SIX

The Development of White Identity

*"I'm not ethnic, I'm just normal."**

I often begin the classes and workshops I lead by asking participants to reflect on their own social class and ethnic background in small discussion groups. The first question I pose is one that most people of color answer without hesitation: "What is your class and ethnic background?" White participants, however, often pause before responding. On one such occasion a young White woman quickly described herself as middle-class but seemed stumped as to how to describe herself ethnically. Finally, she said, "I'm just normal!" What did she mean? She explained that she did not identify with any particular ethnic heritage and that she was a lot like the other people who lived in her very homogeneous, White, middle-class community. But her choice of words was telling. If she is "just normal," are those who are different from her "just abnormal"?

Like many White people, this young woman had never really considered her own racial and ethnic group membership. For her, Whiteness was simply the unexamined norm. Because they represent the societal

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norm, Whites can easily reach adulthood without thinking much about their racial group. For example, one White teacher who was taking a professional development course on racism with me wrote in one of her papers: "I am thirty-five years old and I never really started thinking about race too much until now, and that makes me feel uncomfortable. . . . I just think for some reason I didn't know. No one taught us."[1] There is a lot of silence about race in White communities, and as a consequence Whites tend to think of racial identity as something that other people have, not something that is salient for them.

That is just how Debby Irving understood racial identity until, at age forty-eight, she "woke up White." In her memoir, *Waking Up White*, she recalls, "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."[2] Like my students, Irving's awakening came in the context of an academic course she was taking.

Whether the silence about race is broken in a college classroom, in a cross-racial friendship or intimate relationship, in a corporate office, or in some other life circumstance, once it is meaningfully broken, a process of identity development—specifically linked to an understanding of what it means to be White in a race-conscious society—begins to unfold. Counseling psychologist Janet Helms has described this unfolding for Whites in her book *Black and White Racial Identity: Theory, Research, and Practice*.[3] She assumes, as do I, that in a race-conscious society, racial group membership has psychological implications. The messages we receive about assumed superiority or inferiority shape our perceptions of reality and influence our interactions with others. While the task for people of color is to resist negative societal messages and develop an empowered sense of self in the face of a racist society, Helms says the task for Whites is to develop a positive White identity based in reality, not on assumed superiority. In order to do that, each person must become aware of his or her Whiteness, recognize that it is

personally and socially significant, and learn to feel good about it, not in the sense of a Klan member's "White pride" but in the context of a commitment to a just society.

It comes as a surprise to some White people to think about their race in this way. "Of course White people feel good about being White," they say. But that is not my experience with my students or with the people who come to my workshops. Many of the White people in my audiences either have not given much thought to the meaning of their racial group membership and so don't feel anything, or they have thought about it and feel uncomfortable. The nature of the discomfort can vary and is often linked to their socioeconomic position. Social justice educator Paul Kivel, author of *Uprooting Racism: How White People Can Work for Racial Justice*, notes:

> Those of us who are middle-class are more likely to take it for granted that we are white without having to emphasize the point, and to feel guilty when it is noticed or brought up. Those of us who are poor or working-class are more likely to have had to assert our whiteness against the effects of economic discrimination and the presence of other racial groups. Although we share the benefits of being white, we don't share the economic privileges of being middle-class, and so we are more likely to feel angry and less likely to feel guilty than our middle-class counterparts. Whatever our economic status, many white people become paralyzed with some measure of fear, guilt or defensiveness when racism is addressed.[4]

This psychological discomfort is part of the hidden cost of racism for Whites.

How can White people achieve a healthy sense of White identity? Helms' model is instructive.[5] There are two major developmental tasks in this process, the abandonment of individual racism and the recognition of and opposition to institutional and cultural racism. These tasks are represented by what Helms calls six statuses (or states of mind): *contact, disintegration, reintegration, pseudo-independent, immersion/emersion,* and *autonomy.*[6]

Abandoning Racism

In the contact frame of mind, like the women quoted in the opening of this chapter, Whites are paying very little attention, if any, to the significance of their racial identity. As exemplified by the "I'm just normal" comment, individuals operating from this perspective rarely describe themselves as White. If they have lived, worked, or gone to school in predominantly White settings, they may simply think of themselves as being part of the racial norm and take this for granted without conscious consideration of their White privilege, the systematically conferred advantages they receive simply because they are White.

While they have been breathing the "smog" and internalizing many of the prevailing societal stereotypes of people of color, they typically are unaware of this socialization process. They often perceive themselves as color-blind, completely free of prejudice, unaware of their own assumptions about other racial groups. In addition, they usually think of racism as the prejudiced behaviors of individuals rather than as an institutionalized system of advantage benefiting Whites in subtle as well as blatant ways. Peggy McIntosh speaks for many Whites with a contact frame when she writes, "I was taught to recognize racism only in individual acts of meanness by members of my group, never in invisible systems conferring unsought racial dominance on my group from birth."[7]

Some White people may grow up in families where they are actively encouraged to embrace the ideology of White superiority (children of Klan members or members of other White nationalist groups, for example), and as a result, they may have an elevated sense of White identity from an early age. In such cases, socialization of attitudes about Whiteness and the assumed inferiority of others has been overt and intentional.[8] However, for most Whites, the contact frame of mind in Helms' model of racial identity development represents the passive absorption of subtly communicated messages.

