

FOR WHITE PEOPLE, ON HOW TO LISTEN
WHEN RACE IS THE SUBJECT

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For all the forums that have been tried and promoted in recent years, for all the creative and heartfelt work on creating new ways to be in dialogue, talking about race across races is still very hard. Feelings run deep and intense: fear of what we may hear, fear of what we may reveal, anger at injuries incurred, guilt at injuries inflicted. At the same time, when we do try to express the very complex things we experience about race relations, the language allowed us is constrained by politeness, diluted by confusion, weakened by the infrequency with which we engage the conversation.

People may leave these dialogues with a degree of emotional relief from having spoken at all, but as often they carry from the room an even greater sense of alienation and hopelessness about prospects for change. There exists a windy brew of dynamics that dampen constructive dialogue: every interpersonal, emotional transaction is surrounded by thick institutional forces that, often unintentionally, define the universe as white and discourage diverse participation. Obvious to some, invisible to others, these occurrences can, I believe, be named and overcome. In that spirit, I offer some guidelines to white people for listening when people of color speak about their experiences of race.

Underlying this article is the assumption that the white people I address do want to challenge racial oppression. Otherwise, why would you be reading? Why would you be in the conversation? I believe the reasons for doing so go beyond altruism, are not

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about helping another (with the troubled implication that that other is somehow weak or in need of help coming from one in a superior position). I deeply believe that racism, and all other oppressive inequities, also wound those who benefit from their existence. Our lives, too, are distorted and limited by our participation in an unjust society in a number of ways.

My comments are grounded in two precepts:

- (1) **We live in a society laced with troubled forms of power**, and it is in that context that most stories of race are spoken.
- (2) **We live in a society laced with invalidating notions of pathology**, and it is in that context that many experiences of race are heard.

TROUBLED TALK, HARD LISTENING

Conversation about race between people of color and white people begins with asymmetry. Very few among the ever-expanding U.S. population of color can avoid dealing with race on a daily basis. The ever-presence of racial dynamics in their lives is made evident by the frequency with which the subject arises in same-race conversation. For white people, however, talk about race is rare, only infrequently arising unless something is raised by a person of color.

The single most pained complaint I hear from people of color who have tried to engage in dialogue with white people is that every conversation involves them in a two-fold task: they first have to make evident to the white listener experiences the latter cannot possibly know unless told; and they then have to fight to overcome the white listener's disbelief. The first half of this dynamic arises from a wide gap in racial

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experience in America; those on the white side of the chasm know a lot less about life on the opposite bank than the other way around. Portrayals of “normalcy”, on media, in schools, at the workplace, reflect life in white America, while cultures of people of color, if they appear at all, are mystified, distorted through a lens of stereotypes. In the case of male Americans of African heritage, for instance, there are far more images of violent, thieving, jiving, doping men than of accomplished, highly-educated, wise and peaceable ones. Interpersonal transactions that result are thus asymmetrical. People of color generally recognize they must explain themselves more fully, if they are to be understood, than white people, and that task breeds weariness, resentment, and an inclination to stop caring about being understood at all.

The second half of the dynamic is stimulated by white people’s disbelief that the America *they* know could possibly be so oppressive. Not only can that realization challenge something central to one’s identity as citizen of a land of justice, but it may also cause pangs of guilty self-inquiry: Is it possible / am racist in some ways I don’t understand? Often, white people in conversation deny the reality of what they are hearing. In forms subtle or bold, they argue against the story being told them.

I’ve said the problem is two-fold, but in practice it is even more complex than that. A third level of troubled transaction happens when distress washes over the white listener, and she or he then becomes the focus of the interaction. The person of color, drawn into reassurance, explanation, or some other response to the pain of the other, may once again experience herself or himself as marginalized.

To texture these encounters even further, none of us appears in the world with only one identity. Any two people in conversation represent a complex matrix of social locations. They may be of the same gender or different ones, rich or poor, straight or

gay, educated or uneducated, young or old, fat or thin, disabled or not, and so on. The identities that matter most may not be visible to strangers: an asymptomatic disease, a childhood experience, an ethnic origin not reflected in appearance. Each of these aspects, apparent or not, contains within it a thick assortment of experiences of power, each reflecting inequities of access to material resources and to social regard. One way this all shows up is in a tendency to rank oppressions: "You think *you* have it bad! Well, let me tell you how it was to grow up as [fill in the blank]!"

