

DEBBY

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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

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*The discomfort of trying to cross racial lines.*

THE FACT THAT THE PLAYING FIELD is not level means that life experiences are not merely different, but unequal and unfair. Not understanding this basic reality made me unaware of how people of color experience America, and more than that: it set me up to be skeptical and judgmental when a person of color tried to explain it. I've had people question me when I've tried to convey a painful experience—it's infuriating and alienating. Not being believed, especially about an experience that is painful to begin with, is salt in the wound. It drives a wedge in a relationship, creating mistrust and disrespect. I now understand that the signals I was sending out to people of color were alerting them to keep quiet, since my ignorance might render their comments fodder for accusations of oversensitivity or paranoid imaginings. My oblivion acted like a wall, a warning of danger, between us.

The charged barrier that makes crossing the racial line so fraught reminds me of the electric fencing systems people use to train their dogs to stay in the yard. Wearing a collar that interfaces with the "fence," the dog gets zapped by an electric current each time he attempts to stray beyond the boundary. It's a great way to train a dog to stay in its safe zone, away from a busy road and in the yard close to home. It doesn't take many startling Zaps for the dog to know exactly where the line is and retreat back to safety. Eventually, the collar isn't even necessary. It's a form of conditioning.

For decades, the racially charged Zap, also invisible, sent me scampering back to my comfort zone like a well-trained dog. Rather than examining the source of the social tension I felt around people of color, I retreated to my social comfort zone—other white people. While I had been conditioned not to see race at all, people of color had been conditioned not to bring up race to white people. The resulting elephant in the room helps maintain segregation, avoidance, and racially socialized behaviors. While friends and

acquaintances of color bottled up accumulated racial pain, I maintained a degree of racial oblivion that made me a poor listener for their tender and charged words.

I now understand that my exchanges and friendships with people of color were cautious ones. As nervous as I was about saying something wrong, my racial counterparts likely felt equally apprehensive that I would judge them or perhaps expect that they teach me about racism, putting them in the weary role of educating yet another white person, a white person who registered disbelief at every revelation. Looking back, I can see now that my few friends and colleagues of color had in fact made attempts to share the burden of racism with me, only to have their worst fears realized. As I openly or silently judged and questioned their stories of discrimination with words and body language that said, "Really? Are you sure she meant it that way?" they must've thought, *You don't have a clue, do you?*

Without knowing terms like "segregation" and "avoidance," I stuck to my white-dominated world and ideas. I did what felt easiest. And true to any self-perpetuating system, the path of least resistance served to maintain the system. As I further immersed myself in a monocultural world, the playing field continued to look level, and opportunities to raise my racial awareness stagnated. Like living in a hall of mirrors, I constructed and reconstructed my reality based on the same old views, shielding myself from the knowledge that my friends of color lived in an alternate universe about which they couldn't tell me because I couldn't hear it.

Had I known then what I know now, I would have understood that I had the power to defuse that Zap line. Had I known that learning about systemic racism, understanding whiteness, and practicing the art of cross-racial conversation lay in wait for me, perhaps I would have taken the plunge years earlier. Instead, my ignorance acted like a charger cord for the cross-racial Zap factor, setting me up to avoid, avoid, avoid and perpetuate, perpetuate, perpetuate.

I had my first experience with feeling the Zap and sensing it for what it was one night at Wheelock. Pamela, a black classmate in her late fifties, and I often were the first to arrive in the classroom. On this particular night we started chatting about the recent inauguration of President Barack Obama. As I was speaking, I referred to him as "Obama." Pamela literally flinched, took a breath, and said, "I don't think that's right, you calling him 'Obama.'"

"What do you call him?" I asked.

"President Obama—that's what he is. He's our president." She didn't look one bit happy with me.

The first thing I thought was, *That's not right. I've called all our presidents by their last name. And so did my parents.* Had I not been in a class about racism, I might have changed the topic right there, further affirming for me a vague idea that black people were overly sensitive about race. Fortunately, given the setting, I forced myself to stay with the conversation.

"But I've called all the presidents by their last name," I said, trying hard not to sound as defensive as I was feeling.

"Are you sure?" she asked. "I doubt you called President Bush 'Bush.'"

I thought for a minute. Truth be told, I believe I called President Bush something much worse than "Bush," but I kept my mouth shut. *This might be one of those cases where racial realities and belief systems are clashing,* I thought to myself. I felt all stirred up and was trying to figure out what to say just as the professor walked in and class swung into action. *Saved by the bell,* I thought, though my insides churned with the feeling of an unhealed upset.

