

For Black History Month: A Conversation About Antiracism

Zoom service

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February 21, 2021

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**Sally:** The conversation around race has changed significantly in my lifetime.

I grew up in a middle-class White family in an overwhelmingly White suburb of Cleveland, Ohio. My parents were politically and socially liberal. We were active members of a Unitarian Universalist church from the time I was 10 years old. I might have been 12 when I went with my father to the County Seat to demonstrate against redlining and real-estate discrimination. One high-school summer, I worked at a day camp for inner city Black children, bused to our suburb for “fresh air” and a break from the ghetto. I saw all people as equally human; the same under our superficially different skins.

In 1974 I married, my husband a Black man – a college professor, a mathematician who was a philosopher who was an idealist who – if you asked him – would tell you his race was “human.” And I, with my idealistic color-blindness, was literally unable to see the looks people gave us on the street and in the mall. We raised our four biracial children in college towns and predominantly White suburbs – even when he was teaching at Historically Black Spelman College in Atlanta. We – or at least, I – never had those conversations with them about what it means to be Black in America. Perhaps we thought we were post-racial. I believe we thought we could will ourselves and the nation into that place where our children would, as Martin Luther King, Jr. dreamed, “not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.”

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If I had known then what I know now, I would have parented differently. It might not have kept my two sons out of jail, and prison. It might not have made it easier for my daughters to forge their sense of racial identity in the fires of hurtful social interactions and painful self-examination. It might not have given the world my daughter Nafis's art – a powerful commentary on race and violence in America; a reflection on the role of history and heritage and society in shaping identity; a profound tribute to the resilience of the human spirit.

*pause*

**Carol:** The conversation around race has changed in my lifetime.

I grew up in a middle-class White family in Aurora, Illinois. I remember my school district as about 80% Hispanic and 6% white; today it is 88% Hispanic, 7% Black, and 2% White. My parents, both college educated, chose to live in a predominately blue collar neighborhood, and we attended a Unitarian Universalist church about 30 minutes away in an affluent White city. At school, it was normal to make jokes about being the “tall white girl” and the racial stereotypes of everyone; all our differences acknowledged but seemingly unimportant. It wasn't perfect and racial problems were still there, but everyone knew it and knew it needed to change. Going to church, or any of the surrounding predominantly white cities, always felt odd because of the lack of diversity. Surrounded by white people, instead of being one of the only ones. Growing up, I knew racial inequality, and the need for change was important; it seemed so obvious to most people I knew.

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Since then, I have moved around but not lived anywhere quite like Aurora; and even growing up there, I have had to grow and learn more about the privilege I have, acknowledging that it's always been there but I never truly realized it until two years ago. While driving from Washington state to Illinois with my mother, I was pulled over in South Dakota. Being pulled over is never fun, but my real fear was because in the car were my two dogs, one of whom is fear aggressive. He can be extremely protective of me, and so to keep everyone safe, I kept my hands in the open and exited my car while asking if I could come out to the officer so I could keep us all safe. Sitting in his patrol car out of the cold while he took down my information, I was agitated and anxious, and all I could think was what if somehow Lucky got loose, what if something happened? The officer noticed my nervousness, and asked about it; maybe that's why he searched the car for drugs. But in the end, all was well, and he let us go with just a speeding ticket.

Afterwards while back on the road, my mother asked how I was doing, and all I could think was: what if I was black? How different would that stop have been if I was black?

*pause*

**Sally:** Color-blindness. A routine traffic stop. Growing up White in America, I took these things for granted. In thirty years of marriage to a Black man, in forty years of parenting biracial children, I was willing and able to ignore and to deny so many painful realities of life for people of color – Black, Indigenous, Asian, Latinx people – in America. My

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ignorance shaped and largely silenced any conversation at all around race. If I didn't see the differences and didn't think they were real, my silence was a kind of acceptance of a *status quo* that rests on and perpetuates inequality of opportunity and inequity of resources based on race. If I didn't see the differences, didn't think they were real, I was not a safe conversation partner for anyone whose experience was much different than mine – and so there was no deep trust, no real conversation, no real understanding, even with people I deeply loved.