We live in a world of competitiveness, and we all internalize mindframes that compare and order in hierarchies all sorts of incomparable matters. To do so is understandable, but it also creates a noisy filter interfering with compassionate listening to the experience of others. If all victimization is wrong, isn't it in the interest of us all to hear others' accounts and to ally broadly to bring about change?

STORIES OF DOUBT AND RAGE

Chris Cooper, an African-American professor who also once served as a police officer and holds both a doctorate in sociology and a law degree, gives us an example of all this in the form of what he calls the "Veracity Test."

Usually it is at a conference. They say what they do (e.g. Associate Professor, etc.), I say what I do, and then there is silence and a stunned look from the white person. He or she says: "You say you're a lawyer and a Ph.D.?" They really emphasize that word "say." Then they speed up! At a fast pace, they ask, "Where did you go to law school?" I am supposed to answer in rapid succession - I know the game. [from *Conflict Resolution notes*, Oct. 2001]

Level one of the transaction is Chris' perception that his white interlocutor is stunned, then disbelieving that he is so highly accomplished. Chris registers the transaction as a clash between the fact of his credentials and the assumptions of the other person based on stereotypes. Chris's story goes on to recount how he answers quickly and with authority, thereby taking on, and at the same time submitting to, the "Veracity Test." He

does not interrupt the flow of conversation to question the other's assumptions overtly; he seeks instead to overcome doubt, to take on and pass the test.

The need to choose a strategy imposes burdens: the management of emotion and the construction of a certain self-protective distancing. This complex act is the first introduction of an asymmetry of energy into the relationship. The person in Chris's role is required to do more work simply to stay in conversation than the white person.

Imagine for a moment that Chris were to make a different choice and confront the person of whom he speaks. I suspect he might get a reaction something like this: "Oh no, no! It's not that I'm doubting your word, and certainly not because you're Black. I'm just impressed; you're so young and have done so much!"

At this point, level two of the transaction begins. Chris (or perhaps I should switch here to a generic person of color, since from here on I'm writing *my* story, a product of my imaginings about Chris's experience) must, once again, make a choice: Do I ("Chris", my imagined Chris) fight for my perception, or do I give up, deflated and angry? Either way, "Chris" experiences something wounding. To be thought "wrong" about an experience one has lived, or to have that experience reinterpreted in a way that does not resonate with your experience, is to stand at the doorway to madness, a portal most of us fight passionately to resist entering.

CHALLENGED REALITY

You may think my assertion too dramatic. It comes from a long career in psychology. Some thirty years ago, I joined an effort to recast psychotherapy in a feminist mode. Many women's groups at the time were challenging ideas of expertise, especially in the medical arena. We took on the particular goal of creating a theory of psychology and a practice of therapy that asserted people's essential goodness and

sanity, rather than the contrary assumptions we believed to underlie those conventional approaches that led to endowing psychiatrists and psychologists with undue power. Judging people sane or mentally ill meant that psychiatrists could involuntarily hospitalize, forcibly medicate, apply electroshock and other damaging procedures, attach diagnostic labels with the effect of altering careers, and so on. In contrast to such an approach based in premises of pathology, we viewed a major chunk of psychological stress as an outgrowth of social alienation, of the many ways in which most of us are coerced to live lives that don't adequately sustain us, and then are separated from the sorts of alliances and communities that might empower us to make change happen.

One of those dynamics is something I call functional dysfunctionality. An important insight of the women's movement of that day was that female experience in the world is inherently defined as pathological. The very social assignments given to women - to nurture relationships, to intuit others' troubles, to express emotion, to make peace, to depend on others, to forge human bonds, and so on - run counter to definitions of the strong, healthy individual. Many of these functions have come to be labeled "co-dependence", something not good, something, indeed, dysfunctional and yet embodying all the functions for which women are socially groomed. We are to care for others more than ourselves, be attuned to the emotional states of our significant others, be endlessly patient and sweet. And for all our efforts we are held responsible for the addictive behavior of those with whom we're bonded. Men, on the other hand, are praised for being self-sufficient, going it alone, honing a competitive edge by staying immune to whatever feelings their vanquished adversaries might experience.

