

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

Lessons my mother couldn't teach me.

"WHATEVER HAPPENED TO ALL THE INDIANS?" I asked my mother on a Friday morning ride home from the library. I was five years old.

The library's main draw for me had always been a large, colorful mural located high on the lobby wall. It featured three feathered and fringed Indians standing with four colonial men on a lush, green lakeshore. The colonists didn't hold much interest, perhaps because these were images familiar to me, a white New England girl with colonial ancestors. The dark-skinned Indians and their "exotic" dress, on the other hand, took my breath away. The highlight of my library excursions was sitting in a chair and gazing up at the Indians on the wall as my mother chatted with the librarian checking out our family's weekly reading supply.

About a year earlier, my mother, amused by my interest, had suggested I check out some books about Indian life. Lying on my bedroom floor back at home, I had pored over the images. Colorful illustrations of teepees clustered close together, horses being ridden bareback, and food being cooked over the campfire added to my romanticized imaginings of the Indian life. Children and grown-ups appeared to live in an intergenerational world in which boundaries between work and play blurred. Whittling, gardening, cooking over the fire, canoeing, and fishing—these were enough for me. I wanted to be an Indian. I collected little plastic Indian figures, teepees, and horses. For Halloween my mother made me an outfit as close to the one in the mural as she could.

Eventually, my infatuation led to curiosity. If I had descended from colonists, there must be kids who'd descended from Indians, right? I wondered if there was a place I could go meet them, which is what led me that Friday morning to ask the simple question, "Whatever happened to all the Indians?"

"Oh, those poor Indians," my mother said, sagging a little as she shook her head with something that looked like sadness.

"Why? What happened?" I turned in my seat, alarmed.

"They drank too much," she answered. My heart sank. "They were lovely people," she said, "who became dangerous when they drank liquor."

I could not believe what I was hearing. *Dangerous?* This would have been the last word I would have applied to my horseback-riding, nature-loving friends. "Dangerous from drinking?" I asked.

"Yes, it's so sad. They just couldn't handle it, and it ruined them really."

This made no sense to me. My parents drank liquor. Some friends and family drank quite a bit actually. How could something like liquor bring down an entire people? People who loved grass and trees and lakes and horses, the stuff I loved?

I must have pressed her for more because my mother, who along with my father sought to protect my siblings and me from anything upsetting, went on to tell a tale in vivid detail about children hiding under a staircase, in pitch blackness, trying to escape the ravages of their local friendly Indian now on a drunken rampage, ax in hand. They were all murdered.

"Well, what happened to the Indian?" I asked, my heart beating in my chest.

She paused, thinking. "You know, I don't know," my mother answered sincerely. We both went silent.

I never questioned this narrative's truth or fullness despite its dissonance with the peaceful images in my books. My mother, full of kindness and empathy, told it to me. I don't question that she believed it. She told me a version of a story as she had heard it from someone else, who also likely believed it. I had no other, more complete historical context in which to place this story about a nearly extinguished culture now neatly tucked away on isolated reservations I didn't know existed. I had minimal knowledge of how Native peoples had long flourished in their own cultures before white Europeans decimated them with theirs. It makes me wonder how many lies and half-truths I've swallowed and in turn inadvertently passed along in my lifetime.

Stereotypes, I've learned, are not so much incorrect as incomplete. It's true that alcohol was a factor in the waning of indigenous people. But there's infinitely more to the story. What my mother didn't tell me was that the white colonists had purposefully introduced alcohol to Native Americans, using it to weaken, subdue, and coerce them into signing over land and rights. She didn't explain how disease brought by our ancestors had infected and killed Indian men, women, and children, in some cases killing

90 percent of a Native nation's population. Nor did she tell me that those who survived disease found themselves in dehumanizing federal programs designed by white men to "civilize" Indians, separating them from one another and stripping them of the languages, customs, beliefs, and human bonds that had held them together for centuries.

She didn't help me understand what it might have felt like, for people as attached to their families and homes as I was to mine, to be torn from theirs. She didn't turn and gently ask me to imagine what it might be like to lose nine out of ten of my closest friends and family. She didn't tell me that today indigenous people use words like "invaders" and "terrorists" and "genocide" to describe the Pilgrims and their actions. She didn't explain that the English coming to America was part of a larger historical pattern of white Europeans invading countries, exploiting resources, and "civilizing" people they considered to be savages, all in an entangled quest to dominate through Christianity and capitalism. She couldn't tell me any of these things because she herself had never learned them.

The question I asked that Friday morning was typical of a young child trying to make meaning of the world around her. Unfortunately, my mother's own upbringing had left her lacking the necessary knowledge and life skills to connect me to my world through historical truths and critical analysis. Instead I got hand-me-down snippets that never added up and left me feeling confused and upset. Neither my mother nor I understood that moment as one of many in which she was racializing me. Without ever once mentioning the words "race" or "skin color," my mother passed along to me the belief that the two were connected to inherent human difference.

