

“All the Way Down to Our Amygdalas: An Introduction to Anti-Racism”

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Psalm 139:23-24 and Romans 12:2

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The movies, *Inside Out* and *Inside Out 2*, are Disney Pixar movies about an adolescent girl named Riley. The story is told from the perspective of her personified emotions inside her brain. As Riley goes through life, in particular as her family moves from Minnesota to San Francisco, we watch her emotional journey through funny colorful characters representing Joy, Sadness, Anger, Fear and Disgust; little characters operating a giant control panel covered with lights and levers and knobs inside Riley's brain. In general, Joy is in charge, but at appropriate times Sadness takes over. Or sometimes Fear or Anger, represented by a little red man with a loosened tie, whose head occasionally catches on fire. And so on.

In *Inside Out 2* Riley goes through puberty and new emotional characters join the cast including Anxiety, Envy, Embarrassment, and Ennui or Boredom.

A key premise of the Inside Out movies is that sometimes a mechanism inside the control room of Riley's brain produces a Core Memory. This is an event that is so intensely positive or negative, that it shapes Riley's personality. Core memories are represented by little orbs that form in colors corresponding to the emotion of the event. Sometimes core memories are joyful, sometimes scary, sometimes sad. And the assumption is we want

Riley to fill her personality with joyful core memories, or at least on balance more joy than sadness or fear or disgust.

In a pivotal moment in the first movie as Riley matures she produces her first mixed emotion core memory. She tries to run away from home back to Minnesota, gets really scared, and then is reunited with her parents. The core memory produced is not just happiness and not just sadness or fear but some of each.

I have a memory that I believe is a core memory that has shaped who I am, in particular the ways that I process race and racism.

When I was in 9th grade, which, where I grew up, was the last year of Middle School, I was being bullied. And the bully was a Black boy named Kendall. I didn't have a lot of exposure to Black people at that point. My middle school was predominately white. We lived on the East Coast of Florida in a beach town. And almost all the people in those Florida beach towns were white. But for integration purposes they would bus Black children from the mainland to our school. Kendall was in that small group.

I was a pretty awkward kid. I wasn't very coordinated but I was kind of big. I think I was a tempting target for a bully; a big kid who wasn't a good fighter. But, I also unintentionally made myself a target with Kendall partly because I thought he was really cool. He was the star of the football team. Super athletic. Seemed like a leader of his group which were all Black kids. And he wore a gold chain. One day, I went to him in front of his friends with all the best intentions and said, "Hey Kendall, I really like your gold chain."

And I don't know if he thought I was making fun of him, or I embarrassed him in front of his friends, but from that day on he was after me. Passing me in the hallways he would lurch at me to try to scare me. One day he and his friends cornered me in a bathroom. I was able to get away without getting my head put in a toilet, but it was a close call.

At the same time that was happening, I was developing a friendship with a boy named Jerry. Jerry was also Black. But Jerry lived in our neighborhood. Jerry was extremely cool. Everyone liked Jerry and he liked me and we even hung out together sometimes.

In fact, one Friday night, Jerry and I went to a football game. We were walking under the bleachers and Kendall came up behind us with his friends, put his hand on my shoulder, spun me around and hit me hard in the face. I mean he was a middle school boy, so it wasn't a knockout blow or anything, but it was enough to send me reeling. When I looked up my vision was blurry and I saw blurry Kendall standing in front of me and he hit me again. Next, all I remember is Jerry, who grabbed me by both my shoulders and shook a little and said, "Tom, run." So I did. I ran out of the stadium and kept running until I got to McDonalds where I saw some friends and sat down like nothing had happened.

This is a core memory, but it's mixed. And I think in a couple ways it shaped how I process race. First, on some level of which I am barely conscious I had and probably still have fear or anxiety related to Black boys and men. I've done a lot of work around it and have overcome it, but on some level it's something I will always deal with.

