

DEBBY

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waking up

white

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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

INTRODUCTION

NOT SO LONG AGO, if someone had called me a racist, I would have kicked and screamed in protest. “But I’m a good person!” I would have insisted. “I don’t see color! I don’t have a racist bone in my body!” I would have felt insulted and misunderstood and stomped off to lick my wounds. That’s because I thought being a racist meant not liking people of color or being a name-calling bigot.

For years I struggled silently to understand race and racism. I had no way to make sense of debates in the media about whether the white guy was “being a racist” or the black guy was “playing the race card.” I wanted close friends of color but kept ending up with white people as my closest friends. When I was with a person of color, I felt an inexplicable tension and a fear that I might say or do something offensive or embarrassing. When white people made blatantly racist jokes or remarks, I felt upset but had no idea what to do or say. I didn’t understand why, if laws supporting slavery, segregation, and discrimination had been abolished, lifestyles still looked so different across color lines. Most confusing were unwanted racist thoughts that made me feel like a jerk. I felt too embarrassed to admit any of this, which prevented me from going in search of answers.

It turns out, stumbling block number 1 was that I didn’t think I had a race, so I never thought to look within myself for answers. The way I understood it, race was for other people, brown- and black-skinned people. Don’t get me wrong—if you put a census form in my hand, I would know to check “white” or “Caucasian.” It’s more that I thought all those other categories, like Asian, African American, American Indian, and Latino, were the real races. I thought white was the raceless race—just plain, normal, the one against which all others were measured.

What I’ve learned is that thinking myself raceless allowed for a distorted frame of reference built on faulty beliefs. For instance, I used to believe:

- Race is all about biological differences.
- I can help people of color by teaching them to be more like me.
- Racism is about bigots who make snarky comments and commit intentionally cruel acts against people of color.
- Culture and ethnicity are only for people of other races and from other countries.
- If the cause of racial inequity were understood, it would be solved by now.

If these beliefs sound familiar to you, you are not alone. I've met hundreds of white people across America who share not only these beliefs but the same feelings of race-related confusion and anxiety I experienced. This widespread phenomenon of white people wanting to guard themselves against appearing stupid, racist, or radical has resulted in an epidemic of silence from people who care deeply about justice and love for their fellow human beings. I believe most white people would take a stand against racism if only they knew how, or even imagined they had a role.

In the state that is somewhere between fear and indifference lies an opportunity to awaken to the intuitive voice that says, "Something's not right." "What is going on here?" "I wish I could make a difference." In my experience, learning to listen to that voice is slowly but surely rewiring my intuition, breaking down walls that kept me from parts of myself, and expanding my capacity to seek truths, no matter how painful they may be. Learning about racism has settled inner conflicts and is allowing me to step out of my comfort zone with both strength and vulnerability in all parts of my life. Racism holds all of us captive in ways white people rarely imagine.

As my white husband said to me recently, "It couldn't have happened to a whiter person." And if I, a middle-aged white woman raised in the suburbs, can wake up to my whiteness, any white person can. Waking up white has been an unexpected journey that's required me to dig back into childhood memories to recall when, how, and why I developed such distorted ideas about race, racism, and the dominant culture in which I soaked. Like the memoir by the guy who loses two hundred pounds or the woman who overcomes alcohol addiction, my story of transformation is an intimate one. In order to convey racism's ability to shape beliefs, values, behaviors, and ideas, I share personal and often humiliating stories, as well as thoughts I spent decades not admitting, not even to myself.

As I unpack my own white experience in the pages ahead, I have no pretense that I speak for all white Americans, not even my four white siblings. Never before have I been so keenly aware of how individual our cultural experiences and perspectives are. That said, all Americans live within the context of one dominant culture, the one brought to this country by white Anglo settlers. Exploring one's relationship to that culture is where the waking-up process begins.

For white readers I've included short prompts and exercises at the end of each chapter to help you explore the themes in depth and in relation to your own experience. To get the most out of them, I suggest using a journal and taking the time to write out your thoughts. I've found the act of writing to be a great excavator of buried thoughts and feelings.

My waking-up process has been built largely on the collective wisdom from people of color throughout the centuries who've risked lives, jobs, and reputations in an effort to convey the experience of racism. It can be infuriating, therefore, to have the voice of a white person suddenly get through to another white person. For this reason, throughout the book I've included the voices and perspectives of people of color to highlight the many ways they have tried to motivate white people to consider the effects of racism.