Without meaning to, on that day or any other, my mother gravely misled me. She didn't do it because she was evil or stupid or had upholding racism on her mind. My mother was warm, compassionate, and bright. She told me the versions of events as she knew them, errors and omissions included. Just as she had once done, I used my scant information to construct a story about humanity. Over the course of my childhood the media confirmed my idea of Indians as "savage" and "dangerous." I came to see them as drunks who grunted, whooped, yelled, and painted their faces to scare and scalp white people. What a tragedy that over time my natural curiosity, open mind, and loving heart dulled, keeping me from confronting wrongs I never knew existed.

That Friday morning was the first and last time my mother and I spoke of the Indians' fate. Shock gave way to disappointment. My little collection

of plastic Indians lost its luster and ultimately got boxed up and put in a dark corner of the attic. Out of sight meant out of mind. First, though, I separated out the horses and built a barn of cardboard for them, using oat-meal for shavings and packing straw for hay. As I deconstructed the Indian world according to my wants and needs, and parceled out its parts to new roles and hidden spaces, I had no idea of the parallel playing out between my actions and those of white people over the centuries.

As stunning as my mother's version of events is for its incomplete portrayal of indigenous people, equally powerful to me is the subtle and indirect way it contributed to the ongoing portrayal of white people as the superior race. The story whispered to me the idea that Indians were somehow "other," like a whole separate and inferior species. Indians were drunks, so white folks must not be. Indians were dangerous, so white people must be safe. Indians lacked self-control, so white people must really have their act together. Indians weren't good enough or tough enough to survive, but white people sure were, even when they drank liquor. Like drops of water into a sponge, moments like these saturated me with the belief that I was of a superior race and wholly disconnected from other races—except as a potential victim.

On top of all of this is another critical point. Embedded in her incomplete story was a message that just one piece of information, drawn from a single perspective, was good enough to form a conclusion. Neither my mother, nor the media, nor my schooling encouraged me to dig deeper, to find indigenous people and ask how they told their own history. My mother passed along to me not only incomplete information but also an intellectual habit of not questioning authority, not pursuing other dimensions of a story, and not having the interest or stamina to grapple with complex issues. As a result, I came to view history as something set in stone, printed in books, painted in pictures, and taught by teachers who delivered facts. I took it all at face value, constructing for myself a one-dimensional world in which people were right or wrong, good or bad, like me or not.

Q What stereotypes about people of another race do you remember hearing and believing as a child? Were you ever encouraged to question stereotypes?

The downside of perpetually looking on the bright side.

IN CONSIDERING THE CULTURAL INFLUENCES that shaped me, I've thought a lot about how optimism infused itself into my very being. I used to think it was something I inherited, a kind of hardwired chipper trait. Recently, however, I came across a description of Baby Boomers as a "postwar generation of opportunity and optimism." Ha! I thought. There it is again, me attributing something to myself when it actually is as much about my culture as my character. It was yet another moment in this unending journey of coming to see the ways in which I soaked up and enacted larger social forces.

The year I was born, 1960, marked the fourteenth year of the postwar baby boom—generally defined as 1946–1964. With their oldest child born in 1946 and their last in 1960, my family embodied the national fertility phenomenon resulting from the sudden influx of men in their early to mid-twenties returning from World War II. My father and uncles were just a handful of the millions of GIs who returned home to women awaiting marriage. Making things even rosier, the US government stood poised to inject cash into the GIs' dreams to settle down, pursue careers, and start families. Known as the GI Bill, this federal program allowed men, like those in my family, to pursue higher education on the government's nickel and buy homes with low-rate, government-backed mortgages.

The bill funded an economic and housing boom that created a vibrant suburban sprawl and a culture to go with it. New suburbs popped up around the country, while established suburbs burgeoned. Free from burdensome loan payments, suburbanites consumed and accumulated in grand proportions. Across America, families like mine purchased once-rare commodities at exponential rates. The sale of televisions, cars, and single-family homes exploded. Ads and television shows promoted goods while projecting images of the suburban ideal onto the popular psyche, promising a world of happy nuclear families, clear gender roles, manicured lawns, throngs of

children on shiny new bikes, and neat driveways harboring stylish new cars. Suburban life and all it entailed became a norm for millions of American families. By the time I was born, the newly defined American dream had become an attainable reality for millions of white families. It turns out that the culture of achievement, security, and optimism I so thoroughly internalized was part of a larger pattern.

Being born and raised in the post-World War II baby boom era exposed me to a particularly potent brand of optimism that mixed like a gin punch cocktail with the New England Yankee can-do spirit that had been defining my family for generations. Not having experienced the Great Depression or World Wars I and II, I believed optimism was a given and achievement and security were available to all who bucked up and kept their nose to the grindstone. Optimism seemed not only a realistic mindset, but necessary for achievement. After all, people who complained or moped were unlikely to get far in life. Upbeat was the attitude of the successful.