But the other way it shaped me on a profound level is I have a deep seated knowledge that the color of Kendall and Jerry's skin did not define them. Kendall wasn't mean or violent because he was Black. Jerry wasn't kind and loyal and protective because he was Black. It was a profound emotionally intense moment where I had a relatively small sample size of what Black people were like and one person was trying to hurt me and one person trying to help me. Any conclusion that I could have drawn based on Kendall's race was impossible to draw because of Jerry.

One thing the Inside Out movies don't totally capture about human developmental psychology is that we as human beings have two parts of our brain that help navigate the world. One is the amygdala which controls our emotions on an unconscious level. It controls fight or flight but it also controls safety, trust, and love. The other is the prefrontal cortex which is where we do higher analysis, emotional regulations, moral reasoning and judgement. In my example both Kendall and Jerry are core memories implanted in my amygdala. Kendall is a memory of a Black person who scared me and attacked me. Jerry is implanted as a Black person who was kind and protective. And my prefrontal cortex has had to sort those out.

We have very little control over our amygdalas. There is a part of me that may always see a Black man, especially a strong athletic Black man, which is how I remember Kendall even though he was just a boy at that time, but when I see a man that triggers that image, my amygdala will produce stress hormones in body before I have a chance to even think a conscious thought. In a matter of milliseconds. And the rational part of my

brain will have to do its work in that altered emotional state. In a way I'm operating in an emotional deficit in some situations. That's what unconscious bias is. Even if we know a person cannot be judged by the color of their skin, our amygdalas for any number of reasons will have us operating in a deficit of stereotypes.

This is why white doctors consistently give Black and Hispanic patients less pain medicine than white patients. That's a documented fact. Even though the doctors are not conscious of doing it, studies have documented that it is true. It's why real estate appraisers will appraise homes with pictures of people of color at a lower value than homes with pictures of white families even if they don't consciously realize they are doing it.

But if we drilled down, surely not every white doctor or real estate appraiser has had profound life-changing experience with people of color in a way that influences their biases. Something else must be at work. Our perceptions of race are shaped by more than our conscious experiences.

That something else, that something more that shapes us is a culture of white supremacy. When you hear "white supremacist" you may think, Klu Klux Klan or Aryan Nation or Nazis or any of the grosser examples that we know of. But white supremacy is a broader and more nuanced phenomena than those particular examples. White supremacy in the U.S is all around us. It's the way white features are considered more beautiful by society. No one ever tells us that. We just absorb it. White facial features, hair, and body shape dominate our media. Even among people of color, light skin is often considered more desirable than dark skin. In 2024 \$8.6 billion was

spent globally on skin lightening products. White supremacy infuses our culture. It's in media, in the news, in politics, in wealth distribution, educational opportunities, access to healthy environments, job opportunities. In America in particular, but more and more globally, we grow up breathing and drinking that whiteness is superior.

If we are thinking about Inside Out movies, this would be something the movie doesn't capture. What is Riley absorbing every day about beauty standards, and who to fear, and who has value in society? What is she absorbing by the subtle ways her teachers treat children in her classrooms differently based on their skin color? If we were portraying it through the movie's metaphors, white supremacy might be portrayed as a paleness over every experience of every child in America. In the movie when any core memory or otherwise is generated, a little ball is formed with colors that represent joy or sadness or anger, etc. In a white supremacist all those colors are paler because of the influence of whiteness on our personalities. We are all affected by an unnatural paleness.

That's why it's not enough to just say we are not racist. White supremacy has stained our personalities with paleness we don't even perceive. That's why we use the language of anti-racism. We acknowledge when it comes to racism we are all starting in a deficit of stereotypes that go beyond our conscious individuals' thinking. And that may seem like an impossible task,

But our Bible passage today gives us a starting point. Psalm 139 ends with an invitation.

Search me, O God, and know my heart;

test me and know my thoughts.

24 See if there is any wicked way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting.

The invitation is to go deep. To pay attention to our thoughts. To be mindful of feelings. What ways is our amygdala setting the stage for our interactions with people before we realize? What patterns, stereotypes, feelings, does our brain serve up to us before we even have a chance to think.

