

Transformation

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Moving Beyond White Guilt

Two years ago in the summer of 1996, we published in these pages an article by Women's Project board member, Amy Edgington, entitled, "Growing Up With Racism: A Personal Odyssey." Through word of mouth promotion by our members, that article has now been sent around the country to individuals and organizations engaged in the struggle against racism. In it, Amy put out a call for white women to come together with her to read and discuss books, videos, etc., by women of color. In this edition, Amy presents ideas this work has brought her. At its conclusion are two of Amy's poems and a reading list. Amy is a poet, an anti-racist worker, an incredible resource for those working on lesbian battering, a library assistant, an artist, a disability rights activist, and, with the exception of a few years, a life-long resident of Arkansas.

For the past year I've had the privilege of belonging to a group of white women who read and discuss African American literature on a monthly basis. I learn a lot from the books we've read, and I also find it valuable to meet and talk with other white women who care about the issue of racism. I've been reminded through our discussions of what an enormous stumbling block guilt can be for white people.

I have frequently avoided discussions of guilt, because of what I see as a pervasive tendency in America to psychologize, individualize, and depoliticize every issue. Nevertheless, in my experience, guilt does have political consequences. It can become a substitute for change or an excuse not to change; it can also be the starting point for the acceptance of responsibility and meaningful change.

What Guilt Is

I constantly hear the idea that guilt is a destructive emotion imposed by others in order to manipulate us. Guilt has such a bad reputation nowadays, that we can feel instantly justified in rejecting or avoiding anyone or anything that might make us feel guilty, from our parents to the issue of racism. But I see guilt as a mixture of positive elements like conscience and remorse and negative elements like fear and resentment.

Conscience: Often I feel guilty because my conscience is telling me I am in the wrong, not because someone is manipulating me. If I consistently reject my own judgement or avoid facing it, then I will wind up without a conscience. And no one is easier to manipulate than a person who has no conscience.

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Conscience should not be a static thing. Like most people, I began to acquire one in childhood, when I started to take responsibility for deliberate wrong-doing. However, if we are to become full adults, we have to stretch and grow morally by taking responsibility for the consequences of harm we do unintentionally and for acts of omission, such as failing to stop others from doing harm and benefiting from wrongs committed by others. Nothing challenges the consciences of white people more in this respect than racism.

When I unintentionally did or said something racist, I often tried to clear my conscience by changing the focus from what I had done (or failed to do) to what I meant. What I had to accept is that racism has little to do with our individual intentions, good or bad, our personal prejudices or lack thereof. As long as we see racism only as the harm done to people of color by white people, we think we can shrink our culpability by limiting the damage we do as individuals. But in fact racism privileges us so thoroughly that most white people need do nothing but sit back and enjoy the many advantages of domination. The challenge racism poses to the consciences of white people is to recognize the full extent of the privileges white supremacy bestows on each of us.

Remorse: Once my conscience told me I was in the wrong, I felt remorse for the harm I had done. Remorse consists of grief and

shame. Grief for the other person's pain is a good thing. It reflects my capacity for empathy, which is the foundation for an ethic of love. But shame turned my attention back on myself and my bruised self-esteem. It undermined my ability to empathize with the person who was truly injured. Frequently, she had to take care of

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me, before she could hope to (maybe) get her own wounds tended. My challenge was to get my attention off myself and to focus on the person I had hurt. When I do that, I act against the history and culture of Whiteness, which always magnifies white people's pain and puts our needs first.

I can think of no better example of this than the term "racial recon-

ciliation." Adopted by the white leadership of the Christian right wing, these words imply that white people and people of color have suffered equally under racism. If that were true, given the power that white people have and how highly our culture values comfort and personal happiness, we would have wiped out racism out centuries ago. No matter how agonizing our remorse may be, it does not begin to compare with the injury racism inflicts on people of color or to cancel out the privileges domination brings to white people.

Fear: Like most people I learned in childhood to fear punishment for doing wrong. But far from punishing our racism, people of color usually don't confront us about it. Often, it may not seem worth the risk or effort to do so. Nevertheless, white people have an exaggerated fear of the anger of people of color. I think this fear comes partly from history: our theft of the land we live on and our ownership—less than 140 years ago—of African Americans. For generations we've been taught that our prosperity depends on maintaining control over people of color, that our lives and livelihoods are in danger if a dark-skinned person even looks daggers at us. As if history were not enough, modern white media forces into every corner of our lives the message that any agitated or even dissatisfied Black person is apt to do us bodily harm.

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In the days of slavery and genocide, white power decked itself in hatred and bold assertions of superiority. Today, as Black feminist, bell hooks points out, the most persuasive mask of white supremacy is fear. My fear of the anger of dark-skinned people convinced me I was powerless. It kept me from seeing how my actions and inactions helped to maintain a system of superior power that benefited me immensely. To move through the layer of fear that came with my guilt, I had to acknowledge that people of color have far more justifiable reasons to regard white people with terror.

