From Paul Kivel, Uprooting Racism
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# *"I'm Not White"*

*RECENTLY I WAS* doing a workshop on racism and we wanted to divide the group into a caucus of people of color and a caucus of white people, so that each group could have more in-depth discussion. Immediately some of the white people said, "But I'm not white."

I was somewhat taken aback because although these people looked white they were clearly distressed about being labeled white. A white, Christian woman stood up and said, "I'm not really white because I'm not part of the white male power structure that perpetuates racism." Next a white gay man stood up and said, "You have to be straight to have the privileges of being white." A white, straight, working class man from a poor family then said, "I've got it just as hard as any person of color." Finally, a straight, white middle class man said, "I'm not white, I'm Italian."

My African-American co-worker turned to me and asked, "Where are all the white people who were here just a minute ago?" Of course I replied, "Don't ask me, I'm not white, I'm Jewish!"

Most of the time we don't notice or question our whiteness. However, when the subject is racism many of us don't want to be white, because it opens us to charges of being racist and brings up feelings of guilt, shame, embarrassment and hopelessness. There are others who proudly claim whiteness under any circumstances and simply deny or ignore the violence that white people have done to people of color.

Those of us who are middle class are more likely to assume we are white without having to emphasize the point, and to feel guilty when it is noticed or brought up. Those of us who are poor or working class are more likely to have had to assert our whiteness against the effects of economic discrimination and the presence of other racial groups. Although we share the benefits of being white, we don't share the economic privileges of being middle class and so we

are more likely to feel angry and less likely to feel guilty than middle class counterparts.

Whatever our economic status, most of us become paralyzed with some measure of fear, guilt, anger, defensiveness or confusion if we are named as white when racism is being addressed.

In this country it has always been dangerous even to talk about racism. "Nigger lover," "Indian lover," and "race traitor" are labels which have carried severe consequences. You probably know the names of white civil rights workers who were killed for their actions against racism, such as Goodman, Schwerner, and Luizzo. Many of us have been isolated from friends or family because of disagreements over racism. A lot of us have been called "racist."

Saying "I am white" may make us feel either guilty of being racist, or traitorous toward other whites. We don't want to be labeled or stereotyped. Talking about racism has often occurred in the context of angry words, hostility, accusations and divisiveness. We also may have fears about people of color separating from us if we are clearly identified as white.

In any case, some of us are quick to disavow our whiteness, or to claim some other identity which will give us legitimate victim status. We certainly don't want to be seen as somehow responsible for or complicit with racism.

We must begin here—with this denial of our whiteness—because racism keeps people of color in the limelight and makes whiteness invisible. To change this we must take whiteness itself and hold it up to the light and see that it is a color too. Whiteness is a concept, an ideology which holds tremendous power over our lives and, in turn, over the lives of people of color.

Our challenge in this discussion will be to keep whiteness center stage. Every time our attention begins to wander off toward people of color or other issues, we will have to notice and refocus. We must notice when we try to slip into another identity and escape being white. We each have many other factors that influence our lives, such as our ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, class, personality, mental and physical abilities. Even when we're talking about these elements of our lives we must keep whiteness on stage with us because it influences each of the other factors.

What parts of your identity does it feel like you lose when you say aloud the phrase "I'm white"?

Part of our discomfort may come from the complex relationship our own family's ethnic and class background had to whiteness. Was your ethnic or cultural group ever considered not white? When they arrived in the United States, what did members of your family have to do to be accepted as white? What did they have to give up?

How has pride in being white (or becoming American) sustained you or your family? Has that identification or pride ever allowed you or your family

to tolerate poverty, economic exploitation or poor living conditions because "at least we're not colored"?