If this sort of self examination is critical to our work, isn't it interesting that attentiveness and mindfulness are basic ancient spiritual practices?

We cannot be defensive if we are going to do this work. We have to be humble. We have to know we have all been shaped by forces that were beyond our control. We are damaged people. We have been damaged by a culture of white supremacy.

That word "wicked" in the Psalm literally means "hurtful". "See if there is any hurtful way in me". It also means "idol." "See if there is any idolatrous way in me." Is there anything in me that has absorbed the lie that one group of people is superior and therefore makes an idol of one group? Is there any way in me that has absorbed lies about people based on the color of their skin.

And then the verse says, "lead me in the way everlasting." Anti-racism is a task that requires the involvement of a power greater than ourselves. We

are asking for spiritual guidance as we face these lies we have believed without even knowing it.

The Romans passage we ready says “Do not be conformed to this age” - Do not be conformed to a culture of white supremacy that defines everything from a person’s beauty to their worth based on skin color, “but be transformed by the renewing of the mind, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.”

We do need God’s help in this process, but there are also practical things we can do to renew our minds. We are never done shaping our personalities and beliefs. It doesn’t matter how old you are. “That’s just what I was taught” is a lazy excuse. Life is too precious and too short to say we are too old to change. And there is too much at stake.

So what are the practical steps to transforming our minds including our amygdalas? The first step is awareness. Awareness about what is happening inside us. Attentiveness. Mindfulness.

Another step is education. Reading books is a good step. *How to Be Anti-Racist* by Kendi, *White Fragility* by Robin Di’Angelo, *Caste* by Isabel Wilkerson. I haven’t read it yet but folks on the anti-racism team have been recommending *My Grandmother’s Hands* by Resma Menakem. Arm your prefrontal cortex with knowledge against the lies told to us by our amygdalas.

Another step is exposure. The more interaction we have with people of different races the more our rational brains will be unable to tolerate the lies of the stereotypes of our amygdalas.

If you don't know people of other races, you can start by watching movies by people of other races. Media is often the problem; make it part of the solution.

But ultimately we need to move beyond exposure to relationships. Really knowing people of diverse races. This isn't about having a black friend, it's about getting to know lots of different people. What do they like to do? Who are their families? What struggles do their families have? What tv shows do they like or books? What do they find funny?

I'm on a bit of a journey right now around Muslim people. Islam is not a race of course, but the more I go visit the Stanford hunger strikers in the evenings, many of whom are Muslim, the more I see how diverse they are. And that amigdalian image of a muslim in my brain is crumbling in the face of reality.

It's interesting that our goals as a church include being anti-racist and multi-ethnic. There is a bit of a chicken and egg thing there. Or those two things kind of feed off each other. Like the more racial and other diversity we have in the congregation, the more exposure we will have to each other, the more real relationships we can start building, the more anti-racist we will be. And the more intentionally antiracist personal work we do, the more

likely we will be a welcoming community for all people that could become truly multi-ethnic.

One of the things the anti-racism team has talked about recently is the ways we we can signal with art or banners or whatever that we are welcoming and this sanctuary isn't just a white space, But the most important thing we can do to be more welcoming is for each member to do the work of examining their hearts, and renewing their minds around race and racial stereotypes.

Being anti racist is not about being woke. Not that there's anything wrong with being woke. Being anti-racist is about awareness of the lies we have come to believe consciously or unconsciously. It's about the deficits in which we start when it comes to race in America. Being anti-racist is about searching our hearts and minds with humility. It's about exposure to diverse people. It's about going deeper in our relationships with diverse people. It's about reprogramming our stubborn little amygdalas.

Really it's about loving our neighbor better. Which, if we do it well in a white supremacist society, is radical counter culture practice. "Do not be conformed to this age," do not be conformed to white supremacy, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind - all the way down to your amygdala.