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Ali's Journey

Finding a Trailhead to an Antiracist Path

I grew up in a predominantly White suburb of Pittsburgh. In my family and community, race rarely came up as a topic of conversation. It's not like we had a rule against talking about race. It was just not done. Perhaps in the vein of "If you don't have something nice to say about someone, don't say anything at all," our default mode was to keep quiet because the rare comments we did hear tended to be amplifications of the national narrative that painted People of Color and Native people as deficient. The result is that I grew up feeling hesitant to talk about race and embarrassed when I did. I wasn't embarrassed because I had been openly instructed not to talk about race; I registered it as a shameful topic simply because *it was systematically not spoken about*.

If you had asked me at that time if I grew up in a segregated community, I would have said no. There were several Families of Color in our professional-class suburb of Pittsburgh, and we all went to school and work together. Back then, I was unable to zoom out and see that, in reality, my community was, in fact, 99.8 percent White. We lived 10 miles away from predominantly Black communities in the city, yet we never mixed. If that's not segregation, I'm not sure what is.

If you had asked me back then if we were antiracist, I would have said yes. We were against racism. But we thought of racism as overt acts of violence, men in white hoods, Jim Crow laws, racial slurs, and hatefulness. We didn't hate anyone. We thought racism was wrong, but we thought about racism as individual meanness or violence. We didn't know about and didn't think about systemic racism—about all the social and public policies that went into creating a community that was almost 100 percent White just 10 miles from a community that was almost 100 percent Black. We lived in the North. We thought of racists as people who lived in the South. We were middle-class, and our parents were college-educated. We thought of racists as poor and uneducated White people. As far as we could tell, racism had nothing to do with us.

If you had asked me back then what I thought about being White, I would have said, "I'm colorblind.¹ It's rude to notice difference." In my family and community, we didn't consciously think of ourselves as "White" or as coming from an all-White community. The homogeneity of our suburb was invisible to us. Our Whiteness was unspoken.

In truth, I didn't actually know that we didn't talk about race or see that there was anything to talk about until I went to college. I attended a historically and predominantly White liberal arts college in New England. The campus was crowded with kids from day and boarding prep schools. The few Black students in attendance had to travel an hour to get their hair done in a nearby city because there were no Black hairdressers near or on campus. Nevertheless, it was there where I was first asked to talk about race and see that I'm White. I'm sure the irony of learning about race while attending an elite institution escaped nobody, but it was my grandfather who said it first: "We send you to this fancy liberal arts school and suddenly *you're* calling everybody racist!?"

When I first took part in race conversations, I did so because it was an academic requirement. It's not that I was uninterested; I had heard great things about the professor, and I was curious and excited about the material. I saw in those conversations a profound connection to the values of community and fairness I had been raised with. But I still saw the topic of race as something that wasn't about me. In spite of my interest, I probably wouldn't have signed up for a course on African American literature had it not been required.

In class, at first, I choked on my words. I would stumble in my speech, trying to evade certain words. I would leave silent, audible ellipses when it came time to say "White," "Black," "Asian," "Latinx," or "Native." My mind would race anxiously. *Is it "Black" or "African*

American”? Am I cool enough to use the word “Black”? Is it “Asian American” or “Asian”? Is it “Latinx” or “Hispanic? Is it “Indigenous,” “Native American,” or “American Indian”? I’ve heard some people use the term “American Indian,” but they were American Indian. What is respectful? What is racist? Maybe I should just keep my mouth shut. . . .

Because I wasn’t sure what to say or how to say it, I listened. I listened to Peers of Color talk about racism in their own lives. I felt empathy and sadness as I heard their stories. I assumed my role was to nod and listen, to witness. And then one day a classmate turned to me and said, “What about you, Ali? What is your racial story?”

I drew a blank. I could not fathom that I had a racial story. I’m White! Do White people have a racial story? We weren’t racist, as far as I could tell. My parents didn’t use racial slurs. What else could constitute a racial story for White people? How could I have a racial story?

It wasn’t until many years later—in a White antiracist learning space—that I heard another White person talk about silence and omission *as a racial message*. The fact that I grew up in a colorblind community *was* a racial message. Recognizing that colorblindness, colormuteness, silence, and an implicit belief that race had *nothing to do with us* was a racial message. This changed everything for me. It was like acquiring an invisible-ink pen. As I rubbed the pen over the pages of my life, where I had once seen only the absence of color, images suddenly popped from the page, and I could recognize forms in the Whiteness; I could see racialized messages, a racial story, a life shaped by race. Contrary to my belief that being White was meaningless, akin to nothingness, I began to see that being White was integral to how my life had unfolded.

