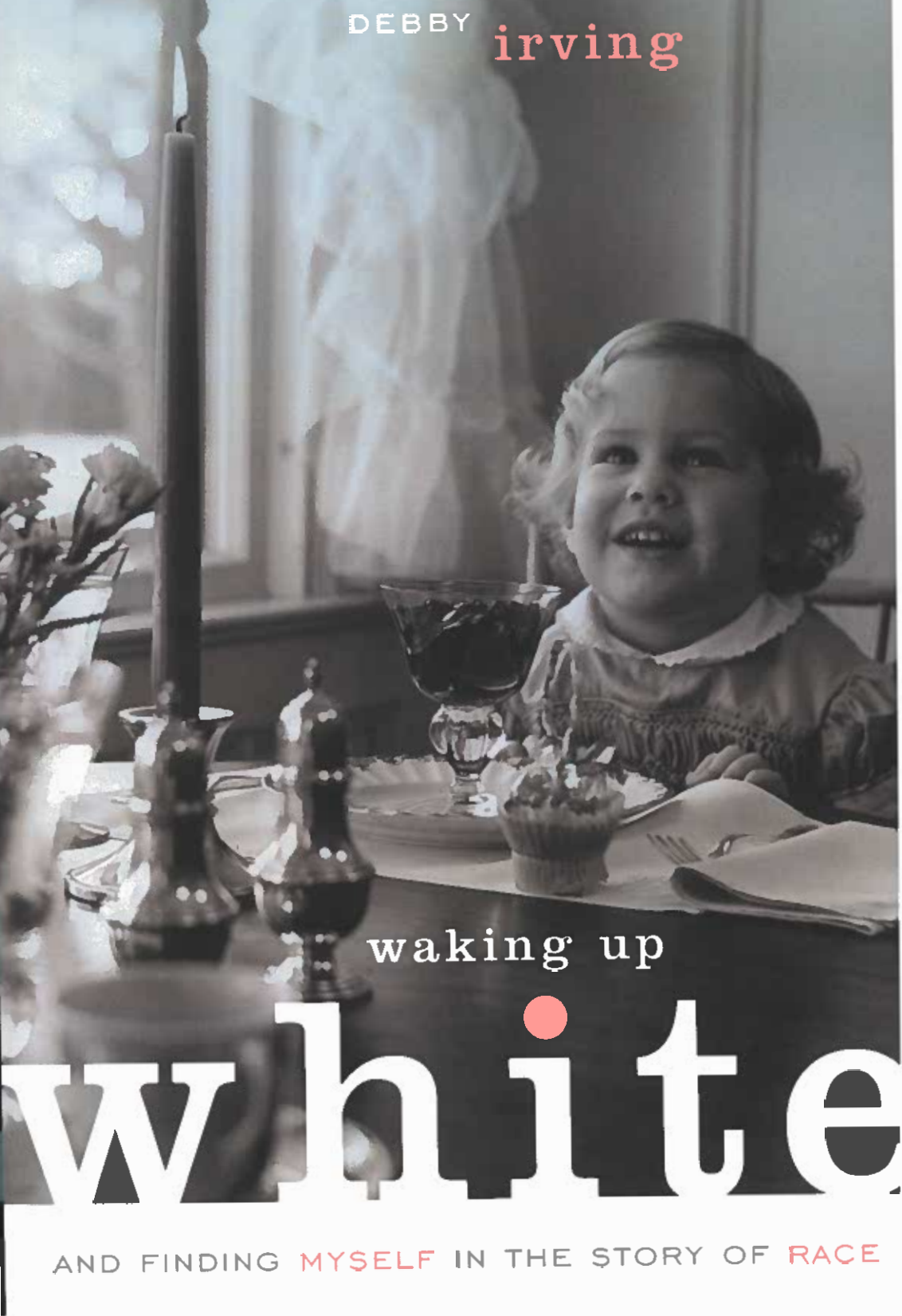


DEBBY **irving**



waking up

# white

AND FINDING MYSELF IN THE STORY OF RACE

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white

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debby irving



ELEPHANT  
ROOM  
PRESS

*Out of sight, out of mind.*

**WORKING IN LOCKSTEP** with the iceberg phenomenon, in which we see what we already believe, is another phenomenon: inattentional blindness, also known as selective seeing. To raise awareness of this problem the Wheelock curriculum included not only copious amounts of reading and viewing material but assignments designed to examine how we made meaning of what we were reading and viewing. We were pushed hard to be cognizant of what we did and did not notice. And most importantly, why?

One day, while cueing up a video for us, the professor said, "Okay, once this starts, you're going to see two teams of people. Pay close attention because I want you to keep track of how many times the people in the black shirts pass the basketball to the people in the white shirts." Fun! I thought. I love little tests like this.

