

As with much of the country, I was stuck at home fearing the worst of Covid, when George Floyd was murdered. For me, this started a journey that evolved into a hard look at my white privilege and my racism. I acknowledge that this is a lifelong journey of learning or, rather, one of unlearning my white conditioning. I believe that I have an obligation as a human being to explore my white privilege and use it to improve the lives of all people. Because we are all on our own personal paths to awareness, I do not think I am any better or worse than any other white person.

I grew up a very white kid in a very white suburb of Chicago. I cannot remember any relationships with non-white people until college and no meaningful relationships until after college. Even though one entire wall in my childhood bedroom was literally covered with posters, cards, and newspaper articles of and about Michael Jordan, I was an unaware, and uncompassionate racist person through college. I repeated racist jokes and I used the 'N-word.' I did not see Black people as equals. Despite this, I was so proud of myself for choosing to become a high school Social Studies teacher and address all the past and present injustices that I saw myself as separate from. While I think I had a positive impact on many students, I was also very self-righteous, believing I could open my students' hearts and minds without changing myself.

Consequently, I have realized that I screwed up many opportunities teaching and sometimes did more harm than good despite my intentions. One example that I have a particularly hard time reconciling is that I never realized when teaching the concept of *assimilation* that all the students in my classroom were still facing unrelenting forces to assimilate into white culture. Instead, I presented Indian Boarding Schools as the quintessential evil example. I am in no way minimizing the horror of such schools, only using them to highlight that I spent 20 years perpetuating white culture in my classroom through my classroom management techniques and my own clothing choices of shirt and tie.

During the pandemic, I read a biography of James Baldwin. Before I opened the first page, I was dumbfounded to realize that I had never heard of Baldwin in school even though I had taken an African-American Literature course in college - albeit a very white college in central Illinois. The biography of Baldwin broke my heart and melted my brain. How could I never have never felt the suffering, trials, and struggles of Black people? How could I not have a greater appreciation for their perseverance, survival, and contributions to the creation of the modern US amidst hundreds of years of hate, murder, and discrimination? Why did I never allow myself to feel the betrayal of the broken promises of equality from our Civil War to today's Black Lives Matter movement?

Should I feel bad about this? Yes. Should I wallow in my pity? I have learned that the answer is yes and no. While it is important for me to feel the pain, it is in no way productive for me to put my hands up and act as though I am helpless, the victim, or incapable of growing and impacting positive change moving forward. I am not personally responsible for slavery or establishing a systemic culture of racism that has created our unequal and unjust society. No. Should I do everything in my power as a compassionate, privileged white person to disrupt the system? Yes, because I am responsible for what happens moving forward.

*"I want to know if you can sit with pain—mine or your own—without moving to hide it or fade it or fix it. It doesn't interest me who you know or how you came to be here. I want to know if you will stand in the center of the fire with me and not shrink back."* — Oriah Mountain Dreamer

I am learning that self-love is an essential component of healing and working to help others. If I do not love myself, it is impossible to accept that I have not been perfect. It is impossible to hear others' criticisms of me as something deeply personal and suggestive of my flaws as a person. Without self-love, it is not possible to pick myself up and try again. For me, this is especially challenging as a man in a society that thrives on teaching boys and men to bury their emotions.

I am learning, although I have a very long way to go, that there is good in all people. We have all been conditioned to believe and act in racist ways. The judgment I often feel, clouds my judgment, hardens my heart and prevents me from thinking and communicating clearly. At the same time, despite my racist, white conditioning and racist actions, I am also a good person.

I am learning that it is not about my intentions. What really matters is other people's experiences and perspectives. I cannot understand what it is like to not easily be surrounded by other people that look like me. I cannot truly understand what it is like to be judged or treated differently because of how I look. I cannot understand the fear of being pulled over and feeling safe or terrified that I might be harmed or killed. I cannot understand what it is like to have my history ignored. I cannot understand what my intentions feel like when they are flawed. Therefore, no matter how I try to justify what I meant, what matters is that I accept my mistakes, acknowledge them and the feelings of the other person and strive to be better moving forward.

*"I want non-target people to receive the raw expressions of anguish, outrage, terror and all their variations in constituent emotions from target people without defending, diverting, denying, but to just receive it and just be affected."* — Femi Isoke

*"Don't intentions count for something?" we white people continue to ask. Good intentions are a start, a pre-requisite perhaps, but intentions alone will not end racism, even at the personal level. We are not home free.*

*As a white person, I don't know what it's like to be on the receiving end of my good intentions, and I have been trained not to ask or notice. I want to be seen as an individual, to believe my whiteness doesn't mean anything. I don't want to know that it is a factor in interactions with people of color, beyond my control. I don't want to feel that weight of history, to acknowledge that my fortune in life is due, in part, to being born into a group called "white" that rose to the top at others' expense. But the weight of that privilege is part of my family legacy, like it or not. It lives alongside the many other gifts I received from my parents.*

*Racism is complex and it hurts. If we must have good intentions, let the first one be to see and not shy away, to feel the pain—our own and others'—uncensored and with love. Then we have a starting point for connection, and for truly making the world a better place in which to live.*

- Excerpt from *Good Little White Girl* by Janet Carter