DEBBY irving

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Waking Up White, and Finding Myself in the Story of Race
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Some names and locations have been changed to protect privacy.

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

— James Baldwin

THE GI BILL 7

Discovering the meaning of unearned privilege.

RETURNING TO WHEELOCK week after week to study the history of industry, immigration, law, policy, education, and scientific and social beliefs from a variety of perspectives added multiple dimensions to my worldview. Some classes left me with a sense of relief, an *Aha, that explains that* feeling. Other classes hit me like a ton of bricks, a *Damn, this cannot be true!* reaction. There was no moment more profound or life altering, however, than the night I learned about the GI Bill.

On April 9, 2009, I raced into class, arriving just in time. I took a deep breath, relieved to see a television set in the corner of the room. *Great—we get to watch a movie,* I thought. About a half hour into the film, *Race: The Power of an Illusion*, the focus turns to the GI Bill. I remember thinking, *Hmm, my father and uncles talked about that bill, about how great it felt to win the war and come home to free education and a housing loan.* My father's law school education had been paid for by that bill. My parents' first home had been subsidized by it. In 1975, when Vietnam vets came home to a cruel reception, my father expressed his outrage by contrasting it to the enthusiastic welcome he'd gotten in 1945. He pointed to the GI Bill as proof.

But all of a sudden, the film starts talking about the bill not being accessible to black Americans. An elderly black couple, Mr. and Mrs. Burnett, appear on the screen, speaking about the day half a century earlier that they'd excitedly driven out to a New York suburb, Levittown, to look for a home. Mr. Burnett, a returning GI, and his wife drove through a neighborhood and toured a house, imagining themselves living there. They were convinced: this was the lifestyle they wanted. When Mr. Burnett approached the realtor, expressing his interest and inquiring about the purchase procedure, the realtor sheepishly told him he couldn't sell to Negroes. "It's not me," he explained. The Federal Housing Authority (FHA) had warned the town's developers that even one or two nonwhite families could topple the

kind of values necessary to profit from their enterprise. The Burnetts were crushed.

The chilling reality is that while the American dream fell into the laps of millions of Americans, making the GI Bill the great equalizer for the range of white ethnicities in the melting pot, Americans of color, including the one million black GIs who'd risked their lives in the war, were largely excluded. The same GI Bill that had given white families like mine a socioeconomic rocket boost had left people of color out to dry. I'd been reaping the benefits of being a white person without even knowing it. I felt duped and alarmed.

Watching this film was like driving by a grotesque car crash—transfixed, I couldn't turn away, yet what I was taking in was literally making me nauseated and short of breath. My thoughts raced with the notion that racism was frightfully bigger and more sinister than I'd ever understood—and hardest for me, that people like my own family and friends, people in charge, must have understood this to a certain degree, if not had a hand in its orchestration. This was intentional. This was manipulative. This was not freedom for all.

Though black GIs were technically eligible for the bill's benefits, in reality our higher education, finance, and housing systems made it difficult if not impossible for African American GIs to access them. On the education front, most colleges and universities used a quota system, limiting the number of black students accepted each year. There were not enough "black seats" available to allow in the one million returning black GIs. In addition, many black families, already caught in a cycle of poverty from earlier discriminatory laws and policies, needed their men to produce income, not go off to school. In the end, a mere 4 percent of black GIs were able to access the bill's offer of free education. Meanwhile, the bill allowed my father to go to law school without paying a dime, assured that his white parents could retire comfortably with the aid of the Social Security program, an earlier government program tilted heavily in favor of white people.

On the housing front, it got worse. A set of policies created by the FHA, and implemented by lenders and realtors, mapped out neighborhoods according to the skin color of residents. This national housing appraisal system, commonly referred to as "redlining," deemed skin color as much a valuation indicator as a building's condition. Neighborhoods inhabited by blacks or other people of color were outlined in red, the color in the

legend next to the word "Hazardous" (investment). Towns like Winchester, far from Boston's redlined neighborhoods, would have been outlined in green and noted as "Best." The higher the rating, the lower the interest rate on the loan, and the greater the appreciation in home values.

Bluelined ("Still Desirable") and yellowlined ("Declining") areas attracted realtors eager to fill their pockets by leveraging the notion of "marginal" neighborhoods. Going door to door, these fear-inciting salesmen promoted the idea of black residents as dangerous for neighborhood values. In a practice known as blockbusting, the strategy was to scare white homeowners into selling their homes quickly at fire-sale prices before black folks moved in and dragged down property values. Then realtors would turn around and sell that same home at an inflated value to a black customer, who had effectively just bought a home in a neighborhood about to lose its value because of their purchase.