Robert Carter, another racial identity researcher, illustrates this point when he quotes a forty-four-year-old White male who grew up in upstate New York, where he had limited direct exposure to Black people or other communities of color.

> There was no one to compare ourselves to. As you would drive through other neighborhoods, I think there was a clear message of difference or even superiority. The neighborhoods were poorer, and it was probably subtle, I don't remember my parents being bigoted, although by today's standards they clearly were. I think there was probably a message of superiority. The underlying messages were subtle. No one ever came out and said, White people are this and Black people are like this. I think the underlying message is that White people are generally good and they're like us, us and them.[9]

These messages may go unchallenged and unexamined for a long time, perhaps a lifetime.

While active exploration of what it means to be Black is an almost universal experience for African American adolescents due to the encounters with racism they commonly have, the same is not true for White youth. For White people living in largely White environments, it is possible to live one's entire life without giving focused attention to what it means to be White. Ethnic identity (being of Irish, Italian, Polish ancestry, for example) may be celebrated as part of a family's cultural traditions, but being White may go unexplored because it just seems "normal." But if one's social context changes, in college for instance, there may be new experiences that trigger active exploration of this dimension of identity. If that happens, the disintegration state is likely to occur next.

Disintegration is marked by a growing awareness of racism and White privilege as a result of personal encounters in which the social significance of race is made visible. For some White people, disintegration occurs when they develop a close friendship or a romantic relationship with a person of color. The White person then sees firsthand how racism can operate. For example, one female college student described her experiences shopping with a Puerto Rican roommate. She couldn't help noticing how her Latinx friend was followed around in stores by suspicious store clerks. She also saw how her friend's Black boyfriend was frequently asked to show his college ID when he visited their residence hall, while young White men came and went without being questioned.

For other White people, disintegration may result from seeing racial incidents captured on video, as was the case for Jill Robbins, a White female blogger. She titled her essay describing her reaction to the online video of the shooting of Philando Castile "How I Finally 'Got' the Meaning of White Privilege." Here's an excerpt:

> If I look into my rearview mirror and see flashing red lights, I'm not afraid. I probably have an "oh shit" moment but I have zero fear that I'll be harmed or even harassed by a police officer. I'm a nice white lady in a minivan . . . in suburbia USA. I might walk away with a ticket or maybe just a warning. No police officer is going to perceive me as a threat or a problem. I don't know what it's like to be hunted or profiled.
>
> And that right there is white privilege. It's the knowledge that being a victim of police brutality is probably never going to happen to me. . . . I know that if my white husband had been the one pulled over for a busted tail light that odds of him getting shot are almost nonexistent . . .
>
> A man I don't know who died two days before his 33rd birthday has had such a profound impact on me. It means more than something ugly on the news. I don't know if walking away less tunnel-visioned here in my white, suburban bubble means anything to anyone else but it means something to me.[10]

When that bubble starts to pop, the cycle of racism becomes increasingly visible. The visual image of Philando Castile slumped and bleeding in his car while his girlfriend tries to make sense of what just happened and her four-year-old daughter sits in the backseat is hard to explain away. But there are other, more commonly encountered visual images that also illuminate the cycle of racism in operation. For example, in my Psychology of Racism class, I often showed a very powerful video, *Ethnic Notions*,[11] on the dehumanizing images of African Americans in popular culture from before the Civil War through the late twentieth century. The video links the nineteenth-century caricatures of Black physical features, commonly published racial epithets, and

the early cinematic portrayals of stupid but happy "darkies," menacing Black "savages," and heavyset, caretaking "mammies," to their updated forms in today's media. After seeing this film, students reported that they couldn't help but notice the pervasiveness of contemporary forms of racial stereotyping on television each night. The same programs they used to find entertaining now offended them.

They also started to notice the racism in the everyday language of family and friends. For example, one White student reported that when she asked her roommate to get her a glass of water, the White roommate jokingly replied, "Do I look Black to you?" Although I had never heard of this expression, it was very familiar to the student. Yet, before then, she had never recognized the association of Blackness with servitude and the assumed superiority of Whiteness being conveyed in her roommate's casual remark.

This new awareness is usually characterized by discomfort. The uncomfortable emotions of guilt, shame, and anger are often related to a new awareness of one's personal prejudices or the prejudices within one's family. The following excerpts from the journals of two White students illustrate this point:

> Today was the first class on racism. . . . Before today I didn't think I was exposed to any form of racism. Well, except for my father. He is about as prejudiced as they come.