I can think of no bigger misstep in American history than the invention and perpetuation of the idea of white superiority. It allows white children to believe they are exceptional and entitled while allowing children of color to believe they are inferior and less deserving. Neither is true; both distort and stunt development. Racism crushes spirits, incites divisiveness, and justifies the estrangement of entire groups of individuals who, like all humans, come into the world full of goodness, with a desire to connect, and with boundless capacity to learn and grow. Unless adults understand racism, they will, as I did, unknowingly teach it to their children.

No one alive today created this mess, but everyone alive today has the power to work on undoing it. Four hundred years since its inception, American racism is all twisted up in our cultural fabric. But there's a loophole: people are not born racist. Racism is taught, and racism is learned. Understanding how and why our beliefs developed along racial lines holds the promise of healing, liberation, and the unleashing of America's vast human potential.

Racism is not the unsolvable, mysterious tug-of-war I once thought. There is an explanation for how America got so tangled up with racism. Ironically racism, the great divider, is also one of the most vital links we

share, a massive social dysfunction in which we all play a role. Perhaps the greatest irony for me has been the discovery that after all these years of trying to connect with people I was taught to see as different and less-than, I've learned that the way to start is to connect with parts of myself lost in the process of learning to be white. I invite you to use my story to uncover your own, so that you too can discover your power to make the world a more humane place to live, work, and thrive.

Thank you for reading.

The making of a belief system.

THE PHOTO ALBUMS OF MY CHILDHOOD read like a stroll through the Norman Rockwell Museum. Skating and skiing on the ponds and hills of New England. Holiday gatherings with food-laden tables and exuberant faces. Men on the golf course. Women knitting in rocking chairs next to children playing games by the fire. The vacation-bound family station wagon crammed with children, dogs, and sporting equipment. And everyone, everywhere, white. These iconic visions of a life of comfort and frolic, however, are but the tip of the iceberg. The real story begins beneath the waterline, where the beliefs I adopted over the course of my childhood informed my choices and behaviors.

When I arrived in March 1960, my white parents, Bob Kittredge and Jane Pierce Kittredge, had been married fifteen years and produced my four older siblings, ages six to fourteen. My parents made their home in Winchester, an almost exclusively white Boston suburb set in a leafy green, pond- and lake-filled area north of the city. With excellent public schools and plenty of green space to play in, it provided a clean and safe world in which my mother could take care of the five of us while my father enjoyed an easy commute to his job as an investment lawyer in Boston.

Today, my father would probably be called a workaholic. Long days at the office were often topped off with volunteer board or committee work for the bank, hospital, and country club. I hovered around him when he was at home, playing blocks nearby while he worked. Saturday mornings he worked from his favorite easy chair, his briefcase open in his lap, a pencil between his teeth. The sound of the briefcase snapping shut usually indicated the start of a family project: household jobs that gave me not only a number of skills but also an unshakable work ethic. Under the direction of both parents, the whole family raked, shoveled, mowed, weeded, pruned,

and fertilized. We built a backyard patio ourselves, following a guide from the hardware store about how to lay bricks with the help of a level. I did most of this willingly, just to be a part of the group and spend time with the father I adored.

My father's family was only minimally present in our lives. My dad's mother came from a big Boston Irish Catholic family who owned Doyle's, a bar where word had it Boston's Irish Catholic body politic made back-room deals. The family had also, according to lore, made sure no cronies went thirsty during Prohibition. Unfortunately, relations were fraught on my father's side, in no small part because of my grandmother's choice of a husband in the 1920s. My grandfather, a Protestant farm boy from northern Vermont, never measured up in the eyes of my grandmother's family. For one, he was on the wrong side of the Protestant-Catholic divide at a time when that particular culture clash raged in Boston. For the last fifty years of her life, my grandmother burned with anger at her family for the rejection she felt, even contending that she'd been shortchanged in a cleverly manipulated family will.

In her anger, my grandmother put the kibosh on the Catholic Church and raised her two sons Protestant. She also worked overtime to make sure her children proved her family wrong by becoming the superstars she needed them to be. It worked. My father, through a series of scholarships, excelled his way through prep school, Williams College, and Harvard Law School, making him a worthy match for my mother, a Smith College graduate from an esteemed New England family.

The heart and soul of the family culture in which I was raised came from my mother's family, a large, close-knit clan of interwoven clans of old, white, Massachusetts and Maine families with whom we spent holidays and summer vacations. By the time I came along, my father's Irish Catholic and poor-farmer roots had been so thoroughly extinguished I knew little of them until I was in my twenties. I identified 100 percent as a New England WASP, with parents and an extended family who bore all the trappings of the social elite and an extensive network of like-looking and like-minded family and friends with whom to preserve our Anglicized, Yankee culture.

