarely grasp what it means to live day in and day out as a person of color marked for race. We don't know because our experience differs. We need to learn *how* to learn just as much as *what* to learn. Often this means unpacking generalizations, which will help us "get" *how* race changes experience. We might, for example, learn that the high school completion rate in the US is 90%. That's pretty high and represents steady improvement over the years. Yet, if we dig deeper, we learn that the rate is highest for non-Hispanic whites at 94%, lower for Blacks at 87%, and even lower for Hispanics at 71%.[16]

Chapter 5 looks specifically at cultural misunderstandings as an impediment to conversations about race. Because we live in a country that continues to carry the "melting pot" emblem either as a description or an attribution (remember *e pluribus unum*—"out of many one"), whites often assume that the way they do things is just the way it's done (white privilege and white normalcy). That assumption makes some cultural practices and preferences stand out as "odd," "exotic," or simply "interesting." At worst, the judgment is that they are "wrong" or "ignorant." It might be music identified as "Black," Aretha Franklin's funeral, Chinese Americans sending their children to Chinese school on Sundays, eating collard greens, or wearing hats in an age when hats are not the norm in the US. Sometimes when cultural practices differ, it's easy for whites to not recognize an important difference or to misinterpret the difference—because we have been the majority for so long. We might also be ignorant of why what a white person says about a Black person is offensive, for example, to describe a Black person as "articulate" or "well educated," thinking that these statements are

compliments. In the area of race relations, many cultural misunderstandings offend and propel mistrust. We as whites might make comments that belie misunderstanding or are blatantly offensive. In this chapter, we identify some of the sources of cultural misunderstanding through concrete examples.

Chapter 6 brings together key points we have made throughout the book and suggests ways to create safe spaces for conversations about race. Our aim is not to draw cemented conclusions but rather to integrate ideas so that we have guidance for moving forward to build racial understanding, trust, and relationships through productive conversations about race.