The 1960s media-delivered world of white people confirmed my understanding of life as pretty comfortable. Ozzie and Harriet could have been my parents. Beaver Cleaver could have been my neighbor. The world was jovial, problems were surmountable, and people got along. Life was comfortable. Normal was a house or two, a car or two, a pet or two, a TV or two. The social issues of my TV world were limited to squabbles and misunderstandings between family and friends and could be solved in thirty minutes or less. And everybody was white.

History lessons further reinforced the world as I knew it. At home and in school I learned about my country's history exclusively through the lens of white European Americans, the kind of people I'd heard about in my own family history. The guys in the history books looked a lot like the guys in the portraits at the Winchester Savings Bank. I used to squint and imagine them without their wigs and goofy old-fashioned clothes, turning them into people I might bump into on the street. The black-and-white photos of former and current hospital presidents hanging in the Winchester Hospital lobby looked a lot like the men I knew. My father was even one of them. Everywhere I looked I saw a world I wouldn't have described as white. I would have told you it was just the world. These were the guys who ran things. I knew and liked them. They felt familiar. Life was friendly, and I belonged. Of course I was optimistic.

My parents spoke often of their commitment to making our childhoods worry-free. They never argued, at least not in front of us. They never

spoke ill of anyone else. They didn't let us watch the news. They didn't speak about world events unless they were cheerful events, like Neil Armstrong landing on the moon or Mark Spitz winning seven gold medals. I wish they were still alive so I could ask them what their thinking was. How much was their impulse to protect us in reaction to the hardship they'd experienced in their own young lives? I imagine that fifteen years of economic depression and family and friends fighting in world wars must have made for tense households. I can't know their intentions, but I can say that the impact was to leave me both programmed to look for hope in dire circumstances and ill prepared for a world far more complex and multidimensional than the one I knew. (It's not lost on me that this tension led me to this book.)

As I've swapped childhood stories with people of color, I've learned the ways in which many parents of color prepare their children for a hostile world. Trying to protect children by providing a worry-free childhood is a privilege of the dominant class—a white privilege. Many parents of color teach their children to keep their hands in plain sight if a police officer is near and to avoid white neighborhoods in order to avoid being questioned simply for being there. In the same way I was trained to make myself visible and seek opportunity, many children of color are trained to stay under the radar and avoid suspicion.

Another thing that kept family conversations light in my house was the ability to avoid sharing disturbing history and current events. Watching the documentary *Cracking the Codes: The System of Racial Inequality* gave me a glimpse into how much more difficult such avoidance must be for families of color. Just trying to pass down family history would inevitably lead to upsetting truths. In the film, a black woman describes a childhood conversation she had with her mother. It begins when the young girl asks her mother why neighborhoods in her hometown, Washington, DC, look so different. Question by question and answer by answer, the mother and daughter ease the conversation all the way back to slavery. The daughter, struggling to understand the concept, presses her mother, just as I had pressed mine about the Indians. "What do you mean? They had them doing a lot of chores?" the girl asks. Her mother tries to explain slavery. "Oh no sugar, uh-uh, they couldn't be married, they couldn't keep their children, they didn't have their own souls, everything was taken from them, and you know your grandfather? His father was a slave. That's why he has that African name, Osi." The girl is stunned. "Well, why did the people let themselves be slaves?" she asks.

Her mother answers, "Oh Ericka, it wasn't like that. The whole government supported it."

I had no awareness of girls like Ericka or mother-daughter conversations about history not told in textbooks. The image of young Ericka trying to take all that in shook me. I imagined having a conversation about a topic so tragic with my own children. It felt unbearable to me to have to taint a young heart and mind with such injustice. Yet I don't believe that avoiding all potentially upsetting conversations serves anyone. There is no painless or easy way to convey truth to our children.

I remember the day Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated. I was sliding down the banister when I heard our sitter, an older white woman with blue-collar roots, scream in the TV room. I ran in to see why she was making such a fuss. Her hand was over her mouth, her eyes were glued to the TV, and tears flowed down her cheeks. "King's been shot," she said in monotone, more to the TV than to me. I had just turned eight.

"What king?" I asked.

"Dr. King. Dr. Martin Luther King," she answered without looking at me. "What will become of America?" she asked no one in particular.

I still remember climbing those stairs for another ride down the banister, surprised that no one had ever told me America had a king, let alone one who was also a doctor.

Toward the end of his life, my father, out of the blue, said to me, "I think maybe your mother and I made a mistake by trying to protect you kids so much." The more we talked, the more I understood that as he watched the marriages of three of his five children fall apart, and his four daughters' struggles to balance work and family, he questioned how the sheltered life of comfort, innocence, and ease he'd conspired to create may have played a role. "I don't think we did our job in preparing you for the real world," he said. He wasn't in a contemplative mood; he was deeply distraught.