Like many New England Yankee families, our roots went back to the *Mayflower* and other early boatloads of English settlers. (If you're related to one settler, you're related to a dozen or so: after all, they were each other's

only mates for the first hundred years.) Families like mine had had ample opportunity to accumulate and merge land and wealth, creating a sense of perpetual abundance and stability.

It has perplexed more than a few friends of mine who are not of Yankee descent why on earth people with so much wealth also embody that famous Yankee frugality. Despite mortgage-free houses, private educations, and ever-growing financial investments, families like mine drove cars until the engine's last breath, patched up the elbows of old sweaters to extend their wear, and reused their morning teabags throughout the day. To me it made perfect sense. These visible expressions of my culture aligned seamlessly with family teachings that money was mostly for accumulating, waste showed carelessness, and flashiness—well, there was almost nothing more evident of poor breeding than flashiness.

Frugality must have been a carryover from the Puritan days, as were restrained emotions and extreme modesty about the body. These three values weighed heavily in my understanding of the world. I wonder, though, at which point exuberance, joy, and humor worked their way into my family's culture, for these were highly prized traits that put the party in the Puritans, at least in my family's case.

Like many old New England families, we had a shared vacation home at which we all soaked up and reinforced these values for one another. Ours was, and still is, in northern Maine, where in 1807 a land grant led a branch of my family to help settle a border town. Well over a century later, a log cabin set on a crystal clear, mountain-ringed lake occupied by my family for generations provided the ideal setting in which to unleash the rowdy (but still frugal) family spirit in all its glory.

Full of successful lawyers, bankers, and businessmen who married spirited women, the extended family lived by the motto "Work Hard; Play Hard." Even on vacation we rarely sat still. We spent a month of each summer at the lake, where early-morning flotillas of small boats ferried children, adults, and dogs to the lake's tiny island for campfire breakfasts. Boating, swimming, horseback riding, and tennis competitions filled the days, and raucous multigenerational card games on the screen porch echoed over the lake late into the night. At evening's end, boats and cars would rumble away from the dock and driveway, signaling the children to scamper to their sleeping porch cots to rest up for the next day. People in northern

Maine still joke: "It's black flies in June, mosquitoes in July, and Pierces in August." I am a Pierce. These are my roots. This is the group whose heritage and cultural traditions I made my own, from whom I took my identity.

From a young age I internalized the idea that accomplishment for anyone was simply a matter of intention and hard work. Family gatherings inevitably included stories about our New England ancestors overcoming challenges. Only recently have I come to understand the impact these stories had on me. Tales of *Mayflower* settlers and other early American ancestors suggested to me that America provided a kind of neutral template on which anyone could design the life they chose. Not only did these stories affirm my place in American history; they translated into a sense of confidence and ability that took hold from an early age. Like my siblings and cousins, I could hold my own by age ten at most any family sport or game, organize an overnight camping expedition, or sew and bake all my Christmas gifts for friends and family. Little did I know how each skill was developing in me the kind of strategy, efficiency, productivity, and confidence so valued in American classrooms and corporate offices.

Being accomplished and staying busy were signs of good character, I believed, in part because they offered ways to show my forebears my gratitude. I would rather have been labeled homely than lazy. Somehow, without anyone ever saying it directly, I felt immeasurably beholden to my long-lost ancestors, pioneers who impressed me with their drive, high morals, and hard work. Because they endured great sacrifice in reaching their goal to establish a new nation, I felt it my duty to carry the torch they lit on New England's shores.

Our good fortune and long line of self-sacrificing forebears led me to another belief: complaining about anything was out of the question. Physical and emotional hardiness were parts of the same whole. Unrestrained emotion was seen as a weakness, unless of course it came in the form of a happy yelp at a notable golf shot or tennis slam. Displays of anger showed poor rearing; pride was gauche; sadness, anger, jealousy, and fear were just plain pitiful—all worthy of being shunned with silver-clinking-on-china silence or a swift change of subject. A "good attitude" was highly valued and rewarded. I learned to stuff down my negative feelings and to buck up with expected chippiness. Each cultural norm motivated me to fit in while judging others who didn't. I learned to become deeply uncomfortable around people who exhibited any of the disapproved emotions, especially anger.

How could I live a life of stifled emotions? Simple: it was all I knew. Later in life I would pay a steep price for my emotional numbness, but at the time the focus on the positive served as my North Star. I'll get into this conditioning more later, as it has huge implications for racism. For now, just know that it is no coincidence that one of the things my white mother could not teach me was to honor feelings of outrage. "The point of life is to enjoy it!" she used to say, in a declarative kind of way, raising her fist in the air. When she said it like that, I liked it. So I went with the program.