In the past few years, I have begun to open myself and my life and my heart to today's conversations around race in America. These are so different from the conversations I grew up with, because then, the frame of reference was always White. White voices, talking about the experiences of other races and other cultures in the third person. White activists, strategizing ways that White people could *help* Black people, poor people, *those* people; ways that *we* could use *our* resources and *our* influence and *our* advantages to make *their* lives better. This is strong language, but true – they were demeaning, disempowering conversations; not among perceived equals but *about* people who were perceived as less – less well-resourced, less capable, less sophisticated.

**Carol:** When I engage my heart and not just my brain in today's conversations, I learn that racism is not any one thing you do or do not do; racism is the sum total of countless small decisions and choices and consequences that add up to society-wide patterns of unequal opportunity,

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unequal access to resources, unequal outcomes. I learn that these patterns are not visible in personal stories – and that there are lots of stories that counter the patterns – but they are visible in statistics and trends over populations and over generations. I come to understand that “racist” is not a noun – not an identity, like “You are a racist,” or “I am a racist;” that “racist” is an adjective that describes something you do, or say, or think. I come to understand that I believed that I was not racist; but that in my color-blindness and my idealism and my silence that silenced honest conversation my so-called “non-racism” only perpetuated the *status quo* – the pervasive inequity of resources and inequality of opportunity that sheltered me, benefitted me in ways that were so invisible to me that I denied the privilege that has smoothed my path for me; privilege that I did nothing to earn except to be born who and where and when I was.

**Sally:** I begin to understand that the invisible racism that is woven into my worldview – and the worldview of police officers and teachers and doctors and well-meaning people across this country and around the world – that racism is also woven into the worldview of people of color who may grow up to believe that they are not smart or beautiful or precious; that if they get the best grades and the best educations, if only they talk right and dress right and stay in their lane – or in their place – perhaps then they can avoid the obstacles that lie in their paths – obstacles that they did nothing to deserve except to be born who and where and when they were.

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**Carol:** I may have grown up surrounded by diversity, but it has still taken years to recognize my privilege. After all, I was in the minority back home and knew that racism against people of color was real, so what more could I do?

The conversation around race today insists that we - all of us, together – are accountable for our actions and for fixing a broken system. When talking to friends of color, what frustrates them is the expectation for them to prove their worth as a human or to have the answers to fix what is wrong. White ancestors were responsible for the mass oppression of anyone different, people of color, and it is up to white people now to be uncomfortable, to push out of the system that benefits us. When a house is deliberately set on fire, we blame the one to set the fire and hold them accountable, not the person whose house burned down.

*pause*

**Sally:** When I bring my heart to today's conversations around race, I learn that the only way for me to be a part of changing the *status quo* is for me to begin to see the patterns around me and within me. And then for me to do or say or think something new; something that challenges or changes the pattern. And the adjective for that is *antiracist*.

This is the work of every day. This work of antiracism is like peeling an onion – with each new layer uncovered comes more insight and more compassion – for ourselves, for others, and for the work we can do, together.

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With each new layer uncovered comes a better understanding of patterns, of systems, of policies, that we can challenge – and ultimately, change – with our words, with our actions, with our thoughts. If we would be uncomfortable. If we would be accountable for the impact of our words, our actions – even our thoughts. . If we would be willing to enter into respectful, reciprocal, *real* relationship with those around us whose experience of the world is much different from ours. If we would thereby bring into being love, justice, freedom – that land where we are bound.

Our music for meditation sings the pain and heartbreak and the power of the journey that calls us. *Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child* dates from the experience of slavery in the United States – when families were separated by slave traders in Africa and in America. This version was recorded by Mahalia Jackson in 1962.

*Motherless Child*  
(Cut the intro)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J80rdIjGR3k>

Tom shares screen

Amen.