Not only was blockbusting a moment of sordid greed on the realtors' part; it was the catalyst for a racial wealth and trust divide that continues today. Home values in black neighborhoods plummeted, while those in white-only areas rose, with an FHA and lending-institution color-coded map spelling out exactly which was which. On top of leaving black people owing years of mortgage payments on a declining asset while funneling white people into homes whose equity grew steadily over time, the twin terrors of redlining and blockbusting fueled white fear and resentment of black people, who could "destroy" a neighborhood just by moving in.

As houses were bought and sold according to skin color and loans were rated and made based on skin color, black folks were left to make do with the remains of city housing, under assault by another federal effort, the Urban Renewal Program. Dubbed by James Baldwin as the "Negro Removal Program," it involved demolishing entire neighborhoods in part to make room for ramps and highways to provide car-owning, professional, white suburbanites easy access to and from the city. The program's promise to replace the razed neighborhoods with new and improved housing never materialized. With 90 percent of low-income housing destroyed, what remained were rental properties—housing without pride of ownership or equity-building opportunity. This critical juncture in American history created a housing footprint that fossilized our communities into skin-color-coded haves and have-nots, reaffirming segregation and provoking increased mistrust between the races.

Between 1934 and 1962 the federal government underwrote $120 billion in new housing, less than 2 percent of which went to people of color. America's largest single investment in its people, through an intertwined structure of housing and banking systems, gave whites a lifestyle and financial boost that would accrue in the decades to come while driving blacks and other minority populations into a downward spiral. Discriminatory practices among colleges, universities, banks, and realtors created an impenetrable barrier to the GI Bill's promise, turning America's golden opportunity to right its racially imbalanced ship into an acceleration of its listing. From the perspective of Americans excluded from this massive leg-up policy, the GI Bill is one of the best examples of affirmative action for white people.

I saw myself in this story. I saw Winchester, my house, my parents' giddy parties with only white people. I saw the stretch of towns between the nearest black neighborhood and mine. I saw my father's law degree, neatly framed above his desk. I saw my isolation. I saw the redlined neighborhoods' isolation. I thought of the house I live in now, partially paid for with money my parents accumulated through their GI Bill–subsidized education and purchase of "Best" white real estate. I thought of how the leg-up the government gave my family had compounded into wealth my parents had passed on to me and my white siblings, a phenomenon duplicated in white families coast to coast. Though I would go on to discover many more similarly divisive laws and policies throughout US history, this was the first one I came to know, and it hit me hard. I felt overcome with emptiness that my parents were no longer alive, because more than anything, I wanted to ask them, "Did you know?" I thought of my father's plea to us at the end of his life, as he gave us his funeral and estate preferences. In a rare display of anger and disgust he admonished us, "Don't use a realtor. Find another way to sell this place. A sealed bid, anything. Realtors are low-lives."

When the class ended, I called my husband, Bruce.

"I need to drive around for a while," I told him. "Can you get the kids to bed?"

"Are you okay? You sound terrible."

"It was an upsetting class." I couldn't put words to what I was feeling. My head spun and my chest burned. "I'll tell you more when I've had a chance to collect my thoughts."

I shook as I drove through the manicured neighborhoods of Belmont, Lexington, and Arlington, the white towns I'd lived in and around most of my life. I drove out to Winchester and parked in front of my childhood home. My life here had felt so innocent, the world such a safe and joyful place. My house stood before me, no longer as a symbol of my happy childhood but as a sinister representation of a social-engineering scheme in which I'd been an unwitting player. I couldn't shake the duped feeling—duped and infuriated to have inherited a legacy that contaminated me with injustice. I felt overcome with a sense of participation and responsibility. For the first time I understood that a tragedy had been staged under my nose, a tragedy in which I played the part of a deluded and unknowing beneficiary.

Prior to the Wheelock course, my attempts to make sense of racism had been akin to trying to understand a game just by watching the players. I made guesses based on what I could see. In contrast, the course asked me to study the rules—centuries of law and policy—to see how players had gotten into their present-day positions. Suddenly every player appeared in a new light.

