



White People Facing Race Uncovering the Myths That Keep Racism in Place

By Peggy McIntosh, Ph.D.



When white people tell deep, honest stories of knowing both oppression and privilege, and when these stories are honored, my experience is that white people can open themselves to facing race, without blame, shame or guilt.



Foreword by The Saint Paul Foundation

Through its **Facing Race** *We're all in this together*[®] anti-racism initiative, The Saint Paul Foundation encourages constructive conversations on the tough issue of racism. Peggy McIntosh's 1989 seminal article, "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack," is a critical tool that has been used with conversation participants to raise awareness of racism and white privilege.

For many white people, discussions about racism and privilege can engender fear, shame and anger. In this article, "White People Facing Race: Uncovering the Myths That Keep Racism in Place," Dr. McIntosh explores the reasons why these conversations are so difficult. She addresses five myths that preserve white privilege and also discusses the rich rewards that actually facing race can bring.

It is an honor that Dr. McIntosh chose to work with The Saint Paul Foundation on this new article. The Foundation appreciates the opportunity to support her efforts to dismantle racism and to help build a community where everyone feels safe, valued and respected.

“A hard or scary thing about talking about racism is” As Victor Lewis, Hugh Vasquez and I start our workshops on race across the United States, we ask everyone in the participant group to pair up with another person and finish this oral prompt as many times as possible in one minute. Each person speaks uninterrupted.

This is a remarkable way of getting fear and resistance into the open, as people speak for themselves. Here are some of the responses we have heard from white participants:

- You don't want to be called a racist.
- I am afraid I may be blamed.
- I may be ashamed.
- I may make a fool of myself.
- My racism may show.
- I'm afraid I may shut down.
- I may get hopeless.
- Someone will get angry at me.
- I could hurt someone.
- I may find out I have a lot to learn about myself.
- I may have to say I'm part of the problem.

In these responses from white people, I hear two fears—that of saying a “wrong” or hurtful thing, and that of losing self-esteem. I've concluded that these responses are rooted in our desire to feel good about ourselves and preserve our images of ourselves and our relationships in the world. We seem to know there is something to be feared, that may get us into trouble with others if we open the lid and speak about racism in the United States.

Resistance, Privilege and Governing Myths

I see the desire to keep our image of ourselves “clean” as part of white privilege. Those of us who are white people in the United States feel entitled to feel good about ourselves because we have been shielded from the negative aspects of white history. We have received assurances that we are normal, admirable and deserving, and that we have better values and behavior than people of color here and around the world. These teachings most often come to us subliminally from our families, educational systems and the media. We resist looking at racism because we fear damage to our perception of ourselves as “good people” in the “greatest country” in the world.

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I think it is natural that we resist anything that might cloud our image of our goodness. But I suggest we ask ourselves why that image hasn't already been clouded. How have whites kept such a strong sense of pride and deservedness? The answer, I think, is that white people are raised on five strong cultural myths: meritocracy, manifest destiny, white racelessness, monoculture and white moral elevation. These lay the foundation for our feeling good about ourselves as white people, and they work in us to override and discredit counter-evidence. They also deter us from entering into serious discussions of racism. One of the central elements of white privilege is not having to take the subject of racism seriously.

The **myth of meritocracy** is the myth that the individual is the only unit of society, and that whatever a person ends up with must be what he or she individually wanted, worked for, earned and deserved. This myth rests on the assumption that what people experience; how they see, feel, think and behave; and what they are capable of accomplishing are not influenced by any social system or circumstance. The myth of meritocracy acknowledges no systems of oppression or privilege that, for various people and in various situations, could make life arbitrarily more, or less, difficult.

The **myth of manifest destiny** includes the idea that white people were intended by God to take the lands of indigenous people and others in order to possess the whole of what is now the continental United States. Under this myth, whites do not have to allow into their moral or ethical awareness the fact that we live on land taken from those who were here before us, and whose cultures and physical existences white people attempted to destroy. Believing explicitly or implicitly that God intended white people to settle North America has excused many whites from seeing white settlement as a matter of racial oppression in which they are the evildoers.

