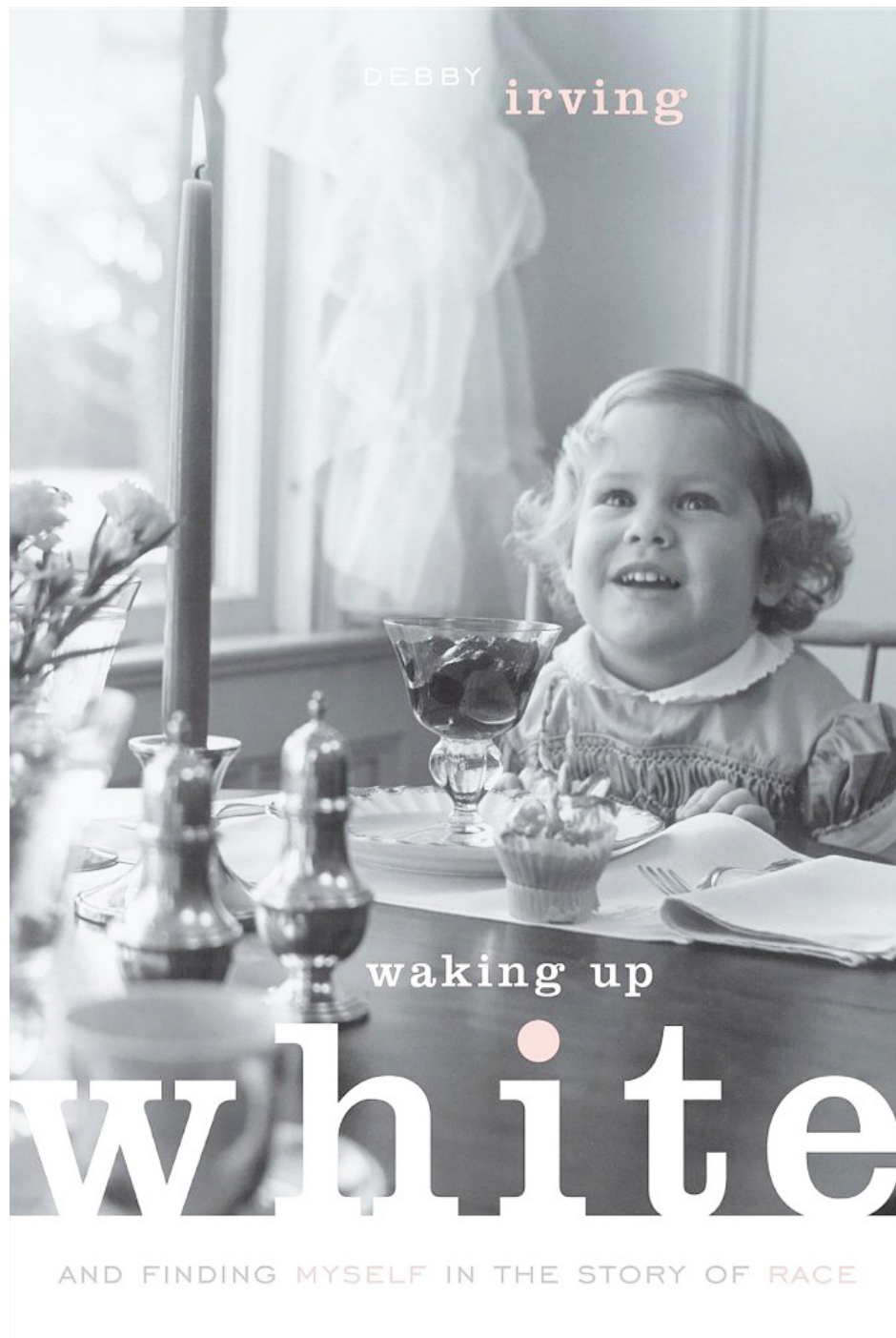

Book Study and Discussion Guide



Week One: Introduction

Getting Started

Do you remember the story of the Princess and the Pea? The princess, despite being on top of twenty mattresses, couldn't fall asleep because something kept jabbing her, poking her, and disrupting her slumber. The tiny pea under all of those mattresses was something she tried to ignore. But that pea kept poking at her, disrupting her sleep, and telling her to "Wake up!"

That story describes my feelings about the subject of race relations. For a long time, I have tried to ignore the issue of race in my life and in my ministry. It is much easier that way. It is easy for me to ignore, and much more comfortable to deny that there is something poking at me. But that "pea" keeps poking, telling me that there is something very broken in God's world, and I need to pay attention to it. Despite my best efforts to deny that race relations is something I need to worry about, it continues to poke at me, disrupt my comfort, and insist that I wake up.

