

Alexandria Wilson

SW504

25 September 2020

Professor Edwards-Brown

Journal 1: Proximity and True Growth

I tuned into the “Unlocking Us” podcast by host Dr. Brene Brown, a world renowned Author, Speaker, Social Worker and Researcher. In this particular episode, Brene dives into an enlightening conversation with best selling author and racial justice speaker Austin Channing Brown. The talk webbed into different topics about the continuous thread of white supremacy that finds itself in every facet of our lives. Before stepping into this podcast, I did not know Austin Channing Brown. I did not know about her best selling book *I Am Still Here: Black Dignity In A World Made for Whiteness*. However, when she spoke about complex issues pertaining to navigating through all white spaces, I felt like we had lived the same life. I am a black woman raised in a lower middle class family. I was taught in classrooms where I represented the only black child. My family lived on a street in which we were 1 of 3 of the black families. I was born into a black baptist church in which loving blackness was vacant. I learned to adapt to racial slurs from the age of 7 from white and non-black counterparts. I learned how to switch my posture to adapt in black spaces. Because of the baptist upbringing, I was sheltered from a lot of content that was sacrilegious or secular. Whatever feedback I received from any spaces, I internalized it as a personal problem. It was not until I attended California State University, Sacramento in the school of social work, where I was challenged into pinpointing my experiences to actual definitions. I attended training and took courses outside the school of social work to deepen my understanding of oppression through history, music, and relationships. I developed language through black lives matter and surrounding movements. I carefully examined my own privilege as middle class heterosexual cisgender able human being, as well as the direct hits of oppression with being a medium dark skinned black woman. Brene and Austin get to a point in the episode, in which Brene begins a conversation by asking Austin what she felt about proximity. Specifically white folks in their proximity to black people and black culture. Austin opened up the notion that white folks will take “their proximity” to black people as literally as it is stated. “Do you have a black friend?” Furthering the literal statement will follow white folks seeking black people to be in their lives as check in the box on the “I am a good person” list. Austin shares with Brene that these actions by un/well intentioned white folks can be harmful to the mental and physical wellbeing of black people. The constant education, re-direction, calling in or out, reminding of dignity and worth of a person while also fighting for the dignity and right of self, answering questions, hearing unmindful comments about race etc. is all emotional labor. This emotional labor can weigh a toll on groups that are currently facing oppression. Austin rewrote the definition to pertain to the specific power white folks invoke in proximate settings. The invasive questions and entering and commanding unknown spaces with unearned confidence, are all examples of comfortable power white folks use in order to get something done, like unlearning racism. It's a “cop out” like Brene shares. Something that is said or done so you can alleviate from the instant reaction to the pain and misguided truths that white supremacy has provided. It takes an enormous amount of work, self reflection, and time to unlearn the interwoven spectrum of patterns that is white supremacy.

In the book *Untamed* by Glennon Doyle, she explores her constant journey as a white woman unlearning racism. In this chapter, she mentions a time where she was challenged by her two young daughters in her proximity to black movements and activism. Glennon did the necessary work to understand the complex issue of racism, and how she has inadvertently contributed to the problem. She mentions a time after some self discovery, where she started participating in a multicultural organization in order to combat racism. She was asked by the organization, to create a presentation for white women who were ready to take the first step in unlearning racism. This workshop featured tools Glennon personally used to begin unwinding white supremacy. The workshop was not felt well by black members of the community. They reasonably felt that the workshop should be led by black women who already have workshops created that serve the same purpose. I am personally happy that Glennon took the initiative to self reflect, rather than resulting in “rules” that she has picked up by the marginalized identities around her. In the *Unlocking Us* podcast, Brene unlocked another level of my third eye by explaining how white people use “rules” in pursuits to racial justice. Brene explains “White people like rules not so they can use them the correct way, it's so we can protect our self... Like ‘you told me African-American is the right thing’...The rules are the fence around the ego.” She further this example by explaining that Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. is often used as a guide for white folks to reference if they want to be a racially sound “good person”. However, knowing the “rules” is not undoing microaggressions, housing discrimination, wage gaps, easy and equal access to education and resources. These same individuals focus a lot on the famous “I Have A Dream” Speech, but fail to read the same passage from the Birmingham Jail that Glennon read on her first day of spiritual awakening. The passage Glennon highlights, focuses directly on the “white moderate” also known as the everyday white person. Dr. King explains in this letter that the white moderate is an even bigger threat than the very systems created to disenfranchise black people. The white moderate has the power to view, interact with, and provide access to resources to black people ;while upholding respect in treating black people like human beings. The white moderate chooses not to. Glennon made it her mission as a white woman who saw something wrong, and decided to to study, reflect, advocate, and teach in order to change it. Austin assertively said “ I think that white people are not children. They are grown. White people are adults who can think critically on their own. Who can read books, listen to podcasts, study history, be self-reflective, you get a therapist and look at the world and say something is not right here.” As I clapped my hands in validation to this statement, I thought about the many conflicts that I have had, specifically with white women in the work space, who felt threatened by my continuing advocacy for equity, adequate training, and representation of BIPOC in the space. One particular time I was working at a rape crisis center with survivors of sexual assault. The Executive Director of the rape crisis center was a “progressive” white liberal woman. She fought hard to eradicate homelessness in the local community, and spent countless time advocating for LGBTQ+ rights. In conversation, she presented herself to be an “open door policy” boss with a keen insight on how oppression works. I presented her with the idea of expanding our continuing education to focus on oppression and discrimination. This topic was not a part of any training or continued education workshop. She was open to the idea at first, but the deeper the presentation got to unlocking hidden truths about white supremacy in the organization, she shut the entire presentation down. She further diminished my educational background, and