The game, it turns out, offers different rules and different starting points for different people. It's a drastically uneven contest in which I am among the more advantaged players. Advantage in the game can take several forms: male trumps female, straight trumps LGBT, able-bodied trumps disabled, Western religions trump Eastern religions, higher class trumps lower class, and so on. But nowhere, as far as I can see, is any advantage as hard-hitting and enduring as skin color. My white skin, an epidermal gold card, has greased the skids for a life full of opportunities and rewards that I was sure were available to everyone. My notions that America offered a level playing field disintegrated. I thought of how hypocritical my belief in small government was, now that I understood how well big government had served me through programs and policies such as those entwined in the GI Bill.

I ruminated on this question: If my childhood of racially organized comfort and opportunity had made me feel like the master of my own destiny, full of confidence, and certain of a bright future, what did this imply about people on the flip side of the coin—people who'd been shut out of a world of comfort and opportunity? How does one construct dreams about the future under those conditions? How can one bear to watch TV shows depicting lives of comfort and ease for people with a skin color you don't share?

When I got home that night, Bruce was in bed reading. He put down his book and took off his glasses.

"What the hell's going on?" he asked. "Are you okay?"

I sat down on the bed next to him. "What do you know about the GI Bill?"

"Um, that was the policy after World War II that helped guys coming back from the war. Free education, low-rate mortgages, maybe down payments? Right?" He looked unsure about why I was asking.

"Who do you think was eligible?" I asked.

"Anyone who'd served. Where is this going?"

I told him about what I'd learned and about how shaken up I was. Bruce, one of the smartest people I know, knew nothing of the GI Bill's inequities.

"Are you sure? That can't be true," he said, getting out of bed to retrieve his laptop. I guessed from his expression that the idea of a twentieth-century federal policy screwing black people seemed as unimaginable to him as it had been to me. I looked around our bedroom and thought of how my parents had helped us with the down payment for our house. I thought of the subsidized housing community two blocks away, full of financially struggling people, mostly people of color, whose parents had no money to lend. Suddenly, it felt criminal to feel comfortable in my own house.

"Holy shit, Deb. This is amazing." A quick Internet search had turned up article after article about the subject.

We looked at each other. This wasn't history locked up in a drawer somewhere; this was public record.

"This changes everything," I said, before laying my head on the pillow for the first of many sleepless nights, wondering, *What else don't I know?*

Q **Have you ever uncovered a family secret or piece of information about a person or place that countered your previous perception? Once you learned the new information, were you able to look back and see clues that had been there all along but that you didn't recognize as evidence of a narrative you didn't yet know about?**

17 MY GOOD PEOPLE

How it was possible that I was both a "good person" and utterly clueless.

WAKING UP FELT LIKE STEPPING OUT OF A DREAM, a fantasy world I'd been living in since birth. In fact, in her book *The History of White People*, Nell Irvin Painter uses the term "cultural fantasy" to characterize the system of racism that's evolved around skin color interpretations. Leaving behind the bubble of white ideology and stepping into a new shockwave-laced reality came with a strange mix of alarm and wonder. I couldn't shake the feeling there must be more I didn't know. What other errors and omissions might I stumble on?

Every fiber of my being had once believed that the rule makers and system operators in America were good people, leaders who looked out for everyone, who would never make selfish decisions. Wasn't that why people like Richard Nixon stood out? Wasn't his selfish greed an aberration? People were good. My family was good. I was good, right? After all, I'd been taught never to reach across the plate to grab the biggest cookie. That would be selfish. Part of growing up, I thought, was learning to be polite and honest and do things for others because that's what grown-ups did.

Learning about how racism works didn't challenge me just because it was new information. It was *completely contradictory* information, a 180-degree paradigm reversal, flying in the face of everything I'd been taught as a child and had believed up to this moment. America's use of racial categories seemed fraught with unfairness, cruelty, and dishonesty. Yet my parents', grandparents', and entire extended family's life philosophy, as I understood it, had revolved around fairness, compassion, and honor. This was my legacy, the one I took the most pride in passing on to my children. Discovering I'd been complicit in perpetuating a system that was so very terribly bad flew in the face of all I'd understood about myself.

I thought hard about where my own attachment to being a good person had come from. I remembered the way my parents encouraged me to be

empathetic. I recalled my mother's own capacity for compassion and kindness, how when her divorced friend Louise felt shunned and excluded from dinner parties, my mother organized one and sat Louise beside my father with strict instructions to him to "make sure she's being included in the conversations." I thought of how when I came home from high school one day saying a classmate had been beaten and then kicked out of her home, my mother said, "Bring her here. She can live with us." Which she did.

