

Call to worship.

From the essay 'The Trauma of an American Untouchable' by Arisika Razak, professor emerita of the graduate program in women's spirituality at the California Institute of Integral Studies:

"What is the cost of being locked in a body that is pathologized and seen as subhuman? How do I handle knowing that every major social institution - educational, medical, judicial, economic - conspires to deny me equal access to resources? What price is paid when I must be twice as good and work three times as hard to succeed? And what does it mean that my stories of loss, attacks, violence and oppression are routinely marginalized or denied by privileged members of the dominant caste?"

Am I Racist?

Why do I want to talk about this topic - Racism - that has been so much in the news in the past several years? Haven't we heard enough? Am I just - to use an ugly old phrase - 'beating a dead horse'?

Here's why: first, there have been a number of excellent books and articles on the topic that have put our country's racist history and ongoing institutional racism in a context that I'd not previously encountered; secondly, when I read these authors, learn about their lived experiences and then try to imagine myself being subjected to the same degree of profiling, violence and injustice I know I'd be livid, enraged. Given the ongoing and often overt racism in our country I marvel that there isn't more violence - would I be able control my rage were I a black man, the tables turned?; third, with a greater understanding of the racism our darker skinned neighbors are subjected to, I consider situations I've found myself in - particularly as a young man - and shudder to recognize how different the outcomes would have been had my skin been brown or black.

Much of my thinking and the ideas presented here have been influenced by Ta-Nehisi Coates' book, 'Between the World and Me', the 'Narrative of the Life of an American Slave' by Frederick Douglass', Ibram X. Kendi's 'How to be an Antiracist' and professor and radical environmental thinker, Eileen Crist, subject of the December 2020 Sun Magazine interview entitled 'Our Great Reckoning'.

I feel the need to start with some review of our history with respect to white supremacy. For those of you roughly my age or older I suspect it is safe to say that, in the basic history and social studies that were presented to us through high school and perhaps on into college, slavery was certainly mentioned, maybe even the brutality of separated families or punishments for attempted escapes briefly touched upon - the whole sordid history tidied up nicely with the emancipation proclamation and the North's victory in the civil war.

We were never asked nor expected to understand the extent of the violence and brutality that was the reality of life as an African-American slave; nor the extent to which the wealth of the early colonies and later our fledgling country was dependent on African-American slave labor.

Probably all of you know of Frederick Douglass and may have read his autobiography. He was born into slavery in 1818 and, as a young man, eventually escaped to the north. In 1845 his autobiography was published. Here's a brief passage referring to Mr. Douglass' childhood years:

"...Master... was not a humane slaveholder. It required extraordinary barbarity on the part of the overseer to affect him... He [the overseer] would at times seem to take great pleasure at whipping a slave. I have often been awakened at the dawn of day by the most heart-rending shrieks of an own aunt of mine, whom he used to tie up to a joist and whip upon her naked back until she was literally covered in blood... The louder she screamed the harder he whipped... He would whip her to make her scream and

whip her to make her hush. And not until overcome by fatigue would he cease to swing the blood-clotted cowskin... I shall never forget it. It was the first of a long series of such outrages. It was the blood-stained gate, the entrance to the hell of slavery.”

The first boatload of kidnapped Africans to be sold into American slavery delivered its cargo in Jamestown, Virginia in 1619. Slaves were regularly subjected to whipping, rape, family separation and, if deemed necessary by the overseer, violent death. Slaves had no legal right to redress of wrongs in court, nor even to testify in court.

Can we who identify as white even begin to imagine?! - long hours of unpaid labor year after year for life?; child or spouse taken, sold, never seen again; spouse, sibling or parent returning to night quarters muted with shame and pain after rape or whipping. Nearly 250 years of exactly this!

The decade after the end of the civil war was very tumultuous in the south. For a brief period, under Republican leadership, ‘radical reconstruction’ led to one of the most ambitious efforts ever undertaken anywhere to create a society of racial equity and nondiscrimination. But white supremacist organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan used violence and terror to reverse these gains and by 1876 Jim Crow reigned - with racial segregation and white on black violence with little legal recourse afforded African-Americans. Yes, even on into my lifetime a black man in the south could be lynched for neglecting to step off the sidewalk when a white woman approached or for calling a prominent white citizen by his first name rather than ‘mister’.