A reluctant homemaker, my mother thrived instead on athletics, creative projects, and the general chaos of neighborhood kids running in and out of her house and yard. Our house in Winchester was a six-bedroom, Tudor-style home with big first-floor rooms perfect for spreading out our blocks, train tracks, coloring books, and board games. We were allowed to tear around on tricycles, rolling over the worn rugs and by the antiques handed down through generations of New England ancestors. My mother set up the house to run more like a summer camp or after-school program than a typical suburban home. Even if it were just a closet, my mother named various parts of the house for the activity they were meant to inspire—the sewing room, the sports room, the costume room. She taught us to sew, bake, and create plays, backyard fairs, and around-the-block parades. She encouraged us to build elaborate forts of tables and sheets. This household atmosphere of endless possibility surely engrained in me the belief that if I could envision it, it could be done.

On most days we were expected to spend at least some of the time outdoors being active and getting fresh air and sunshine. In addition to having a big yard to play in and a summer home to retreat to, we belonged to the Winchester Country Club and the Winchester Boat Club, where we could swim, play tennis, golf, and sail. Both were just a bike ride away. In the colder months my mother bundled us up in hand-me-down jackets and hand-knit hats, mittens, and scarves to share with us her love of sledding, skiing, and skating. Each November, my father built a backyard skating rink on which the figure-skating girls timed their twirls between the puck slaps of the hockey-playing boys. I had more activities to choose from than I had time to do them.

Being the youngest of five, I spent my entire childhood trying to catch up, figure things out, and not get left behind. "Last but not least," my father used to smile in recognition of my efforts. This status as youngest created

in me a lifelong sensitivity to people—especially children—who feel “less-than” in any way, shape, or form. Despite all the riches, all the fun, and all the internal confidence I developed, I also struggled with feeling left out and left behind. My older siblings always seemed to have more important people to be with and more important things to do. My entire family went to the 1964 World’s Fair in New York City and left me, age four, behind with a babysitter to watch it on TV. I’ve never forgotten my sense of being a second-class citizen as a result of their choice. It was a silent and stuffed-down suffering, for I had learned young that complaining was for losers.

Q What values and admonitions did you learn in your family? Think about education, work, lifestyle, money, expression of emotions, and so forth. Try making a list of ten principles, values, and unspoken beliefs. Siblings and cousins can be good resources for thinking about this. Now consider what conclusions you drew about people who did not appear to follow your family’s belief system.

Everyone wants to know:
Which one is the real issue?

BEFORE I CONTINUE, I have to call out what could potentially become a distraction. By now you've noticed that I am not only white but a white Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP), from a family with plenty of socio-economic advantage. I worry that some white readers will quickly conclude: *This story has nothing to do with me. My family wasn't wealthy or WASPy. We immigrated here and made it from nothing.*

Let me first acknowledge that your relationship to American culture may well be different from mine. With the exception of indigenous people, who have been on this continent for thousands of years, every American has a unique coming-to-America story and a unique location in our social landscape. Yet not to be overlooked is the fact that the vast range of white-skinned ethnicities have one critical factor in common: namely, that ever-visible white skin and the perks (whether acknowledged or not) that come with it. Also crucial is the fact that just as white people tend to look at other racial groups as a group, loading them up with stereotypes and judgments, the same thing happens with the white race. Understanding whiteness, regardless of class, is key to understanding racism.

Likewise, you might find yourself thinking, *Wait a minute—this is about class, not race.* I've often heard people debate the entangled relationship between race and class. "Which one is the real issue?" people ask. "Is it race or class?" I've wondered myself how much my socioeconomic advantage versus my skin color advantage shaped my life and skewed my worldview. I've come to believe it's not an either/or issue. Both are real, and both matter. Trying to determine which one is the "real" issue does a disservice to both. Concluding class is the real issue would give me permission to avoid thinking about race. Similarly, assuming race is the more significant issue overlooks the complications faced by white people caught in a vicious cycle of poverty. Both can trap people in a kind of second-class citizenship. If you can't get

the education you need to get a job to pay for healthy food, medical care, transportation, and a home in a neighborhood with good schools, then you can't educate your children in a school that will prepare them for a job that will . . . and so on. Any cycle that traps someone in a state of perpetual disadvantage is the real issue for the person experiencing it.