People of color encounter similar paradoxes and contradictions, different ones depending on factors like ethnic origins, class, gender. For any given identity

stereotypes embody values and injunctions about how one is supposed act, indeed who one is supposed to be. I grew up in a Jewish family living in a 99% Christian community. As a teenager, I knew I was seen as brainy, and that aspect of my identity was both ridiculed and respected. I knew I was also expected to acquire the characteristics of femininity prevalent in that day: cuteness, coyness, straight blond hair, flirtatiousness, a flat belly. I was dark-haired and wide-hipped, and I felt both totally inept in and humiliated by the girl-boy behavior I saw modeled around me. Today, as a white-haired woman, still big-bellied, intellectual and moderately respected in the professional worlds within which I move, I often have experiences very parallel to those of my teen years. People often overlook me, speaking to my son or younger friend, until I say something that earns their attention. I imagine younger folk see age on my face and assume I've lived through years of change, yet they endow me not with wisdom but with kindness, perhaps with patience but not with the critical edge I hope I still have. Brainy and attractive, experienced and accepting: these seeming opposites contain both attributions and instructions that occur in the stereotyping of all peoples. Each dualisms contains a set of injunctions to the individual identified, and each individual, sensing the double standards, must negotiate thick bundles of consent and rebellion. Indeed, whoever we are in the social world, we all find ways to both play to the rules assigned to our particular status, and at the same time to bend those rules, if not outright to reject them.

These strategic negotiations with coercive social role-assignment are both a demonstration of the strength of the human spirit, and they also take a psychic toll. The more dehumanizing the stereotypes, the more actual coercion that person must negotiate. Together, these material and spiritual forces constitute a constant hazard,

requiring targeted individuals to be hyper-attentive, often reactive, or, alternatively, powerfully centered in ones spirit and community. One powerful tool for negotiating these troubled terrains is perceptiveness, using intuition as a means to comprehend complex signposts and dangers.

But intuition is itself a force caught in the dynamic of functional dysfunctionality. At times, extreme intuitive acuity (which I believe to be a healthy human power) is celebrated as "wise", but more often it is condemned as "paranoid". A piece of the work we did to formulate an alternative theory and practice of psychology was to reclaim and celebrate intuition. We called it "paranoia" and proclaimed its virtues. "Paranoia", we said, "is heightened awareness."

We contested the idea that intuition is pathological, but we also recognized that it often is less than accurate. Human beings are truth seekers; we need information in order to manage our destinies, and we impart and receive information in many forms beyond language: a tilt to the eyebrow, a glance away, a slight sag to the shoulders. Based on such non-verbal signals, intuition can register a wide range of human communication, but language is needed to know what exactly those signs mean. Without verbal communication, the truth of what we sense may well become distorted, especially when Person A has an intuition about Person B and Person B denies the truth of that perception. Humans are imaginative creatures, and so, denied the truth, we tend to invent stories to account for whatever we have perceived.

Person A cannot know with accuracy what Person B is indeed feeling or thinking, but Person B may not honestly say, for a variety of reasons. Many of us have a strong inclination to placate uncomfortable emotions, to calm down and soothe rather than to speak the bald truth. Person B may not be clear herself, her consciousness clouded by

the sorts of fear and doubt I've mentioned before. The "kernel of truth" in Person A's perception may lie in some complex social reality that Person B has not yet understood.

In my fantasy, "Chris" asks his conversational partner directly whether he's assuming a young African-American man is not capable of earning the degrees he claims to hold. "No, no," replies Person B energetically. "I'm just surprised because you're young." This denial of any basis to Chris' perception comes, most likely, not from hostility but from a mix of other emotions and intentions: a desire not to offend, guilt for having had such an unguarded reaction, and fear, both of recognizing some kind of racism in himself and also of "Chris's" response to a more honest answer. What if his hurt feelings come out as anger? Given stereotypes of violence, the anger of Black men may be especially frightening to white people. Black women's anger, too, is also unacceptably threatening, although for different reasons. Where for men the fear may be of physical violence, women's anger violates stereotyped roles of sex object or Mammy.

