

“Waking Up White”

by Debby Irving

Book Excerpt:

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.