

I don't identify with my race. My whiteness is inherently a part of who I am and how I move through the world, but the way I see myself, mind and body, has next to nothing to do with my race. When I look in the mirror, I recognise my face, my hair, my skin. But I don't see whiteness.

This isn't a claim that I'm somehow raceblind. There's a difference, for me, at least, between identifying with your race and identifying as your race. The former implies a deeper connection to the label, one that means the additional connection to a community. But whiteness doesn't come with a community. We have the ability to ignore our race and develop a cultural identity completely separate from it simply because we are treated as the default. We see people that we've been taught to think look like us everywhere, and they see us as 'like them'. That's part of what it means to live in a white supremacist society. The white presence, even if it's not in the majority, is the baseline, the standard. White people living within this society don't have to do any work to figure out their identity, they can live comfortably without thinking about race.

We don't have to think about race. That's an opportunity afforded uniquely to white people. We're intrinsically seen as complete individuals, but this construction of identity separate from race means that we lose individual facets as well as the access to a community. The construct of race benefits us, and so questioning it doesn't come naturally, and most importantly, it's uncomfortable. Given a head start and an advantage in every walk of life, we're desensitized to the feelings of white privilege. I notice it when I'm taught by a nonwhite teacher, and suddenly whiteness doesn't dominate the classroom. I notice it when looking at a collage of presidents, and the forty fourth stands out while the others spark no reaction. I notice it when I hear someone I know say

something racist, but I don't know how to respond. My whiteness allows me to expect certain treatment and be unaware, or ignorant rather, of the feeling of being treated as less than.

Essentially, white thresholds of comfort are much different from systematically oppressed racial minorities', especially when it comes to discomfort around race related topics. Being able to discuss and think critically about race is a skill, one that doesn't come naturally because race isn't natural. Non white people gather a lifetime's worth of personal experience that makes them experts on racism, and by extension experts on white people. On the flip side, white people can safely live without caring about systemic racism. We can live our entire lives and still be uninformed. The white experience doesn't enable its people to understand race, it just enables us to enforce racism on to the next generation. We have lifetimes of experiences that teach us to, subconsciously or consciously, view people who look different from us as different from us. Challenging these implicit biases is difficult for everyone, but especially white people who haven't fully worked through their own relationships with race. We have to acknowledge that our brains are wired in ways that hurt entire communities, but that can easily trigger fragility responses. Especially when our ignorance causes harm to the people of color around us. When we lash out or shut down after being made uncomfortable, that is evidence of the work we have to do.

And white discomfort is dangerous. It's what causes so many potential allies and accomplices to shy away from activism. If we can't handle being held accountable, and if we can't learn about our history and reality without feeling personally attacked, we are useless to the fight against white supremacy.

White people, you don't have to be perfect at everything you do. In fact, wanting to be the perfect white person is a symptom of white supremacy. But you can want to be good. What you need to do is understand that your imperfections are going to cause harm. Your mistakes will cause harm. And the first step towards improving yourself is to look at yourself and where you're lacking. Work through your thoughts, and feelings, and traumas, and prepare yourself for the hard conversations, the conversations that need to happen. White people as a community need to come together and help each other through our racism. We need to reclaim our own identities beyond and through our whiteness, so that we can live and work as fuller human beings. We need to call each other out on our racism, because we're the ones who won't be hurt by the microaggressions and self defensiveness that follows. Racism was created by people who look like us, so we need to do the work and fix it. It's a responsibility.

"What's wrong with talking about race?"

It was an ordinary lunch period at Staples High School, and on this particular day, my friend and I had elected not to share amusing stories or interesting developments from our lives; no, instead we had decided to discuss racism and education. For the past ten minutes, I had been trying to understand why he was adamantly opposed to schools teaching kids about inequalities present in society today. If today's kids are soon entering such a society, what should stand between them and learning about topics related to the very nature of their world? My friend was quick to answer my aforementioned question.