Then there was my father. If he wanted one thing from his children, it was for us to be honest. While my mother might say little things like, "Did you just cheat on that Parcheesi move, Deb? You want to win or lose honestly—otherwise it won't mean anything. Take that turn over," my father made a sweeping, explicit demand that being honest at all times was non-negotiable in our family. And believe me, I put him to the test.

One evening, when I was about eight, I appeared at the dinner table with a copy of *Heidi*.

I proudly plopped it on the table. "Look what I got today," I said, flipping through the hardcover book full of spectacular full-color illustrations.

"Where'd you get that?" asked my mother.

"The Sheffields have boxes of books like this in their garage. I took this, and Cathy [my friend] took *Black Beauty*."

My parents glanced at each other. "Do the Sheffields know you took them?"

"No, but they have tons of them. They'll never know."

We finished dinner quickly. My mother called Cathy's parents, while my father explained to me that we were taking the book back to the Sheffields. I wished I'd kept it secret. When we got to the Sheffields' house, panic set in as we bypassed the garage and headed for the front door. With a hand on my shoulder, my father rang the bell.

"What a nice surprise, Bob and Debby!" Mrs. Sheffield said, still in her apron. I hugged the book close to me and stared at the porch floorboards.

"Well, actually, we're here to return something." My father went on to explain that I'd taken a book from their garage. "We've spoken about how this is stealing. Debby understands now that going into your garage is wrong and that taking anything that doesn't belong to her is wrong. It won't happen again." He gestured for me to hand over the book.

"Well, that's perfectly understandable," Mrs. Sheffield said.

I burst into tears.

"I think you still owe Mrs. Sheffield an apology, Deb," my father said, patting me on the back.

"S-s-sorry," I blubbered.

We walked home slowly, my father's silence allowing me ample time to feel my regret. I would never steal again. Or so I thought.

A few years later, when my friend Mary invited me to go to Woolworth's with her to shove candy into our oversized raincoat pockets, we got caught. The store manager called our parents. My father brought me to the store the next day, toured me up and down the aisles, and explained about the vast chain of people who'd created, transported, and organized the store's contents. Each was a good person doing their job, he told me. Each expected the items to be bought, not stolen, in the final step of the consumer process. People all around the world, I learned, were counting on me to pay for the merchandise they'd worked so hard to get to me. In comparison to my father, so wise and good, I felt like a total loser. I had failed him, failed the Woolworth's people and all the people around the world who'd worked together to make and deliver the cool stuff I loved. At the end of the tour he brought me up front and motioned for me to apologize to the manager. I crumpled over in a heap of sobs. My father and the manager waited for me to pull it together, which I couldn't muster. Eventually my father said, "I think we can all agree Debby regrets what she did." The long, silent ride home left me, once again, to reflect on the responsibility I had to be an honest and upright citizen. And how awful it felt to be anything less.

My childhood takeaway was that learning to be good, fair, and honest was as much a part of becoming an adult as growing taller. Sure, there were some bad eggs out there—Richard Nixon, Charles Manson, the kid who lived across the street from us who put our sprinkler behind our car's back tire so we'd run it over and ruin it while backing out of the driveway—but most people the world over were good. And my family? We were definitely good. Our parents impressed the importance of it on us all the time.

Not only was my family good, but our extended family was good, our friends from Winchester were good, and my parents' college friends, work friends, and ski and golf friends were good. I remember in my teenage years, when one of my parents' couple friends stopped being a part of the dinner party crowd, I asked my mother, "Why don't the Littles come over anymore?" In a low voice she told me, "Daddy and I are very disappointed in something he learned about Mr. Little." I pressed her. "It had something

to do with a less-than-honest business dealing," she told me. I felt disappointed in my old pal Mr. Little, but very proud of my parents for drawing the line. We associated only with good people.

Which is why, when I learned about the discriminatory policies and practices in lending, housing, and higher education during the GI Bill era, they did not align with my view of leadership. I knew executives, real estate moguls, media guys, and politicians—people who ran stuff. I loved these men. They were family, friends, and neighbors. I never questioned that the white guys in charge were good people, bringing compassion, fairness, and honor to every part of their life. Didn't they live by the Golden Rule and treat others the way they themselves would want to be treated?