Invoking the optimism so prevalent in our family, I think I said something with a lighthearted laugh to comfort him. "We could have turned out a lot worse, Dad." Though that is what I felt at the time, the more I understand the world, the more I think he was right. By pretending the world was virtually problem-free, my family culture left me grossly underprepared to solve problems. Oh, I could fix a flat tire or jury-rig a spent boat rope, but messes created by difference of opinion or lifestyle? Those left me high and dry, as I looked on with no tools to understand the situation, de-escalate

tension, or navigate toward a solution. In my case, my protected childhood only made for years of stress and confusion about real-world issues. If I had been introduced to some holes in the illusion of perfection, I might have been able to peek through and see the many sufferings and contradictions in the world around me. I might also have understood earlier in life how to connect to the world beyond mine.

Q What were some of the major economic, political, demographic, and pop culture trends from ten years before your birth until age twenty? How did they show up in your life? How do you think they influenced your beliefs?

The exclusive world of thriving people raising thriving children.

FOR MUCH OF MY LIFE, the word “exclusive” brought warm, fuzzy feelings. An *exclusive* resort, *exclusive* club, or *exclusive* school meant top-notch quality. It felt good to know I was a part of an exclusive place or group of people because it made me feel that I too was exclusive, meaning of top-notch quality. But doesn’t “exclusive” actually mean people are being excluded? How did it ever become okay with me to exclude someone? In the same way I hadn’t given much thought to the implications of “race,” I hadn’t given much thought to the concept of “exclusivity.” I took on the word, and I took on the lifestyle, without thinking through the implications.

For me, part of the waking-up-white process is acknowledging that I’m a recovering lemming. Of course I did things like live in Winchester, play at the Winchester Country Club, and ski at the “exclusive” ski club to which we belonged, because that was the life into which I was delivered. I simply went along to get along. I never considered that the space I was taking, or the resources I was using, might be being withheld from another to make it all possible.

I also had no idea of the valuable and coveted social network I was forming. I never imagined that the life that felt so regular to me could perpetuate my good fortune and ensure my corner of the market. As I moved about in a world where CEOs were just dads and board chairs just friends and family, I developed a wealth of social capital, a network of people and a cultural affinity with them, that would later add to my own success by employing me or supporting my fundraising efforts. It’s impossible to fully quantify the accumulated and compounded advantages that came simply from living day in and day out with a small group of people connected to each other and to untold resources.

Beyond Winchester my parents’ well-established New England network of white friends and family immersed me in a monocultural world. If we

traveled, we stayed with people who lived in homes a lot like ours, belonged to country clubs a lot like ours, attended schools like ours, and had similar cars, TV sets, artwork, and antiques. My exceptionally sheltered world felt familiar and easy to navigate everywhere I went.

The social rules remained constant. I remember being shocked when my mother asked me to change up my language and say "Yes, ma'am," to my Southern aunt. I looked at my mother as if she had two heads. *I don't say "ma'am,"* I thought. *That's not the right way—that's just weird.* She gave me the hairy eyeball enough times that, for the course of the trip, I conformed to this Southern convention. That's about as multicultural as I got. Right through my senior year of college, life exposed me mostly to other versions of myself and the customs and traditions I considered normal.

My friends and I took our socializing seriously, often acting like miniature versions of our parents, reinforcing for one another the expected responsibilities and rewards as descendants of people we believed to be New England's "first people" (overlooking the fact that indigenous people were actually the real "first people"). Catchy little phrases such as "Blood is thicker than water" and "Don't air your dirty laundry" reminded us to stick together, show our excellent breeding and rearing, and set an example for others. I tried to buck the system here and there (which you'll read about later) but eventually conformed to the demands of the strict social code of upper-middle-class life. At country clubs and other likely gathering places where intersecting clans of WASP families met and mingled with the assurance of practiced square dancers, I mastered every step.

Being with people a lot like me allowed me to avoid any serious cultural clashes. Not only were family and friends similarly raised; a key social code included avoiding conflict by keeping social interactions light and cheerful. "Never discuss politics or religion" served as an explicit conversation guideline. The rest were implicit—learned by feedback. If I stuck to conversation within my culture's conversational norms, I'd get a laugh or a follow-up question. If I said something outside the norms, the tension, silence, or swift change of topic would tell me I'd made a misstep. If there'd been a handout on conversation principles, it might have said: *Don't discuss religion, politics, money, negative emotions, fears, resentments, vulnerabilities, or bodily functions. Do discuss weather, hopes and dreams (as long as they're none of the above), travels, who you know, who's doing what where, commuting routes and times, consumer products you've tried and do or do not*

like, where you go/went to school, sports, and music. Remember, it might have said: *problems are private*.