"Because kids shouldn't be taught to hate each other."

The entire discussion had been prompted by a rather contentious subject: critical race theory. You've heard about it in the news, or maybe you've seen the signs around town, or maybe you've even been vocal about your belief on whether or not it belongs in the classroom. CRT is a simple concept: race is a social construct, and racist elements are present in American institutions. I've always found the debate around CRT uniquely fascinating, because no matter your stance on the issue, everyone seems to agree that it's an especially divisive issue. Such a simple concept has long been the subject of nationwide debates, and even today, politicians move to ban CRT from their states' schools' curriculums. Clearly, the subject strikes a very particular chord with the masses, triggering particularly potent emotions.

Both my friend and opponents of critical race theory place focus on the inherent ties between societal racism and pride. Indeed, as humans, conversations about our race-people that look like *us*, people that have experienced things like *us*, people that are treated like *us*-have a certain gravitas, naturally prompting us to defend the honors of those that are similar to us, and it is from this that concerns of "hating each other" spring. When white people read about the

legacies of the Founding Fathers falling under question, it's only natural that their collective sense of pride feels under attack. When minorities read about the persistence of the wealth gap, it's only natural that pride compels them to feel indignation. As someone of both white and minority descent, I'm fortunate enough to have been exposed to multiple sides of racial issues, but large swaths of the population exist in more homogenous communities. For someone who's spent their entire life surrounded by people like them, why wouldn't other racial groups become the villains of their story? This complex, conflict-prone landscape of tribalism naturally leads people to avoid race-related discussions entirely.

But should they?

Racism is an illness, an affliction of the soul that our country has long struggled to vanquish, and a disease that will probably never be completely eradicated. It certainly won't vanish of its own accord; no, in order to properly treat it, citizens need to make an active effort, and this begins with awareness of systemic racism and its effects. The wealth gap, hate crimes, and police brutality won't disappear with plenty of water and a good night's rest; no, citizens need to be aware of these issues, and awareness is born from discussion. Without discussion, without acknowledgement, without action, we allow the malady to roam unchecked, spreading through the cells that are our communities and taking root in the body that is the United States of America. Whether we like it or not, the illness will continue its merciless rampage, and the symptoms will persevere. Every now and then, a flare-up will occur, temporarily drawing attention towards some poor soul who has been gripped by the disease. Of course, this can't go on forever: such an ailment is unsustainable. Do you know what happens when an infection goes untreated?

Catastrophe.

If pride serves to inflame the disease, then perhaps the proper anti-inflammatory agents in our conversations are humility, level-headedness, and compassion. People shouldn't be taught to hate each other, but that doesn't mean we can't acknowledge the world we reside in, faults and all, in order to make it better. My friend has reservations about the teaching of systemic racism in our schools, but as someone who represents a racial minority himself, he recognizes the need for our society to commit to fighting discrimination. Furthermore, his willingness to share his views and experiences with me proves that despite concerns of divisiveness, he accepts the need to communicate about race in an environment he knows is receptive. Indeed, talking about societal racism is essential, and though it's not always easy, a proper approach can turn potential divisiveness into productivity. Through humility, we can accept the reality of our world, past and present. Through level-headedness, we can understand that it's our actions that ultimately define us. Through compassion, we can empathize with the plight of others, and seek to cure our world as best as we can.

Through discussion, we take the first step into becoming the heroes of our stories.

I don't think we can talk about race without talking about privilege. Without exploring the extensive systematic disparities and historic inequities that have plagued people of color for centuries. Because privilege is both a cause and effect of racism, genuine conversations about race inevitably coalesce into deeper discussions. They force people to acknowledge their own privilege, and this can be an uncomfortable and jarring experience. As such, conversations about race can be difficult because recognizing privilege can feel like a personal attack.