And what about the bankers I knew? My father explained to me at a young age, when he took me to open a savings account, that the bank would take my money, lend it out to someone who needed it, charge the borrower a little bit, and share that little bit with me, the saver. Banking felt darn near like a good deed. I never questioned who was doing the borrowing or for what. I certainly never entertained the idea that borrowing rules and procedures might differ according to skin color.

I wondered how much my parents' generation and the ones before it had thought about their part in the racism scheme. If I didn't get it, and the majority of the white people I'd been speaking to didn't get it, could it be possible that the system was being in part perpetuated by white people who also thought of themselves as good people without any connection to racism?

About this time I came across Edmund Burke's quote "All that is necessary for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing." *That's me,* I thought. *I've been doing nothing.* I hadn't been doing nothing because I didn't care or lacked the courage. I did nothing, at least nothing with any real impact, because I didn't understand how racism worked. If you can't see a problem for what it is, how can you step in and be a part of its solution, no matter how good a person you are?

For years, as I contemplated the plight of those "less fortunate," of all colors, I had pangs of guilt. As I became older and increasingly aware that others had so little, it felt less comfortable to have so much. Learning the ways in which racial categories had been used to elevate the status of whites in relation to all other humans, however, mitigated my sense of passive guilt. Guilt got crushed by culpability. Seeing myself in a system with people

as opposed to a sympathetic observer on the sidelines changed my relationship to the problem. I understood then that it was possible to be both a good person and complicit in a corrupt system.

Once I saw myself as part of the system, I recognized myself as part of the problem. If that didn't sting enough, I also faced the dawning realization that I was now raising my own children to continue the pattern. I'd encouraged them to feel compassion for the "less fortunate" and be grateful for all they had without helping them to see the bigger picture, the system that connected their good fortune to the "less fortunate" they experienced as separate from themselves. I was passing along what I'd been taught, teaching them to be benevolent do-gooders, not critical social thinkers and problem solvers. What I would give to have started my life as a parent with the racial awareness I'm now developing.

Q How would you complete this sentence? I never thought I could perpetuate racism because I am______________________, and I believe____________________________.

COLOR-BLIND

Why saying "I don't see race" is as racist as it gets.

UNTIL I TOOK THE WHEELOCK COURSE, racism had remained an undiscussed topic among my closest circle of white friends and family. It's not that we made a pact never to talk about it; it just never came up. In the same way cancer might not come up if you didn't know anyone experiencing it, we didn't understand that we *were* experiencing it. Racism simply was not on our radar. Moreover, I think I'd concluded early in life that racism was an unseemly topic of conversation. After all, if you didn't have something nice to say, you didn't say it at all. Did I on some level know how "not nice" conversations about race and racism might get?

In an early Wheelock class, we'd been asked to fill out a survey. One of the questions went something like this:

> How often do you talk about race with your family and friends?
> a) daily
> b) once a week
> c) once a month
> d) a couple times a year
> e) never

I went back and forth between "once a month" and "a couple times a year," thinking, *Who talks about race daily?*

All of the students of color answered "daily." I couldn't believe it. I couldn't even fathom what there would be to talk about every day. I didn't yet understand that not talking about race was a privilege available only to white people. I was months away from learning that parents of color had no choice but to teach their children about race and racism. In the film *White Privilege 101: Getting In on the Conversation*, which explores different racial groups' understanding of white privilege, I watched a mirror image of my talking-

about-race epiphany: a young black woman explained, "I couldn't believe it when I found out white people don't talk about race every day. I thought everybody talked about race every day. Not talk about it? How can you not talk about it?"

While most people of color struggle daily to brace themselves for and make sense of our racialized world, navigating its hurdles and setbacks and reaffirming their own right to exist, I'd been gliding through life unaware race was factoring into my life. In his article "The Right Hand of Privilege," Dr. Steven Jones explores invisible privilege by reminding readers of the myriad ways our society is set up for right-handed people. He asks readers, "How many of you, who are right-handed, wake up in the morning thinking 'My people rule'?" It got me thinking: how often do I come home and say, "Whew, not followed by a single cop or store manager all day!" Or, "Man, I just love the equity I've got in this house thanks to hundreds of years of racial advantage!" Invisible privileges are exceptionally easy to ignore.