I began to question what I had learned about who was most likely to do me violence. I had to face my fear of punishment from other white people for breaking ranks and opposing racism. White privilege is based on white solidarity, maintained by a combination of rewards for "good" (racist) behavior or silent complicity and by threats and violence against those who break the codes of Whiteness. Our obsessive exaggerated fear, of Black anger in particular, is meant to reinforce our loyalty to Whiteness.

Resentment: In childhood I frequently experienced resentment as part of guilt. When I was caught doing something "bad" but pleasurable, I was told it was wrong because it hurt others or because it would hurt me in the long run. Growing up meant learning sometimes to put others' feel-

ings ahead of my own or to forgo current bliss for the promise of future gain. When it comes to racism I am still learning this lesson. White privilege is something we enjoy. Besides the countless material advantages of Whiteness, it gives us a sense of entitlement, social acceptance, moral and intellectual superiority and personal

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importance. It puts us, in the words of novelist Jamaica Kincaid, "beyond confidence and beyond doubt."

Small wonder then that I felt resentment when confronted by people of color on racism. I didn't want to give up the privilege of pretending that as long as I never used the word "nigger," I didn't have any power over people of color. I didn't want to give up the privilege of defining what was or

wasn't racist. Whiteness taught me to think of myself as an example to the less civilized. It was a shock to find out, after all I had invested in a sense of superiority, that I didn't own the moral high ground. I had to climb down off my high horse and accept the word of people of color on what racism is and what we need to do about it. I had to learn to doubt everything I had been taught. I had to get off the white expressway and take the scenic route through other people's realities.

I found I had swallowed the belief that white people can't help being racist, that we are so thoroughly conditioned we can't be any other way. Of course I resented being told to make changes I believed were beyond my control. I confused being white with Whiteness. I was born white, but I learned Whiteness. If racism were inevitable, simply part of "human nature," then there would be no effort to indoctrinate white people with racist beliefs, no pressure on us to conform to white supremacy. In fact, as bell hooks maintains, white people have the ability to reject Whiteness, by acting against racism at every opportunity. I have a choice: I can continue to wear the armor of white privilege, or I can develop true confidence, by finding out who I would be if I moved through the world without it.

Acceptance of responsibility

As I leave behind the shame,

White

I come from a clan I can't love
or leave. I wear its flag.
The color resembles panic
tinted with bloodshed.

I want to believe I'm descended
from at least one red-necked woman
in a clapboard house wanting columns,
who spoke out against slavery.
But I don't know her, anymore

than I know: Who rode with the KKK?
Who received as a gift
the slaves her father fathered?
Who betrayed the black woman
she once loved as a child?
Ask these questions
and the defenders of white honor
turn into avenging sperm.

My guilt is individual.
What coats my throat
like red clay dust
is collective privilege.
Silence pledges allegiance;
sisterhood demands proof
of the treason underneath my skin.

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fear and resentment attached to white guilt, empathy tugs more strongly and the call of conscience rings out more clearly than ever. I choose disloyalty to Whiteness, because I embrace an ethic of love instead of the ethic of domination, not because I think I share what people of color have experienced under racism, and not because of a guilt-ridden, do-gooder, liberal mentality. I am an enemy of Whiteness because, as a woman, as a lesbian, as a person with disabilities, I have experienced the ethic of domination on my own body. I fight the dominators for the right to live, to love myself, to openly love those I chose, and to not pretend desires I do not feel. I believe I will never achieve or deserve these rights while I myself continue to practice an ethic of domination over others. Nor do I imagine that I will ever attain these goals without people of color as my allies.

As Americans we are trained to regard all problems and solutions as individual in nature. But in order to replace the ethic of domination with an ethic of love, we have to build broad coalitions with a multi-issue agenda. And each issue on that agenda will require collective effort. No amount of change in my individual behavior could remove the privileges I have as a white-skinned person in a racist society. Change is only possible if I take action with others to attack and dismantle the system of racism.

White Americans are taught to

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admire individual efforts, single-minded focus and quick results. Shame and contempt are attached to any condition that requires us to ask for help, such as childhood, poverty, illness or disability. But to fight racism we will have to find allies among people of color and other whites. We will have to help each other struggle on several fronts simultaneously for generations. If we regard fighting racism as an individual endeavor, we will quickly become immobilized by guilt.

How We Can Defuse the Negative Aspects of Guilt

Get information: The more I learn about racism, the less I tend to see it as an individual moral problem and the fewer mistakes I make as an individual. The more I learn about racism the less work people of color have to do to explain to me how they experience the world. The more I learn about the ethic of domination the more I understand what I would gain by living in a world free of supremacist blinders, capable of respecting differences, and filled with true self-respect that does not demand submissive gestures from anyone.

Do something: The strongest antidote to guilt is action. The less I do about racism, the guiltier I feel. White supremacy is built largely on the complicity and inaction of white people. The simplest thing, such as interrupting a racist joke or writing a letter to the editor about police brutality is a significant break with the image

of white solidarity that racism depends on. Racism is so huge that all my acts seem small in comparison, but it is precisely this kind of lifelong chipping-away that we must commit ourselves to doing.