It is a paradox in these situations that the truth is often much easier to hear than the more extreme stories with which we fill a blank in truthful communication. "Well, what's true," a Person B committed to honest communication might say, "is that I've never before come across a young Black man with multiple degrees. And, besides, you look like an athlete (Chris, an expert in martial arts, is in splendid physical condition), which goes against my stereotype of brains not being compatible with brawn. So, yeah, I'm startled. And I guess I did doubt you a little bit, which, I'm now beginning to see, does involve some racial stereotypes. I apologize for that."

In the absence of such validation (accompanied when possible with reassurance about whatever part is not true) we construct versions to account for our perceptions

that are built from a variety of lived experiences, hearsay, media images, and so on. Because the process usually involves emotions - fear, insecurity, anger, confusion - these speculations tend to reflect our worst fears about what's really going on. To hear a truthful account from the person concerned is, therefore, relieving, however unwelcome the news may intrinsically be. In its absence we continue to strive for an explanation of our intuitions that makes sense, and the story can become so elaborated that we may eventually indeed appear "mad". That word has two meanings: crazy and angry. Having to fight for the truthfulness of ones perceptions can take a person in either direction. We may doubt our perceptions, lose a sense of self, and feel crazy. Or we might come out raging and get labeled crazy.

POWER, IN THE WORLD, IN THE ROOM

The difference has to do with power. "When we talk about racism, sexism, homophobia, etc. etc., what are we referring to if not a model of dominance and chronic conflict." In a paper called "Beyond Mediation: Reconciling an Intercultural Role, a New Role for Conflict Resolution," Roberto Chené, someone I think of as a very special multicultural guide, invokes power inequities as the necessary frame around the "isms". It is not about difference, he insists, but about power and its uses in damaging ways.

Power is not something we have or don't have; it is more an environment in which we live and a process through which we relate to other people. Power is not either good or bad, but it can be used cooperatively or coercively. Any of us, whatever our racial identity, would probably be upset to have our feelings and perceptions denied in the way I've described. At issue is the power to define reality; to forfeit that definition to another's authority is to give up other powers as well, especially the ability to name

and therefore deal with that which is happening to us. None of us willingly relinquishes those powers.

But to experience what amounts to a competition for reality - whose truth is the truer truth? - when one's lived experience is distorted and eclipsed all the time by a dominant culture is extraordinarily more painful, and unacceptable. That is the situation people of color encounter in America. For "Chris" to accept that Person B meant nothing by his question and tone of voice is to doubt his own perceptions in a context in which his perceived world is seldom if ever acknowledged by those who live outside its boundaries. On the other hand, to contest B's meaning is to take on the correction of a profound world-view, buttressed at every turn by powerful myths of equality and fairness.

White Americans do enjoy privileges that flow from the very inequalities we so often want to deny. For the most part, we are not aware of those privileges, and when we are we do not know what to do about them. In fact, most white people are more attuned to the ways in which we are *underprivileged*, for both things are true. Most white Americans are not of the privileged elite. Whatever our race, our lives are not perfectly under our control; we experience on a daily basis our relative powerlessness to affect so many things, from war to job security, from love to traffic jams.

But in fact white Americans do have access to forms of power denied to people of color. We can shop in a store and be free from suspicious scrutiny. We can apply for an apartment and rest on our credit rating undistorted by negative assumptions based on our skin color. We can apply for a job and, even in the context of affirmative action programs, be hired at rates disproportionate to our numbers in the population. We can walk down a street and expect the cop we see to protect us, not to shoot us. The list is

long; I refer you to Peggy McIntosh's helpful list in a short article called, "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack".

Some of the privileges I've mentioned are interpersonal, a friendly transaction with a shopkeeper, for example. Others are deeply buried in institutional dynamics. How often I've taught undergraduate students of color who, once admitted to an elite university were left, members of a tiny minority, to identify and handle daily discomforts based in their racial identities: a professor who failed to recognize them in class, classmates who avoided inviting them to join a study group, a social atmosphere hard to penetrate, and so on. Whatever the nature of these more subtle experiences, they tend not to be evident to white people and to be very vivid in the consciousness of people of color. That difference is imbedded in the nature of power inequity. Being on top feels comfortable; it is experienced simply as the way things are supposed to be. Being on the bottom feels miserable; it is experienced as insecurity, anger, discomfort, confusion.