For me, one by-product of a worldview devoid of race was the absence of overt bigotry. When I say my childhood was all white, I'm actually exaggerating. I had two Asian American friends over the course of my childhood. When one of them came over, my parents likely would have said something positive like, "Isn't that Danny a fun friend for you," or "Anna is so tall and beautiful." I sized up both of these friends pretty much the way I'd size up any friend. Were they fun to be with? My elementary school friend Danny loved to laugh and told great jokes. I adored him. My junior high school friend Anna liked to eat candy and smoke cigarettes. She shared both and taught me how to blow smoke rings—the perfect teen companion. I never spoke about their heritage with them. They never spoke to me about feeling different. If they spoke about race or cultural difference regularly with their families, I knew nothing of it.

One sleepless night this year, as I tossed and turned, thinking about my previously unrecognized white privilege, I imagined what my life would have been like if just one parent had been in a historically undervalued racial group. What if my father had been black? I had heard that to effectively compare skin color difference, one should hold constant other variables such as socioeconomic status, education, health, and so forth. So I imagined my father, still a lawyer, still making a good income, still healthy and robust. Yet despite all these, I realized we could not have lived comfortably in Winchester in the 1960s and '70s, even if the realtors, lenders, and residents had

allowed our family into the town. To borrow an anthropology term, my life would have followed the "hypo-descent rule," in which the "inferior" race in my mix would have become my racial assignment.

We would not have been accepted into the Winchester Country Club, the place where my family spent hours swimming, golfing, playing tennis, and making friendships that would become lifelong personal and professional connections. As a biracial child in Winchester I would have been a visual standout. During my teenage years, when I most longed to be like everyone else, I wouldn't have stood a chance. Instead of nourishing my sense of belonging, my daily life would have planted seeds of insecurity and resentment about my tentative place in a white world. My family's annual summer excursions to our grandparents' hometown in northern Maine would have been no more comfortable. My extended white family would not have looked like versions of me, but reminders that even among my own lineage I didn't fit in. Could my black father have even safely traveled to an isolated town in northern Maine? Chances are a significant portion of our income would have gone to support my father's black parents, who—without a lifetime of access to good education, jobs, and housing followed by a pension and/or Social Security–funded retirement—would have needed our financial assistance. Perhaps they would have moved in with us. When my paternal grandparents died, more than likely there would have been little if any inheritance to pass along to future generations. Just about nothing in my white life could have happened as it did were I anyone but the child of two white parents.

Though it once felt polite to ignore a person of color's race and just see all people as individuals, my former color-blind approach was actually allowing me to ignore my own part in the system of racism. Color-blindness, a philosophy that denies the way lives play out differently along racial lines, actually maintains the very cycle of silence, ignorance, and denial that needs to be broken for racism to be dismantled.

Q **If both of your parents are white, imagine just one of them being a person of color. Rethink your life from birth to the present. How would your race have influenced your experiences and your outcomes?**

DIVERSITY TRAINING 23

The harder I tried, the worse it got.

IN THE FALL OF 1996 I missed a golden opportunity to expand beyond my social circle of white friends. The time had come to choose a preschool for my daughter. Instead of researching which schools had developed racial diversity among staff and families, and which among them had integrated cultural competency into their work with children and families, I simply chose the school that my mom friends were sending their kids to. I was pregnant with child number 2 and sick as a dog. I was in survival mode, retching around the clock. I made the easy choice, the path of least resistance.

By the fourth month of preschool, my morning sickness lifted. As I came to, I realized I'd just signed myself up for a repeat of the playground: more white grown-ups, more white children. Yet my daughter had quickly fallen in love with the school, and I hadn't the heart to tear her away from it. The preschool, I observed, included a few white European families and one Korean family but was hardly reflective of Cambridge's multiracial population. I wondered if I would ever be able to break the habit of surrounding myself with white people. The private cooperative preschool I'd chosen required parents to pay about $5,000 a year and also to volunteer in the classroom one day every three weeks. Had I done my research I would have understood that these two factors would make the school an unlikely choice for single parents or families with two full-time jobs, especially when the city offered free or far less expensive options with no time demands on parents. The school was a custom-made option created by and for upper-middle-class white parents.

A year or two into what would ultimately be a six-year run at this school, a new director came on board. A white South African woman, she had racial diversity on her mind too. The two of us formed a diversity committee and hired a professional to run a workshop for parents. Our goal was

to learn how to create an environment capable of attracting and maintaining families of color. A white man showed up. *Hmmmm, diversity being taught by a white guy?* I was surprised and a little disappointed. I wondered what he could teach us.

"Exploring our own issues with race is an important part of this work," he started off. "If we can't be comfortable with it, our children will pick up on it." He then posed this question to the group: "How would you handle it if you were in a grocery store and your child pointed to a black man and said loudly, 'Why is that man's skin dirty?'"

