

How Racism Damages White People

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When I was in college and coming to awareness of the depth of racism and other forms of oppression in this country and in myself, I wrote a paper about my desire to learn more about systems of oppression and movements for social change. One of the questions I asked in that paper was whether, as a heterosexual white man from an upper-middle class background, I could claim any wounds from those systems of oppression. It has taken me 15 years to begin to answer that question.

I believe that racism is a sickness at the soul of our country; it is a sickness that lives within each of us who are white, and it does tremendous damage to our individual and collective souls. I believe that the healing for that sickness can only come from actively working as allies with people of color to help interrupt racism and dismantle white supremacy.

I believe that to sustain that work, we as white people need to be able to articulate for ourselves what stake we have in ending racism. There is always the risk for us that we will act out of the sense of white superiority, even as we are trying to do anti-racist work, and expect people of color to thank us for the charitable work we are doing. There is the temptation to see ourselves as noble saviors helping pitiable people of color, as opposed to people who are just beginning to take tiny steps to mitigate the violence inherent in the racist system our ancestors created and that we continue to benefit from. It has been new learning for me to recognize that, though I am not oppressed by racism, I have been damaged by it, and that the health of my own soul depends on me working against the system that has caused that damage.

In the past couple years I've begun to keep a list of the ways I believe racism has harmed me as a white person. It is a rough list, an ongoing list. I encourage other white people who are committed to working against racism to make your own list, and to share them with white people in your life.

So, how racism harms us as white people...

- We live with lies – lies about who we are and how the world works. We are told in implicit and explicit ways, for example, that it is inevitable that some people will be on the bottom. When we look around and see white people in large suburban homes with beautiful manicured lawns and black people living 10 minutes away in substandard housing – we are told that there is nothing we can do, that “those people” just need to work harder. We are told that we live in a meritocracy.
- We do not know who we really are. We do not know where the fruit of our own labor ends and where the benefits bestowed upon us by privilege begin. It is impossible to separate those things.
- Our anger so often turns to disdain/contempt/judgment (our feelings of superiority) really quickly, imperceptibly. Our anger often becomes a tool of domination over others, and this is especially true for us as white men. If I am in a position of power

relative to the person/people I am angry at, I expect to be able to rant and rave and have things changed for me. If I am not in a position of power in the particular situation, I suppress my anger and stuff it down, with the result that it comes out sideways at a later time, often at the expense of women or people of color. Our inability to use anger except in conjunction with our unearned privilege limits our ability to use it for creative purposes (as Audre Lorde discusses in “The Uses of Anger”)

- The love we give and receive in our closest relationships is tangled up with dehumanization and violence (the passing down of a house and land that was stolen from Native Americans; the giving of diamonds from mines in Liberia or South Africa; a mother or father singing “10 little Indian boys” as a favorite song to their young children)
- We misjudge where danger really is (we fear black men coming into our neighborhoods to rob and steal; we fear black men raping our sisters and daughters, though they are in much more danger from other white men – an uncle who molests, the young man in college who date rapes)
- We misunderstand freedom - thinking that privileges that our world dominance achieves on the backs of others (especially on the backs of people of color both here and abroad) is freedom.
- White supremacy tells us we are superior, we have our shit together, we have the answers to the world’s problems. This illusory sense can leave us totally incapable of sustained work to dismantle racism, where we don’t have the answers, can’t solve the problems alone, and lack the ongoing awareness and insight of how racism is impacting people of color.
- We lose out on the incredible gifts of people of color:
 - Think, for example, of what our country could have become with another 40 years of leadership from Martin and Malcolm, both who were assassinated before they reached 40 years of age, because they challenged white racism and U.S. imperialism
 - Think of the genius denied nurturance during slavery, or that genius which is languishing now in most of our urban public schools
 - Think if the Europeans arriving in the Americas had been able to learn from the examples of sustainable living practiced here – because they weren’t, we are now playing a leading role in the process of destroying ourselves and the planet
- The richness of our own ethnic, cultural and linguistic heritage is literally whitewashed.
- We allow ourselves to be in conflict with other middle, working class and poor folks, which distracts us from changing a system which exploits us all and funnels money and resources to the wealthy
- One of the reasons this country did not pass universal health care back during the presidency of Roosevelt is that the American Medical Association lobbied to kill the idea before it gained traction because it would have forced the integration of hospitals in the South
- Most of the structural impediments to voting that continue to disenfranchise millions in this country (for example, the Electoral College system, and the fact that voter

registration is not automatic when you get your driver license, but still requires an extra step) – most of those structural impediments are vestiges of explicitly racist policies.

- We learn to remain silent in the presence of injustice; we learn to live with senseless cruelty done to those who are not like us; we put boundaries around our love, and we suffer immensely from being loved in circumscribed ways; we have a difficult time accepting and loving all of who we are, and we have a difficult time loving others as well; we want to pledge unconditional love to our children, but they see that there *are* conditions to our love, for they see us remain silent in the face of others' pain, and love could not be so silent, love could not give up or give in so easily; our children feel the lie, as we felt the lie – there are parts of us that were not loved (not that doing anti-racism work makes us suddenly able to love perfectly and unconditionally; we are imperfect in our humanity, we are at once whole and broken; but racism takes those breaks, those gaps, those tears, and lengthens and widens and deepens them. Some people are ripped apart completely).
- Racial segregation cuts us off from forming deep and lasting relationships with people of color. In so doing, racism has succeeded in cutting us off from personal connections to those who are being hit by the oppression and violence of racism, and those relationships are what would most naturally pull us into the anti-racist work we need to be doing for our own liberation, for the restoration of our own souls.