Why should I, or anyone like me, worry about race? Isn't that someone else's problem? I'm white, why do I have to worry about race? But here's the thing - the pea under the mattress that keeps me from being comfortable and content - Jesus commanded in Matthew 22:39 to "love your neighbor as yourself." Jesus was very clear about the two most important commandments (loving God is the other one), so we'd better believe that loving others is pretty important to God. We are called to love everyone, each and every person that God has created on this great earth, including the people who don't look like us.

Loving others is hard work. But it is important work, especially when it comes to race relations. I have recently been "waking up" to the fact that our brothers and sisters of color are suffering from a very deep wound that we need to pay attention to. This is a wound that is easy for us white folks to ignore. But if we start asking questions and really listening, we will begin to hear stories of pain, of being oppressed by a system that overwhelming favors white people.

We need to take this pain very seriously. It's part of being disciples of Jesus, who took all of our pain very seriously. We need to start listening, start learning, and start being curious about what is hurting our brothers and sisters of color in the United States. We need to start believing them when they tell us about their pain and struggle.

Thank you for participating in this book study of *Waking Up White*, by Debby Irving. I believe that you will find, like I did, that this book is a great first step toward understanding why, in 2017, we are still talking about race. As you enter the conversation, perhaps you will be moved, like I was, to continue to examine the role race has played in shaping your life and the lives of our brothers and sisters in Christ. Perhaps you will feel moved to further engage in the important work of undoing racism in the United States.

If you find this discussion guide helpful, please let us know and also share it with others. As the African saying goes, "Each one, teach one." Tell your friends what you've learned and invite them to hold a book study of their own. We believe that racism will only be dismantled when white people are fully engaged in the struggle alongside people of color. God's grace and peace be with you on this journey.

Your Sister in Christ,
Wendy Steger, M.Div., Shepherd of the Valley Lutheran Church

Week One: Introduction

Getting Started

In his book, *It Was On Fire When I Lay Down On It*, Robert Fulgham speaks with great disdain about the “gunk in the sink.” We all know what he’s talking about - the bits of food and yuck that gather around the drain. He then talks about the bravery of his mother:

“One of the very few reasons I had any respect for my mother when I was thirteen was because she would reach into the sink with her bare hands - bare hands - and pick up that lethal gunk and drop it into the garbage. To top that, I saw her reach into the wet garbage bag and fish around in there looking for a lost teaspoon. Bare hands - a kind of mad courage.”

Cleaning out the “gunk in the sink” is part of being an adult. It’s an unpleasant but necessary job, and Robert Fulgham’s mother, was brave enough to handle the mess.

Racism is like the “gunk in the sink” for our communities and our nation. Cleaning out the gunk, and being brave enough to face it, is simply part of being a grown-up. Only when we face the “ick” will we all become more healthy and whole as God intended us to be. During this four week class, we are going to ask you to be brave and face the gunk. At times you may feel uncomfortable, but that’s part of the process.

Introductions

Go around the group and share what high school you went to, and why you are interested in participating in this book discussion.

Question 1

Each person tell your life story in two minutes in as much detail as possible.

Question 2

What are you looking forward to learning in this book study? What, if anything, are you anxious about?

Question 3

Did you feel like you had a “culture” when you were growing up? Why or why not? If you could change one thing about the way you were raised, what would it be?

Week Two Questions

Question 1

When she was five years old, author Debby Irving asked her mother, “Whatever happened to all the Indians?”

“Oh those poor Indians,” my mother said, sagging a little as she shook her head with something that looked like sadness. “Why? What happened?” I turned in my seat, alarmed. “They drank too much,” she answered. My heart sank. “They were lovely people,” she said, “who became dangerous when they drank liquor.”

Respond to the following questions: What stereotypes about people of another race do you remember hearing and believing as a child? Were you ever encouraged to question stereotypes?

Question 2

Debby Irving remembers learning some of the following values and beliefs as a child:

- Money was mostly for accumulating; waste showed carelessness and flashiness
- Accomplishment for anyone was simply a matter of intention and hard work
- Being accomplished and busy were signs of good character
- Complaining about anything was out of the question
- She was expected to show emotional restraint, and keep an optimistic and chipper attitude at all times

Respond to the following questions: What are some of the values and beliefs you learned as a child? How did you make sense of the fact that some people had great material wealth while others didn’t?