So when a person who frequently encounters suspicion about his intentions, ignorance of his culture, negative stereotypes of all sorts, finds himself in a conversation in which, out of a lack of awareness or whatever else, someone of the dominant identity expresses even subtle doubt or unawareness or fear, his or her reaction is likely to be magnified by the broader social meanings of the encounter. What may be irritating to a white Person A is either enraging or numbing to a Person-A-of-color. A seemingly casual social inquiry from one perspective is a serious and far-too-familiar symbol of disrespect from another. The question Chris heard as a slight – "You say you're a lawyer and a PhD?" – might ring very differently in the ears of a young white man who has always lived surrounded by the expectation of his professional success. In the context of his

life, he might well hear as congratulatory the same statement Chris heard as derogatory.

HOW TO LISTEN ACROSS THE GAP

I've discussed a few of the many dynamics that polarize conversations across racial identities. Let's look at what they suggest for ways white people can engage constructively. I address these suggestions to people of my own race, not because I think the work should not be reciprocal, but because I think the work is usually *not* reciprocal. Our society is explicitly assimilationist; in the mainstream there is a profound belief that the way white America does things is the ideal and that people of other cultures and identities do well to grow toward that ideal. So much of non-white experience is inaccessible to those in the mainstream that white people of good conscience face a dilemma: we cannot know what we do not know. But we can know that we don't know it and be open to learning it. On the other hand, people of color need to know, as a survival strategy, the white ways that dominate the cultural landscape, and indeed they cannot escape knowing because that is what the mainstream portrays as a universal norm.

So a starting place for being in conversation across racial identities, and especially in conversations about race, is **for white people to move more than halfway toward connection**. That is a fair thing to do for it rectifies a long-standing imbalance. But even more it is a practical thing to do. We have more to hear, more to learn, more to integrate into our awareness of the social world.

Secondly, it is important for white people to **listen with an acknowledging ear rather than a doubting one**. What we hear is often painful to believe, challenging to understand. But we need to act on the assumption that there is essential

truth in the story people of color tell, even when it is hard for us to sort out what that truth is.

Which brings me to the third guideline, about emotion. Many people of color have already suffered so much emotional pain and worked so hard in the ways I've described just to get to the decision to speak out, that when they do it is often with passion. To be angry in the face of oppression is a courageous and wholly normal thing. Rage is not pathological; it is an expression of the human spirit. How rage is expressed may be problematic. It may be raw, accusatory, judgmental, personalized. It would be helpful to many white listeners if the person feeling anger were willing to speak in a gentler voice. But under the conditions of racism that exist in our society, it is asking way too much to insist those oppressed by racism find and use a non-threatening voice. There are, of course, cultural differences at play as well; what is an unacceptable form of anger in a white community may be wholly unremarkable in a Black one. But even where cultural styles are closer to each other, perhaps among some Asian groups, for instance, and some white ones, I argue that **it is the responsibility of those in dominant power positions to walk more than halfway across the emotional bridge, to unpack and understand the sources of anger** whether or not the person speaking "does it right".

Fourth, **take the risk to broach difficult subjects**. When white people "get down" to honest talk with people of color, we often feel a good deal of anxiety. I've mentioned the fear of being the target of anger. But we also worry about discovering and exposing racism we fear does in fact lurk somewhere within us. We're not quite sure what might give offense, and so we talk delicately, cautiously...fearfully. In doing so, we convey a set of problematic assumptions to people of color: that we are

condescending, that they are dangerous, that we are only partially engaged in the dialogue, leaving the responsibility on the other's shoulders. Taking the risk of speaking truthfully is preferable to white silence, perhaps one of the most common and certainly one of the most harmful of racist transactions. What is ideal, however, is taking risks having first done our own work of unlearning racism (more on this subject below).

