

# Waking Up White

*And Finding Myself in the Story of Race*

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*If I love you, I have to make you conscious of the things you don't see.*

*~ James Baldwin*

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*Acknowledgments*

*Tell Me What to Do!*

*Notes & Sources*

## Introduction

Not so long ago, if someone had called me a racist, I would have kicked and screamed in protest. “But I’m a good person!” I would have insisted. “I don’t see color! I don’t have a racist bone in my body!” I would have felt insulted and misunderstood and stomped off to lick my wounds. That’s because I thought being a racist meant not liking people of color or being a name-calling bigot.

For years I struggled silently to understand race and racism. I had no way to make sense of debates in the media about whether the white guy was “being a racist” or the black guy was “playing the race card.” I wanted close friends of color but kept ending up with white people as my closest friends. When with a person of color, I felt an inexplicable tension and a fear that I might say or do something offensive or embarrassing. When white people made blatantly racist jokes or remarks, I felt upset but had no idea what to do or say. I didn’t understand why, if laws supporting slavery, segregation, and discrimination had been abolished, lifestyles still looked so different across color lines. And, most confusing? I had unwanted racist thoughts that made me feel like a jerk. I felt too embarrassed to admit any of this, which prevented me from going in search of answers.

It turns out, stumbling block number one was that I didn’t think I had a race so I never thought to look within for answers. The way I understood it, race was for other people, brown- and black-skinned people. Don’t get me wrong--if you put a census in my hand I would know to check “white” or “Caucasian.” It’s more that I thought all those *other* categories like Asian, African American, American Indian, and Latino were the *real* races. I thought white was the raceless race -- just plain, normal, the one against which all others were measured.

What I’ve learned is that thinking myself raceless allowed for a distorted frame of

reference built on faulty beliefs. For instance, I used to believe:

- ❖ Race is all about biological differences.
- ❖ I can help people of color by teaching them to be more like me.
- ❖ Racism refers to bigots who make snarky comments and commit intentionally cruel acts against people of color.
- ❖ Culture and ethnicity is only for people of other races and from other countries.
- ❖ If the cause of racial inequity were understood, it would be solved by now.

If these beliefs sound familiar to you, you are not alone. I've met hundreds of white people across America who share not only these beliefs but the same feelings of race-related confusion and anxiety I experienced. This widespread phenomenon of white people wanting to guard themselves against appearing stupid, racist, or radical has resulted in an epidemic of silence from people who care deeply about justice and love for their fellow human beings; people who would take a stand against racism if only they knew how. Or even imagined they had a role.

In the paralysis that is somewhere between fear and indifference lies an opportunity to awaken to the intuitive voice that says: "Something's not right." "What is going on here?" "I wish I could make a difference." In my experience, learning to listen to that voice is slowly but surely rewiring my intuition, breaking down walls that kept me from parts of myself while expanding my capacity to seek truths, no matter how painful they may be. Learning about racism has settled inner conflicts and allowed me to step out of my comfort zone with both strength and vulnerability. Racism holds all of us captive in ways white people rarely imagine.

As my white husband said to me recently, "It couldn't have happened to a whiter person." And if I, a middle-aged suburban white girl, can wake up to my whiteness, any white person can. Waking up white has been an unexpected journey that's required digging back into

childhood memories to recall when, how, and why I developed such distorted ideas about race, racism, and the dominant culture in which I soaked. Like the memoir by the guy who loses 200 pounds or the woman who overcomes alcohol addiction, my story of transformation is an intimate one. In order to convey racism's ability to shape beliefs, values, behaviors, and ideas, I share personal and often-humiliating stories, as well as thoughts I spent decades not admitting, not even to myself.

As I unpack my own white experience in the pages ahead, I have no pretense that I speak for all white Americans, not even my four white siblings. Never before have I been so keenly aware of how individual our cultural experiences and perspectives are. That said, all Americans live within the context of one dominant culture, the one brought to this country by white Anglo settlers. Exploring one's relationship to that culture is where the waking up process begins.

For white readers I've included short prompts and exercises at the end of each chapter to help you explore the themes in depth and in relation to your own experience. To get the most out of them, I suggest using a journal and taking the time to write out your thoughts. I've found the act of writing to be a great excavator of buried thoughts and feelings.

My waking-up process has been built largely on the collective wisdom from people of color throughout the centuries who've risked lives, jobs, and reputations in an effort to convey the experience of racism. It can be infuriating, therefore, to have the voice of a white person suddenly get through to another white person. For this reason, throughout the book I've included the voices and perspectives of people of color to highlight the many ways they have tried to motivate white people to consider the effects of racism.