Question 3

Debby Irving writes,

When we replaced the screens on our cabin’s front porch one summer, my parents had us carefully roll up and bind the old screens and set them off to the side “for the Indians.” Acts of charity for people I was taught to see as inferior fed right into my belief that the white race was not only better at achieving but an exceptionally generous and moral breed on whom others depended. Missing from my storyline was the part about how the land grant my family used to settle the town had been a catalyst for the demise of Native peoples.

Respond to the following questions: As you think back to your high school or college history courses, whose “story” did you hear? White people, black people, brown people? What was included and what was left out?

Week Two Questions & Notes

Question 4

Debby Irving describes feeling “duped and alarmed” as she learned about government supported institutional racism. Following World War II, the “same GI Bill that had given white families like mine a socio-economic boost had left people of color out to dry.”

After watching the video, “The House We Live In,” respond to the following questions: Has anything from this book, so far, upset your previous notions about why some people have great material wealth while others don’t? Why or why not?

Question 5

Debby Irving writes that systemic racism is far more than simply prejudice. She quotes a black woman who helped her understand the concept, “All racial groups have problems with people in other racial groups. White folks have not cornered the market on that. The difference between white folks and everybody else is that they have the power to turn those feelings into policy, law, and practice.”

Respond to the following questions: How were lending practices following WWII an example of systemic racism? In your own words, how is undoing systemic racism different than encouraging diversity?

Week Three Discussion Guide and Questions

Question 1

About the True Colors video from 1991, Debby Irving writes,

If I hadn't watched this with a racially mixed group of workshop attendees, I might have underestimated the film's validity in the year 2010. As soon as the lights came up, however, the people of color shook their heads and looked at each other in camaraderie, while the white participants sat wide-eyed and incredulous.

Respond to the following questions: What from the video rang true? What upset you? What from this video contradicts the idea that in America, people fail or succeed based on individual effort?

Question 2

Debby Irving writes, "It's not enough to feel empathy toward people on the downside, white people must also see themselves on the upside to understand that discrimination results from privilege."

She also writes about Jared, young black student at her school, "Our worlds barely resembled one another. Mine made me believe I belonged to a country where I could do anything I set my mind to; his reminded him every day that achieving in white-dominated institutions was for people who didn't look like him."

On "*Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack*," circle the statements that apply to you.

Respond to the following questions: Were you surprised by any of the statements on the list? How does "color-blindness" help to perpetuate systemic racism? Why is it important to recognize white privilege?

Peggy McIntosh is associate director of the Wellesley College Center for Research on Women. This essay is excerpted from Working Paper 189. "White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming To See Correspondences through Work in Women's Studies" (1988), by Peggy McIntosh; available for \$4.00 from the Wellesley College Center for Research on Women, Wellesley MA 02181. The working paper contains a longer list of privileges. This excerpted essay is reprinted from the Winter 1990 issue of Independent School.

Week Three Questions & Notes

White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack

by Peggy McIntosh

*"I was taught to see racism only in individual acts of meanness,
not in invisible systems conferring dominance on my group"*

DAILY EFFECTS OF WHITE PRIVILEGE

I decided to try to work on myself at least by identifying some of the daily effects of white privilege in my life. I have chosen those conditions that I think in my case attach somewhat more to skin-color privilege than to class, religion, ethnic status, or geographic location, though of course all these other factors are intricately intertwined. As far as I can tell, my African American coworkers, friends, and acquaintances with whom I come into daily or frequent contact in this particular time, place and time of work cannot count on most of these conditions.