> It really bothers me that stereotypes exist because it is from them that I originally became uninformed. My grandmother makes all kinds of decisions based on stereotypes—who to hire, who to help out. When I was growing up, the only Black people that I knew were adults [household help], but I admired them just as much as any other adult. When I expressed these feelings to my parents, I was always told that the Black people that I knew were the exceptions and that the rest . . . were different. I, too, was taught to be afraid.

Others' parents were silent on the subject of racism, simply accepting the status quo.

Those whose parents were actively antiracist might have felt less guilt but often still felt unprepared for addressing racism outside the family, a point highlighted by the comments of this young woman:

> Talking with other class members, I realized how exceptional my parents were. Not only were they not overtly racist but they also tried to keep society's subtle racism from reaching me. Basically I grew up believing that racism was no longer an issue and all people should be treated as equals. Unfortunately, my parents were not being very realistic as society's racism did begin to reach me. They did not teach me how to support and defend their views once I was interacting in a society without them as a buffer.

When the disintegration frame of mind emerges, White individuals begin to see the degree to which their lives, and the lives of people of color, have been affected by racism in our society. The societal inequities they now notice directly contradict the idea of an American meritocracy, a concept that has typically been an integral part of their belief system. The cognitive dissonance that results is part of the discomfort that is experienced at this point in the process of development. Responses to this discomfort may include denying the validity of the information that is being presented or psychologically or physically withdrawing from it. The logic is, "If I don't read about racism, talk about racism, watch those documentaries or special news programs, or spend time with those people of color, I won't have to feel uncomfortable." (In the case of my students, this was usually not an option. By the time they were feeling these emotional responses deeply, it was too late to drop the course.)

The desire to withdraw physically or psychologically to avoid the discomfort is a symptom of what Robin DiAngelo has called "white fragility": in essence, a low tolerance for the cognitive and emotional stress that comes from exposure to new information that disrupts one's sense of racial equilibrium.[12]

If, despite the strong impulse to withdraw, the individual remains engaged, he or she can turn the discomfort into action. Once they

have an awareness of the cycle of racism, many people are angered by it and want to interrupt it. Often action comes in the form of educating others—pointing out the stereotypes as they watch television, interrupting racial jokes, writing letters to the editor, sharing articles with friends and family. Like new converts, people experiencing disintegration can be quite zealous in their efforts. A White woman in her forties who participated in an antiracist professional development course for educators described herself at this stage:

> What it was like for me when I was taking the course [one year ago] and just afterwards, hell, because this dissonance stuff doesn't feel all that great. And, trying to put it in a perspective and figure out what to do with it is very hard. . . . I was on the band wagon so I'm not going to be quiet about it. So there was dissonance everywhere. Personally, I remember going home for Thanksgiving, the first Thanksgiving [while taking the course], back to our families . . . and turning to my brother-in-law and saying, "I really don't want you to say that in front of me—I don't want to hear that joke—I am not interested." . . . At every turn it seemed like there, I was *responsible* for saying something. . . . My husband, who I think is a very good, a very liberal person, but who really hasn't been through [this], saying, "You know I think you're taking yourself too seriously here and where is your sense of humor? You have lost your sense of humor." And my saying, "It isn't funny; you don't understand, it just isn't funny to me." Not that he would ever tell a racial joke, but there were these things that would come up and he would just sort of look back and say, "I don't understand where you're coming from now." So there was a lot of dissonance. . . . I don't think anybody was too comfortable with me for a while.[13]

My college students had similar experiences with family members and friends. Though they wanted to step off the cycle of racism, the message from the surrounding White community seemed to be, "Get back on!" A very poignant example of this was shared with me by a young White man from a very privileged background. He wrote:

> I realized that it was possible to simply go through life totally oblivious to the entire situation or, even if one realizes it, one can totally repress it. It is easy to fade into the woodwork, run with the rest of society, and never have to deal with these problems. So many people I know from home are like this. They have simply accepted what society has taught them with little, if any, question. My father is a prime example of this. . . . It has caused much friction in our relationship, and he often tells me as a father he has failed in raising me correctly. Most of my high school friends will never deal with these issues and propagate them on to their own children. It's easy to see how the cycle continues. I don't think I could ever justify within myself simply turning my back on the problem. I finally realized that my position in all of these dominant groups gives me power to make change occur. . . . It is an unfortunate result often though that I feel alienated from friends and family. It's often played off as a mere stage that I'm going through. I obviously can't tell if it's merely a stage, but I know that they say this to take the attention off of the truth of what I'm saying. By belittling me, they take the power out of my argument. It's very depressing that being compassionate and considerate are seen as only phases that people go through. I don't want it to be a phase for me, but as obvious as this may sound, I look at my environment and often wonder how it will not be.

The social pressure from friends and acquaintances to collude, to not notice racism, can be quite powerful.