Perhaps this is why the civil rights movement seemed so removed from my life until two decades after landmark protests and policy changes shook the country. Only recently, in a family conversation about my awakening, did my two oldest sisters tell me of their involvement in the movement. As Smith College students, both had traveled to the South. One sister spent a week at the predominantly black Benedict College in South Carolina and followed up by arranging to have a renowned Benedict professor speak at Smith. The other sister traveled to North Carolina to register voters, staying with a black host family. Why did I never hear of their efforts? Perhaps the answer lay in the fact that my parents had asked at least one sister not to mention anything to our aunt and uncle living in South Carolina, who they presumed would not approve. Did they intentionally not say anything to me in an effort to prevent a chatty four-year-old from spilling the beans? Or was it a way to avoid the risk of bringing a potentially contentious conversational topic to the dinner table? In either case, the omission contributed to the ignorance that now makes me burn with regret.

People of all colors have been incredulous about just how sheltered my childhood was. "Didn't you see pictures of the civil rights movement in the paper?" they ask, trying to imagine how the images and stories of the era could have escaped me entirely. Here's the embarrassing truth: until I was a teenager, the only parts of the paper I ever saw were the sports and comic sections. The paper landed on our front porch every morning but was gone before I could sit down for breakfast. Each day, when my father left at exactly 7:03 to catch the 7:18 train to Boston, he folded the paper and snapped it into his briefcase, along with his peanut butter and jelly sandwich and train fare, which my mother placed on the kitchen table. The paper left with my father, who joined all the other commuting men striding down the street in their gray suits and fedoras, each carrying a briefcase as they headed to buildings in Boston's financial district, where they would meet and mingle with friends and colleagues from other exclusive, walled-off towns and neighborhoods.

In the absence of larger social concerns, my childhood was filled with the excitement of days ahead, of a time when I would step into the roles I watched the adults in my life play. I studied them deeply out of both affection and a desire to emulate them. Saturday night dinner parties at our

house, when I'd weave through the crowd handing out appetizers, gave me the ideal opportunity to examine my parents' friends. Standing around the room in a smoke-swirled haze in their V-neck sweaters and pearls, swishing ice in their cocktail glasses, and throwing their heads back with laughter, they made being a grown-up look wonderful to me.

Until the age of twenty-two, when I graduated from college, this was my world. I was surrounded by similar houses with similar families of children with homemaker mothers and commuting suit-and-tie fathers. Now I can see they were white children with white homemaker mothers and white commuting fathers. That white-skinned people were the only ones I knew never struck me as anything other than perfectly normal. They weren't white people to me—just people. And this, I assumed, was the American experience.

If I could turn back time and rewrite the script for those years, my parents would be deft at sharing with me the realities of American history and current events, especially the civil rights movement. They would explain to me the movement's ideals and the strength and courage of the resisters. Instead of protecting me from what they may have perceived as frightful events fit only for adults, they would point out the courage of people on different sides of the racial divide coming together to encourage America to live up to its ideals. They would help me imagine what it must feel like to hold your ground at a lunch counter or in your town's first integrated high school. They would explore with me the similarities and differences between the way my ancestors risked their lives to free themselves from English rule and the way black Americans and their white allies were now risking their lives to free themselves from segregation. My heart aches to think of the lessons I lost in being "protected" from this powerful and poignant chapter in American history.

As it was, I was left to imagine myself imitating the only world I knew. My parents trained me well to succeed in a world I would ultimately find too constrained. Did I sense on some level that injustice was in play? Or was it the sick, sad feeling that came over me when I was asked to tamp down feelings and steer conversations away from authenticity and toward a narrow definition of politeness? Whatever it was that drove me to pursue the life I did, in the mix was a need to find out what existed beyond the walls so I could make sense of what was happening within them. I never anticipated having to challenge my belief that everything I had was earned or inherited

from people who'd earned it. The big houses, the private educations, the clubs, the optimism—all of these I believed were earned through nothing other than hard work and high ethics. For most of my life the idea of unearned privileges remained unheard of, an unfamiliar concept from an unknown American reality.

Q How connected to or disconnected from the larger world was your family, your school, your town? How much did you understand about conflict and struggle in your world or beyond? How did you make sense of people who had material wealth and people who didn't? What was your family's attitude about the people in power?

The course that changed the course of my life.

ONLY WHEN I MOVED, shortly after college, to the city of Cambridge, Massachusetts, did I start to see racial disparities that signaled something was terribly amiss. From 1984 to 1994 I worked in arts administration, where I developed a passion for connecting arts organizations to “inner-city” schools and neighborhood centers, disproportionately populated by kids of color. Because of my family’s connections to Boston’s corporate and foundation gatekeepers, raising money came fairly easily, and I truly believed my efforts to bring arts to inner-city schools would help “the disadvantaged” experience something positive that would bring lasting change. I had no idea what I was up against or how supremely ill equipped for the task I was.

Once I had children of my own, I shifted my focus exclusively to urban schools, first as a volunteer and eventually as a classroom teacher. I became increasingly disturbed by the racial divide I observed, as well as by my ongoing inability to explain it. Buildings seemed to be shiny and new and full of white kids, or dilapidated and old and full of black kids. In my children’s Cambridge elementary school, where students of multiple races actually coexisted, the white kids appeared happier and performed better academically than their peers of color.

