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For Jan 4



waking up

white

AND FINDING MYSELF IN THE STORY OF RACE

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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

*After years of wanting to help and fix others,
I learned I had my own work to do.*

I FIND IT PARADOXICAL that so often in my life, when I've felt a relationship not working well, I've focused on the other person and how much I wanted them to change. Even though changing myself is the one thing I can actually do, it seems to be the thing I've been most resistant to doing. I spent the first ten years of my marriage, for example, ticked off at Bruce, wishing he would just settle down and go with my program. The way he related to time, order, and conflict drove me nuts. If he could just be more like me, I reasoned, we'd be free of these annoying misunderstandings.

"Why exactly do we need an agenda for the weekend, Deb?"

"Because we'll make the most of our time that way," I'd say, thinking, Duh, and expecting a thank-you.

"But what if I just want to hang out and let things happen?"

"We can schedule that in," I'd assure him.

After years of thinking Bruce deficient for not doing and seeing things my way, I had a revelation. One sunny Sunday afternoon, a friend who'd administered the Myers-Briggs personality test to Bruce and me showed up on our doorstep, the analysis tucked neatly under her arm. "This explains a lot," she said, patting the packet, raising her eyebrows, and tossing us a meaningful smile. I imagined the pat and smile indicated that Bruce was about to get straightened out, and we could finally get on with the fairytale marriage he'd been screwing up.

Perhaps you won't be surprised to learn that it was I who would have the epiphany that day. Bruce's answers came up all yin for my yang, driving home the point that he wasn't defective, just differently wired. For those of you who speak Myers-Briggs, we were an ENTP-INFP match made in heaven. While Bruce focused on the outer world, I lived in the realm of ideas. While he lived spontaneously and joyfully, I invested hours planning the specifics of our life. Though I never missed a detail, his free-

dom from them allowed him an ease I lacked. When I cheerily greeted him each day with a neatly printed to-do list, he felt the walls closing in. I felt unappreciated.

Once we understood that contrasting styles, not character flaws, were at the root of our irritation with one another, we explored the ways our divergent personalities shaped our habits. Increasingly we converted criticism into collaboration, using our complementary styles to be a better team. Our marriage and our parenting styles took on new energy and intelligence as we pursued a common path using our full complement of perspectives and skills. After all those frustrating years of trying to fix Bruce, to make him more like me, I finally found the mate I was looking for when I let him be himself.

Shifting from a superior/inferior paradigm to a strength-in-difference paradigm was kind of a good news/bad news situation. On the downside, I had to admit Bruce had been right to resist my Pygmalion makeover attempts. On the upside, I finally had someone I could work on: me. I noticed my tendency to micromanage him and made a conscious effort to let go. I practiced being a better listener. I kept my mouth shut and tried to put myself in his shoes before speaking. This approach, ironically, gave me the very control I had sought in making our marriage a more livable situation. This I could do, and with a lot less wear and tear. After years of hearing the old adage "You can only change yourself," I finally understood it.

About a year into my waking up white journey, I realized I'd been unknowingly caught in a similar dynamic in the racial arena. During all the years I'd tried to help and fix people of color, part of my subconscious expectation had been that people outside my culture should assimilate to my ways, see and do things the way I'd been taught was right and normal. Unlike in my marriage, however, where Bruce and I felt free to tell each other how frustrated we were, in cross-racial relationships such freedom of expression often does not exist. Because throughout history speaking up has cost people of color jobs, homes, and even lives, too often the choice is to stay silent. There's a long and painful American history of people of color, when in the presence of white people, conforming to survive. The cost is staggering. The silencing of feedback from people of color can create a deadlock dynamic in which white people remain ignorant about their impact, while people of color accumulate frustration.

Understanding and working toward breaking this dynamic is central to dismantling twenty-first-century racism. While slavery and Jim Crow laws provided white people tangible evidence of racism and clear-cut demands for its undoing, today's racism lives hidden beneath the surface, in individual hearts and minds. Today's work to dismantle racism begins in the personal realm. Until I began to examine how racism had shaped me, I had little to contribute to the movement of righting racial wrongs. My cultural markings, invisible to me, screamed "Caution!" to those outside my culture. It explains why, for so many years, my best efforts stagnated or backfired. Until I examined how racism shaped me, I had little hope that any person of color would want to engage with me around a problem I saw as theirs. Only when I began to explore and share my personal struggle to understand my racialized belief system did people of color start opening up to me, engaging with me in our common struggle.

I can never change the fact that I've spent my whole life soaking up the attitudes and behaviors of a single culture. As effortlessly as breathing, I can be fast, tough, competitive, goal oriented, and self-sufficient. When social tension stirs my gut, my first reaction can be silent judgment, distancing me from the discomfort I feel and squelching opportunities to connect, learn, and grow. Slowing down and making myself vulnerable to my own ignorance and to other cultures' ways of being and knowing requires intention and effort. As white racial justice educator Peggy McIntosh explained to me, "I see that I will never outgrow what I have come to think of as my hard-drive attitudes and assumptions, but when I install the alternative software, I discover that I have outgrown some of them or can talk to myself about figuring out how to outgrow them. The alternative software allows me to see or study them." Becoming culturally competent has required developing an intimate understanding of my culturally crafted hard drive.

Q Can you make a list of the ways in which America's dominant culture has left an imprint on you? I could not have created much of a list before this journey. If you have trouble making one, you're not alone!