Listen: When a person of color says, "That's racist," it's time to take a deep breath, close my mouth, sit down and listen, be-

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cause school is in session. I'm in the first grade again and it's gonna take a lot of study to move on to the next class. I try to put my feelings on the back burner. I tell myself that if I have hurt someone, even inadvertently, she needs to be taken care of first. I try not to expect instant forgiveness or restoration of trust. I must follow through on any commitment I make to change.

I can take care of my guilt later by breaking it down into pieces.

What do I feel remorse about? What am I scared of? Why do I feel resentment? What changes do I need to make? What do I need to know? Who can help me? How can I help other white people change?

Talk: Undoing racism cannot be done alone. It's important for me to find other white people who share the same goals. We must also seek converts, to try to turn the souls of other white people from the racism's cynical fear, mean-spiritedness, narrowness and indifference, to the kind of love for self and others that values diversity and feels no need to dominate. This is how white people can practice what Cornell West calls the "politics of conversion."

There are clearly many white people who are deeply committed to white supremacy; they are unlikely to be swayed. It's important to let them know that they face white resistance, to tell them, in effect, "If I cannot change your mind, I will put my body in your path." We should measure our commitment to fighting racism not by how many people of color we count as friends (or lovers), but by how many white people we are willing to speak to about racism.

Back to the Past

Finally, I cannot talk about white guilt without talking about the collective guilt our race bears for atrocities such as slavery and the genocide of Indian peoples. History threatens to crash down

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on us whenever we are confronted with our individual racist behavior in the here and now. Collective guilt is like a herd of elephants in the living room that white people have been trained to ignore, and we tend to get freaked out when someone calls the dung to our attention.

Slavery and genocide are part of every aspect of contemporary white racism. All white privileges have their roots in these historical outrages. Americans, particularly white Americans, are allergic to looking at the past; we glorify the endless frontier of the future. We have been taught that this is a land where people can put aside their past and become whatever they wish to be. This dream is only attainable for white people, however; people of color are never allowed to leave their ancestry behind them.

White people often protest, in anger or frustration, that there is nothing we can do to change history. But in fact, history is collective memory; we actively work to change history when we ignore it or remain willfully ignorant about it. Our first duty to history is to know it, to look deeply and unflinchingly at the successive enslavements of Indians and Africans, at the forced labor of the Chinese who built our railroads, at the massacres, imprisonment and broken treaties Indians have suffered, at lynching and segregation (the evil step-twins of slavery), at the

incarceration of Japanese Americans and the anti-Semitic immigration policies that helped condemn Jews to Hitler's gas chambers.

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Finding Our Heroes and Heroines

It's not just the racist past that's been buried. The long history of anti-racist work in this country has been buried as well. Some white people may know the names, if not the lives, of some of the Black heroes and heroines of abolition, thanks to the efforts of African-Americans to educate us. But the abolition of slavery, the most hopeful event in the history of social justice, was due, in part, to the efforts of a significant minority of white men and women.

Did we learn their names in school?

How many Americans know that the hymn, "Amazing Grace," was written by a slave trader, describing a religious conversion that led him to spend the rest of his life working to abolish the slave trade in Great Britain? It serves the interests of white supremacy for white people to forget both our frightful legacy of racism and those ancestors who opposed racism.

For me, the personal stories, fiction and poetry of those who experienced these atrocities, or whose ancestors did, are the most compelling kind of history. This is the only history not written by the "winners," and it's very different from what we read in school. It has the power to open our eyes to the concrete details of oppression and to the interior lives of those we were trained not to see. This writing is full of hope and wit, despair and courage; it colors in the blanks in our vision of what it means to be human.

Moving on

Collective guilt might seem like an even bigger pit to fall into than individual guilt. But listening to the past is the first step in turning collective guilt into collective accountability. The next step is collective responsibility: to look carefully at the exactly how we experience privilege today and yet are able for the most part to remain blissfully unaware of it in a society dominated by white people.

The Gang

You've seen them on the corner of Capitol and Main,
in pin stripes and blue serges jaywalking Broadway,
Watch for the \$100 haircuts, those Italian leather shoes,
telltale bulges of cell phones and beepers,
high-caliber laptops slung at their sides.

Everyone knows which houses belong to the gang:
glass-studded concrete towers where nobody lives,
where they peddle junk bonds and bail out S & Ls.

The neighborhood is full of graffiti: the S
with a double line stands for the gang's motto,
"How long can you keep a snake behind bars?"

On Wall Street, signs fly across the money pits:
deals go down in L.A. with a few lines of coke.

In Washington, the gang robs groceries
from Grandma, lunch money from the kids.

They send teens in baggy pants to drive by
Panama and Grenada. Jets low-ride
the asphalt skies of Baghdad and Mogadishu.
Assault guns can't touch fuel-air bombs,
cluster mines, uranium-tipped shells.

Yes, we have a gang problem,
yet every time shooting starts,
the gang blames some other color.
They mask themselves with smiles,
they speak through muffled lies,
but we hold the gang responsible:
we know who they are.

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Most importantly, we can begin to turn collective guilt into collective action, to transform or overthrow institutions such as the racist educational system, media,

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courts, prisons and police that put the power behind white privilege. It's hard work and it's scary, but it feels a whole lot better than wallowing in guilt.

—Amy Edgington

**FIGHT
RACISM**