Looking for answers, I worked on diversity committees, went to diversity forums, and participated in outreach efforts to include and welcome students and families of color. The more I tried to understand and “help,” the more confused I became. The fact that my efforts lacked traction mystified me. The persistent worrying about doing or saying something wrong perplexed me. Worst of all, over time I started to wonder if I might be doing more harm than good. Lurking in my consciousness was a haunting sense that I was missing something.

In the winter of 2009, at age forty-eight, I began coursework for my master’s degree in special education at Boston’s Wheelock College. The class

"Racial and Cultural Identity" offered the only opening for me, a late registrant. Though the decades since college had stripped away some of the naiveté left by my sheltered white childhood, nothing had prepared me for the dose of reality I was about to get. I expected the course to teach me about "other" races and cultures so I could better help students of color. I suppose I thought I'd get some tips, some do's and don'ts that would keep me from offending students and parents. Much to my surprise, however, the course asked me to turn the lens on myself. I had never thought to look within for solutions to a problem I imagined as outside of myself, and what I found shocked me.

In the first class the professor explained that we would be examining our own cultural and racial identities deeply, "deeeeeply," she'd said a second time, slowly, for emphasis. Huh? I thought. Racial what? Racial identity?! What am I going to do? Not thinking I had a race, the idea of asking me to study my "racial identity" felt ludicrous. On top of that, I reasoned, the subject of race was not new to me. After all, I'd had a twenty-five-year run of creating opportunities to bring together different cultural groups and to serve underserved populations. I'd raised money and developed programs for inner-city youth and families, disproportionately black and poor. I'd attended every diversity workshop that would have me. My teaching job in the Cambridge public schools brought me face-to-face every day with young children and families from an array of racial and cultural backgrounds. I saw difference as just difference, not better or worse. I was nice and kind to people of all races and cultures. I believed every person could make it in America, if just given the opportunity. Typical of a long-standing pattern of thinking I knew more than I actually did, I felt skeptical that examining myself could further my understanding of others.

I suppose in that "we're going to examine ourselves deeply" moment, I was about 90 percent sure this was the wrong approach and 10 percent curious. I also felt drawn to the professor and her candid way of speaking about racial difference. Fortunately I kept my mind open just enough to get drawn in, bit by bit, each class wedging in enough new information to erode old understandings and leave me questioning assumptions. It didn't take long for me to bump up against the limitations of my knowledge of American history, despite the fact that I had majored in history in college.

As my understanding of America's history broadened, isolated bits of disconnected data found their logical place in a tapestry carefully woven

over time. The dilapidated and isolated inner-city neighborhood, the phone call that landed me my first job, the diversity initiatives that fell short, the way my white students consistently rose to the top, my mixed feelings about affirmative action, friendships with people of color that felt stilted—suddenly they all became united in a single narrative. It was as if I'd been examining the world through a telephoto lens, zooming in on events, communities, and individuals without putting each in context or connecting one to the other. As my lens retracted, more of the tapestry came into view, revealing the interplay between various scenes. Racism wasn't about this person or that, this upset or that, this community or that; racism is, and always has been, the way America has sorted and ranked its people in a bitterly divisive, humanity-robbing system.

Q The late historian Ronald Takaki referred to the history taught in American schools as “The Master Narrative,” the version of history told by Americans of Anglo descent. Think about what you did not study. Did you learn about Lincoln’s views on enslaved black people? Anti-immigration laws of the nineteenth century? America’s laws regarding who could and could not gain citizenship? The Native Americans who had once lived on your town’s or school’s land?

Freeing myself from the conflict-free world of WASP etiquette.

ONE OF MY FIRST CHALLENGES in the hours and days following the workshop upset was to stay at the conference and just let the feelings come. Avoiding negative emotions was a remnant of my upbringing that still fit like an old glove. The process of socialization I underwent in my early years to adjust my naturally emotional self to the more constrained customs and expectations of my culture left me with some less than helpful coping skills. Rather than face feelings like anger, embarrassment, or guilt head-on, my first reaction usually involved an urge to run, defend myself, blame someone, or have a stiff drink. Over time, however, I'd learned to listen to my grown-up self and remember that if I didn't deal with unwanted feelings, they'd catch up with me sooner or later.