The video started, and six people—three of each shirt color—began mingling around, at a walking pace, tossing basketballs to one another. I was rapt. I counted, counted, counted. "Fifteen!" I said shooting my hand up in the air.

The professor smiled. "Did anyone see the gorilla?"

"What gorilla?"

"Are you kidding?"

Six of us refused to believe we'd missed seeing the gorilla that the professor and the six other students swore up and down had just been on the TV screen.

"This time," the professor said, "instead of concentrating on the ball, look for the gorilla." Shortly after the second viewing began, I saw it: a person in a big furry gorilla suit, entering stage left, shuffling around a bit, waving at the camera, and exiting stage right. How had I missed a giant, furry gorilla on center stage?

This exercise, meant to demonstrate inattentive blindness, got my attention. What was my real-world corollary to counting basketball passes? What was I so busy keeping my eye on that I hadn't noticed my white privilege? Keeping myself and my family fed, getting myself and my kids to where we needed to be on time, making sure there was enough money in the bank, paying the bills on time, keeping in touch with friends and family—these were the things that occupied my attention in a way that allowed the rest of the world and other people's problems to remain background noise.

I began making an effort to slow down, look around, and notice how other people might be experiencing the world. One fall evening at the grocery store I noticed a woman straining to reach an item from her wheelchair—not an unusual sight, but one on which I usually would not have ruminated. My norm would have been to get through my list and home in time to whip up a family dinner. Even if I'd paused to help her, a kind of tunnel vision would have set me right back to my task. This time I made an effort to think about this woman's reality. Had she taken a car or subway here? Was there a curb cut where she needed it? Half of the items at the store lay beyond her reach. How did she negotiate that? A simple trip to the grocery store suddenly became an endless series of obstacles I'd never considered because I had the able-bodied privilege of not having to.

In the following days I found myself noticing things that I could do that the woman in the wheelchair could not. Ah, I'd think, I couldn't get into this store, or *Wow, I'd have a hard time grabbing this deposit slip.* I was starting to recognize my able-bodied privilege, which in turn helped me imagine the challenges faced by people without it. I thought about the day in, day out frustrations of trying to move about in a world designed by people who hadn't considered my reality, my needs.

But how could I imagine the experience of a person of color? Without any understanding of systemic racism's ability to produce drastically different life experiences and outcomes along racial lines, I had assumed my daily experience was basically universal. People were mostly friendly, I felt mostly safe, and those with authority encouraged and supported me. Making visible the privilege of white skin is key to racism's undoing, and antiracists coast to coast are continually looking for new ways to help white people see the phenomenon as real and operating 24/7 in their own lives.

In 1988 Dr. Peggy McIntosh, a white Wellesley College professor, documented her own effort to wrap her head around her invisible white-

skin privilege. She pushed herself to compile a list of privileges enjoyed by her but not, she had learned, by her black colleagues. So elusive were the examples she sought to identify that most of them came to her in her sleep, requiring her to keep a notepad and pencil by her bed. In her essay "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack," Dr. McIntosh laid out the forty-six seemingly benign privileges she dislodged from her subconscious. I say "benign" because they don't seem like big deal until their opposites—the lack of privileges, the discrimination—are considered. Here's a sampling.

I can go shopping alone most of the time, pretty well assured that I will not be followed or harassed.

I can be sure that my children will be given curricular materials that testify to the existence of their race.

I can swear, or dress in second-hand clothes, or not answer letters, without having people attribute these choices to the bad morals, the poverty or the illiteracy of my race.

Whether I use checks, credit cards or cash, I can count on my skin color not to work against the appearance of my financial reliability.

I am never asked to speak for all the people of my racial group.

I can criticize our government and talk about how much I fear its policies and behavior without being seen as a cultural outsider.

I can choose blemish cover or bandages in "flesh" color and have them more or less match my skin.

Privilege is a strange thing in that you notice it least when you have it most. I'm never more grateful for the privilege of good health, for instance, than when I'm sick. It's the old "You don't know what you've got till it's gone." But with skin color's permanence, we only get to experience what we've got. As a white person, whether or not I know it, whether or not I

admit it, I've got white privilege, an advantage that both is born of and has fed into white dominance.

In an effort to make visible white advantages, Diane Sawyer did an investigative report for ABC's *Primetime Live* called "True Colors." When I watched it for the first time, I felt as if I were watching a *Twilight Zone* episode. In the video, made in 1991, she sends two twenty-something guys—equal age, education, dress, and so on—to St. Louis for two weeks. John (white) and Glenn (black) are given the charge to "begin a new life" in this new city. They set out separately, hidden cameras in tow, to buy clothes, find an apartment, buy a used car, and find a job.

The contrast in treatment at every turn is stunning. John is given hearty handshakes, welcomed to the community, invited into stores, encouraged by the employment office, offered a car for less money than Glenn, and offered an apartment to rent. Conversely, Glenn is ignored in stores, harassed on the street by a car full of white guys, warned by the employment office not to screw up, charged more for the very same car, and turned away from the very same apartment John ended up getting, after Glenn had been told it was no longer available.