experience as a black woman to it atom, while also gaslighting me and everyone in the room by saying I was stealing company money by working on a presentation no one allowed me to work on. I am not sure what truly triggered this response, but it was not one of self reflection. This established executive director had the academic and community knowledge to place her here at this non-profit. Although she did not use the powerful excuse of not knowing, she used the same power as a privileged white woman to be as aggressive as she wanted, and spew harmful language to the unpowerful underserved black woman. Austin's quote reigned true. For example, out of everything that white people have accomplished successfully, white supremacy has to be the most complex and winning idea that white people are capable of creating systems, read and write levels of exploitation, colonize the majority of the world and infiltrate the rest with anti-blackness, and so on. If white supremacy can be studied and upheld, it can be unlearned and dismantled. This all depends on if you want to do the work, are ready to listen, and apply.

It is well documented that the United States and some white moderate, cherish a world that is colorless. You see this evidenced in laws, practices, and housing. The obvious signs of segregation are shown through redlining and disproportionate prison populations. The less obvious exist in smaller facets of everyday life. One would be public transportation. According to Barriers, Stereotypes Block Transit Options in Metro Detroit an article by Quinn Klinefelter, "On a suburban SMART bus route that stops by the intersection of 12 Mile Road and Haggerty Road, just short of Novi, obstacles are present literally by design. The SMART bus line ends about a mile-and-a-half from shopping and jobs that are available in Novi." This means that anyone coming on said SMART bus will have to walk to their respected location. This was intentional for the Novi community. I have witnessed injustice in public transportation in my hometown in Southern California. Disparities did not restrict specific areas of the community, but were reflected in price for bus fare and substandard time management in delivering transportation. In my time following high school, I spent a lot of time riding public transportation. I would take the bus to my local community college for class, straight to work, and back home. At one period of time, I was taking up to 4 different busses. I had the privilege of receiving free student fare through the community college. However, when school was not in session, I witnessed and also experienced the rising fare rates set by the county public transportation system. Each semester a single ride was raised by .25 cents. The year before I left to attend Sac State, a day pass was three dollars, and a week pass was seven dollars. I often thought these rates were high. However, in Sacramento, a single ride is three dollars and a day pass is six dollars and rising. These price differentiations matter to low income communities who need to go to work, school, or to day care. For one person, a monthly payment of six dollars a for one day is one hundred and eighty six dollars. For a four person household, this would equal to seven hundred and forty four dollars a month. For a very few in the city of Sacramento, that seven hundred and forty four dollars is rent. These financial challenges create conflicts for families who have to choose between keeping employment or having necessities. The majority of the people that partake in public transportation in Sacramento are low income black and brown families. These like many financial disparities have kept marginalized communities segregated from affluent white communities.

Singer Macy Gray sang “someone once told me the grass is much greener on the other side.” Detroit rapper Big Sean says “the grass is green where you water it.” Big Sean’s observation is valid for the affluent white folks living in San Francisco, California. San Francisco is one of the most expensive places to live in the country, and it is also overwhelmingly white. The city is often covered in thick fog coming from the nearby bay. What most of the new white affluent residents of San Francisco may not be aware of is toxic waste that is dumped in a nearby region called Bayview Hunters Point, a low income, black and brown community. This community was heavily researched by black woman Dr. Nadine Burke Harris. This was well documented in the book *The Deepest Well: Healing the Long-Term Effects of Childhood Adversity*. She mentions this toxic waste on top of neglect from the local government, causing a multitude of health problems for the children living in the area. These serious conditions looked like high cases of asthma and heart conditions. In other areas of the country such as the Texas Gulf Coast, where the surrounding black community is subjected to breathing in toxic chemicals from the non-conveniently placed oil and gas refineries. In this area there are “four of the country’s 10 biggest oil and gas refineries and thousands of chemical facilities.” (Knickmeyer, 2020). According to the article, ‘They’re killing us,’ Texas residents say of Trump rollbacks, the pollutants are so bad that cities such as Houston have pollutant levels of up 62%. This has caused breathing difficulties as well as asthma outbreaks among residents. Both of these cases depict proximity in a new way then previously mentioned. Before, we mentioned examples of white women and other genders alike actively wanting to not seem racist. Fulfilling a guilt or checked boxed rule, was their mission. However, some white people (a good chunk) have no problem taking up space in areas once undesired by them. Forcing themselves into communities until they transform into the city they see themselves living in. Their world has always been white, and they would like to keep it that way. Whiteness in this case is expanded into property, control of who you see in your environment, and control of what is in your environment, including clean air and water. Nowhere is there a question about who is being pushed out, and where they are going. I often think that policy makers that adhere to white moderate community demands, have the Patrick Star philosophy. In the cartoon Spongebob Squarepants, there was an episode in which the community, Bikini Bottom, was battling a monstrous worm that ate through the entire town. The townspeople came together to problem solve. Patrick’s idea was to “take Bikini Bottom, and push it somewhere else.” The townspeople of course booed at the absurd comment. How can one push a town to safety? But this comment is also true to accommodations that are made to keep black and brown people out of their proximity. They keep lead out of water, keep their air clear of pollution, and keep their street free of Black, Indigenous, People of Color. Proximity is the social construct created around whiteness. What white people deserve, and whom they deem worthy to protect. White communities with the help of the governments who also reflect their narratives, take entire communities and push them somewhere else. Somewhere they do not want to be, with people and toxins they don’t want to be around, and no resources to help them survive. This much like transportation issues, keeps black and brown people disenfranchised and white communities maintaining whiteness.