As much as I wanted to escape the conference, I understood that staying and using the discomfort to learn and grow would be the wiser choice. One of the things that kept me going was the indebtedness I felt to the rough-cut group who had supported me in my worst moment. Rarely in my life had people engaged with me so authentically during a time of distress. In my culture, we would have pretended everything was fine, that it wasn't a big deal. I too once thought avoiding painful topics the best tonic for one who's hurting. Had a family member or friend from my home culture seen what happened in the rough-cut workshop, I'm guessing they'd have called home and, with the best of intentions, forewarned others in a hushed tone, "Don't ask Debby about the workshop. It didn't go so well." I would have pretended to be fine around this person and then distracted myself with one of my aforementioned avoidance tactics. This was my first experience of having a group of people—strangers, at that—help me hold my pain and encourage me to stick with the discomfort to learn from it. In a strange sense, I felt more cared for and understood by my workshop allies than by many people I'd known for years. I felt broken yet connected,

in pain but acknowledged, a welcome contrast to what I'd known for much of my life.

My parents—warm, funny, kind, and smart, so competent in so many ways—were utterly unprepared for one thing in life: navigating emotional conflict. Typical of their era, race, and class, they believed unpleasanties belonged under the rug, where, the hope must've been, the magic winds of time would blow them away. Bucking up and soldiering on without complaint—this is how successful people got on. Our ancestors did it, and so should we.

I'm guessing more than a few people reading this will say, "Wait a minute—my family's white, and we yelled and screamed at each other all the time." Not every white family buys into the culture of niceness and shuts off their feelings. In fact, I'm guessing my brother, who married a French woman, may have this very response. When he first met his wife's family, he couldn't believe the way they'd erupt with anger, hear each other out, and be done with it, moving on with the conversation or day's activities as if nothing out of the ordinary had just happened. It's true: not all white families adopt the dominant WASP culture as thoroughly as mine did. However, for centuries, people have learned that in America's classrooms, boardrooms, and public places, those who most often succeed are those who conform to the dominant culture prototype, which demands emotional restraint.

In my home, expressing "troublesome" feelings not only was not rewarded but was met with punishment in the form of silence or being exiled to my room. Complaints brought a quick "You'll be fine," perhaps intended to reassure me but having the impact of making me think I shouldn't feel the way I did. The message I took from it was that negative feelings were wrong, and something was wrong with me for having them. I learned to keep my unseemly emotions to myself until, over time, I learned not to feel them at all. The admonition "If you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything at all" served as a cultural signpost as I developed an acute sense of what not to say and what not to feel in order to remain valued.

One of my earliest memories of trying to resist the culture of niceness into which I was being indoctrinated has to do, coincidentally, with a race-related family upset. My oldest sister, Diane, was nineteen, and I was five. The year was 1965. One day at breakfast, Diane was crying—something I'd never seen her do before.

"What's going on? Why are you crying, Diane?" I asked. Her vulnerability made me uneasy. Her sadness made my heart heavy. She didn't answer.

Eventually another sister, Emily, eleven at the time, leaned over and whispered, "Mom and Dad won't let her go to *A Patch of Blue*." *A Patch of Blue*, Emily explained, was a movie in which a "Negro" kissed a white girl. Diane's boyfriend had invited her to go see it with him. I couldn't grasp the problem. I had no idea what a "Negro" was—a cookie, maybe? Furthermore, I couldn't remember my parents ever saying no to a movie.

I started in again. "Why can't she go? I don't get it."

I couldn't stand Diane's crying and my siblings' awkward silence. I got up from the table and tracked down my mother. I found her in the sewing room.

"I think it's stupid Diane can't go to that movie," I said defiantly. "I think you should let her go."

My mother, working on a sewing project, ignored me. To my right sat a McCall's dress pattern piece she had laid out, its delicate brown translucent paper ready for tracing the fabric beneath it. I reached up, crumpled it, and whipped it at her like a snowball. Now I had her attention. She glared at me, hands on hips, her lower jaw thrusting forward. We stared at each other. We stared and we stared, until she turned away from me and leaned onto the sewing machine table, her clenched fists now open, holding her up, as she began to weep. She had been trained over a lifetime not to raise her voice or to engage in conflict, so her anger and confusion must have turned to tears because she felt completely unprepared to navigate the confrontation I presented. "Go to your room," she whispered weakly.

So through the house I wound, to my room, none of my questions answered, feeling an anxiety-provoking mix of guilt and anger and concluding that raising objections and questions made me less loveable. I learned nothing that day about what the word "Negro" meant or how my family felt about dark-skinned people. I learned nothing of the civil rights movement and its activists, who had risked lives to make a black man kissing a white woman legal. All I learned was not to come out of my room until I had made myself right. Sociologists would say this is an example of how a culture uses rewards and punishments to enforce its cultural norms. This one—emotional restraint and its partner denial—sunk its claws into me, leaving scars that would take years to heal.

I internalized this "Nice is good" norm so thoroughly that I came to loathe conflict and judge harshly those uncivilized enough to stir it. I bristled when anyone—even my own husband—raised unpleasant subjects,

created conflict, or expressed anger. *Poorly raised*, I'd conclude. Though I don't think my parents ever actually used the term "poorly raised," the number of times they referred to someone who'd been "well raised" made it clear to me what "poorly raised" would look like.