I can think of no bigger misstep in American history than the invention and perpetuation of the idea of white superiority. It allows white children to believe they are exceptional and entitled while allowing children of color to believe they are inferior and less deserving. Neither is true; both distort and stunt development. Racism crushes spirits, incites divisiveness, and



justifies the estrangement of entire groups of individuals who, like all humans, come into the world full of goodness, a desire to connect, and boundless capacity to learn and grow. Unless adults understand racism they will, as I did, unknowingly teach it to their children.

No one alive today created this mess, but everyone alive today has the power to work on undoing it. Four hundred years since its inception, American racism is all twisted up in our cultural fabric. But there's a loophole: people are not born racist. Racism is taught, and racism is learned. Understanding how and why our beliefs developed along racial lines holds the promise of healing, liberation, and the unleashing of America's vast human potential.

Racism is not the unsolvable, mysterious tug-of-war I once thought. There is an explanation for how America got so tangled up with racism. Ironically racism, the great divider, is also one of the most vital links we share, a massive social dysfunction in which we all play a role. Perhaps the greatest irony for me has been the discovery that after all these years of trying to connect with people I was taught to see as different and less than, I've learned that the place to start is by connecting with parts of myself lost in the process of learning to be white. I invite you to use my story to uncover your own so that you too can discover your power to make the world a more humane place to live, work, and thrive.

Thank you for reading.

## **Childhood in White**

*A man's character always takes its hue, more or less,  
from the form and color of things about him.*

*—Frederick Douglass*

## What Wasn't Said

*Lessons my mother couldn't teach me.*

“Whatever happened to all the Indians?” I asked my mother on a Friday morning ride home from the library. I was five years old.

The library's main draw for me had always been a large, colorful mural located high on the lobby wall. Depicting a lush, green, lakeshore scene, the mural featured three feathered and fringed Indians standing with four colonial men. The colonists didn't hold much interest, perhaps because these were images familiar to me, a white New England girl with colonial ancestors. The dark-skinned Indians and their “exotic” dress, on the other hand, took my breath away. The highlight of my library excursions was sitting in a chair and gazing up at the Indians on the wall as my mother chatted with the librarian checking out our family's weekly reading supply.

About a year earlier my mother, amused by my interest, had suggested I check out some books about Indian life. Lying on my bedroom floor back at home, I had pored over the images. Colorful illustrations of teepees clustered close together, horses being ridden bareback, and food being cooked over the campfire added to my romanticized imaginings of the Indian life. Children and grown-ups appeared to live an intergenerational life where boundaries between work and play blurred. Whittling, gardening, cooking over the fire, canoeing and fishing -- this was enough for me. I wanted to be an Indian. I collected little plastic Indian figures, teepees, and horses. For Halloween my mother made me an outfit as close to the one in the mural as she could.

Eventually, my infatuation led to curiosity. Where were the descendants of these folks anyway? If I had descended from colonists, there must be kids who'd descended from Indians, right? I wondered if there was a place I could go meet them, which is what led me that Friday morning to ask the simple question, “Whatever happened to all the Indians?”

“Oh, those poor Indians,” my mother said, sagging a little as she shook her head with something that looked like sadness.

“Why? What happened?” I turned in my seat, alarmed.

“They drank too much,” she answered. My heart sank. “They were lovely people,” she said, “who became dangerous when they drank liquor.”

I could not believe what I was hearing. *Dangerous??* This would have been the last word I would have applied to my horseback-riding, nature-loving mural friends. “Dangerous from drinking?” I asked.

“Yes, it’s so sad. They just couldn’t handle it, and it ruined them really.”

This made no sense to me. My parents drank liquor. Some friends and family drank quite a bit actually. How could something like liquor bring down an entire people? People who loved grass and trees and lakes and horses, the stuff I loved?

I must have pressed her for more because my mother, who along with my father sought to protect my siblings and me from anything upsetting, went on to tell a tale in vivid detail about children hiding under a staircase, in pitch blackness, trying to escape the ravages of their local friendly Indian now on a drunken rampage, ax in hand. They were all murdered.

“Well, what happened to the Indian?” I asked, my heart beating in my chest.

She paused, thinking. “You know, I don’t know,” my mother answered sincerely. We both went silent.