If, when you move down the streets of major U.S. cities, other people assume, based on skin color, dress, physical appearance or total impression, that you are white, then in American society that counts for being white. This is where we are going to start talking about what it means to say, "I am white." I realize that there are differences between the streets of New York and Minneapolis, and between different neighborhoods within each city. But in American society there is a broad and pervasive division between white people and people of color, and most of us know from a very early age which side we are on. If we are white we are told or learn in early childhood who to stay away from, who not to play with, who not to associate with, who isn't one of our kind.* This is true even if our parents are liberal or progressive. The training is too pervasive within our society for anyone to escape.

Whiteness is about more than skin color, although that is a major factor in this country. People of color and Jewish people are also marked as different by dress, food, the smells of cooking, religious ceremonies, celebratory rituals and mannerisms. These features are all labeled racial differences, even though they may be related to culture, religion, class or country of origin. I'm sure you know whether you are treated as "white" or as a person of color by most of the people you meet.

Say "I am white" to yourself a couple of times. What are the "but's" that immediately come to mind? Do you quickly add on another identity, perhaps one where you might claim a victim status such as female, poor, lesbian or gay, Jewish or Italian? Do you defend yourself with statements such as, "I have friends who are people of color," or "My family didn't own slaves"? Do you try to separate yourself from other white people? ("I don't feel white." "I'm not like other white people.") Do you try to minimize the importance of whiteness? ("We're all part of the human race.")

We are understandably uncomfortable with the label "white." We feel boxed in and want to escape, just as people of color want to escape from the confines of their racial categories. Being white is an arbitrary category which overrides our individual personalities, devalues us, deprives us of the richness of our other identities, stereotypes us and yet has no scientific basis. However, in our society being white is also just as real, and governs our day-to-day lives just as much as being a person of color. To acknowledge this reality is not to create it nor to perpetuate it. In fact, it is the first step to uprooting racism.

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* Several studies have shown that young children between the ages of two and four notice differences of skin color, eye color, hair, dress and speech and the significance that adults give to those differences. See McGinnis, Oehlberg, and Derman-Sparks.

Whiteness *is* problematic. All the fear, anger, frustration, helplessness and confusion we experience about admitting that we are white is the result of racism. Many of these feelings are what keep us from recognizing and talking about the effects of racism in our own lives and the devastation that racism wreaks in our society.

We may claim that we aren't white because we simply don't (or refuse to) notice race. I sometimes like to think that I don't. But when I'm in an all white setting and a person of color walks in I notice. I am slightly surprised to see a person of color and I look again to confirm who they are and wonder to myself why they're there. I try to do this as naturally and smoothly as possible because I wouldn't want anyone to think that I wasn't tolerant. Actually what I'm surprised at is not that they are there, but that they are there as an equal. All of my opening explanations for their presence will assume they are not equal. "They must be a server or delivery person," I tell myself. It is usually not until another white person introduces me, or gives me an explanation, that my uneasiness is laid to rest. (And even then I may inwardly qualify my acceptance). We notice skin color all the time but we don't "notice" race unless our sense of the proper racial hierarchy is upset.

When I first meet someone, and I think this is true for most of us, I identify their gender (and get anxious when I can't), I identify as much about their class as I can figure out, and I identify what their racial identity is. I have two categories, white and other. I'm interested in the other. In fact, because of my assumptions about the commonness of whiteness, I often assume a person of color will be more interesting than another white person. But whether we value it positively or negatively, the difference counts and we notice it.

Since I've been taught to relate differently to people who are African American, or Latino/a, or Asian American, I may need more information than appearance gives me about what "kind" of person of color I am with. I have some standard questions to fish for more information, such as: "That's an interesting name. I've never heard it before. Where's it from?" "Your accent sounds familiar but I can't place it." "You don't look American, where are you from?"

Sometimes we ask these questions of white Americans who have unusual names or unfamiliar accents. Most often we use them to clarify who is white and who isn't, and secondarily, what kind of person of color we are dealing with.

