

# Transformation

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## Growing Up With Racism: A Personal Odyssey

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**S**everal times when I have talked about racism with other white women in the South, someone who, like me, grew up in the days of segregation, has told how she once snuck a drink from the "colored" fountain and discovered, to her surprise, that the water "didn't taste any different." From that moment she began to suspect that despite what she'd been told, Black people were human too. And she claimed that because of this early experience, she'd never treated Black people any differently from white people. I've heard and read this tale with few variations often enough to recognize a mythical quality about it. Like many myths in our culture, it is both a starting place and a stopping place: it begins with a powerful truth which it then distills into a simple, comforting form, like an overstuffed sofa that invites us to lie down and take a long nap.

When I was about ten years old, integration was a hotly debated topic in our town prior to the historic desegregation of Central High School. My parents were privately strongly in favor of integration. To them, it was a matter of morality. Little Rock was considered a moderate city in the South, partly because it had "peacefully" done away with the Jim

Crow law that forced Blacks to ride in the back sections of the city buses. The peace, however, was more like an unevenly armed truce, with a single law on the side of the Black community and the threat of violence, condoned and abetted by the police, on the side of the white community. The result was that even though I rode the bus twice a day, I had not yet seen a Black person move to the front of the bus, or a white person sit in the back.

One blistering August afternoon when I got on the bus with my mother, she took the only seat left in what was still labeled the white section. Tradition dictated that white children in this circumstance should stand throughout the ride or sit on the mother's lap. Suddenly something I had done countless times seemed outrageous to me. I was tired and hot; I didn't want to stand for another hour or to be held like a baby. I looked at the back of the bus where there were several empty seats.

Anger at my own dilemma shifted to moral indignation. I knew what the law said. I understood that fear kept Black people from sitting in the white section. The tension in their bodies, their suppressed voices and

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downcast eyes, the uniformed white bus driver whose thin veneer of jocularity demanded submission—these things I could grasp intuitively as a child in a world ruled by adults. But what kept white people from sitting in the back? I figured it could only be prejudice. Most whites acted as though they thought Blacks were dirty and avoided any close proximity to them. I thought they were wrong. I'd been told by my parents that they were wrong. It dawned on me that each time I did what I was supposed to do, everyone assumed I agreed with bigotry. I spotted a Black girl a few years older than I was, boldly strode down the aisle, and sat in the empty seat next to her. I did not speak to her, or even look at her after I'd sat down. I sat there, thrilled with myself, braving the glares aimed at me from passengers in the front of the bus, heart thudding for fear the bus driver might stop and put me off the bus, as I had seen him do to Black people he considered "uppity".

By the time I got off the bus at our stop, I had nearly nominated myself for sainthood. I thought that Black girl would remember me forever as the first tolerant white person she'd encountered. My mother sat me on a bench at the bus stop and gently brought me down a notch or two. First, she said, I'm proud of you for trying to do the right thing. Second, I don't ever want you to do that again. She passed on to me that day a parent's terror for her child in a potentially explosive situation and the fear that made her too passive to risk expressing her

views to white people who disagreed with them. But I do give her credit for the things she made me think about. Did I realize, she asked, the danger I had put the Black girl in? She had taken a far

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greater risk than I had by remaining in the seat next to me, instead of getting up and moving to sit with another Black person, leaving me the seat to myself, as tradition demanded. There was no way the Black girl or even the white people could have known that it was not my intention to make her give up her seat. I had given her no choice but to face possible violence or certain humiliation. I had never really thought about her feelings at all, except to expect her gratitude.

My involvement in civil rights and my efforts in making friends across racial lines in high school and college were tentative. I was

still determined to do what I saw as right, but I was more aware of the limitations of my moral vision. I often closed my heart because I was afraid I might do or say something racist or thoughtlessly put Black people at risk. I was no longer sure at all that I could do anything right. I felt stuck on that bus where there was no moral place to sit or stand. Guilt was keeping me from learning anything useful or doing anything effective. It's ironic that we speak so often about being burdened by our guilt as white people. In fact our guilt may cause us intense discomfort, but it is people of color who bear the burden of white guilt, since it causes white people to collude with racism, to avoid or lash out at the people we believe are making us feel so guilty.