The idea of safety comes up when proximity is near. Brene explains rules to be a way for white people to protect themselves. I think this is protection from the fear of accountability.

Accountability in my experience can be a challenging word to digest, as it is interchanged with responsibility. Responsibility is also seen as something people do not want to be accountable for. I like to think of Responsibility as our duty to respond to a particular situation. If you are employed and signed the new hire paperwork, it is your responsibility as an employee to make sure you are prepared to start your day at a designated time. To take responsibility for an action is to uphold that response. Taking the responsibility of a crime, is saying you did that action. Whereas accountability places you as the person who committed the crime, understands their role in the action, and how it led to this outcome, with the understanding that other players were also affected. Accountability forces the person to review the situation from an objective view. Acknowledging how their actions and emotions played a key part in the outcome of the situation. In the Glennons story in Untamed, she faced negative feedback about her participation in leading a workshop towards white women. Glennon's self reflection was her taking accountability for her role in the outcome, by acknowledging that she missed a mark, she reflected, studied to understand, understood, and kept moving through life. Responsibility looks like "our organization takes diversity seriously. We are going to do an entire investigation into the very obvious evidence." or "I am sorry that everyone is mad at me for (insert racist comment)." This fear of accountability as well as criminality fly white people out of urban neighborhoods, because of the fear associated with it. The NPR Throughline podcast explores mass incarceration in our country. They mention a time after slavery when white southern states practice common leasing (the leasing of prisoners to local companies that wanted the labor). These common leasing conditions increased the number of black people in prison, and it shaped the white public view of black people in the criminal justice system. White "scientists" also began to create unfactual scientific data to show that black people were dangerous. Glennon talks about her white family watching "cops" like it was a soap opera. These depictions created and maintained a fear of black people. Further driving away from facing the reality of the situation. White people make it a point to surround themselves with nothing but whiteness and white people. This is why I suspect that white people feel especially uncomfortably comfortable around marginalized identities. These spaces feel unsafe for black people. In the next question, a TV show on youtube with hosts, Jenny, Chi Chi, and Austin Channing Brown, they sat down with Brene Brown to talk about being brave. Chi Chi mentioned white spaces being especially fearful for black people. This fear is different from white fear. Our fear is reinforced in person and through the media.

White Supremacy affects everyone who is not a rich white male. It impedes our education, housing, food, other community resources, and most importantly growth. Like Austin said in the Unlocking Us podcast, learning to unlearn white supremacy is a major step to being a better human for other humans. The growth that one has is rooted in self love and discovery. When one finds themselves, it opens their heart to others. Asking questions and seeking your own answers from voices that have already spoken, taking accountability when you mess up, and knowing positionality rather than proximity. Positionality focuses on where you are in relation to marginalized communities. Specifically power dynamics between the person or group. It's a great check in rather than a box checked. If these steps are even attempted by the

white moderate, imagine the community collaboration and common understanding to move towards change.

Reference

Harris, N. B. (2018). The Deepest Well: Healing the Long-Term Effects of Childhood Adversity. Simon & Schuster.

Knickmeyer, E. (2020, April 19). 'They're killing us,' Texas residents say of Trump rollbacks. AP NEWS.

<https://apnews.com/article/9553e45fd2fc46940ce5b3ca4b4a0d04>

E6: Brave Together (Brené Brown). (2019, November 11). [Video]. YouTube.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hiHRvVuzRT0&t=650s>

NPR. (2019, August 14). NPR Choice page. Throughline: Mass Incarceration.

<https://choice.npr.org/index.html?origin=https://www.npr.org/2019/08/14/751126384/mass-incarceration>