

Uprooting Racism

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My son was raised as a Quaker, but he left the meeting and joined an African American mega-church. Both our daughters were raised as Quakers, and they also left. During a retreat I attended this summer, several African American Friends told me they no longer attend their Quaker meetings because they cannot tolerate the racism they experience there on a weekly basis.

Before I go on, I want to share some definitions with you:

- I define *White Supremacy* as a historically based, institutionally perpetuated system of exploitation and oppression of continents, nations, and people of color by white peoples and nations of the European continent – for the purpose of maintaining and defending a system of wealth, power, and privilege.
- *Race* is a social construct that artificially divides people into distinct groups.
- *Racism* is a complex system of beliefs and behaviors, grounded in a presumed superiority of the white race.
- *Internalized Racial Oppression* is the internalized process of accepting and acting out a belief of self, rooted in the historical designation of people of color as inferior.
- *Internalized Racial Superiority* is the internalized process of privilege that leads white people to believe they are superior to others.
- *Culture* consists of concepts, values, and assumptions about life that guide behavior and are widely shared by people. These are transmitted from generation to generation – rarely with explicit instructions – by parents, teachers, religious figures, and other respected elders.

Our past is not divorced from our present. We cannot fully understand and adequately respond to the racial injustices of the present without understanding the racial injustices of the past.

Mark Charles, a theologian, speaker, and writer of Navajo heritage, stated at the *Common Memory* conference in 2015, “European immigrants and their descendants have one memory: a romanticized memory of God-ordained discovery and conquest, empty lands, cheap labor, Manifest Destiny, and exceptionalism. While minorities,

including Native Americans and African Americans, have a very different historical and lived experience, which includes stolen lands, slavery, genocide, broken treaties, segregation, mass incarceration, boarding schools, and systemic dehumanization. . . There is so much that the majority of our citizens have NEVER been told. And it traumatizes them to learn that this exceptional, God-fearing, freedom-loving, justice-seeking nation they were taught about in their classrooms is actually a deeply-flawed and systemically racist country.”

Structural racism touches and implicates everyone in our society – African, Asian, European, Latin, and Native Americans. It is a powerful system for allocating privilege. It was created by – and for the benefit of – able-bodied, Christian, European, heterosexual, land-owning men.

Whiteness is used to maintain a status quo of social hierarchies, ensuring that Whites continue to accumulate wealth, quite literally on the backs of people of color. It ensures that a set of unearned but real financial and social privileges are maintained for Whites at the expense of others, through limiting access to housing, banking, property ownership, capital (money), and employment.

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In this country, everyone’s culture is evaluated based on the norms associated with White Culture. The concept of the United States of America as a “melting pot” is a myth. There is no “melting pot,” but there is an expectation of assimilation. As a U.S. citizen, I am expected to embrace and emulate middle-class white traditions as my own and forsake all others from my ancestors’ countries of origin.

Right now, I find the Religious Society of Friends to be a lot like the mythical “melting pot.” People are welcome

to become Quakers if they are willing to assimilate. White Supremacy and White Privilege affect the number of African Americans who are drawn to and remain in the Religious Society of Friends.

Many African American Friends do not feel free or equal in their religious home. In my home, I am free to move the furniture around. If each time I walk across the room, my leg hits the coffee table, after experiencing that pain a few times, I will decide to move or remove the coffee table. It is time for us to re-arrange, replace, or remove some practices in Quakerism. Friends of European descent have controlled Quakerism since its inception. It is time to co-create a religion that reflects all of us.

In January 2015, Philadelphia Yearly Meeting came to unity that “[We] commit to increase our consciousness as Friends about the intersection of privilege and race in our culture

comfort with safety. . . But it is rare that [conversations about racism] are actually unsafe; they’re uncomfortable because we aren’t accustomed to that level of discourse. . . American culture tends to hide the stories of guilt and shame and seeks to elevate stories of success . . . which result in amnesia about a tainted history.”

This practice is exactly why Donna McDaniel and I decided to research and write *Fit for Freedom, Not for Friendship* (2009). We wanted to disrupt Friends’ normal White culture by presenting a publication that shared the full history of the relationship between Quakerism and African Americans with all of its complexity.

As a person of Color in the Religious Society of Friends, I need Friends of European descent to be resilient, to walk alongside those of us of Color who have no choice but to move forward, and to stick to the hard work of separating Whiteness from White Supremacy. I want White Friends to have the vision to see things differently, to listen in new ways, and to understand things outside of the context of White culture.

We need to build a Religious Society of Friends where everyone feels welcome for who they are, a Society that does not cause people to leave their cultural identities outside the door. Let’s begin to identify and abandon those aspects of Quakerism that are not related to the core of our beliefs. Let us discard the non-essential

Eurocentric practices that have become attached to the way we practice our faith. Once those are removed, we can – people of Color and of European descent together – rebuild Quakerism and the world into an equal and peaceful home. ❀

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and spiritual community . . . this work needs to be done with the involvement of all of us. . . We want this work to become part of the fabric of what we do whenever we get together as yearly meeting members and attenders.”

Since then, we have been working to live into this minute, which has been a difficult, painful, and at times, anger-filled process. It has felt like it is tearing our community apart and, in some ways, it is. Addressing racism in the Religious Society of Friends today is as turbulent as ending enslavement was for our Society in the past.

In his book *White Awake* (2017), Daniel Hill elucidates this type of turbulence: “White people tend to confuse