Finally, **white listeners need both take personally what people of color say to us....and simultaneously not take it personally.** On the "not personal" side of the contradiction, you, as an individual, are probably not responsible for the institutional arrangements that embody and perpetuate racism. It is not your "fault" that a young African-American man with multiple professional degrees appears in the white world as improbable, that so few young men of color achieve social status and professional recognition. On this level of reality, we are talking about a discriminatory political-economic order that you did not create, but from which you derive unearned benefits, such as an ability to move through a store free from the suspicious gaze of shopkeepers, better access to credit and housing than do people of color, more comfortable social interaction with strangers on subway cars and colleagues at work, the latter giving rise to subtle but statistically significant career advantages. At the same time, the American way falls far short of delivering to you, as well as for citizens of color, the promises of the American dream. For you, as well, there exist far too few opportunities for community, security, peace, and love than you deserve.

If you have internalized from that social universe attitudes and assumptions that distort the reality of people of color, if, in other words, you have taken on some racist beliefs, that is only to be expected. You are not responsible for the world that was given to you. But you are responsible for changing that world, and, as one step among many

toward that end, for changing that world as it appears within you. What follows from that idea is that you are also responsible for learning more and more how better to be in relationship to those of other races that fare less well in our racist society than you do.

So much of racial dialogue is tainted by white defensiveness that this question of responsible/not responsible is critical. It is extremely painful for white people to entertain the idea that we are somehow complicit in injuring our fellow human beings that we end up by doing just that, causing injury by our unwillingness to take people of color (and others subject to subordination) at their word. When we react by explaining and defending ourselves, we take the focus of the conversation away from the story of racial injury offered us and turn the dialogue to our own distress - a clear replication of the very wrongs the speaker is likely trying to articulate. We loop the encounter back into the inequality of work I've already described, by arguing against the unfamiliar understanding being voiced, the very awareness we cannot have unless we listen with an open mind.

In the moment, therefore, in the present transaction, we are liable to do the precise thing that we are denying we have done: acting in ways that discriminate against the speaker's reality, exploit the speaker's energy, oppress the speaker's voice. It is hard work to resist defensiveness; but here is an opportunity to actually change a central dynamic of racism.

Where, then, is there room for the complicated feelings white people in these interactions are apt to feel? Once engaged in committed dialogue, we, too, must deal with our choices, emotions, and attitudes. That is work, I believe, we must do with others of our own race. With kindness, with forgiveness and understanding, we can hear each other out and, in supportive unity, recognize the distortions in our beliefs that we

have unknowingly internalized. There is a paradox, of course: how can we come to know that which we cannot know without benefit of insight from the people who *do* know, by virtue of living as targets in a racist society? There are limitations to whites-only work on racism, but having made a good-faith effort at awareness raising, we come to dialogue with people of color in a different way - open to hearing their truth, in a spirit of true alliance, with clear recognition of how profoundly we do the work together for our mutual benefit.

But is the benefit mutual? Why should white Americans do such painful work? After all, it is one of our privileges that we don't have to do it - unlike people of color who cannot avoid it. At the beginning of this article, I commented on the reasons why we white people need to engage the work I've outlined. I think it's helpful in the end to articulate some reasons for doing so, self-interested reasons that are also for the common good.

First, racism teaches white children to be silent. We notice racial differences ("Why does Peter have such curly hair?") and we are told it is impolite to comment ("Hush! You'll hurt his feelings.") We question injustices ("Why don't we let Mary, our housekeeper, eat dinner with us?") and we are told not to ask ("That's just the way it is") or that our perception is wrong ("She doesn't want to eat with us.") We seek connection ("Can't I go play basketball at the park?") and we are told people of color are dangerous ("No. That's not a good neighborhood.")

Eventually, we stop asking, commenting, questioning.

Next, since we can't speak, we stop noticing. Every child knows about justice. "That's not fair!" is a universal protest. When do we stop protesting? When we stop noticing.

If we can't speak about race and we stop seeing racial injustices, eventually we lose awareness of injustice in general -those done *to* us as well as those done *by* us.

So talking about race, across racial lines, against racism, is a chance to join forces. We are so commonly frustrated by how hard it is to make profound change happen in the world; talking differently about race is an opportunity for all of us to make change in the moment; it is practicing now the future we hope to create. It will not quickly alter the banking, housing, educational, corporate, governmental institutions whose dynamics lie at the heart of racism. But it will help to unify us in common cause, and thus become a crucial part of the on-going work of making our world a more just place.

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