I didn’t actually realize how deeply I had been socialized to be colorblind until I came home from college and tried to talk about this with my parents. They were uncomfortable with the conversation. They didn’t buy my systemic analysis. They said they tried to be colorblind, to treat everybody the same. They were open to what I was learning, but they were not convinced by my argument. In fact, they seemed to think I was racist for noticing race. And for my part, I lacked the skills or background knowledge to convince them otherwise.

One day in May, after I had returned home from college for the summer, my dad and I had a disagreement. I don’t even remember now what the disagreement was about. He thought I was being impractical; I thought he was being unfair. I didn’t know how to respond. I believe what came out was something along the lines of “That’s just racist!”

When my dad is angry or disappointed, he gets very quiet. The rest of us—my siblings and I—are left wondering what we did or said to render this quiet, introverted man even more subdued. I attribute my strong inner compass today to this dynamic. He never yelled, never lectured, rarely explained what I did wrong. He would withdraw. And I would be left to discern for myself which lines I crossed and how far. In this case, I knew what I had done. For years after, he did not engage with me when the topic of the conversation was race. I don’t believe this was intentional. I think it’s just how he manages conflict. He considered me a disrespectful adversary. And because of that, he withdrew.

For a long time, I felt that I had a foot in two different worlds—one where I understood how much racism had shaped my life, where I was trying to get to know more People of Color and Native people, where I was trying to unlearn my habits, language, and expectations that had been shaped by White people and White cultural norms. The other was a world where I could enjoy my time with my parents and the friends I’d grown up with, talk about other stuff, and not be so hyper-focused on race. I wanted to keep a foot on both paths, but I sometimes felt that if I did, I would split in two. My family had always been one of the most important parts of my life; I couldn’t walk a path that they were not on. At the same time, I couldn’t unknow what I had learned about racism and the ways in which it had shaped my life. I couldn’t enjoy my time with friends and family if we weren’t willing to address racism.

One day, well after college, I was driving somewhere with my father, and I said to him, “I know I haven’t always been great at talking about race with you. The truth is that there’s a lot I don’t know and I don’t understand. But I want to be able to talk about it with you because it’s important to me—and you’re important to me. I can’t explain everything or even justify all my own ideas and beliefs. But I just want to offer that if you ever have questions,

I would listen to them. And then maybe we could think through the answers—or possible explanations—together.”

This was the beginning of a new relationship for my dad and me, one in which we began to walk an antiracist path together. Even though I was further along on my journey than he was on his, that didn't mean we couldn't walk together. I knew more about racism than he did, but he knew more about sports, economics, fiscal policy, and history than I did. So as we walked, he brought things into the conversation that were relevant and critical to my journey—information I did not know I was missing. I knew a lot about antiracism, but I only really knew how to listen to people who knew more than I did. I didn't know how to talk to White people who disagreed with me or had different assumptions or who knew less than I did about race. He taught me that. He challenged me to defend my ideas, and he questioned me. But he never engaged with me from a desire to defeat me, to twist my logic in his favor, or to impart an ideology. He challenged me and allowed himself to be challenged. He sought mutual understanding. He listened to me and expected me to listen to him.

More than any other person, my dad has taught me how to talk *with* White people about race. He has helped me learn—through the experience of helping him learn—what works and what doesn't work to help White people shift their belief systems, their actions, and their hearts. This gave me the opportunity to experience what a change of heart can feel like from the outside and how to meet this shift in another person with my own humility and an utter absence of gloating or competition, so that I can support the other person's journey without seeing their progress as a reflection on me. The reward for continuing to engage with my dad on the subject of race has been that, as an adult, I am surrounded by White people who are working hard to recognize and intervene in racism: my parents, my siblings, our partners. The channels of communication between us are open. Now, when my dad is confused or has questions about race, he calls me, and we talk them through. My parents now grandparent my children with an antiracist lens. Every conversation, every tear, every frustration has been worth it.

I share this story in detail because I believe this is White people's work: to talk with one another in a way that helps people step onto—and stay on—an antiracist path. Too often, White people take up the decision to be “antiracist,” and then look around for the nearest “racist” from whom they can differentiate themselves. I once did this, too. Initially, in calling my dad's ideas “racist,” I got to perform the role of the “antiracist” because I was *anti*-him. He was a convenient foil. But this is the short view. And ironically, it is an orientation shaped by white supremacy, which teaches us to value competition and individualism over mutual support and interdependence.