1. I can if I wish arrange to be in the company of people of my race most of the time.
2. I can avoid spending time with people whom I was trained to mistrust and who have learned to mistrust my kind or me.
3. If I should need to move, I can be pretty sure of renting or purchasing housing in an area which I can afford and in which I would want to live.
4. I can be pretty sure that my neighbors in such a location will be neutral or pleasant to me.
5. I can go shopping alone most of the time, pretty well assured that I will not be followed or harassed.
6. I can turn on the television or open to the front page of the paper and see people of my race widely represented.
7. When I am told about our national heritage or about "civilization," I am shown that people of my color made it what it is.
8. I can be sure that my children will be given curricular materials that testify to the existence of their race.
9. If I want to, I can be pretty sure of finding a publisher for this piece on white privilege.
10. I can be pretty sure of having my voice heard in a group in which I am the only member of my race.
11. I can be casual about whether or not to listen to another person's voice in a group in which s/he is the only member of his/her race.
12. I can go into a music shop and count on finding the music of my race represented, into a supermarket and find the staple foods which fit with my cultural traditions, into a hairdresser's shop and find someone who can cut my hair.
13. Whether I use checks, credit cards or cash, I can count on my skin color not to work against the appearance of financial reliability.
14. I can arrange to protect my children most of the time from people who might not like them.
15. I do not have to educate my children to be aware of systemic racism for their own daily physical protection.
16. I can be pretty sure that my children's teachers and employers will tolerate them if they fit school and workplace norms; my chief worries about them do not concern others' attitudes toward their race.
17. I can talk with my mouth full and not have people put this down to my color.
18. I can swear, or dress in second hand clothes, or not answer letters, without having people attribute these choices to the bad morals, the poverty or the illiteracy of my race.
19. I can speak in public to a powerful male group without putting my race on trial.
20. I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to my race.
21. I am never asked to speak for all the people of my racial group.

Cognitive Dissonance and Racism Awareness

(or...why feeling guilty isn't the answer)

Cognitive Dissonance* - In psychology, **cognitive dissonance** is the mental stress or discomfort experienced by an individual who

- a.) holds two or more contradictory beliefs,
- b.) performs an action that is contradictory to one or more beliefs, or
- c.) is confronted by new information that conflicts with existing beliefs.

Human beings strive for internal consistency.

When someone is confronted with new information or performs a behavior that conflicts with an existing belief, a person adopts different strategies to relieve the mental stress or discomfort. For example, suppose someone has adopted the attitude that they will no longer eat high fat food, but eats a high-fat doughnut, the belief (I will not eat high fat food) conflicts with the behavior (I just ate a doughnut).

Belief #1: I won't eat high fat food.

Belief/Behavior #2: I just ate a doughnut

Faced with this state of cognitive dissonance, someone can:

1. Change the behavior ("I will not eat any more of this doughnut")
2. Justify behavior by changing the conflicting belief ("I'm allowed to cheat every once in awhile")
3. Justify behavior by adding new behaviors ("I'll spend 30 extra minutes at the gym to work this off")
4. Ignore or deny any information that conflicts with existing beliefs ("This doughnut is not high in fat")

The purpose of these strategies is to reduce the mental stress and discomfort caused by the inconsistency of having two conflicting beliefs and/or behaviors.

*https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cognitive_dissonance

When it comes to race, many of us who are white are being confronted with new, very unpleasant information about the world we live in. As Debby Irving writes, "Learning about how racism works didn't challenge me just because it was new information. It was completely contradictory information, a 180-degree paradigm reversal, flying in the face of everything I'd been taught as a child and had believed up to this moment."

Those of us who are white, using myself as an example, are now faced with a state of cognitive dissonance.

Belief #1: I, Wendy, am a good person, a Christian, and a moral human being. It's important for me to be "good" and follow Christ.

Believe #2 (brand new information): I am complicit in, what Debby Irving calls "a massive social dysfunction" that deeply hurts many, many people.

Cognitive Dissonance and Racism Awareness

(or...why feeling guilty isn't the answer)

Faced with this state of cognitive dissonance, I can:

1. Change the belief that I am basically a good person. I can feel ashamed and guilty.
2. Justify the situation. (I'm still a good person because the problem is so large I couldn't possibly make a difference.)
3. Ignore the new information. (Racism isn't real, or at least it's not as big of a deal as some would make it.)
4. Adopt a new behavior. Realize that both are true: I am a basically good person AND I play a role in systemic racism. Therefore, I will do whatever I can to work towards dismantling and undoing racism.

All of the above strategies are ways of dealing with the mental stress and discomfort of cognitive dissonance. Each one of us gets to decide how we will deal with this new information (to us) about racism in America. Ultimately, however, it is only strategy #4 that will make a difference in the problem.

Week Four Discussion Guide and Questions

Question 1

Debby Irving writes, “Cross-racial relationships are essential to racial healing. The kind of contact and connection they engender is indeed the antidote to the centuries-old pattern of segregation and avoidance.”

She also writes, “White people must learn how to listen to the experiences of people of color for racial healing and justice to happen.”

Respond to the following questions by mutual invitation: Have you tried to form relationships across racial lines? If so, were you successful? If not, what has held you back? Have you ever found yourself “not believing” a person of color when a story of discrimination was told to you?

Question 2

Debby Irving writes, “During all the years I’d tried to help and fix people of color, part of my subconscious expectation had been that people outside my culture should assimilate to my ways, see and do things the way I’d been taught was right and normal.”