If I hadn't watched this with a racially mixed group of workshop attendees, I might have underestimated the film's validity in the year 2010. As soon as the lights came up, however, the people of color shook their heads and looked at each other in camaraderie, while the white participants sat wide-eyed and incredulous. I broke the silence: "But that was 1991. It must be better now." The people of color in the room quickly set me straight. "Debby, I don't feel like I can even go out to get the paper on my front lawn in my bathrobe. There's so much scrutiny around me all the time. This is no secret in my circle of friends," a black man said.

I felt gut-punched by this unveiling of a parallel universe, until now out of sight and out of mind. Once I'd seen it, though, I started to hear people of color report incident after incident just like those in the film. Like learning a new word and then hearing it everywhere, I couldn't believe how pervasive these stories were. Why hadn't I heard them before? Or had I?

There's an interesting circularity to this learning. The more I understand the privilege side of the equation, the more I understand the discrimination side, and vice versa. Until I have a clear idea of what racial discrimination looks and feels like, I can't imagine how the lack of it affects my life. Discrimination and privilege are flip sides of the same coin. What must

make it so infuriating for people of color is the double whammy that white folks, unaware of their skin color advantage, pose: To really get racism, a white person must get both pieces. It's not enough to feel empathy toward people on the downside; white people must also see themselves on the upside to understand that discrimination results from privilege. You can't have one without the other. Like a seesaw, the upside and downside are joined together.

Seeing and feeling one's privilege proves a much harder task than seeing and feeling discriminated against. In a workshop titled "Reproducing Whiteness" I listened while a white man aired his frustration about the lack of privilege awareness that so often comes with being white in a white-dominated society. "I just don't see it unless someone else points it out to me," he said, "and then I feel like, 'Duh, why couldn't I see that on my own?'"

"Maybe it's because you don't want to see it," a black man sitting near him said, his arms crossed, his annoyance barely cloaked. "I'm sick of white people saying they can't see it. I think they can't see it because they don't want to see it."

For a moment, I felt personally attacked. How could he not believe it when so many white people had just been talking about how hard it was? Then the irony hit me. Before waking up, hadn't I questioned the validity of people of color's experiences? It's hard to imagine something you don't experience firsthand, especially when it is so counter to your own experiences.

As I've spoken with longtime friends of color about what I'm learning, most have nodded their heads in recognition. What restraint and grace these friends have shown not to grab me by the shoulders and try to shake me awake earlier. Most have been followed in stores, harassed by police, given higher interest rates when applying for loans, mistaken for an employee when in fact they are a customer, mistaken for an orderly when in fact they are a doctor, not challenged as students, not listened to as parents—and the list goes on.

At another workshop, led by Crossroads Antiracism Organizing & Training, the facilitator asked for a white person who'd taken out a loan recently to describe the process. The woman who volunteered spoke about filling out a form while chatting with the banker, giving some references, being thanked for her business, and being approved within a couple of days. The facilitator looked around the room and asked, "Sound like what you've experienced,

white folks?" White heads, mine included, nodded. This sounded like the loan process to me.

She then asked for someone from a racial group other than white to volunteer to share a recent loan application story. The black woman who volunteered stood and described this: "I don't just fill out a form. I fill out form after form. Documentation this and documentation that. There's no chit-chat." She turned to the room, "Chitchat? What, are y'all kidding me?" The room filled with laughter, temporarily breaking the tension. "No one thanks me; that's for sure. More like, 'I can't guarantee the outcome here, ma'am,'" she said, mocking the cold tone of a bureaucrat holding a customer at arm's length. "Then it takes weeks, sometimes months, for the loan to get approved. That's what it looks like in my world," she concluded, sitting down, while the black and brown workshop participants nodded their heads in silent recognition. The facilitator let us sit there for a few minutes, with the white people quietly taking in the alternate universe we'd just heard described.

The way America's lending and housing systems have partnered to create a segregated housing footprint plays a massive role in maintaining the alternate universe syndrome. Segregation enables avoidance, which enables denial, which creates the illusion that white privilege doesn't exist. But just because I didn't see my skin color advantage didn't mean it didn't exist. As a white person, I don't have to do anything to have skin color advantages conferred on me without my permission, without my awareness. I can choose to write and speak against it, but at the end of the day, as long as our racial system is intact, there's nothing I can do to give away my privilege. I've got it, whether I want it or not. The question is what will I do with it.

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- Q Watch parts 1 and 2 of "True Colors" online, a total of eighteen minutes. (See Notes on Sources for the URL.) Write ten words that describe how Glenn (black) is treated. Write ten words for how John (white) is treated. Which customer service experience feels more like yours?