But it is very difficult to stop noticing something once it has been pointed out. The conflict between noticing and not noticing generates internal tension, and there is a great desire to relieve it. Relief often comes through what Helms calls reintegration. In the reintegration frame of mind, the previous feelings of guilt or denial may be transformed into fear and anger directed toward people of color. The logic is, "If there is a problem with racism, then you people of color must have done something to cause it. And if you would just change your behavior, the problem would go away." The elegance of this argument is that it relieves the White person of all responsibility for social change.

I am sometimes asked if it is absolutely necessary to experience this kind of reintegration thinking. Must one resort to blaming the victim to restore a sense of emotional equilibrium? Although it is not inevitable, most White people who speak up against racism will attest to the temptation they sometimes feel to slip back into collusion and silence. Because the pressure to ignore racism and to accept the socially sanctioned stereotypes is so strong, and the system of advantage so seductive, many White people get stuck in reintegration thinking. The psychological tension experienced at this stage is clearly expressed by Connie, a White woman of Italian ancestry who took my course on the psychology of racism. After reading about the process of White identity development, she wrote:

> There was a time when I never considered myself a color. I never described myself as a "White, Italian female" until I got to college and noticed that people of color always described themselves by their color/race. While taking this class, I have begun to understand that being White makes a difference. I never thought about it before, but there are many privileges to being White. In my personal life, I cannot say that I have ever felt that I have had the advantage over a Black person, but I am aware that my race has the advantage.
>
> I am feeling really guilty lately about that. I find myself thinking: "I didn't mean to be White, I really didn't mean it." I am starting to feel angry toward my race for ever using this advantage toward personal gains. But at the same time I resent the minority groups. I mean, it's not my fault that society has deemed us "superior." I don't feel any better than a Black person. But it really doesn't matter because I am a member of the dominant race. . . . I can't help it . . . and I sometimes get angry and feel like I'm being attacked.
>
> I guess my anger toward a minority group would enter me into the next stage of Reintegration where I am once again starting to blame the victim. This is all very trying for me and it has been on my mind a lot. I really would like to be able to reach the last stage . . . where I can accept being White without hostility and anger. That is really hard to do.

"But I'm an Individual!"

Another source of the discomfort and anger that Whites often experience in this phase stems from the frustration of being seen as a group member, rather than as an individual. People of color learn early in life that they are seen by others as members of a group. For Whites, thinking of oneself only as an individual is a legacy of White privilege. As McIntosh writes, "I can swear, or dress in secondhand clothes, or not answer letters, without having people attribute these choices to the bad morals, the poverty, or the illiteracy of my race. . . . I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to my race. . . . I am never asked to speak for all the people of my racial group."[14] In short, she and other Whites are perceived as individuals most of the time.

The view of oneself as an individual is very compatible with the dominant ideology of rugged individualism and the American myth of meritocracy. Understanding racism as a system of advantage that structurally benefits Whites and disadvantages people of color on the basis of group membership threatens not only beliefs about society but also beliefs about one's own life accomplishments. For example, organizational consultant Nancie Zane writes that senior White male managers "were clearly invested in the notion that their hard work, ingenuity and skills had won them their senior-level positions." As others talked about the systemic racist and sexist barriers to their own achievement, "white men heard it as a condemnation that they somehow didn't 'deserve' their position."[15] If viewing oneself as a group member threatens one's self-definition, making the paradigm shift from individual to group member will be painful.

In the case of White men, both maleness and Whiteness are normative, so acknowledging group status may be particularly difficult. Those White women who have explored their subordinate gender identity have made at least some movement away from the notion of a strictly individual self-definition and may find it easier to grasp the significance of their racial group membership. However, as McIntosh and others have pointed out, understanding one form of oppression does not guarantee recognition of another.

Those Whites who are highly identified with a particular subordinate identity may also struggle with claiming Whiteness as a meaningful group category because they feel far from the White male middle-class norm. For example, Whites who grew up in impoverished circumstances often struggle with the idea that they had anything described as "privilege." Jewish people of European ancestry sometimes do not think of themselves as White because for them the term means "White Christian." Also, in Nazi Germany, Jews were defined as a distinct, non-Aryan racial group. In the context of an anti-Jewish culture, the salient identity may be the targeted Jewish identity. However, in terms of US racial ideology, Jews of European ancestry are also the beneficiaries of White racial privilege.[16] My White Jewish students often struggled with the tension between being targeted and receiving privilege. In this case, as in others, the reality of multiple identities complicates the process of coming to terms with one particular dimension of identity. For example, one student wrote: "I am constantly afraid that people will see my assertion of my Jewish identity as a denial of whiteness, as a way of escaping the acknowledgment of white privilege. I feel I am both part of and not part of whiteness. I am struggling to be more aware of my white privilege . . . but I will not do so at the cost of having my Jewishness erased."