In time, I learned that my original reaction to my dad was predictable. It's part of a pattern of how White people coming into racial consciousness interact with other White people. Essentially, I had just found out that I benefited from a racist system. I had learned that I am fragile. But I didn't know what to do with that information. Because I knew it made me feel bad and guilty, I figured that's what I was supposed to do with other White people—make them feel bad and guilty, too.

I would come to better understand that if I truly wanted to effect societal change, I needed to shift away from trying to differentiate myself from the White person standing next to me. Trying to make myself look good compared to them *fails* as an antiracism tactic in multiple ways. First, it shames them and makes them feel disillusioned with the “woke” person who seems concerned only with making *them* into the racist. Second, it deludes me into thinking I'm somehow different from them in qualitative ways and therefore not invested in a racist system, when I so clearly am, particularly with regard to how much I benefit from that system and have been socialized to uphold that system. Third, it means I am fighting the wrong thing—focusing on an individual rather than the system that has shaped and continues to shape us both. Each of these failures is a failure of strategy. It would take me more time to learn to engage *with* people so that more White people stay on an antiracist path and work for change.

Managing Anxiety

Today, I spend my time leading public conversations about race. And no matter how many race conversations I've been a part of, I always feel some anxiety. I'm anxious that people will question my value, my knowledge, and my background. I worry that I might not be radical enough or that I'm too damaged as a White person with biases and insecurities to lead effectively. I also have self-doubt as a White person who wants very badly to make change but feels cautious about staying in my own lane. I'm very clear that there are things I can never know about racism because I don't experience them directly. At the same time, I don't want to stay silent about racism simply because there are certain things I can't understand. In fact, my identity as a White person is the reason I feel I must speak up.

A big part of what makes it possible to keep showing up—in spite of my doubts—is that I have a lifetime of experience managing anxiety. When I was in fifth grade, I would lie in bed, tormented by whether I should leave the light on in my closet. If I did, it might explode and cause a fire. If I didn't, I would be sleeping in the dark, which seemed possibly more threatening than fire. At the time when this anxiety started to spin out of control, my grandmother was visiting. She recognized what was happening and diagnosed my panic attack. It was familiar to her because she had them regularly. I happen to be quite similar to my grandmother in personality and body type, so it followed that the anxiety that plagued her throughout her life might also plague me. My parents took me to a therapist, and thus began a lifetime of learning strategies for managing the anxiety that has always been a part of who I am.

I still have anxiety today. When the pandemic first began in March 2020, I was just finding my feet again after being diagnosed with multiple sclerosis (MS) less than two years before. I was immunocompromised due to my MS meds and unsure what any of this would mean for me. I remember waking up several nights, unable to breathe, convinced I had the coronavirus, and only after deep breathing and meditation using an app on my phone—one night for three hours—was I able to convince myself that my inability to breathe was panic-induced, not viral.

The anxiety I experience in my work comes just before the start of workshops or presentations. I worry that I don't know enough, that I'm not sufficiently up-to-date on current events, and that I'm not sufficiently tapped into the experiences of People of Color and Native people to talk about racism and white supremacy. But every time I get anxious, I have strategies for grounding myself. I tell myself that I don't know everything; I can't know everything. I tell myself that I'm there to teach—but also to listen and to facilitate the conversation to help people hear one another. I reassure myself that I'm there to make mistakes and learn from those mistakes. In fact, I'm there to model what it looks like to be a White person and a teacher who makes mistakes and takes feedback—and continues to move forward. I don't need to know everything. I just need to be honest about what I don't know and forthright about what I do. I need to show up and be a part of the conversation with all my gifts and imperfections—and make it possible for others to do the same. I share this because I know I'm not alone in my anxiety around racial stress. Throughout the book, Eleonora and I will both share strategies for managing the anxiety that threatens to derail our personal power. These strategies work to relieve anxiety *and* keep us engaged in the conversation.

360-Degree View on Race

You already know that I spent the first 18 years of my life knowing very little about race. By the time I arrived in my doctoral program, I had been on my own journey of learning how to live an antiracist life for seven years. In college, I had taken at least one class per semester on racism, African American literature, African history, colonialism, or racism in education. I had spent more than two years living in South Africa and writing the biography of Black feminist activist Nomzwakazi Gertrude Sgwentu. After college, I had spent a year on a Watson Fellowship studying local NGOs (nongovernmental organizations) in Senegal,

Bangladesh, India, and Ghana. And I had been teaching—substitute teaching at Wilkinsburg Middle School in Pittsburgh; teaching Spanish at the Oregon Episcopal School in Portland, Oregon; teaching math at the East Harlem School at Exodus House in Harlem; and teaching GED equivalency to adults at La Guardia Community College in Queens.

