

## On the Five Stages & White People Waking Up to Racism



Why is it white men deny racism so strongly or get so caught up in guilt or try to flourish debating skills in conversations about it or get so depressed about it?

This is a piece I have been meaning to write for a long time. I don't consider it a complete thought but more of a rough thesis that I send out into the world for reflections.

But to get there, I have to tell you a story about how, years ago, there was a fire in a night club. Some people were killed. Others were almost killed but survived.

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But before I tell you that story, I want you to remember something.

It's a movie scene I'm fairly certain you'll remember.

It's Neo waking up from the Matrix.

He is unplugged from it and wakes up in a body he's never used, realizing that his whole world was a lie. It was a fantasy. It existed only in his head.

I ask you to imagine what that would be like.

\*

And now back to the fire at the nightclub.

Studies were done on the ones who were not killed by the fire. Much of what was learned came from a woman whose name many of us know today: Elizabeth Kubler-Ross.

She found that these people went through a similar set of stages in their recovery. Five stages in fact. Five stages which have become very well known to many of us as 'the five stages of grief' or the 'five stages of dying'!

But, those stages might be better thought of as the five stages of trauma. What she was looking at wasn't that they were close to dying but that they were almost *killed*. What she was looking at wasn't grief, it was PTSD.

What were those five stages?

- 1 - Denial.
- 2 - Anger.
- 3 - Bargaining.
- 4 - Depression.
- 5 - Acceptance.

I want to submit that white men, as a group, live in a fantasy world in which everyone is treated equally.

I want to submit that, for most white men, waking up from that fantasy to the realities of what's happening in the world is traumatic.

I want to submit that the sudden realization of systemic racism and sexism is like a bludgeon to the mind and a shattering of reality.

I want to submit that most white men are so deeply insulated from the realities of racism and misogyny that coming face to face with the brutal realities and histories of it, especially if it's all at once, is not so different from Neo being unplugged (a fine allegory as it is also a white man being forcibly woken up from a fantasy).

Waking up for white men is traumatic, like having your eyes wide open in the dark and suddenly staring into a flood light. It sends you reeling.

And so, predictably, white men go through the five stages.

If you apply these five stages to white men waking up, it becomes, to women and people of colour, immediately recognizable.

## *The Five Stages*

### **1 - Denial:**

*"Racism is over. That got solved fifty years ago. And women are equal now if not actually more privileged. If anyone is oppressed it's white men."* I think this denial is triggered by guilt and overwhelm. I think that, initially, it's too much to take in. I recall sitting at a gathering of young leaders in California and listening, for five days, to them share the stories of what had happened and was happening in their communities. It was shattering. Some of those stories I don't know if I will ever tell again. It took a long time for that all to really sink in. Not that I didn't believe the stories but that the implications of what it meant for where the world was at were so big.

### **2 - Anger:**

*"Stop trying to make me feel guilty! I didn't own slaves! What the fuck! This is not how you get allies! I can't change the past, ok! It's over. [So we all just need to move on](#). What the fuck do you expect from me? I'm tired of being seen as the oppressor!"* I believe that anger comes from a feeling of helplessness. I think most white

people feel so utterly overwhelmed when they finally see the big picture. Or, they begin to see it and, even if the logic makes sense, it's too shattering to really take in and so they push back hard and with anger. They know that letting in the experiences of people of colour and women would shatter the world they live in. Hello, internet trolls. This can also be turned inwards as a self-hatred or hatred of other white men and a desire to not be that.

### 3 - Bargaining:

"Okay. But white people have it bad too, right? I mean sure cops need to make some changes but *#BlackLivesMatter* needs to be less in people's faces." This is the stage in which white men bring out all of their debating skills and play devil's advocate. Part of it is trying to understand but much of it can be driven by a deep-seated defensiveness because the implications of really seeing it are too big.

### 4 - Depression:

I think that the depression that white people feel can stem from a certain kind of [self-hatred](#) of guilt or the sense that it's too big and that nothing will ever change. It's understandable. I suspect that white-guilt lives here. There's this sense of, "*Nothing good has ever or will ever come from white people.*" Of course, that's not true but it seems to be a stage white men go through.

### 5 - Acceptance:

It's safe to say that it's not a given that anyone ever gets here. White men seem to get stuck along the way and never move. Many get stuck in denial and refuse to even consider other perspectives of facts. Some get stuck in anger, convinced that they are the real victims here. Some get stuck in bargaining and imagine they can move forward in their lives without changing anything meaningful if they just find the right angle. And many get stuck in depression after they've given up fighting it.

Acceptance means that we see it for how it is without all of the stories about what it means about us as white people. It means we stop making it about us. It means we stop hating ourselves or our ancestors. It means we see the bigger story which gives us the capacity to see what our place in that story might be.

Acceptance means that we can finally begin to be useful in doing something about it because we finally understand what the 'it' is.

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For many white men, waking up to the outer realities of these times is an inner, psychological trauma. It is utterly different in degree and kind than the daily and ongoing, real-world traumas of marginalized people, but it seems to be a trauma nonetheless.

The trauma is not so much the realities (though that's a lot to take in as well) so much as the implications of it.

And, if it's a trauma, and these stages are relatively predictable, perhaps this gives us some sort of a map that might give us some comfort for ourselves as white men and also some patience with other white men as we engage with them.

Importantly: this is not an argument to avoid the conversations with white men because it's traumatizing. I'm not writing this to stop the trauma from happening. I'm writing this because it will happen and, perhaps, knowing this might help us all find some better wisdom in how to engage others and ourselves with more compassion and better strategy.

I've been to and heard many stories of white men going to anti-oppression trainings that didn't take the scale of this trauma into account. They pumped people full of information and sent them out into the world shattered. The trainings handled the intellectual side of things but left the emotional realities utterly untended to. We can do better. [Be Present](#) does incredible work with this. As does the [Orphan Wisdom](#) School.

I've been to and heard many stories of white men leading anti-oppression trainings while still traumatized and traumatizing others.

There need to be [spaces to process the scope of this](#).

But it's not an indictment of anti-racism trainings either (even the ones that end in disaster). It's an indictment of the culture and how it's lured us into such a darkness that even one lit candle is blinding to the eyes. It's an indictment of a culture that has us so asleep that waking up to what's really going on seems to have a guarantee of some level of trauma in it. That's how big the level of disconnection is. That many white men are this deeply disconnected from the realities of our times is not news to people of colour or indigenous people.

When a white man hears someone really break it down and give forth a lucid and heartbreaking analysis of where we are and how we got here, it is devastating. "I didn't know. I had no idea..." we say to ourselves eventually. It's devastating because what we are hearing is so vastly different from our daily, lived experience. We are being given a map that, in no way, matches the territory we know.

When a marginalized person hears someone really break it down and give forth a lucid and heartbreaking analysis of where we are and how we got here, it is confirming. It *affirms* their daily experience. "I knew it..." they say to themselves eventually. It's *confirming* because what they are hearing is identical to their daily, lived experience. They are being given a map that, in every way, matches the territory they know. They've had a foot on their back their whole life and someone is doing a footprint analysis on it. Finally.

I think it's traumatic for white men because one story of the world is destroyed and it's not replaced with anything else that confirms our goodness. I think this leaves us vulnerable.

I think that [self-hatred](#) and white guilt are strategies for dealing with the trauma of waking up suddenly (but that these strategies are actually created *by* the trauma). I think that these five stages are the ways we cope with the trauma.

I welcome your thoughts on this.