In 1969, I tried to get as far away as I could from Little Rock, thinking that racism was a regional problem, and that the only way I could avoid being part of the problem was by leaving the South. I had studied German in college, worked and saved for a year afterwards. My parents gave me a plane ticket as a belated graduation present; so, at 23, I packed my bags and landed on a continent where I had not even the name and address of a single person and only rudimentary knowledge of a fairly difficult language. Only ignorance of the magnitude of what I was doing made me this brave. I had told my parents I was going to study for a year. Secretly, I had no intentions of ever returning home for more than a visit. I studied and found jobs in Germany, visited Holland, Morocco, Spain, Ireland

and France for periods of one to six months.

The privilege of travel gave me the experience of having to learn the rules of another society from scratch. For the first time, I became aware of equally complex, unwritten rules that governed my own society, rules which no one seemed to notice or question. I discovered, to my astonishment, that many of the students and a wonderful professor I admired, belonged to one of several factions labeled communist or socialist. Talk about folks I had been taught to look down on—even by my parents! Yet I found them to be some of the most concerned, intelligent, and kindest people I'd known. I thought some of their ideas impractical, wrong-headed or contradictory, but I gained great illumination from a viewpoint that made economics primary. Since the issue of class was among the most hidden and obscure in American education and culture, I definitely needed some balance. Growing up, I had only understood politics as something that happened every couple of years when elections were held. For the first time I understood politics as something that affected people's daily lives.

I discovered that as an American I had enormous power and privilege coupled with equally vast ignorance cultivated by media and schools that deliberately treat the rest of the world and its peoples as if they were mere scenery or servants, either literally or in the form of military or business "interests". As I read works by authors such as James Baldwin,

Malcolm X, Angela Davis, Ann Moody, Ralph Ellison and Eldridge Cleaver, I started to understand that as a white person living in America, I had also inherited a dangerous combination of privilege and self-centered

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obliviousness towards people of other races. I was an imperialist within my own country.

Travel to different countries gave me insight into how racism and colonialism operate outside the U.S. I was particularly struck by the example of Ireland, a nation which must surely have been the testing ground for England's harshest methods before its heyday as an imperial power. I knew about the military occupation in Northern Ireland, but I was startled to learn to what extent the Republic of Ireland continues to be kept in economic dependence and exploited as a source of cheap labor, much like former colonial

nations of the Third World. This led me to think about how much the economy of the South has functioned like a colony within U.S. borders, how the North had profited from, colluded with and encouraged slavery. Later, industries were lured South, with local bond issues that paid to build factories, with low taxes and wages which insured that most of the profits would flow back to absentee owners in the North. Bosses told white workers that if they let unions in, Blacks would take their jobs. While factory owners manipulated fear and prejudice, Jim Crow laws were set up to insure that Blacks remained "in their place," yet most white people still failed to prosper. More than a hundred years after the Civil War ended the Dixie states lagged far behind other regions of the country in health care, education and income, for Blacks especially, but also for whites. This was not a sign of congenital Southern stupidity, and it was no accident. I began to understand that racism exists because it is extremely profitable for many white people and because even the poorest have been made to fear that they would be worse off economically without it. Clearly, racism was far more than a regional problem I could move away from. No wonder I had failed in approaching racism as a moral issue: it was simply too huge.

Moving back to the States after four years involved a series of events I think of as simultaneously coming out and coming home. Within a few years, I claimed two identities I had tried to reject since early childhood—as a lesbian and

a woman with disabilities. I also acknowledged my more recent past as a survivor of rape. Last of all, I freed myself from an abusive relationship and began to talk about lesbian battering. Each of these steps brought me closer to home, to the core of who I am. Each also removed me further from the mainstream and made me more of an outsider. Understanding my own oppression turned out to be an important step in understanding my personal stake in fighting racism.