About fifteen minutes into the class, I was still trying to make sense of our conversation when Pamela offered another insight, this time to the whole class. We were talking about cross-cultural misunderstanding. I was worried Pamela might use her minutes-old example with me. Instead, she offered a fresh one. Pamela had put each of her four children through one of Boston's most elite private schools. She told us about a night, years earlier, when she'd driven out to a wealthy, white suburb to pick up her daughter from her friend Alison's house. As they were leaving, Pamela noticed that her daughter said good-bye to Mary, the housekeeper. Once in the car Pamela turned to her daughter and asked, "What do you call Alison's parents?"

"Mr. and Mrs. Smith," she answered.

"Then why do you call Mary by her first name?" she'd asked.

"Because everyone in the house does," her daughter explained.

"Well, not you. From now on I want you to refer to her the same way you do the parents. She's your elder, and she deserves your respect as much as any elder. Find out her last name, and use it."

As I sat in my sweatpants that night listening to the impeccably dressed Pamela, I thought of how differently we valued formality. I viewed it as an obstacle to connecting with people; Pamela viewed it as a sign of respect. I grew up in a household where proper manners and attire were the standard.

Somewhere in the twenty-five years between college and Wheelock, I began to want to shed the formality, feeling that it alienated me from new friends and colleagues by marking me as an "other," a snob. I could still do the small talk, corporate dinner, country club thing, but I loved nothing more than the informality and casual dress that passed for normal in my circle of Cambridge friends—white friends. It felt like the pressure was off, and I could just be me. I suppose I ended up equating informality with authenticity.

Bruce and I consciously created an informal atmosphere around our home, encouraging our children's friends to call us Bruce and Debby and letting our kids pick out their own clothes as soon as they expressed interest. We encouraged respect toward others but not in a stiff, scripted way. I prided myself in my lack of concern about appearances, often going out in sweatpants with my hair done up in a quick and sloppy twist and thinking, *This is what I love about Cambridge. No one cares how I dress.* I didn't see that having the choice to be more casual was a privilege that came with my skin color. Unlike my friends of color, I didn't have to counterbalance a narrative that told the world I was less-than. Like a too-tight skirt that I could put on or take off at will, I chose when and when not to be formal and felt totally entitled to do so.

Sitting next to Pamela that night, I felt like a baggy gray insult. I thought of all the times I'd casually introduced my children to adults of color using the grown-ups' first names. I thought of the way I took the liberty of calling adults of color I didn't know all that well by their first names and wondered what impact it might have had on them. Did my casual tone impart the authentic spirit I meant or an indication of disrespect? Using first versus last names meant something entirely different for Pamela from what it meant to me.

I've long known that cross-cultural mismatches lay thick on the ground. But I thought culture clashes only applied to interactions with people from different countries, in which looking at someone in the eye is respectful in one culture and an insult in another. A touch may be a sign of sympathy in one culture, a sexual advance in another. But in my own country? I was beginning to see how different people's beliefs and behaviors could be based on the way their race positioned them within a single dominant culture. I thought of the Golden Rule, the set-in-stone belief I'd been raised on, that one should always treat others the way you yourself would want to be treated. The limitations of this adage in the realm of race relations struck me like a thunderbolt.



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In the years since Pamela opened my eyes, I've heard countless stories of how white people's casual ignorance about skin color privilege has insulted and alienated people of color. Part of the power differential is that white people have the choice, the power, to ignore race and racism. I can choose not to have a single cross-racial relationship. I can choose not to talk about race. And I can choose not to learn the beliefs, customs, traditions, and values of racial groups other than my own.

Not so for people of color, who can't escape knowing what life looks like in White Land. White life is everywhere—on TV and billboards, in movies, magazines, and newspapers. For survival purposes people of color must learn the dominant culture, the white culture, in order to survive. Knowing how to act in a white-run classroom, a white-run office, or a white-dominated public space is essential. What's more, people of color often report they have to act more white than white people because of the scrutiny they're under. It reminds me of how, as a child, I quickly learned the names of the kids in the upper grades and how, as an adult, I swiftly learned the ways of the people at the top of the ladder in my workplaces. It seems a fairly natural survival tactic to study those on whom one depends to survive socially or otherwise.

The worst part of the cycle of segregation and avoidance is that it happens at the institutional level, with the consequences ranging from social discomfort to lack of access to survival basics. White people are more likely to hire white people. White teachers are more likely to understand and gravitate to white students. White police are more likely to trust and support white citizens. White doctors are more likely to relate to and appropriately treat white patients. White bankers are more likely to make speedy, low-interest loans to people who look and act like them. The Zap factor doesn't just hurt feelings; it limits possibilities in a way that affects people of color's ability to access life-sustaining resources such as education, wealth, and health.