The room filled with the sound of air sucking through teeth as we twisted and grimaced at the idea.

"That would be awful," someone said. "I'd just try to get to another aisle as quickly as possible."

"I'd say, 'Shhh,' to my child. Then later I'd explain that we don't talk about people that way," another offered.

"Those are the kinds of things most people say," he said gently, "but if you send your child the message that skin color, or race, is a taboo topic, you risk a few things. First, you're suggesting there's something wrong with the black man, so wrong it can't be mentioned. Second, you teach your child that curiosity can get you in trouble. And third, you miss a chance to explain that dark skin isn't dirty—it's just a different color. What we really want is to *use* moments like these to make talking and teaching about race natural. Kids notice difference without judgment, if we let them."

"Ahhhhh." The group let out a collective breath of recognition that of course we didn't want to plant race as a source of anxiety in our kids' minds. What a simple paradigm shift. *Honesty is the best policy*, I thought.

We batted around some words and phrases we might use to answer our child's question. "Remember," he said, "you want to keep the topic open for discussion. See how you might keep it going."

One woman volunteered a different approach. "What if you said, 'Skin color comes in lots of shades of brown—even your skin is brown, just lighter.' Maybe I'd try to make eye contact with the man and smile, like 'I'm trying.'"

Someone else imagined she might say, "Just like eye color and hair color can be different, so can skin color." She said she'd want to keep it simple.

The facilitator encouraged us to add in something like, "That was a good question," to let our children know we valued their curiosity.

Before this workshop, I would have thought a quiet "Shhhh" followed up by a "We don't speak about people that way" would've been the way to go. It excited me to know that there were professionals in the world, "diversity trainers," who could help people like me navigate the complex world of cross-race relations. If this white guy could learn how to navigate multiracial groups, maybe I could too.

Though I had made a shift from wanting to help and fix people of color to wanting to develop my own "diversity" skills, I didn't get how problematic my approach still was. Far from the important work of understanding systemic racism and its impact on my life outcomes and perspective, my new aim was to understand some magical set of cross-racial manners. What drove my pursuit was a desire to learn how not to screw up and embarrass myself so I could preserve my good-person image. Still trapped in my white-dominated belief system, I didn't know what I didn't know. Topping the list was the unknown truth about just how much humility would be required to become an effective agent of change.

So, desperate to be a good white person and not say something embarrassing, I started seeking out diversity workshops. I hoped to gather more tips like the "Don't say 'Shhhh'" one that seemed so helpful. Yet every workshop I went to left me feeling increasingly aware of how easy it was to say something offensive, ironically serving only to ramp up my fears of putting my foot in my mouth and humiliating myself. For the next eleven years I found myself caught in a cycle of seeking wisdom only to become increasingly anxious. The more I became aware of the ways in which I might say the wrong thing and of how fed up many people of color were with white ignorance, the more I sought wisdom.

In January 2008 I attended a diversity workshop at my daughters' middle school. The parent organizers had hired Boston Improv, a theater group, to act out typical scenes in which white people make an unintentional racialized remark, leaving the person of color reeling. Boston Improv encouraged the racially mixed audience of about sixty parents and staff to raise their hands and come up on stage to replace any one of the characters so as to change the course of the scene. The group would then analyze the interactions and replay it using a higher level of racial consciousness.

Sitting in the back of the room, I watched a scene up on stage in which a black teenage boy (an actor) was touring a school to which he was considering applying. The football coach had exchanged one or two words with

him as he checked out the gym, and then the boy's mother approached. The coach thrust his hand out enthusiastically to greet the mother and launched in to tell her how great her son was. He repeated several times, "He's so *articulate*; I think he'd do just *great* here. We could really use someone like him on the team." On about the third or fourth "articulate," a black parent seated just behind me shot her hand in the air and stood, her chair toppling over behind her. Though composed on the outside, the force of her energy sent a shockwave through me. *What just happened?* I wondered frantically. *What did she see that I didn't?* She wove her way through the sea of chairs and marched up onto the stage. She took the place of the boy's mother. "I'll take it from here," she said.

"What do you mean my son is articulate?" she demanded of the coach. "You barely spoke two words to him. How would you know whether or not he's articulate?" Then she added, "And what do you know about his football skills? Have you ever watched him play? Have you spoken to his coach?"