Similarly, White people whose central group identification is with the LGBTQ community sometimes find it hard to claim privileged status as Whites when they are so targeted by homophobia and heterosexism, often at the hands of other Whites. Heather Hackman, a social-justice educator who identifies as a lesbian, describes her own journey as a college student, initially resisting any new understanding of race.

> I just wanted people to stop calling me a racist. [I] took in just enough information to make it seem like I was on board with racial issues. But if one were to scratch beneath the surface, one would see that I had no real *knowledge* of racial issues, and worse, I had no real *desire* to know. . . . I could not see *why* I should care about it because I could not see myself in this country's story of race. . . . But something was percolating in me that made this ignorance untenable for much

longer. My identity as a feminist, coming out as a lesbian, and learning how the systems of oppression associated with those identities worked were beginning to make it impossible for me to persist in my racial delusions. My last two years of college were filled with moment after moment, lesson after lesson, and conversation after conversation that helped me to see that learning about racial issues in earnest and then speaking out about racial oppression was deeply connected to my speaking out about gender and queer oppression and that I could not advocate for the latter without addressing the former.[17]

Even when White men and women don't see or think of themselves as White, other people still do. As White people begin to understand that they are viewed as members of a dominant racial group not only by other Whites but also by people of color, they are sometimes troubled, even angered, to learn that simply because of their group status they may be viewed with suspicion by many people of color. "I'm an individual, view me as an individual!" For example, in a racially mixed group of educators participating in an antiracist professional development course, a Black man commented about using his "radar" to determine if the group would be a safe place for him. Many of the White people in the room, who believed that their very presence in the course was proof of their trustworthiness, were upset by the comment, initially unprepared to acknowledge the invisible legacy of racism that accompanied any and every interaction they had with people of color.[18] The White people in the course found some comfort in reading Lois Stalvey's classic memoir, *The Education of a WASP*, in which she describes her own responses to the ways Black people tested her trustworthiness. She writes,

I could never resent the tests as some white people have told me they do. . . . But to me, the longest tests have always indicated the deepest hurts. We whites would have to be naive to expect that hundreds of years of humiliation can be forgotten the moment we wish it to be. At times, the most poignant part of the test is that black people have enough trust left to give it. Testing implies we might pass the test. It is safer and easier for a black person to turn his back on us. If he does not gamble on our sincerity, he cannot be hurt if we prove false. Testing shows an optimism I doubt I could duplicate if I were black.[19]

Sometimes poorly organized antiracism workshops or other educational experiences can create a scenario that places participants at risk for getting stuck in their anger. Effective consciousness-raising about racism must also point the way toward constructive action. When people don't have the tools for moving forward, they tend to return to what is familiar, often becoming more vigorous in their defense of the racial status quo than they were initially.

As we have seen, many White people experience themselves as powerless, even in the face of privilege. But the fact is that we all have a sphere of influence, some domain in which we exercise some level of power and control. The task for each of us, White and of color, is to identify what our own sphere of influence is (however large or small) and to consider how it might be used to interrupt the cycle of racism.

Defining a Positive White Identity

As a White person's understanding of the complexity of institutional racism in our society deepens, resorting to explanations that blame the victim becomes less likely. Instead, deepening awareness usually leads to a commitment to unlearn one's racism and marks the emergence of the pseudo-independent status.

Sometimes epitomized by the "guilty White liberal" persona, the individual whose thinking is dominated by a pseudo-independent mindset has achieved an intellectual understanding of racism as a system of advantage but doesn't quite know what to do about it. Self-conscious and feeling guilty about one's own Whiteness, the individual often desires to escape it by associating with people of color. Ruth Frankenberg, author of *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness*,[20] describes the confusing emotions of this process in an autobiographical essay. "I viewed my racial privilege as total. I remember months when I was terrified to speak in gatherings that were primarily of color, since I feared that anything I did say would be marked by my

whiteness, my racial privilege (which in my mind meant the same)."[21] When her friends of color were making casual conversation—chatting about their mothers, for example—she would worry that anything she might say about her own mother would somehow reveal her race privilege, and by the time she had sorted it out mentally, the topic of conversation would have changed. She writes, "In that silence, I tried to 'pass' (as what? as racially unmarked? as exceptional? as the one white girl who could 'hang'?)."[22]

Similarly, a student of mine wrote:

> One of the major and probably most difficult steps in identity development is obtaining or finding the consciousness of what it means to be White. I definitely remember many a time that I wished I was not White, ashamed of what I and others have done to the other racial groups in the world. . . . I wanted to pretend I was Black, live with them, celebrate their culture, and deny my Whiteness completely. Basically, I wanted to escape the responsibility that came with identifying myself as "White."