The more I understood that my aversion to social discomfort was replicated millions of times over by millions of white people, including those leading America's educational, medical, finance, and housing systems, the more I understood how oppression can be held in place by good, but ignorant, people. If the people with less power, in this case people of color, try to convey the way the dynamic disempowers them, they risk being seen as ungrateful, paranoid, weak, irrational, and unworthy. The fact that people

of color still find the strength to continue trying to be heard tells me something about their resilience and fortitude.

Crossing the charged racial line, as uncomfortable as it was at first, allowed me both to learn about life on the other side and to reexamine my own from a new vantage point. As I replaced ignorance with understanding, the cross-racial conversational playing field leveled. As I spoke freely of my white privilege and shock at not having understood systemic racism until recently, people of color began to open up about their own experiences. We used our contrasting exposures to racism to explore them as related experiences. As I moved from segregation and avoidance to contact and connection, I slowly transformed what had once been a charged barrier to a beckoning bond.

In year three of my journey, a black woman approached me after a meeting. "Did you say your maiden name was Kittredge?"

My parents had been gone for over five years, and I longed for moments when someone might say, "I knew your mother," or "I worked with your father."

"Yes," I answered, eager to see where she was going.

"Do you have an older sister Diane?"

"Yes," I answered, wondering if they'd been college classmates or professional colleagues.

"Well, how about that," she said. "I went to high school with Diane."

"In Winchester!?" I blurted out, unable to hide my shock that there had been even one black person in the town during my life there.

She laughed. During the meeting she'd heard my open confession of not understanding racism or white privilege until recently. "Honey," she said smiling, "there's a whole lot I'll bet you don't know about Winchester and the history of black folks living there."

She told me of how Winchester once had hundreds of black families working for white families. She put a new spin on the postwar era, explaining that hand in hand with suburban expansion came an appliance boom: dishwashers and laundry machines replaced household help, a machine-for-people swap that drove families like hers out of Winchester. She described her family's resolve to stay in the town that had been theirs for three generations, to continue to give their children the top-notch education the town delivered.

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"My mother trained us well," she said. "She told us, 'This is where the good schools are, and if you want to make the most of it, you need to stay away from drugs.' You know what else she told us?" She paused. "'White kids who do drugs go to college; black kids go to jail.'" She leaned closer and whispered, "That's still happening today you know, more than ever."

I had a revelatory moment this year as I was writing down the word "ignorance." Interesting that the word, which implies a passive state of being, shares the same root with the word "ignore," which implies an active choice. How much of my not crossing the color line earlier had to do with not seeing, and how much was it my choice not to go in search of it? This is a question I am not yet able to answer. It felt passive, but I know too well these days how understandings like this can change with time and reflection.

Cross-racial relationships are essential to racial healing. The kind of contact and connection they engender is indeed the antidote to the centuries-old pattern of segregation and avoidance. But it doesn't work without understanding and braving the Zap factor, an important step in the process of building trust.

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**Q** Have you ever had anyone doubt, dismiss, or minimize an experience that was formative for you? How did it feel? How did it affect your feelings about that person?

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*The snap judgments that fueled my racial anxiety.*

MY PARENTS TRIED TO INSTILL in me the importance of replacing judgment with empathy. You couldn't grow up in my house without hearing my mother's refrain, "People who are mean are usually sad or angry." They also encouraged me to put myself in other people's shoes: "His mother's been ill, Deb. Put yourself in his shoes." Despite their efforts, I still developed a robust capacity to make snap judgments. As I'm learning how and why they got there, I'm also learning to let myself off the hook and work with the judgments, as opposed to letting them drive or shame me.

The monumental cognitive task of processing the millions of pieces of information that flood us daily requires that we sort and categorize. It's a natural human function. Information, which comes to us through all five senses, travels via our nerves to the brain, where it gets registered, sorted, and stored. Categorization is a necessary part of the memory-retrieval process, the cognitive equivalent of providing us with a well-labeled filing system versus a room full of unsorted papers. This level of efficiency is what would have allowed one of our ancestors, meeting up with a life-threatening enemy in the jungle, to assess the situation quickly and react accordingly. If we had to start from scratch, gauging each potential threat before us, we wouldn't have survived as a species. Like all animals, we have built-in survival skills; sorting is one of them.