My thinking about race during the late 70s and early 80s was affected by working with primarily white feminists and lesbian separatists where I lived in Northwest Arkansas and the Bay Area of Northern California. We began the crucial, mind-expanding process of telling our stories and trying to listen to each other's experiences. What constrained our thinking were the unwritten rules of feminism, which assumed that the experiences of middle-class white women defined sexism and which attempted to rank oppressions, with sexism first and worst. The rules just didn't seem to fit the real women I knew, who like myself, brought multiple identities through the collective door. Women who talked about race, class, anti-semitism, age or disability were labeled divisive if they were not willing to chop off pieces of themselves and put them in order—vagas only, in the front row.

We focused too narrowly on the barriers that kept us from forming friendships across economic and racial barriers. Once we realized that sisterhood could not be

created just by hanging a "Women only" sign on the front door, we demanded endless explanations from women of color, who grew tired of being unpaid teachers. Then we turned the truth, that we could never experience racism on our own bodies, into an excuse to stop trying to understand. Confrontation burnout led many of us to split off into smaller groups: working-class lesbians, lesbians of color, disabled lesbians, old lesbians, Jewish lesbians, finding in such groups a limited haven. But meanwhile, sodomy laws were passed, anti-gay initiatives were launched, "reverse discrimination" suits were filed by white men. I asked myself if focusing so much energy on politics as it affects individual behavior wasn't as misguided as approaching racism as a moral issue. Why on earth would any woman of color risk being my friend if I was doing nothing to change the quality of her life out in the world where she had to survive.

What helped me reach this conclusion were books by women of color and some white women—many of them Jewish—who were rewriting and expanding feminism, lesbian politics and anti-racist work. I found much that challenged me and much that confirmed my own dis-ease with white feminism. I learned that all oppressors use similar tactics, that the majority of women and many men in the world experience multiple oppressions, that most of us who are oppressed also experience being someone's oppressor at some point in our lives. Oppressions do not operate independently or order themselves into a

neat hierarchy; they interlock like a three-dimensional web. It was pointless to argue which strand came first or was strongest, because every strand of oppression reinforces others and tightens the web, whether that particular strand touches your own life or not.

From my own experience, I could agree with women of color that forming political alliances based on identity alone had limited value. For over a year I belonged to a group of lesbians with disabilities: it felt liberating to bring all of myself into that room and feel safe for two hours every week. But our stories revealed widely different experiences with disability. In addition, some felt being poor or female or lesbian or Jewish had impacted their lives more than disability. But we stuck together, because we realized that if we bonded only with those who shared identical experiences, we would split into even smaller groups. Those who had suffered the most numerous oppressions might find themselves in a "group" of only two or three or someone might wind up talking to herself. We would become totally ineffective. We also noticed that common experiences do not necessarily make common goals, and as we began to work with women who were temporarily able-bodied and with men who had disabilities, we learned that we might find support for our issues in spite of differences.

I began to hear that women of color need white women as allies. Friendship might happen, but it would be gravy: allies are the meat and potatoes of effective coalitions.

I had to understand that, because when I worked with men I did not count on or wait for friendship; what I looked for first was a shared understanding of and commitment to issues. And as women of color wrote more and more about their long, painful history with white women, I began to realize that no woman of color has any more reason to feel immediate trust or eventual friendship towards me than I do towards a man.

This period of my life brought me back to my home town at age forty. This meant getting on a Little Rock bus for the first time since early in 1969. I was not conscious that day of remembering the many times I had seen African Americans humiliated on the bus or how frustrated and helpless I had felt. I associated my sense of dread with the discomfort and tedium of one of the same long routes I had ridden since before I could talk or walk. I took my seat in the middle of a bus with fewer passengers than in the past, but as had frequently been the case in my childhood, most riders were African American, female, middle-aged or older. Although I had noticed buses driven by African Americans, some of them women, this driver was a white man. I numbed my mind for the first ten or fifteen minutes. Then my immediate surroundings crept back into awareness: all around me were the voices of African American women in full tone; laughter, hilarious or ironic; bodies and gestures loosened in sharing tales.