That situation remained little changed until the 1960’s landmark civil rights legislation was passed in the wake of increasing anti-racist activism.

Such blatant and brutal acts of racist violence are far less common but still to this day if a black man sees flashing lights in his rear-view mirror he may recall Abner Louima, sodomized with a broomstick by NY police in 1997, George Floyd, suffocated in 2020 when a police officer knelt on his neck for nearly 9 minutes

or the seemingly countless other incidents of blatant racial violence suffered at the hands of police or neighborhood vigilantes documented in the past several years. When a black teen or man is pulled over by the police it is emotionally traumatic - racist physical violence is a real possibility. In contrast when I am pulled over it is a mere inconvenience. I've never feared physical violence at the hands of police.

To this day black parents have 'the talk' with their young sons about this potential and the need for excessive deference when in the presence of a police officer or other white authority figure. My parents never felt the need to do this for me.

An aside on 'white privilege' and structural racism. As a foolish young man I drank too often and too much. On two occasions while living in North Carolina I was pulled over by the police while intoxicated. White police. White offender. No ticket either time. I was allowed to re-enter my car, drive to my apartment. If I had been black I have little doubt that the outcome would have been far different.

I attended college rather than working on the railroad or at the local factory in my home town in Ohio thanks to free tuition at a small liberal arts college in North Carolina. Scholarship? No. There is a monastery affiliated with the college and nieces and nephews of the monks are offered free tuition. All the monks are white.

Had I been ticketed for the DUI's I clearly warranted or not attended Belmont Abbey I would never have made it to medical school nor, of course, enjoyed a career in medicine. If I had been born with considerably darker skin I'd have worked on the railroad or at the factory, at best, and our sons would not have had parents who could afford to have them graduate from college debt-free. Our family is a textbook example of white privilege. I have directly benefitted from institutional racism.

One final point on our country's history before moving on: while Americans with dark skin were being enslaved the Southern colonies / states were building an economy that

produced great wealth largely as a result of that slave labor. The wealth from that labor, through interstate commerce, grew the fortunes of white families and communities in every state in the union. The accumulated and ever growing wealth passed and continues to pass from generation to generation. Meanwhile in much of at least the deep south one STILL sees a dark-skinned body in 'white' neighborhoods only if it belongs to the hired man who mows the lawn or woman who cleans the house. And in other regions of the country redlining has existed for decades, preventing darker skinned families from living in more affluent and less violent neighborhoods. And yes, dark skinned men and women attend college, start businesses and build wealth but they are about 350 years behind their white counterparts when it come to inherited wealth and privilege and the power that comes with it.

As an example as reported by Kendi in 'How to be an Antiracist': the wealthiest HBCU (Historically Black College and University) - Howard University in Washington DC - has an endowment 36 times less than that of Stanford or Yale.

Until some manner of appropriate reparations are made, the wealth and privilege inequities arising directly from slavery and discrimination will persist and grow. The Pew Research Center estimates that white households are worth 20 times as much as black households. 15% of whites have zero or negative wealth, more than a third of blacks suffer this degree of insecurity. When financial calamity strikes - medical emergency, divorce, job loss - the fall is precipitous.

I'm summarizing one important part of our shared history. Unfortunately a similarly brutal and grossly unjust story could be told about our history with respect to the indigenous people who lived on the land before we European americans arrived and the Latinx immigrants who were brought or otherwise migrated from the south for work.

We all acknowledge that the history of black lives in the U.S. and especially the U.S. southern states is a story of violence,

injustice and economic depravation. And yet we have never, as a country, undertaken any serious attempt at reparations.

Allow me to quote from Ta-nehisi Coates in his June 2014 article in The Atlantic entitled, 'The Case for Reparations':

"Having been enslaved for 250 years black people were not left to their own devices. They were terrorized. In the deep south a second slavery ruled. In the north legislatures, mayors, civic organizations, banks and citizens all colluded to pin black people into ghettos where they were overcrowded, overcharged and undereducated. Businesses discriminated against them, awarding them the worst jobs and the worst wages. Police brutalized them in the street.

Now we have half-stepped away from our long centuries of despoilment, promising 'never again'. But still we are haunted. It is as though we have run up a credit card bill and, having pledged to charge no more, remain befuddled that the balance does not disappear. The effects of that balance, accruing interest daily, are all around us."