The **myth of white racelessness** is the notion that white people do not have race or racial experience. In this view, we are just “normal.” Others have race, which we are led to believe makes problems for them, or us. We who are “normal” are racially unmarked, and we set the standard for what it is to be human. The participation of white people in systems of dominance or oppression is not seen as racial.

The **myth of monoculture** is that there is one American culture and that we all experience it more or less the same way. Anyone who is having trouble with American culture is not seeing accurately or behaving appropriately. The myth of monoculture imposes an assumption and a requirement on people of color. It requires them to see and feel and behave like white people (“normal” people)—that is, to assimilate into white culture—and it assumes that they have nothing to lose by forsaking their cultures of origin, and a great deal to gain from fitting into the one “normal” culture. Under the myth of monoculture, *E pluribus unum* (Out of many, one) is understood as an ideal, but not its converse, *Intra unum plures* (Within one, many).

When white people receive these key beliefs and assumptions from their families, the educational systems and the media, they absorb the idea that white people are superior to others. This is not said in so many words. Instead, the assumption that it is natural for us to be in charge of the world and its affairs, and that only a very unusual person of color, unlike others of his or her kind, can be trusted with power, gets instilled in the subconscious minds of whites. This, finally, is the **myth of white moral elevation**, also called internalized superiority.

It is important to recognize how strong a part this cluster of myths plays in creating the psychological underpinnings for white refusal to face racism. The myths have been taught to white people in the United States, usually at a subconscious level, for centuries. Each of these five myths rests in part on white privilege and creates resistance in the hearts and minds of white people to facing race. Elements of the myths can be heard in the most common statements of resistance to discussing race or even raising the subject:

Will a new awareness of our [white] racial history and of the present improve our lives? I feel strongly that the answer is yes.

- Why can't we just get along? There aren't any racial problems if people don't create them.
- We're all the same.
- I'm not prejudiced.
- I don't see color. I just see people.
- Why make waves?
- Don't make people angry.
- Look on the bright side.
- We all have problems. People with character overcome them. Opportunity is there for everyone.
- Some people just don't know how to fit in.
- If they're going to live here, they ought to speak English. They are lucky to even be here.
- They are just ungrateful.
- They spoil this community—this country.

To face race is to be willing to critically examine the five myths underlying these statements. White people's resistance is natural. Raised in an environment that accepts these five myths as truth, why would those of us who are white not resist upsetting our egos, our perceptions of our family and ancestors, and our ideas about this nation? Will a new awareness of our racial history and of the present improve our lives? I feel strongly that the answer is yes. But raising our awareness is not easy because the process works against so much of what we have been led to believe.

K-12 Education

The messages delivered in my schooling with regard to public life in the United States went like this: Things are as they should be. It is all working out. The United States is an example to the rest of the world. We won the big wars, and other people want to come here. They are lucky to be here. Life is good. We (white) Americans are normal people and good people.

This closed system of reassurances reinforced my sense of social stability and managed to stave off my most terrifying visions of war and threat. But now, decades later, I have come to see that these messages also created resistance in me to understanding any history that did not paint me and my white ancestors in a positive light.

Probably more important than the actual content of schooling is the fact that education at all levels in all subject areas in the U.S. discourages students from seeing beyond individuals to the power systems already in place in the worlds we are born into. It discourages students from recognizing systems of both discrimination and advantage, or privilege, and from seeing that our opportunities for choice are in part determined by the systems of power in our society.

The self-affirming view of whites in education helps to explain some of whites' resistance to facing racism, or any other source of injustice. To pay attention to a larger landscape raises doubts about whether, in Browning's words, "God's in his heaven/All's right with the world." It is natural that people who don't have to grapple with this kind of doubt would choose to avoid doing so. It is easier and more comfortable for the more empowered individuals in our culture to believe that all impediments to the good life can be resolved at the individual level.