How successful these efforts to escape Whiteness via people of color will be depends in part on the REC-identity development of the people of color involved. Remember the Black students at the cafeteria table? If they are having racial encounters and are in the immersion mode of active exploration of their Black identity, they are not likely to be interested in cultivating White friendships. If a White person reaches out to a Black person and is rebuffed, it may cause the White person to retreat into "blame the victim" thinking. However, even if those efforts to build interracial relationships are successful, the reality of one's own Whiteness must eventually be confronted.

We all must be able to embrace who we are in terms of our racial and cultural heritage, not in terms of assumed superiority or inferiority but as an integral part of our daily experience in which we can take pride. But, as we see in these examples, for many White people who have come to understand the everyday reality of racism, Whiteness is still experienced as a source of shame rather than as a source of pride.

Recognizing the need to find a more positive self-definition is a hallmark of the immersion/emersion status, as described by Helms. Bob, a White male student in one of my racism classes, clearly articulated this need.

> I'm finding that this idea of White identity is more important than I thought. Yet White identity seems very hard to pin hole. I seem to have an idea and feel myself understanding what I need to do and why and then something presents itself that throws me into mass confusion. I feel that I need some resources that will help me through the process of finding White identity.

The resource Bob needs most at this point are not people of color but other Whites who are further along in the process and can help show him the way.

It is at just this point that White individuals intensify their efforts to see their Whiteness in a positive light. Just as Cross describes the period of Black redefinition as a time for Black people to seek new ways of thinking about Blackness, ways that take them beyond the role of victim, White people must seek new ways of thinking about Whiteness, ways that take them beyond the role of victimizer.

The Search for White Allies and the Restoration of Hope

In fact, another role does exist. There is a history of White protest against racism, a history of Whites who have resisted the role of oppressor and who have been allies to people of color. Unfortunately these Whites are often invisible to us. While the names of active racists are easily recalled—past and present Klan leaders and Southern segregationists, for example—the names of White allies are often unknown. I have had the experience of addressing roomfuls of classroom teachers who have been unable to name even one White person who has worked against racism without some prompting from me. If they can't do it, it is likely that their students can't either.

Those who have studied or lived through the civil rights era (many of today's students have not) may know the names of Viola Liuzzo, James Reeb, or Michael Schwerner, White civil rights workers who were killed for their antiracist efforts. But most people don't want to be martyrs. There is a need to know about White allies who spoke up, who worked for social change, who resisted racism and lived to tell about it. How did these White allies break free from the confines of the racist socialization they surely experienced to claim this identity for themselves? These are the voices that many White people at this point in their learning process are hungry to hear.

Biographies of and autobiographies by White individuals who have been engaged in antiracist activities can be very helpful. For example, there is *A Season of Justice*, the autobiography of Morris Dees, the founder of the Southern Poverty Law Center and a vigorous anti-Klan litigator,[23] as well as *Memoir of a Race Traitor*, by Mab Segrest, a powerful account of her experiences as a White lesbian with deep Southern roots organizing against neo-Nazi and Klan activity in North Carolina.[24] There is *Outside the Magic Circle*, the oral history of Virginia Foster Durr, a Southern belle turned civil rights activist.[25] And, already quoted in this chapter, there is *The Education of a WASP*, the story of Lois Stalvey, a mother struggling to create an antiracist environment for her children during the civil rights era.[26] Each of these books is anchored in events of the twentieth century and explores family histories that go back to the nineteenth century or before. Becky Thompson's book *A Promise and Way of Life: White Antiracist Activism* is based on the life histories of thirty-nine people who collectively represent a social history of White antiracist activism from the 1950s to the end of the twentieth century.[27] Examples of contemporary narratives that extend into the twenty-first century include Bernestine Singley's edited volume *When Race Becomes Real: Black and White Writers Confront Their Personal Histories*,[28] *White Like Me: Reflections on Race from a Privileged Son—The Remix* by Tim Wise,[29] *Waking Up White and Finding Myself in the Story of Race* by Debby Irving,[30] *Witnessing Whiteness: The Need to Talk About Race and How to Do It* by Shelly Tochluk,[31] *Fire in the Heart: How White Activists Embrace Racial Justice* by Mark Warren,[32] and *Everyday White People Confront Racial and Social Justice: 15 Stories*, edited by Eddie Moore, Marguerite W. Penick-Parks, and Ali Michael.[33]

These narratives can provide an antidote to the feelings of isolation and loneliness that White people often feel at this point. There is comfort in knowing that others have traveled this terrain. One of the consequences of racism in our society is that those who oppose racism are often marginalized, and as a result, their stories are not widely known. To quote Mark Warren, "While studies of white racism might fill a small library, the studies of white antiracism, if you will, could fit in a small bookcase."[34] Having access to these narratives makes a difference to Whites who are looking for ways to be agents of change. White people who are doing this work need to continue to make their stories known to serve as guides for others.