Many of us were taught that it is not polite to notice racial difference. We may have learned that racial difference is an artificial basis used to discriminate against and exploit people of color, and therefore we may over-compensate by pretending to ignore it. White people often say, "I don't care whether a person is black, brown, orange or green." Human beings don't come in orange or green. Those whose skin color is darker are treated differently in general and

we, in particular, respond differently to them. As part of growing up white and learning racial stereotypes, we have been trained to stiffen up, be more cautious, fearful and hesitant around people of color. These are physiological and psychological responses that we can notice in ourselves and see in other white people. These responses belie our verbal assurances that we don't notice racial differences.

There's absolutely nothing wrong with being white or with noticing the difference that color makes. We were born without choice into our families. We did not choose our skin color, native language or culture. We are not responsible for being white or for being raised in a white-dominated, racist society in which we have been trained to have particular responses to people of color. We are responsible for how we respond to racism (which is what this book is about) and we can only do that consciously and effectively if we start by realizing that it makes a crucial difference that we are white.

# *Being a Strong White Ally*

*WHAT KIND OF* active support does a strong white ally provide? People of color that I have talked with over the years have been remarkably consistent in describing the kinds of support they need from white allies. The following list is compiled from their statements at workshops I have facilitated. The focus here is on personal qualities and interpersonal relationships. More active interventions are discussed in the next part of the book.

What people of color want from white allies:

"respect"
"find out about us"
"don't take over"
"provide information"
"resources"
"money"
"take risks"
"don't take it personally"
"understanding"
"teach your children about racism"
"speak up"
"don't be scared by my anger"
"support"
"listen"
"don't make assumptions"
"stand by my side"
"don't assume you know what's best for me"
"your body on the line"
"make mistakes"
"honesty"
"talk to other white people"
"interrupt jokes and comments"
"don't ask me to speak for my people"

# *Basic Tactics*

*EVERY SITUATION IS* different and calls for critical thinking about how to make a difference. Taking the statements above into account, I have compiled some general guidelines.

***1. Assume racism is everywhere, everyday.***

Just as economics influences everything we do, just as our gender and gender politics influence everything we do, assume that racism is affecting whatever is going on. We assume this because it's true, and because one of the privileges of being white is not having to see or deal with racism all the time. We have to learn to see the effect that racism has. Notice who speaks, what is said, how things are done and described. Notice who isn't present. Notice code words for race, and the implications of the policies, patterns and comments that are being expressed. You already notice the skin color of everyone you meet and interact with—now notice what difference it makes.

***2. Notice who is the center of attention and who is the center of power.***

Racism works by directing violence and blame toward people of color and consolidating power and privilege for white people.

***3. Notice how racism is denied, minimized and justified.***

***4. Understand and learn from the history of whiteness and racism.***

Notice how racism has changed over time and how it has subverted or resisted challenges. Study the tactics that have worked effectively against it.

***5. Understand the connections between racism, economic issues, sexism and other forms of injustice.***

*6. Take a stand against injustice.*

Take risks. It is scary, difficult, risky and may bring up many feelings, but ultimately it is the only healthy and moral human thing to do. Intervene in situations where racism is being passed on.

*7. Be strategic.*

Decide what is important to challenge and what's not. Think about strategy in particular situations. Attack the source of power.

*8. Don't confuse a battle with the war.*

Behind particular incidents and interactions are larger patterns. Racism is flexible and adaptable. There will be gains and losses in the struggle for justice and equality.

*9. Don't call names or be personally abusive.*

Since power is often defined as power over others—the ability to abuse or control people—it is easy to become abusive ourselves. However, we usually end up abusing people who have less power than we do because it is less dangerous. Attacking people doesn't address the systemic nature of racism and inequality.

*10. Support the leadership of people of color.*

Do this consistently, but not uncritically.

*11. Don't do it alone.*

You will not end racism by yourself. We can do it if we work together. Build support, establish networks, work with already established groups.

*12. Talk with your children and other young people about racism.*

The next sections of this book discuss how to apply these guidelines to social action in institutional settings. The final part of this section takes a last look at intervening in interpersonal situations and social settings.