White privilege has been a long-standing fixture of American society. However, many people get defensive when the conversation turns to this topic. I recently heard a parent in town express his concern that discussing the idea of white privilege in school would make his children question themselves. He said, "I don't want them feeling bad because they're white." I was disappointed when I heard this, because his perspective represents a widely held misconception. Many white people feel that privilege undermines their success and is solely meant to put them down. But using this discomfort to avoid conversation impedes progress. This type of thinking prevents people from coming to grips with the reality of white privilege; we have to break through these fears to have meaningful discussions. To prompt more people to join in on the conversation, I think it is important to acknowledge the following truths:

First, conversations about race and privilege are not meant to "expose" white people. These discussions may feel like a direct attack on oneself, one's achievements, or one's success. But in reality, having conversations about race and privilege isn't about vilifying advantaged groups. In her groundbreaking essay "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack," Peggy McIntosh writes, "I have come to see white privilege as an invisible package of unearned assets which I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was 'meant' to remain

oblivious." Nowhere does she imply that acknowledging privilege is meant to demonize white people. A conversation about race is not a personal attack; instead we can use this dialogue to understand privilege. This will allow us to develop a more equitable community.

Second, the ironic quality of privilege is that its *absence* triggers our awareness, not its presence. McIntosh calls white privilege "an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools and blank checks." People who have privilege oftentimes aren't aware of the way it helps them, oblivious to the unearned advantages they have over others. But people of color are very aware that they lack the same resources and face more implicit bias than their privileged counterparts. Knowing this, conversations are essential to understanding one's own privilege.

Third, conversations about race are not complete without acknowledging privilege - the ways race disadvantages some while it puts others at an advantage. Most people are outraged by the blatant ways race can be a disadvantage - how people of color are subject to atrocious hate crimes. But a holistic approach to stopping racism also requires solving a more subtle problem, one of privilege. A true commitment to rooting out systemic racism takes more than outrage at hate crimes - it takes acknowledging and talking about privilege.

This is largely why the "colorblind" approach to combating racism doesn't work. It fails to address the inherent advantages certain groups in society possess. By viewing everyone as the same, we ignore how white Americans enjoy privileges denied to people of color. We will fall under the false impression that we live in a meritocratic society, unable to address the inequitable impacts of privilege.



Fourth, the silence surrounding privilege is the key problem here. Constant denials and stigmatization of the issue keep privilege invisible, an unseen contributor to the vast systemic racism present in American workplaces, educational facilities and communities. But we can use conversation to remedy this and shatter the silence.

There is a burgeoning need for more conversation about race. Most people who have privilege aren't aware of it; so we can create a more conscientious community by discussing the social, political, economic and cultural impacts of privilege.

Finally, having white privilege is *not* a character flaw. Like the father who was concerned about his kids, discussing privilege makes too many people feel like a figurative finger is being pointed at them, accusing them of perpetuating bias and hatred. They get defensive, and reject the assumption that they are a part of the problem. It's time to change the way we see privilege. Conversations are not meant to blame or call people out - they help us understand the causes and impacts of racial inequity.

In spite of all this, so many approach conversations about race with emotionally charged opposition and discomfort. This form of defensiveness hinders the conversation, making it harder to explore privilege and combat racism through civil discourse. Some deny the existence of privilege, citing that many white people have struggled and worked hard to achieve success. But the idea of privilege is not meant to undermine the fact that many white people have overcome difficulties and worked hard to earn their achievements. Simply put, privilege is a congenital advantage, separate from what someone earns or achieves during their lifetime.

It's easy to decry hate crimes or to make a social media post condemning racist violence. But this is not enough. Too many hide behind the superficial mask of outrage, but don't take

action. Addressing the systemic racism in our society requires a deeper response, and we can use conversation as the starting point in fighting privilege and driving systemic change. We cannot achieve the next phase of racial equality without conscious, purposeful involvement. Learning to embrace conversations, instead of denying the discomfort, is a step more of us can take. Conversations about race expose privilege, and having the courage to engage is crucial.