In my classes I tried to address the lack of knowledge of White role models by providing concrete examples of such people. In addition to assigning reading material, my strategy was to invite a local White antiracist activist, Andrea Ayvazian, to my class to speak about her own personal journey toward an awareness of racism and her development as a White ally. Students typically asked her questions that reflected their fears about social isolation at this phase of development. "Did you lose friends when you started to speak up?" "My boyfriend makes a lot of racist comments. What can I do?" "What do you say to your father at Thanksgiving when he tells those jokes?" These are not just the questions of late adolescents. The mature White teachers I worked with asked the same things.

My White students often found the topic of racism depressing—especially as they deepened their understanding of how deeply ingrained it is in the structures of our society. Yet they found the opportunity to talk with this ally gave them renewed hope. Through her example, they could see that the role of the ally is not to "help" those targeted by racism but to stand in solidarity with them, speaking up against systems of oppression, and to challenge other Whites to do the same. One point that Andrea Ayvazian emphasizes in her speaking and writing is the idea that "allies need allies," others who will support their efforts to swim against the tide of cultural and institutional racism.[35] This point was

especially helpful for one young woman who had been struggling with feelings of isolation. She wrote:

> About being an ally, a positive role model: . . . it enhanced my positive feelings about the difference each individual (me!) can make. I don't need to feel helpless when there is so much I can do. I still can see how easily things can back-up and start getting depressing, but I can also see how it is possible to keep going strong and powerful. One of the most important points she made was the necessity of a support group/system; people to remind me of what I have done, why I should keep going, of why I'm making a difference, why I shouldn't feel helpless. I think our class started to help me with those issues, as soon as I started to let it, and now I've found similar supports in friends and family. They're out there, it's just finding and establishing them—it really is a necessity. Without support, it would be too easy to give up, burn-out, become helpless again. In any endeavor support is important, but when the forces against you are so prevalent and deep-rooted as racism is in this society, it is the only way to keep moving forward.

Participation in White consciousness-raising groups organized specifically for the purpose of examining one's own racism is a powerful way to "keep moving forward." During my tenure as a professor at Mount Holyoke College, such a group, White Women Against Racism, was formed by White students eager to engage each other in this work. There are similar groups with different names operating formally and informally in local communities around the country.[36] Support groups of this nature help to combat the social isolation that antiracist Whites often experience and provide places to forge new identities.

For example, Showing Up for Racial Justice (SURJ) is a national network founded in 2009 specifically to educate and organize White people to work for racial justice, not alone but in collaboration with local and national multiracial racial-justice organizing efforts. However, SURJ recognizes the need to provide spaces where White people can be "called in, not called out," supported in their learning by other White

people, knowing that mistakes are inevitable. As stated on the website, the SURJ goal is "to learn from those mistakes and keep showing up again and again for what is right and for racial justice." As an organization, SURJ has a particular commitment to engaging with low-income and working-class Whites in order to counteract the way that race has been used to pit disenfranchised Whites against people of color: "While people of color bear the brunt of racism, large numbers of white people have also been failed by the system—facing job loss, inadequate housing and cutbacks in core services. Instead of addressing real fears and insecurity, racist elites actively target working class white people into blaming people of color for the problems their families and vulnerable communities face."[37]

In this age of rising racial tensions *and* economic anxiety, making space for these intragroup conversations among White people is very useful.

I am sometimes asked why such groups need to be made up of Whites only. To many Whites it seems inconceivable that there would be any value in participating in all-White discussions of racism. While of course there is value in cross-racial dialogue, all-White support groups serve a unique function. Particularly when Whites are trying to work through their feelings of guilt and shame, separate groups give White people the "space to speak with honesty and candor rarely possible in racially-mixed groups."[38] Even when Whites feel comfortable sharing these feelings with people of color, frankly, people of color don't necessarily want to hear about it. The following comment, written by a Black woman in my class, illustrates this dilemma:

> Many times in class I feel uncomfortable when White students use the term Black because even if they aren't aware of it they say it with all or at least a lot of the negative connotations they've been taught goes along with Black. Sometimes it just causes a stinging feeling inside of me. Sometimes I get real tired of hearing White people talk about the conditions of Black people. I think it's an important thing for them to talk about, but still I don't always like being around when they do it. I also get tired of hearing them talk about how hard it is

for them, though I understand it, and most times I am very willing to listen and be open, but sometimes I can't. Right now I can't.

Though a White person may need to describe the racist things a parent or spouse has said or done, to tell the story to a person of color may reopen that person's wounds. Listening to those stories and problem-solving about them is a job that White people can do for each other.

It is at this stage of redefining Whiteness, immersion/emersion, that the feelings of guilt and shame start to fade. Reflecting on her own White identity development, sociologist Becky Thompson chronicles this process: "[I understood] that I didn't have to recreate the wheel in my own life. I began to actively seek writing by white women who have historically stood up against racism—Elly Bulkin, Lillian Smith, Sara Evans, Angelina Grimke, Ruth Frankenberg, Helen Joseph, Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz, Tillie Olsen, Minnie Bruce Pratt, Ruth Seid, Mab Segrest, and others."