Through all these experiences, I knew race mattered. In particular, I knew racism explained the incredible differences in opportunities that students from all my different teaching experiences faced. But I still had no idea what I was supposed to do about it, or how/if I was supposed to talk about it with students. I was teaching in the context of a white supremacist society . . . but was I supposed to talk about that with my seventh-grade math students? I didn't understand my Black students' humor or references. . . but how was that possible when I had studied so much?

I took these questions to my Ph.D. program, where I would leave one class on the psychology of race focused on my breath, locating my feelings, considering what it means to be White—as I had been taught to do in that class. I'd arrive next in a class on the anthropology of race, and the teacher would challenge me: "But are you really White? Is anybody actually Black? If race is a social construction, these categories aren't actually real." After going back and forth between classes for a few weeks, virtually unable to reconcile the notion of race that we talked about in one class with the notion of race presented in the other, I went to visit my anthropology professor. "I don't understand how both classes can be about race but can feel so different," I said. "I feel like I need to watch you in conversation with the other professor so that I can figure out where your arguments overlap and where they conflict." My professor laughed. She said that even if she were to debate my psychology professor, we'd probably see that they ultimately agree on much, if not everything. It is the academic silos that give the impression of a disconnect.

Ultimately, I came to love the fact that these two disparate disciplines can coexist within the field of education. In education, we cannot talk effectively about race without talking about the history, the sociology, or the socially constructed nature of race. This is crucial to knowing how we got to be where we are; how false the lived categories of race actually are; how white supremacy was built through social, political, and legal means; and then, in turn, how it has been taught to us subtly through media, geography, religion, language, and school. But we can't actually change things as parents, teachers, administrators, counselors, professionals, and policy makers if we can't identify how race and racism operate on the individual level, in our communication with students, in the eye contact we make or do not make with one particular colleague, or in the pit that forms in our stomachs when a student asks a certain type of racialized question. While it is immensely useful to understand racism conceptually, it is *operationalized* through these micro-moments, through this endless series of actions we perform at the individual and group levels. Understanding these micro-moments is the work of psychologists and counselors.

Eleonora and I bring to this book a 360-degree disciplinary lens on race, antiracism, and Whiteness. We want readers to break down the siloed approach to antiracism. No single lens can explain enough about how racism is operationalized, so it can't provide full guidance on how to disrupt it. Counseling and psychology have much to offer education, but most of the psychology classes aren't open to preservice teachers, even when those departments are housed in the same schools of education. Education has much practical application to lend to counseling, but again, it does not penetrate the cellular walls that divide departments. We want anthropology and sociology's emphasis on the social construction of race to impact how we think about race in counseling and education. We want a historical lens that tells us how we landed here in the first place to be part of all of it. And we want counseling and psychology to connect the dots between history and our daily lived experience, so that we all can understand what's happening in our bodies when race is lived and not just studied.

When we look at our work, we see how all these elements come together for us *all the time*. Each discipline doesn't just add something "extra" to the ways in which we operationalize antiracism in our lives. These multiple bodies of knowledge actually converge in, and shine light on, every decision we make. This book offers an integration of what we have learned and utilized over the years to shape our own antiracism practice and is reflective of

the questions and “stuck” places where many White allies frequently find themselves—just as we have. It offers a map and a language to go from theory to action, from discernment to disruption. It decodes how we have learned to see the racialized world around us, to reengage when our own human bodies get tangled into confusion and paralysis, and to implement concrete tools for antiracist decision-making and action.

The next section introduces you to my colleague, Eleonora, whose perspective on race and approach to antiracism are both different from mine and wholly aligned with mine. We hope that reading both of our stories will help you see broad possibilities for yourself in terms of where you will start on the path, how you will travel it, and how you will choose to make a change in your spheres of influence.

Note

1. When my parents used this term, *colorblindness* was widely used in our society as a way of saying, “I don’t see race.” We use the terms *colorblind* (Bonilla-Silva, 2022) and *colormute* (Pollock, 2005) throughout the book to describe attitudes of pretending not to see race, trying not to see race, intentionally not talking about race, or acting as if racial difference and racial inequality do not exist. We have great respect for the theorists who have helped coin and define these race-specific terms and for how they allow us to describe phenomena and attitudes like the one that was playing out in my family at that time. We also want to acknowledge that these terms play on the words *blind* and *mute* in a way that devalues disability. We hope that as we continue to engage in this conversation about race as a society, we will begin to have no need for these particular terms. And until then, we hope to find new terminology to describe these longstanding problems.