She also writes, “In my experience, I could not begin to develop a multicultural sensibility until I first looked deep within myself to understand the ways in which the culture I’d lived in ended up living in me.”

Look at the following list of traits from American dominant white culture:

- Conflict avoidance
- Valuing formal education over life experience
- Right to comfort/entitlement
- Sense of urgency
- Competitiveness
- Emotional restraint
- Judgmentalness
- Either/or thinking
- Belief in one right way
- Defensiveness
- Being status oriented

Respond to the following questions: Which of these traits do you see in yourself? Why is it important for white people to identify and reflect on the dominant white culture and how it has shaped us?

Question 3

Debby Irving writes, “I couldn’t have known at the age of five that by thinking a fellow human being less human, I made myself less human, or that by disconnecting from my human family I began the process of disconnecting from my natural intuition and ability to love.”

Week Four Questions & Notes

Respond to the following question: What is the cost of racism to white people? What do we lose?

Question 4

One of the most important things we, as white people, can do to dismantle racism is talk to other white people about race. Answer the following questions: Have you ever been in an all-white setting when a racist comment was made? What did you do? What was helpful and what wasn't? What strategies might you use in the future in these types of situations?

Follow Up

Fighting Racism - What Can I Do?

Here are some concrete steps that you can take towards undoing racism:

1. Make some friends who aren't white.
2. Intentionally put yourself in places where you will be the minority.
3. Read books and watch movies featuring characters who aren't white.
4. Join a social justice organization such as NAACP, SURJ (Showing Up for Racial Justice), and participate in Social Justice events.
5. Respond to racism and micro-aggressions on social media.
6. Confront racism when you hear or witness it.

Suggested Readings and Resources

Books

America's Original Sin by Jim Wallis

Between the World and Me by Ta-Nehisi Coates

Black Man in a White Coat by Damon Tweedy, M.D.

Hidden Figures by Margot Lee Shetterly

Living in Color by Randy Woodley

Whistling Vivaldi: How Stereotypes Affect Us and What We can Do by Claude Steele

Why Black Lives Matter (Too) by Mary Canty Merrill Ph.D.

Online Resources

Episcopal Church: A Way Forward

advocacy.episcopalchurch.org/AYayForward

Harvard Implicit Bias Test

implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/

Lutheran Social Service Who Is My Neighbor Curriculum

lssmn.org/congregations/resources/

Lutheran Social Service: My Neighbor is Muslim Study Guide

lssmn.org/refugeeservices/study

Race: The Power of an Illusion (PBS documentary)

pbs.org/race/000_General/000_00-Home.htm

Women of the ELCA: Racial Justice Advocacy Resources

womenoftheelca.org/may-2016--new-racial-justice-advocacy-resources-available-news-432.php

This book study and discussion program has been developed by staff members of (in alphabetical order) and with permission from Debby Irving and Elephant Room Press:

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Debby Irving brings to racial justice the perspective of working as a community organizer and classroom teacher for 25 years without understanding racism as a systemic issue or her own whiteness as an obstacle to grappling with it. As general manager of Boston’s Dance Umbrella and First Night, and later as a classroom teacher in Cambridge, Massachusetts, she struggled to make sense of tensions she could feel but not explain in racially mixed settings. In 2009, a graduate school course, Racial and Cultural Identities, gave her the answers she’d been looking for and launched her on a journey of discovery. Debby now devotes herself to working with white people exploring the impact white skin can have on perception, problem solving, and engaging in racial justice work. A graduate of the Winsor School in Boston, she holds a BA from Kenyon College and an MBA from Simmons College. Her first book, *Waking Up White*, tells the story of how she went from well-meaning to well-doing.



Waking Up White is the book Debby Irving wishes someone had handed her decades ago. By sharing her sometimes cringe-worthy struggle to understand racism and racial tensions, she offers a fresh perspective on bias, stereotypes, manners, and tolerance. As she unpacks her own long-held beliefs about colorblindness, being a good person, and wanting to help people of color, she reveals how each of these well-intentioned mindsets actually perpetuated her ill-conceived ideas about race. She also explains why and how she’s changed the way she talks about racism, works in racially mixed groups, and understands the racial justice movement as a whole. Exercises at the end of each chapter prompt readers to explore their own racialized ideas. *Waking Up White*’s personal narrative is designed to work well as a rapid read, a book group book, or support reading for courses exploring racial and cultural issues.

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