One way people differ from animals, however, is the way we use symbols to make meaning of the world around us. This idea helped me understand why a little thing like a logo could sway me so quickly toward or away from a product. In his book *Language in Thought and Action*, Samuel Ichiye Hayakawa writes, "Animals struggle with each other for food or for leadership, but they do not, like human beings, struggle with each other for things that stand for food or leadership, such things as our paper symbols of wealth (money, bonds, titles), badges of rank to wear on our clothes,

or low-number license plates." America's marketing machine capitalizes on this symbolic process. Show me the Nike, Apple, or Bank of America logo, and I'll fill pages about each brand with the stories I've attached to it. And businesses hope the story I have is one that works in their favor.

But what about when I turn an actual human being into a symbol, a logo, complete with a fully formed narrative? *People with multiple piercings must be angry.* Does this mean people without them are not? *People who drive certain kinds of cars are shallow.* Does this mean people who drive other types of cars are deep? *People who wear a lot of makeup are insecure.* Does this mean those who wear no makeup are confident? Where do I get my stories? Where does all my accumulated information come from? The gathering and sorting I've done all my life has happened largely subconsciously and often shocks me when a piece of previously unexamined information emerges, betraying the judgment with which I once filed it away.

In high school my friends and I used to play a game we called "Instant History." We'd sit on a park bench, pick someone in our view, and invent an imagined profile for the unsuspecting subject. Using their body language, physical attributes, and attire alone, we'd come up with long-winded biographies. One imagined truth led to a whole set of other imagined truths. Before long we'd spun a conceptualized version of the person that was put together as beautifully as a well-worn photo album—and likely couldn't have been further from the truth. It strikes me that even without a concerted effort to create an "Instant History" for a person, I still seem to do a version of it.

Sociologist Allan Johnson's writings helped me understand this habit. This particular reference stuck with me: "As the philosopher Susanne Langer put it, using symbols to construct reality lies at the heart of what makes us human: Only a small part of reality, for a human being, is what is actually going on; the greater part is what he imagines in connection with the sights and sounds of the moment." This phenomenon is front and center in the PBS documentary *People Like Us*. Individuals shown a single photograph of a person are asked to guess at what that person is like. Relying on lightning-quick visual cues such as clothing and hairstyle, participants guess at social class and associated character traits. At one point in the film the camera captures a high school student standing in a crowded school hallway. She's been asked by the filmmakers to describe the other students as they pass her. Without missing a beat she labels each student "geek," "emo," "jock," and so forth. Snap judgments about people are not always about

race. White people make them about other white people. Black people make them about other black people. Turning people into logos, symbolic of a neatly wrapped story, is not race-specific.

Language, even just a single word, is a significant player in the symbolic process that facilitates logo making. Johnson says, "If there's a word for something, we're much more likely to 'see' it and treat it as real." We invent not only the words but also the stories that come with them. The word "race" itself is a perfect example. It's as if I have an imaginary file folder in my head for "race" into which all my race-related words and stories get tucked away. The file is then at the ready to reaffirm old beliefs by rejecting any that don't catalog neatly into the carefully constructed "race" folder.

At times, challenging the racialized language and images I've collected over my lifetime has made me question my entire sense of reality. Take the word "slave." My association with the word had always been limited to the dark-skinned African people enslaved to work on America's Southern plantations. I hear the word "slave," and—POW—an instantaneous image of a large black man emerges in my mind, just like a logo.

A misguided one in fact. The word "slave" likely originated as "Slav," the term used for captured white Slavonic people sold by other Europeans to Arabs as indentured servants during the eighth and ninth centuries. Throughout history societies around the world have forced those they have conquered to work lowly jobs without pay. Ethnicity and skin color sometimes had nothing to do with it. Even in America, the earliest "slaves" came in a variety of skin colors, from a variety of countries, and worked in the capacity of indentured servants. In the mix were white homeless children from London, poor white women, and white convicts, paying off their ocean voyage with three to seven years of hard labor. Unlike white European indentured servants, African people were imported against their will, kept here against their will, and defined and treated as a separate and subhuman species.

For the colonial ruling class, African slaves' easy-to-identify dark skin ultimately made them a more practical investment than their white-skinned and Native American counterparts. Enslaved indigenous people could too easily escape and blend in with the first Native American population they came across. Escaped white indentured servants could blend in even more easily. Limiting the slave population to just black-skinned people subsequently reduced white America's association of word and person to a single, skin-color-coded narrative. In an effort to weaken the logo effect of

the word "slave," many racial justice educators and descendants of those enslaved have changed the language from "slave" to "enslaved African" to convey the label as an act done to others, not as an inherent identity. Words matter.