Keep in mind these words were written before Donald Trump and the Proud Boys were on the national stage. How dispiriting the last 4 years have been to me, a privileged white male. I cannot begin to fathom how it has felt to those with darker skin.

OK, time now to provide an answer to the title question, 'Am I racist?' But first a quick semantic distinction that Ibram Kendi makes and that I find compelling. The question is not 'Am I racist?' vs. 'Am I non-racist?'. The question is racist vs anti-racist. The difference? In Kendi's words:

"what is the problem with being 'not racist'? It is a claim that signifies neutrality. 'I am not a racist but neither am I aggressively against racism'. But there is no neutrality in the racism struggle. The opposite of 'racist' isn't 'not-racist'. It is 'anti-racist'...

One either endorses the idea of a racial hierarchy as a racist or racial equality as an anti-racist. One either believes problems are rooted in groups of people, as a racist, or locates the roots of problems in power and policies, as an antiracist. There is no in-

between safe space of 'not racist'. The claim of not racist neutrality is a mask for racism..."

So, am I racist? I was raised in a mostly white town, could not have embarked on my career path without the institutional racism / white privilege that is rampant in my country, have lived for the past 28 years in a neighborhood with an increasing number of Latinx families but that remains predominately white.

With each biweekly paycheck, I continue to benefit from the structural racism in our country. And while I do make efforts to help marginalized communities with time and money I have yet to seriously devote the appropriate effort necessary. So, Yes, I am racist. It would be a blatant overstatement to say that I am not.

But I am also learning and changing. I am not the same person today that I was a year ago and barely resemble the foolish young man who was overly fond of cheap beer 40 years ago. Fortunately, like most things, racism versus anti-racism is not all or nothing. As Ibram Kendi says, "We can be a racist one minute and an anti-racist then next. What we say about race, what we do about race, in each moment, determines what - no who - we are."

A final thought: Racism does not exist in a vacuum. It feeds on Supremacy - the notion that one group is superior to another, deserving of more than another. As long as any notion of supremacy is accepted racism can not be eliminated. One cannot be anti-gay, anti-trans, or anti-muslim and claim to be anti-racist. Likewise if we are to harbor any hope of our children and grandchildren living in a sustainable, harmonious world we must confront the idea of 'human supremacy' - the belief that homo sapiens are superior to all other species. But that is perhaps a topic for another discussion. Suffice to say that supremacy, racism, rampant consumerism and ecological degradation go hand in hand.

Clearly there is much to do.

Where do we start?

We start:

- by acknowledging that we have a problem and that our abysmal racist past and failure to make amends or reparations continues to exacerbate it;
- by recognizing that where racial inequities exist, racist policies sustain these inequities. We don't see the Latinx population dying from COVID 19 in far higher rates than the white population, or people of color incarcerated at far higher rates than whites because of some inherent immune or behavioral differences. These disparities are the result of racist policies.

But, this need not be rocket science. As Aldo Leopold said in the spiritual snack for this week: "... to plant a pine one need be neither god nor poet, one need only own a shovel. Any clodhopper may say let there be a tree and there will be one." Likewise any clodhopper with a conscience or ounce of empathy can be an anti-racist. One need only take a good look around Yakima then knock on the door of La Casa Hogar, Rod's House, The YWCA or Planned Parenthood; or start speaking up at city council meetings.

The starting point is, of course, in our own hearts. In our culture of individuality and consumerism it is all too easy to pad our own nest, secure our own future, buy into the myth of 'the American dream'. But can we see upon whose backs that dream has been built and where it is leading us? Can we listen with awe to Amanda Gorman's poetry at the Biden inauguration and imagine the beauty and excitement of a true multicultural country that lifts up and embraces everyone? Can we make it a daily priority to see the world with mindful clarity and when confronted with racism in our families, workplaces and communities take the skillful action that is called for?

Finally, this being a church service, I will leave you with the odd spectacle of an atheist quoting the christian scriptures. We all have an image of some type of heaven - in this life or perhaps



another. I believe this paraphrased verse applies to today's topic and, by extension, to heaven in all its forms :

“Verily I say unto you, a camel will pass through the eye of a needle before a rich white person enters the kingdom of heaven!”

Thank you.