This was kitchen table talk, the kind African Americans never used to let slip in front of white

people when I had grown up here. At one point the driver stopped on his route and went into a small laundromat. Buses often stopped for a while when they ran ahead of schedule, but this time the wait stretched out. The women around me began to swap theories full of

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increasing mockery, about just what might be taking the driver so long, openly poking fun in front of white people at a uniformed white male figure who had once been a powerful tin god in the South. Eventually, he returned and the ride resumed; conversation continued to flow around me, and I found that my heart was cracking open, letting a ten-year old's impotent fear, anger and shame flow out of my body and seep silently down my face. I turned toward the window to hide my tears. Too little had changed in Little Rock, but this had, and my tears were tears of gratitude. I was grateful for a glimpse of intimacy,

strength and spirit that had been carefully nurtured and shielded from white eyes for so long in the South; I was far more grateful that getting on the bus no longer meant unavoidably casting my lot with racists. I had long known that African Americans, particularly women much like those around me, had done most of the dangerous work that made this possible, starting with the Montgomery bus boycott, continuing with the unnamed African Americans who braved their way up the aisle to the front of every Little Rock bus, including the driver's seat. But now I was feeling in the roots of my being what I owe those civil rights warriors: certainly, I was not the intended beneficiary of their struggle, but nevertheless, they helped create a world where I have the chance to become a true adult, instead of remaining a child who must sit or stand where white men dictate.

In spite of the distress guilt causes white people, it's probably more comforting than gratitude. As a white person I had been taught to feel superior, but true gratitude is a humbling experience. It's also demanding. It awakened a need in me to become worthy of what I have been given. Collective white guilt included a childish arrogance that told me people of color should be grateful for gestures of tolerance on my part. It's ironic to me now to remember how white people who backed integration constantly encouraged other whites to be more tolerant, as if we were the ones suffering from our racist attitudes. Every day in Little Rock, when I interact with African Americans

where I work or in any other public place, I am amazed at the tolerance shown to me as a white person, given the history of this town and this country, and at the degree of openness I often receive, by doing as little as making eye contact and listening to an African American stranger. I hope someday to achieve even half the degree of faith, the degree of humanity this willingness to take a risk demonstrates. But I do find that by letting go of the guilt that made my eyes slide aside and filled my ears with self-important worries about doing and saying the right thing, I can attend to the person in front of me; I can respond in a way that enhances my faith and makes me more human. I am learning also not to expect openness, to accept the fact that many people of color cannot and will not tolerate the real possibility of any foolishness or worse on my part. That response is certainly not "racism" on their part. And it does not let me off the hook in the least.

Ironically, collective white guilt allows each individual white person to maintain a child's pose of innocence and powerlessness—"It started long before I was born. It's not my fault. There's nothing I can do about it anyway." To start growing up, I must replace collective guilt with the concepts of collective privilege and collective responsibility. I need to acknowledge and learn from my individual mistakes, while recognizing the huge amount of advantage white skin has given me every day of my life, regardless of how I behaved. I must assume my share of

responsibility for dismantling racism, by using my influence with other white people, to challenge economic injustice, police brutality, courts where justice is sold to the privileged, prisons that are becoming apartheid homelands, media distortions and silence, government indifference and neglect—every strand that binds racism together.

Feeling at a soul level my indebtedness to African Americans has allowed me to know how much I need people of color as my allies in this world and to care enough about what happens to them to risk my safety and privilege. Caring means going back to school, because being white has meant never needing to think about race, being sure that my view of the world meant "reality," tuning out the feelings, culture and experiences of people of color. As one way of learning, I have immersed myself for the last ten years in fiction, poetry and biographies by people of color, particularly African American women. This literature is kitchen table talk brought to a high art form. It speaks to me with an intimacy that few people of color can risk with me in person. It has been a fountain of wisdom that allows me to begin to appreciate both what we have in common and the various, unique flavors of African American life.