Media

The public media mirror and increase our resistance to facing race. For example, the media give us glimpses of stories of individuals but do not connect these stories to one another historically. They do not construe race as bearing on the war in Iraq or the Vietnam War, or connect the World War II internment of Japanese people—and not Germans—with race. Even moderately liberal newspaper writers avoid words like *patriarchy*, *white privilege* or *heterosexism* that imply the existence of large systems of power. Talk show hosts back off from systemic comments made by feminist authors and men and women of color. They retreat to individual questions about individual people. In this way they avoid, and teach listeners to avoid, a systemic analysis of injustice in the U.S. that includes an understanding of both oppression and privilege.

Until recent elections, we saw a reluctance on the part of the media and the U.S. white population to have serious discussions on race, culture and the experiences of people of color in the United States. Even when the candidates themselves gave serious speeches on race relations, white writers and pundits did not follow up on the content of what they said. Instead they focused on the horse race: Who was winning? People working in the media have received

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the same cultural education as the rest of us. Therefore, they lack the skills to see the systemic workings of race and gender hierarchies. The media will report on the interesting ways that people negotiate their situations, but they resist connecting the dots between the larger systems and the bits and pieces of news they report about individuals.

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White People's Stakes in Facing Race

Resistance to work on race also comes in a familiar, natural and very personal way from people fearing what they are getting themselves into if they take racism seriously and work against it. Natural questions are: What will it require of us? Consistency? Commitment? How much time and attention will race work cost us? How much money? What obligations? How many changes am I going to have to make? Am I going to be made to feel bad about myself? Am I meant to become a member of the "PC police"? How will I handle social events where my friends and family start to tell racist jokes? Will I lose my popularity or my place? Is all this race talk leading to talk of reparations for slavery? Am I going to lose my job to a person of color?

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Resistance in Organizations and Institutions

I have observed that organizations and institutions act like individuals in resisting facing race. Although they have public profiles and policies, and effects on a far larger scale than individuals, I think their fears are similar. They fear that if they examine their histories and try to remedy past inequity, they will lose power, prestige, profit, security, pride, reputation, freedom and the ability to do whatever they want.

Large corporations for many decades have resisted racial diversification of their leadership. Now, many of them have realized that it may not be in their self-interest to remain monocultural in a time of globalization. It may put them out of touch with reality and damage their credibility, growth and profits. As a result, there is a certain amount of diversity work now done in and by corporations.

Most of it is done to improve the bottom line. Still, it may do some good, if it introduces employees to the concepts and realities of institutionalized privilege and oppression.

University Systems

I think that it is very difficult for a white person to get a good education in race and gender in our colleges and universities. The habits of exclusion in the knowledge system and in scholars' individual egos are deeply ingrained. Knowledge is seen as a white person's realm still, and as largely a male realm. But where are we to raise students' awareness of wider social reality if not in the institutions that claim to work toward transmission of accurate knowledge from one generation to another? Colleges and universities should continue their work to try to make good on the claim of historical accuracy, which always entails multicultural and gendered perspectives. People outside of academic institutions have done some of the strongest work to build awareness and visibility of equity and diversity. In doing so, they have increased racial and gender awareness and developed insights that are needed for the improvement of thinking in academic institutions.

Overcoming Resistance

Those who want to do their homework on race relations must give up the sunny view of monoculture, that we are all in the same system and experiencing it the same way. They must learn to pluralize their minds. They must give up the myth of meritocracy and the assumption that whites should be in charge. The more-accurate frameworks allow one to perceive and recognize the diseases of racism and other societal ills even if one is not suffering as an obvious victim. Developing more-accurate frameworks in the minds of students or citizens requires developing six skills that are seldom taught in American schools:

- the ability to understand the arbitrary nature of our placement in the world at birth
- the ability to see that the circumstances of our birth give us starting orientations within many kinds of existing social, linguistic, cultural and political systems
- the ability to see how our locations in those systems influence our experience and understanding of ourselves and the world
- the ability to recognize that systemic hierarchies have created discrimination and disempowerment, which all of us experience to a degree
- the ability to recognize that the hierarchies have also created unearned advantage, or privilege, which all of us experience to a degree
- the ability to work effectively and reflectively within or despite these hierarchies, in order to limit harm and increase the common good