Internalizing all that optimism at the expense of dealing with negative feelings ultimately cut me off from being able to hear people in distress, even when that person was me. As a young adult, I discovered the fallacy of imagining it possible to selectively turn off some emotions. What I discovered about myself was that my range of emotions could shrink or grow, depending on how much discomfort I was willing to tolerate. The more I could tolerate anger, fear, and grief, the more I could feel joy, love, and serenity. It's the old "No pain, no gain" philosophy. The culture of niceness did nothing short of program me away from my humanity and into a socially scripted role with diminished capacity to feel my way through situations.

Like so many of the behaviors I adopted in childhood, silence and avoidance became subconscious habits. My parents didn't silence me because they didn't care about my ideas. They silenced me because their own childhood socializations engrained in them a subconscious habit of steering away from conflict and authenticity and toward the more socially accepted culture of niceness. They were passing onto me a survival skill, one that bought a place in the high-class world of comfort and gentility, even if that meant diminishing one's capacity to plug into the circuitry of feelings, cutting oneself off from one's own heart and soul.

I adored my parents and the many other fun-loving adults in my life, the very adults whose approval I sought and around whom I learned to douse my emotions and buck up. But did I connect to them deeply? Did I really know what was in their hearts and souls? Did I know their fears or shames in a way that would allow me to be supportive, a way that would allow me to feel less fearful or repulsed by my own? In all honesty I have to say no. I did not know my parents or my aunts and uncles or any of my parents' friends in this way. Our relationships were not the kind in which unfettered conversation leads to greater common understanding and deep personal connection.

In 1994, at the age of seventy-one, my mother suffered a massive brain hemorrhage. She never fully recovered, largely because she was in the early stages of Alzheimer's when it struck. Though her body would

survive another twelve years, I will always feel that 1994 was when I lost her. I was thirty-four years old with a five-week-old baby, just beginning to gather questions to ask my own mother now that I had become one myself. Her loss all but shattered me.

As she lay in the hospital following brain surgery, I wandered around her room at home looking for clues as to what her last days and hours had been like. On her bedside table I noticed the book *Too Good for Her Own Good*. A bookmark sat wedged in a page about three-fourths of the way through the book. *My God, when and why did she get this?* I wondered. I turned it over and read the back cover. My heart pounded as I read the words “work so hard to be so good—and end up feeling so hopelessly inadequate.” I fell to my knees, clutched the book to my chest, and wept. I wanted her back to ask her why she went out and bought this book. In what ways did she feel inadequate? Was the book helping her? Was she talking to Dad about it? We’d never dug this deep together, and now, just as I was losing her, it seemed she was willing to do the kind of self-examination that would have brought us closer. Never having had the opportunity to sit with her and hear about all her thoughts and feelings, the good and the bad, the humiliating and the heroic, still haunts me.

Whom exactly does the culture of niceness serve? I suppose it serves the people for whom life is going well, the people in power. But where does this leave less empowered individuals and populations with legitimate complaints? Speaking truth to power too often results in feelings of judgment and anger at the complainer. The way my mother ignored and silenced me when I tried to advocate for my sister’s desire to see *A Patch of Blue* is not so far off from the way people in power have long ignored and silenced entire populations who voice injustice. It’s hard work to engage in conflict, and even harder to have to change your mind. People in power have the privilege of avoiding both. The culture of niceness provides a tidy cover, creating a social norm that says conflict is bad, discomfort should be avoided, and those who create them mark themselves as people who lack the kind of emotional restraint necessary to hold positions of power. Another vicious cycle. What a predicament for people of color, and what a debilitating deficit for those who buy into it. Ignoring feelings and trying to smooth them over with pleasant chitchat only promises to hold people back from allowing their hearts to join their minds in recognizing injustice when it’s right in front of them, or even inside them.

Despite its potential to create healthier individuals, households, organizations, and communities, embracing the discomfort of conflict in the name of resolution eludes most people raised in the culture of niceness. As long as feedback from unhappy people puts the blame on the complainer, the status quo will be maintained. Change requires tolerating the kind of emotions that arise when the constraints of nice conversations are lifted. I've long felt the term "tolerance," as related to racial and cultural difference, isn't quite right. I've understood it to mean that I'm supposed to tolerate people who aren't like me. Is tolerating someone really the best I can do? Tolerance was what I mustered up when my toddler was having a tantrum and I knew I simply had to endure it.

If there's a place for tolerance in racial healing, perhaps it has to do with tolerating my own feelings of discomfort that arise when a person, of any color, expresses an emotion not welcome in the culture of niceness. It also has to do with tolerating my own feelings of shame, humiliation, regret, anger, and fear so I can engage, not run. For me, tolerance is not about others; it's about accepting my own uncomfortable emotions as I adjust to a changing view of myself as imperfect and vulnerable. As human.

Q What lessons were you taught about crying? Do you feel differently if you see a man, woman, or child crying? For whom do you tend to feel empathy? For whom do you tend to feel judgment? Why?