She also realized that she needed antiracist White people in her daily life with whom she could share stories and whom she could trust to give her honest feedback. Her experience in a White antiracism group helped her to stop feeling bad because she was White. She writes, "I started seeing ways to channel my energies without trying to leave a piece of my identity behind."[39]

The last status, autonomy, represents the most developed of the racial identity frames. With this mind-set, a person has incorporated the newly defined view of Whiteness as part of a personal identity. The positive feelings associated with this redefinition energize the person's efforts to confront racism and oppression in daily life. Clayton Alderfer, a White man with many years of personal and professional experience as an organizational psychologist, described the thinking that characterizes this stage. "We have a more complete awareness of ourselves and of others to the degree that we neither negate the uniqueness of each person, regardless of that person's group memberships, nor deny the ever-present effects of group memberships for each individual."[40]

While autonomy might be described as racial self-actualization, racial identity development never really ends. The person who has experienced

the deeper understanding of autonomy is characteristically open to new information and new ways of thinking about racial and cultural variables.[41] Yet Helms describes each of the six statuses as representing a pattern of thinking that *predominates* at particular points of development. Even when active antiracist thinking predominates, there may still be particular situations that trigger old modes of responding. It is in those moments that being part of a White support group can be especially helpful.

In her book *Witnessing Whiteness*, Shelly Tochluk adds to the thinking about this autonomy phase by proposing that rather than striving to "become an ally," which suggests a completed process, it might be better to speak of "doing effective ally work," which implies a continuing process of growth and learning.[42] Tochluk is part of Alliance of White Anti-Racists Everywhere—Los Angeles (AWARE-LA),[43] a grassroots organization that is pushing the "ally" concept further, to what they call a "Radical White Identity." She explains,

> The exploration the Radical White Identity requires and the way it locates white people as meaningful stakeholders in efforts toward social justice offer a sense of hope and inspiration. Within this approach, our antiracism efforts are not *in service of* people of color, they are part of our own effort to shed the socialization that has led to us behaving in ways that support and maintain the oppression of others. In this way, our sense of ourselves as being fully human is realized when we work toward educational, economic, social, and environmental justice. . . .
>
> Within this community are people who can help me see privilege and racism more clearly, motivate me to continue constructing a healthy and effective antiracism practice, and support me to keeping moving forward in times when I fail.[44]

Tochluk also notes that moving from an unconscious or guilty phase to becoming an effective ally is a "massive leap" that requires scaffolding, all the more reason why becoming part of a community of support is so helpful.

A major benefit of the racial identity development process described in this chapter is increased effectiveness in multiracial settings. The White person who has made a significant effort to work through his or her own racial identity process will have a deepened understanding of racism and an appreciation and respect for the identity struggles of people of color. When we see strong, mutually respectful relationships between people of color and Whites, we are usually looking at the tangible results of both people's identity processes. If we want to promote positive cross-group relations, we need to help young White people engage in the kind of dialogue that precipitates this kind of identity development, just as we need to help youth of color achieve an empowered sense of group identity.

Though the process of examining their racial identity can be uncomfortable and even frightening for Whites, those who persist in the struggle are rewarded with an increasingly multiracial and multicultural existence. In our still quite segregated society, this "borderland" is unfamiliar to many Whites and may be hard to envision. Becky Thompson has experienced it, and she writes: "We need to talk about what living in this borderland feels like, how we get there, what sustains us, and how we benefit from it. For me, this place of existence is tremendously exciting, invigorating, and life-affirming."[45] Though it can also be "complicated and lonely," it is also liberating, opening doors to new communities, creating possibilities for more authentic connections with people of color, and, in the process, strengthening the coalitions necessary for genuine social change.

SEVEN

White Identity, Affirmative Action, and Color-Blind Racial Ideology

"Affirmative action was nice. It had its time. Its time is over."

THE WORDS ABOVE COME FROM A PARTICIPANT IN WHITENESS PROJECT, an interactive investigation into how Americans who identify as White understand and experience their race.[1] He was not the only project participant to express the sentiment that affirmative action should be a policy of the past. Are they right? In 1996, when I was working on the first edition of this book, I knew that one of the topics I would need to write about was affirmative action. My students always wanted to talk about it. Even White students who supported the concept of expanding opportunity for historically disadvantaged groups worried that it would limit their opportunities, that they might become victims of what some called "reverse discrimination." Many did not have a clear understanding of what affirmative action actually was, what was allowed by law, what was not. And so I included a brief overview in this chapter. Twenty years later, that overview is still needed, but the conversation about affirmative action has changed.

What is different today is the widespread belief among Whites (and some people of color) that racial discrimination has declined in the post–civil rights era and affirmative action programs are no longer needed. For some, the election of President Barack Obama (not once but twice),