And yet race and class are inextricably linked. Because class has long been easier for me to understand than race, this book focuses on the more elusive role skin color has had in my life. In grappling with whiteness, I've tried as much as possible to tease out and examine the race factor. Two stories stand out as ones that helped me understand skin color's potential to carry advantage or disadvantage across the socioeconomic spectrum.

A white man I met at a conference shared a story about his 1970s adolescence in poverty. His father had lost everything as a result of a double addiction to alcohol and gambling. Desperate to get a college education, the son shoplifted to pay his way. In all his years of sneaking electronic equipment out of stores, he got nabbed only once. For that, he was told to hand over what he'd stolen and not come back to the store. A young black man trying the same tuition-funding strategy very likely would have been followed around the store by a suspicious employee and arrested if caught.

On the other side of the equation is a story told by John Hope Franklin, an African American man revered for his contributions as a US historian, educator, and author. In 1995 President Clinton awarded Dr. Franklin the Presidential Medal of Freedom. In celebration of the honor, Dr. Franklin hosted a small dinner at Washington, DC's, exclusive Cosmos Club. That evening, a white club member handed Dr. Franklin—who was dressed in a tuxedo—a coat check tag and asked him to fetch her coat. Nothing like this has ever happened to me or any white people I know.

Unlike poverty, skin color is visible and fixed, forever and always. In both stories I see skin color translating to an expectation on the part of onlookers. White skin can erroneously bring high expectations and the message "You belong"; dark skin can erroneously bring low expectations and the message "You don't belong."

Until I understood the impact skin color can have on one's life, I wasn't able to consider racism in combination with other factors that influence one's culture. The cultures that shape people are breathtakingly complex when you consider all that goes into them. Era, geographic location, language, level of education, ethnic heritage, race, gender, sexual orientation,

income, wealth, religion, health, family personalities and professions, birth order, hobbies, and sports provide multiple variables that mix and match to create a unique culture in each and every family and each and every person. To further complicate matters, each element is a cultural carryover from prior generations. When it comes to culture, the only thing we all have in common is that we have one, and it shapes us.

Each of the above variables creates elements of shared experience that spawn shared beliefs and values. People in certain parts of the country, for instance, develop strong identities as Southerners, Californians, or in my case New Englanders. The same can be said of every variable, including race and class. Yet race stands apart from the variables listed above. Not only is race visible and permanent; it's come to act as a social proxy for one's value in American society. White has long stood for normal and better, while black and brown have been considered different and inferior. Social value isn't just a matter of feeling as if one belongs or doesn't; it affects one's access to housing, education, and jobs, the building blocks necessary to access the great American promise—class mobility.

So there we are, full circle, back to racism and classism and how they interact with each other. A discipline within the study of race, intersectionality, examines the myriad ways cultural differences intersect with one another to create unique life experiences and perspectives. That's another book. For now, consider this one story. An acquaintance of mine is a middle-aged white woman from the Midwest. Comparing notes one day, she talked about how her parents were working-class folks struggling financially. They were overtly racist as they spoke and acted from a deep fear that black people were going to move in and take their jobs or buy a house in their neighborhood and lower the value of their home. In contrast, my parents' upper-middle-class world insulated them to a point where they felt little threat. Their lack of fear allowed them to pass along to me a sense of responsibility to help the poor. An element of class you'll notice in my story is the persistent sense of needing to "help" and "fix." These characteristics are considered by many to be trademarks of the dominant class.

You may also notice that I often conflate racism and classism. Though at times it may sound as if I think all white people are loaded and all black people are downtrodden, I know it's not that cut-and-dried. But I need to start somewhere, and this book is the story of the *beginning* of my racial learning journey. As much as I tried to untangle and hold separate the racial thread,

at certain points I couldn't. I'm getting better at it as I go, but it's a long, slow process of distancing myself from the embedded beliefs I internalized throughout my young life.

I hope that the fact my story is loaded with socioeconomic privilege doesn't prevent white readers from finding their own connection to race and racism. Every white person can awaken to the impact the ideology and practice of whiteness has on our brothers and sisters of color. Despite our cultural differences, what's crucial to grasp are the ways in which our shared social system ultimately connects all our stories into a single collective narrative. My story is just one point of entry into our shared history.

Q Class is determined by income, wealth (assets), education, and profession. Betsy Leondar-Wright, program director at Class Action, suggests these categories as a way of thinking about class:

Poverty

Working Class

Lower-Middle Class

Professional Middle Class

Upper-Middle Class

Owning Class

How would you characterize your parents' class? Your grandparents' class? Your class as a child? Your class now? What messages did you get about race in each?