They played it out for a bit, the mother finally educating the coach that his job was to evaluate her son based on his athletic merits, not to make assumptions about how his skin color made him a good athlete. She also drove home the stupidity of praising a person for being articulate when you've barely spoken to them.

I was stunned. I hadn't caught either point on my own.

It turns out the word "articulate" is one of those words white people tend to use to describe a person of color who is able to string a sentence together, the implication being that this is a rare thing, an exception. For a racial group that has had to prove its intelligence over and over again, setting the bar this low is insulting.

I drove home that night thinking, *"Articulate"? Are you kidding me? I use that word all the time. I'm not sure if I've ever used it to describe a person of color, but I call my white husband articulate. What if I slip and use that word around a black person?* My anxiety was through the roof. If that word could cause such rage, what else might I say that would enrage someone? My fear about saying the wrong thing reached an all-time high.

I had never been socialized to say what I thought or felt. Instead I'd been trained to say what I imagined the other person wanted to hear. At the age of eight I'd had a particularly humiliating experience because of saying the "wrong" thing. My mother had driven me to my friend Mary's house to get a sleeping bag I'd left there. My mother parked the car at the curb, and I ran

up to the house on my own. When Mary's young, beautiful mother, whom I adored, answered the door with my sleeping bag, she asked, "How are you?" A few nights earlier, my father had picked me up from Mary's house at three a.m., when I'd developed a stomach bug. I gave Mary's mother all the dirty details of how many times I'd thrown up, what color it was, and how I had now progressed to a diet of Saltines and ginger ale. She shook her head with compassion and told me how glad she was that I was better, for goodness' sake. It seemed to me like a typical good chat with Mary's mom.

When I got back to the car, my mother asked, "What on earth were you talking about for so long?"

I told her about our conversation.

"Why did you tell her all that?"

"She asked how I was."

"Oh my goodness, Debby, don't you know? When someone asks you how you are, they don't want to hear how you *really* are. The proper response to 'How are you?' is 'Fine, thank you.'"

I was mortified. There I'd been yammering on, and maybe all she'd wanted was a "Fine, thank you." I felt exposed and foolish. I remember blushing for one of the few times in my life. My face burned, and my stomach felt bouncy.

The feelings I experienced following the Boston Improv workshop reminded me of this "Fine, thank you" moment with my mother. I felt exposed, vulnerable, and terrified of potential humiliation. I got home that night and wrote an email to the parent, a black man, who'd led the effort to organize the forum and had closed the session by inviting people to contact him with feedback or questions. I poured my heart out in the email, totally dumping all my race-related baggage on this poor man. I confessed to a mounting stew of confusing and upsetting feelings around race. I listed about twenty emotions I was wrestling with, including guilt, despair, fear, hopelessness, confusion, and anxiety. I told him that I didn't feel I was getting any closer to understanding cross-race relations and I didn't know how to proceed. "Do you have any advice for me?" I wrote in closing. I was years from learning just how weary people of color are of being in the position of having to educate white people. I hadn't made the connection that this is one reason why white people becoming racially aware and coaching other white people to do the same is so important. I still thought race was something that belonged only to people of color, and I wanted the rule book.

I got an email back the next day in which he reassured me this stuff was tricky but to try to remove the guilt piece—it would only interfere with progress—and to please stick with it. I liked being encouraged not to feel guilty, but I still felt red-hot, prickly apprehension about saying something stupid and hurtful along the way. And I still had no idea why I kept feeling as if I were banging my head against a wall.

Because my main objective was to learn how not to screw up around people of color, my mind was trained away from what I really needed to learn. Had I understood racism as a social system, or explored the way race had shaped my identity, my perspective, my values, and my achievements, I would have made more progress sooner. Instead, I made the mistake of overlaying my cultural values, such as "Say the right thing" and "Be a good person," on a new, markedly different social situation. I now understand that fear of doing or saying something offensive perpetuated my cultural incompetence.

As I look back now, I can see why our efforts at Agassiz Preschool were lackluster. We put photographs of kids from around the world up on the walls. We attracted a family or two of color, none of whom completed their children's full three years there. When I found out recently that Louis Agassiz, the school's namesake, had devoted much of his nineteenth-century scientific career to proving racial classification and white superiority, I wondered if we'd looked as ill equipped for racial integration as we were. And once again, I had to ask myself if I'd done more harm than good.

Q Think about five rules from the "rule book" of social interaction that you grew up with. For each rule, can you imagine how it interferes with honest cross-cultural dialogue, given what you've learned in this book or from other sources?