I never questioned this narrative’s truth or fullness despite its dissonance with the peaceful images in my books. My mother, full of kindness and empathy, told it to me. I don’t question that she believed it. She told me a version of a story as she had heard it from someone else who also likely believed it. I had no other, more complete, historical context in which to place this story about a nearly extinguished culture now neatly tucked away on isolated reservations I didn’t know existed. I had minimal knowledge of how these people had long

flourished in their own culture before white Europeans decimated them with theirs. It makes me wonder how many lies and half-truths I've swallowed and in turn inadvertently passed along in my lifetime.

Stereotypes, I've learned, are not so much incorrect as much as they are incomplete. It's true that alcohol was a factor in the waning of indigenous people. But there's infinitely more to the story. What my mother didn't tell me was that the white colonists had purposefully introduced alcohol to indigenous people, using it to weaken, subdue, and coerce them into signing over land and rights. She didn't explain how disease brought by our ancestors had infected and killed Indian men, women, and children, in some cases killing 90 percent of a native nation's population. Nor did she tell me that those who survived disease found themselves in dehumanizing federal programs designed by white men to "civilize" Indians, separating them from one another and stripping them of the languages, customs, beliefs, and human bonds that had held them together for centuries.

She didn't help me understand what it might have felt like, for people as attached to their families and homes as I was to mine, to be torn from theirs. She didn't turn and gently ask me to imagine what it might be like to lose nine out of ten of my closest friends and family. She didn't tell me that today indigenous people use words like "invaders" and "genocide" and "terrorists" to describe the Pilgrims and their compatriots. She didn't help me understand that the English coming to America was part of a larger historical pattern of white Europeans invading countries, exploiting resources, and "civilizing" people they considered to be savages, all in an entangled quest to dominate through Christianity and capitalism. She couldn't tell me any of these things because she herself had never learned them.

The question I asked that Friday morning was typical of a young child trying to make meaning of the world around her. Unfortunately, my mother's own upbringing had left her lacking the necessary knowledge and life skills to connect me to my world through historical

truths and critical analysis. Instead I got hand-me-down snippets that never added up and left me feeling confused and upset. Neither my mother nor I understood that moment as one of many in which she was racializing me. Without ever once mentioning the words race or skin color, my mother passed along to me the belief that the two were connected to inherent human difference.

Without meaning to, on that day or any other, my mother gravely misled me. She didn't do it because she was evil or stupid or had upholding racism on her mind. My mother was warm, compassionate, and bright. She told me the version of events as she knew them, errors and omissions included. Just as she had once done, I used my scant information to construct a story about humanity. Over the course of my childhood the media confirmed my idea of Indians as "savage" and "dangerous." I came to see them as drunks who grunted, whooped, yelled, and painted their faces to scare and scalp white people. What a tragedy that over time my natural curiosity, open mind, and loving heart dulled, disabling me from righting wrongs I never knew existed.

That Friday morning was the first and last my mother and I spoke of the Indians' fate. Shock gave way to disappointment. My little collection of plastic Indians lost its luster and ultimately got boxed up and put in a dark corner of the attic. Out of sight meant out of mind. First though, I separated out the horses and built a barn of cardboard for them, using oatmeal for shavings and packing straw for hay. As I deconstructed the Indian world according to my wants and needs, and parceled its parts to new roles and hidden spaces, I had no idea the parallel playing out between my actions and those of white men over the centuries.

As stunning as my mother's version of events is for its incomplete portrayal of indigenous people, equally stunning to me is the subtle and indirect way it contributed to the ongoing portrayal of white people as the superior race. The story whispered to me the idea that Indians were somehow "other," like a whole separate and inferior species. Indians were drunks, so white folks must not be. Indians were dangerous, so white people must be safe. Indians lacked

self-control, so white people must really have their act together. Indians weren't good enough or tough enough to survive, but white people sure were, even when they drank liquor. Like drops of water into a sponge, moments like these saturated me with the belief that I was of a superior race and wholly disconnected, except as a potential victim, from other races.

On top of all of this is one more critical point. Embedded in her incomplete story was a message that just one piece of information, drawn from a single perspective, was good enough to form a conclusion. Neither my mother, the media, nor my schooling encouraged me to dig deeper, to find indigenous people and ask how they told their own history. My mother passed along to me not only incomplete information but also an intellectual habit of not questioning authority, not pursuing other dimensions of a story, and not having the interest or stamina to grapple with complex issues. As a result, I came to view history as something set in stone, printed in books, painted in pictures, and taught by teachers who delivered facts. I took it all at face value, constructing for myself a one-dimensional world in which people were right or wrong, good or bad, like me or not.

**?** *What stereotypes do you remember as a child hearing and believing about people of another race? Were you ever encouraged to question stereotypes?*