I find it easy to label people who aren't white—he's *Hispanic*, she's *black*, they're *Asian*—but until recently, I've not labeled white people. When I think of the way I label *African Americans*, *Asian Americans*, and *Native Americans*, I wonder why I never thought it strange not to also say *German American*, *Greek American*, or even a generic *European American*. Not having a label for white people reinforced for me the idea that white populations are the norm, raceless and ethnicity-less. No label is needed because it's a given. I realize that for years, when I spoke about an encounter with a white person, I would say something like, "I met the sweetest lady this morning" or "One of my students brought me a delicious brownie today." The term "white" was always assumed. On the other hand, for people of color, I was more likely to insert a label. "I met the funniest guy, a black guy, waiting for the bus today," or "Rosie, my Haitian student, made a beautiful bracelet for me today." People of color get labels, complete with narratives and stereotypes.

This is hugely problematic, given how skewed my perceptions were. Because of the way racial bias plays out in the media, I see the black guy on TV getting shoved into the cop car. Because of the way racial bias plays out in our real estate and lending systems, I don't have a black neighbor I can see going out at midnight to get his feverish daughter cough medicine. My personal interactions and real experiences with people of color are far outweighed by the negative images that have saturated my data field through the media. While I have a multidimensional and nuanced understanding of the range of white people in my life, I have a narrow definition that fits neatly in a file labeled for one race or another. No matter how much I try to stay open-minded and follow Dr. Martin Luther King's advice to "not judge people by the color of their skin but by the content of their character," I am fighting against the tide of stored negative data. When the word or image comes up, the story comes with it.

In my late twenties a back spasm led me to try a chiropractor for the first time. My white doctor recommended someone he and several of his patients had gone to with great success. When I got to the appointment, I was caught off guard to find a black chiropractor. Immediately, my subconscious began spewing forth feelings of being unsafe. As I began to question



his credentials and abilities, my conscious mind was horrified. I tried to turn off the voice of prejudice in my head but couldn't. Every move made me wonder, *Did he do that right? What if that snap permanently injures me?* When he suggested I get some X-rays, a suspicion flashed into my mind that he was somehow in cahoots with the X-ray business and scamming me. Back in his office, as we recapped our first session and laid out a plan for the weeks ahead, I noticed the wall behind him slathered in framed diplomas and certificates from his extensive education at white institutions. Suddenly I relaxed. While the symbol of his skin color triggered negative thoughts, the symbols of the white-dominated institutions triggered positive thoughts. Both of these responses made me feel confused and ashamed. Where was my commitment to judge people by the content of their character? Each incident like this only fueled an inexplicable anxiety that would carry over to the next interaction with a person of color.

Though today I am still taken aback by intrusive racialized thoughts, it's happening less often, and I no longer find them bewildering or judge myself for them. How could I live in a racially organized society and not have filed away racial stereotypes? Though I may never get beyond my mind's tendency to lump and label, at least now I'm aware enough to say to my overloaded subconscious, "Thanks for sharing—buh-bye."

A favorite read of mine, Claude Steele's *Whistling Vivaldi*, takes its title from an anecdote by *New York Times* columnist Brent Staples. As a black college student he noticed that, upon seeing him walking down the street, white people would react, reaching for the hand of the person beside them or even stepping off the sidewalk to cross the street. In his words, "I'd been walking the streets grinning good evening at people who were frightened to death of me. I did violence to them just by being." When he started whistling a Vivaldi tune, a symbol from the white European American culture, the atmosphere would change—bodies would relax; a few even smiled. Staples used one symbol to counteract another.

Though I've gone through most of my life not identifying myself as white, I've learned that people of color do in fact see me as white. I'm as much of a logo to them as they are to me. I am as much at risk of being judged by the color of my skin and not my character. In a racially ordered world, I too am, at least to people of color, in a lump, a group. I have a label. Being lumped and labeled puts me in a box I don't want to be in. I want people to take the time to know me the person, not sum me up with



a four-hundred-year narrative I want nothing to do with. How could I have avoided labeling the white population, when I seemed to do it so naturally to every other cultural group? Easy: I had no language and therefore no file folder in which to collect stories and stereotypes for the white race, the invisible race.

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- Q** What have you filed away? Create a column that contains these labels: African Americans, Asian Americans, Native Americans, Jews, Latinos, Muslims, Whites. Next to each, quickly write at least five stereotypes that come to mind for each. Do not pause, censor, or correct; rather, let emerge what will. Now look at what you've written. Does it surprise you? If you are white, do you have any stereotypes for whites? Why do you think this is?