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In the monocultural, single-system world I was living in before I learned to see other systems, I was looking fine. But in the multicultural world that I actually live in, the truth of my history is that I am a member of both oppressive and oppressed groups. To acknowledge the oppressive part of my ancestral history is to reposition myself in the social and political world more as part of the problem than as part of the solution. I was fearful of this repositioning; I feared loss of centrality, certainty, self-esteem, confidence, entitlement, power, self-satisfaction, self-respect, pride, the sense of superiority, the sense of protection, the sense of competence and the familiar landscape of my psyche. Like most white people, I resisted looking at race.

What can help overcome that resistance? Processes of group discussion that value and honor the stories of each person in the group are the best way I know. We are all arbitrarily placed in systems, but we all have our individual essences, which I feel are our sacred centers. When white people tell deep, honest stories of knowing both oppression and privilege, and when these stories are honored, my experience is that white people can open themselves to facing race, without blame, shame or guilt. They can exchange their resistance for a profound new understanding that sustains rather than destroys the psyche and the social fabric.

At our workshops on race, after the first prompt has allowed people to acknowledge what is hard and scary in talking about race, we ask the pairs of participants to take a minute each to respond to another prompt: "A good thing about talking about racism is...." When we repeat this prompt in a closing session, we hear from white people responses like these:

- It is such a relief to get it out in the open.
- I've never just sat and listened to people of color talking about their lives before.
- I had no idea our lives were so different—and we work in the same building.
- I learned I was dreaming that we are "all living in the same world."
- I was sure I could be heard here.
- I know I am not being blamed here.
- Talking about race showed me to myself in a hard but good new way.
- I think I will be a better person now.
- Learning about privilege is changing everything for me.
- I can learn how to work against racism in myself and others.
- I have longed for interracial community; now I think there is hope for it.
- I am feeling healed of my fear of people of color.
- I know I am white and this has untied so many knots for me.
- I never realized I had personal power to weaken the system of white privilege.

Being known and heard while telling one's experience, and listening to the experiences of others, can be transformational.

These responses reflect my own experience. Being known and heard while telling one's experience, and listening to the experiences of others, can be transformational. It lessens resistance to facing the grievous injustice that has distorted all of us and produced social myths. It lessens fear and increases compassion and empathy. It helps white people see more clearly who we are and where we came from, and makes us better at seeing how our learning of what we were taught has distorted and disempowered us, too.

"Deeply personal group work" is the name I have given to the format of work in the National SEED Project, which I founded in 1986 to help K–12 teachers put their teaching and self-knowledge on a more inclusive base. The project does transformational change, and for the participants who are white, it overcomes the sad, sick, resentful and fearful feeling that whites often harbor as they resist facing race. In that frame, white people see "race" as belonging to those "other than us." A healing understanding is that all of us are racialized and that race is in us as well as around us, that whites were taught not to know this, and that we can undo that ignorance and use our newly recognized power constructively.

Support for overcoming my resistance to facing race came from some of the most compelling authors I have read: Frantz Fanon, Paulo Freire, Lillian Smith, Virginia Woolf, Barbara Smith, Will Gravelly, Tillie Olsen, Akasha Hull, Sylvia Ashton-Warner and Alice Walker. It also came from work with my colleagues Victor Lewis and Hugh Vasquez of the film *The Color of Fear*, people in the film *Mirrors of Privilege*, people in women's studies around the world and colleagues in the SEED Project of the Wellesley Centers for Women, especially

Brenda Flyswithhawks and Emily Style. These companions have provided me with the sense that we are not alone and that we are all hurt by the systems we are in.

Facing race, I have learned, opens new doors to possibility and connection. My life has been transformed by walking through those doors. A glimpse of the potential for transformation can help to overcome whites' resistance to facing race.

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