This literature delights while it educates, but it does not romanticize. The myth that oppression makes people noble pervades our society. Both liberals and the oppressed themselves often tend to believe it. For instance, I once be-

lieved that women were morally superior to men, and nearly died in a battering relationship with a woman before I could admit that some of us are just as dangerous as any man. African American literature brings home the truth: racism wounds and scars people, including those who do manage to survive and even thrive. It is interesting to me to see the amount of attention paid in our popular culture to the lifelong damage individuals suffer from such traumas as incest, child abuse, neglect, rape, and battering. I am glad notice is finally being given to these issues. But I would also like to see our culture acknowledge that racism, although different, is surely as devastating, particularly when combined with the horrors of poverty. How, exactly, is a person of color supposed to escape a dysfunctional relationship with white society? Where can one go to recover from racist abuse that never stops? African American literature makes it clear that people behave nobly, when they do, at great cost and in spite of injury, not because of it. I am glad that oppression does not enoble us. If racism were about turning people into saints, why would we want to stop it?

No amount of reading could teach me to know racism from the inside. People of color will always be the experts and the leaders on this issue. As a white person I've been taught that the only worthy results are those that surpass others. To devote myself to understanding racism and pursuing justice, when I am guaranteed never to reach the top, flies in the face of

conditioning, but it fills other needs: not to be the best at others' expense, but to do better by everyone; to contribute through action, instead of profiting by doing nothing. As I do so, I become smarter and tougher in my struggles as a woman, a lesbian, a person with disabilities. And I gain powerful allies.

These days, I am learning through the Women's Project, the first feminist organization I have seen and, I suspect, still one of few, that truly places anti-racist work on a par with fighting sexism, and one that does not shuffle homophobia or any other unpopular issue to the bottom of the agenda in order to gain acceptance. Nothing has helped me understand racism more, or feel more productive and hopeful in fighting it than the work, writing, and friendship of Suzanne Pharr, Kerry Lobel, Janet Perkins, and Kelly Mitchell-Clark, and the stories and energy contributed by many, many others I have worked and partied with at the Women's Project over the last ten years. These women are far ahead of me on the road and I am grateful for all they have taught me and the patience they have shown.

I encourage those of you who want to transform the world we have inherited, those of you who want to make a difference, but have not been sure how to get involved, those of you who have felt immobilized by fear or guilt, to use the Women's Project as a place to learn as you contribute to our work. We have a wonderful library of literature by people of color and a wonderful librarian,

Lynn Frost, who can guide you to the books, audio tapes and videos you need. The public library also has a substantial collection by African Americans and the Main branch has a list of these books available on request at the circulation desk. I urge you to lend your personal as well as your financial

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support to the work we do to oppose oppression. We have a network of Watchcare volunteers who monitor incidents of hate violence and the activities of white supremacists around the state. The MIWATCH program needs volunteers to transport children from around the state to visit their mothers in prison. Come hang out and stuff envelopes, join one of our phone banks, or put your name on a list of those who are willing to participate in silent vigils of protest when white supremacists like Thom Robb make public appearances, to make visible a counterforce to the growing power of the

right wing. I have found that learning and doing go hand in hand, that the mind and heart follow where the body leads.

Most of the Women's Project's work is done by active volunteers, while the staff provide such essentials as a meeting place, library, telephones, mailing lists, copiers, vision and guidance. I would like to start a reading/audio/video group centered on works by and about people of color that would help us understand racism and our stake in fighting it. I would also like to expand the Watchcare Project to include a group of women and men who are willing to monitor and analyze local news stories for incidents and attitudes that create the climate of hatred which leads to acts of violence, and to take the further step of writing letters to the editor that counter this hatred, to make the voices of justice-loving people heard in our communities. Oppression thrives on silence, even more than on hate speech. I know that I myself have stayed silent out of a sense that I could never find time and energy to respond to all the racism I see in the news. But in fact, we can and should divide this work, and we don't need to be gifted writers to do it. We can help each other find the words, and the act of speaking up and signing our names to what we stand for is the most eloquent thing we can do. It is risk-taking, privilege-sharing work. Leave a message for me at the Women's Project, if you are interested in these ideas or if you have some idea of your own that you would like to get off the ground. ■