

Living into God's Dream

An EJM Interlude Title

Dismantling Racism in America



Edited by Catherine Meeks
Foreword by Jim Wallis

A White Lens on Dismantling Racism

Diane D'Souza

It is in the ordinary that the extraordinary is revealed, and the ordinary does not begin in extraordinary ways. As we face down the plague of racism, poverty, and inequality, we are called by God to create revolutionary acts of change in often very ordinary ways. . . . And that is what's most extraordinary of all.

—Rev. Dr. Serene Jones¹

I did not anticipate that writing this chapter would be so hard. I wanted to write about the concrete work of dismantling racism to encourage us when we despair that things will never change. Our keen focus on the things we need to fix sometimes blinds us to places where progress is being made. I also wanted to inspire action or potential direction among other Whites who sometimes wonder what part they can play in bringing change. I've seen individuals and church congregations become aware of the pervasive evil of racism and then get stalled on what they can do to uproot it. This chapter, I thought, could provide a few windows into the practical work of dismantling racism and building Beloved Community.

¹ Serene Jones, "Sermon Four," in *SELMA Hand-in-Hand Sermon Guide* (Washington: Values Partnerships, 2015), 19.

Yet in the process of writing I learned how hard it is to separate my research and teaching from my own journey as a white Euro American² woman recovering from racism. In the course of talking with many people about their work of making change, I had an uncomfortable interaction that fueled significant personal growth. This experience was humbling and important, shedding light on the process of challenge and change inherent to dismantling racism. I realized it would be valuable to relate that story and what I learned from it, but struggled with how to do that authentically. In the United States it is normative to place White people's stories and feelings at the center of discourse. This is a norm I am committed to change. Using my own story to frame the chapter seemed to contradict what I believe. I also knew that I wanted to shine a strong light on the realities of racism—as do the three stories I chose to tell—since Whites often have the privilege of ignoring racial inequities. At the same time, relegating my personal experiences to a concluding footnote would mean readers might not understand my motivation in telling these stories. After months of wrestling with this question, and feedback from people I trust,³ I finally decided that to accept Malcolm X's invitation to engage White communities around racism⁴ meant that I needed to tell the truth about this messy, painful, and ultimately reconciling and healing process—even the struggle to value and find a place for our own stories.

The racism that is the focus of this chapter is a system of oppression that assigns privilege, respect, and value based on the whiteness of a person's skin. I join others in using the expression "dismantling racism" because it conveys that racism is not just about feelings and interpersonal relationships but also social institutions and systems that we have constructed, are complicit in maintaining, and must act intentionally to deconstruct. "Building Beloved Community" is the positive compass that helps orient our construction of a different reality.

2 Recognizing that every term has inherent limitations, I use the descriptors Euro American and Afro American to indicate United States citizens of European and African ancestry. They are interchangeable with White and Black. My preference for the prefix Afro draws on the endorsement of citizens of Caribbean background who find it more resonant than "African American." I value the term Euro American because it forces Whites to claim their ethnic identity alongside other US citizens, and also because it reminds us that every White American is also an immigrant.

3 Thank you to Ann Moritz, Abigail Ortiz, Donna Bivens, Noel D'Souza, Bennie Wiley, Bithiah Carter, and Mira D'Souza: this chapter is richer for your input. Any mistakes or shortcomings in its scope or content are my own.

4 "Let sincere white individuals find all other white people they can who feel as they do—and let them form their own all-white groups, to work trying to convert other white people who are thinking and acting so racist. Let sincere whites go and teach non-violence to white people!" Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (London: Penguin, 1965), 494–95.

I have come to think of racism as a soup we're all swimming in. Unlike the sea, a soup is created by human enterprise and its flavor and consistency are formed by the ingredients we add to it. Just as it is difficult to change the flavor of a broth once you have added too much salt or a strong spice, our racism soup resists change. Swimming in a broth created collectively over countless generations, we steep in toxic privilege and oppressive diminishment—even if we fail to see or acknowledge it. It does not matter whether we live in a mixed race community or a homogenous one, we all soak in this soup. As a person raised and living in the United States, racism enters and resides in me in ways I am mostly unaware of until I slam into it. Such encounters are painful, and yet they carry the seeds of transformation for, as James Baldwin reportedly observed, "You cannot fix what you cannot face." Forced to acknowledge my own racism, I can choose to respond differently from how it dictates. I can create a different mindset. I can reach out when my urge is to draw back. I can begin to shape a different future. To face and then reject the evil that infects me is to choose life, for the power of racism lies in alienating us from each other and from ourselves.

A Journey toward Wholeness

I grew up in a relatively homogenous town in New Jersey. In my high school, with the exception of one classmate who was Afro American, all students, staff, and faculty were of European descent. Like most middle- or upper-class White Protestant families, mine did not talk about race. It was in Montreal while attending graduate school that I met and married a fellow graduate student from India. My parents were not pleased with the union. Most hurtful was my father's lament, "I never thought I'd have brown grandchildren."

Being a partner to a non-American person of color opened my eyes to racism and xenophobia. I was nonplussed when Canadian immigration officials would not allow Andreas's brother to get a visa and come from India to attend our wedding. The skeptical official who interviewed us in Canada displayed a cavalier disrespect I had never encountered in my own interactions with government representatives. In a similar way, I had not given much thought to crossing the US–Canadian border. In six years of traversing it, I never associated my effortless crossing with my privilege as a White American. Then that privilege disappeared. I now had a new normal: longer stops to talk with border security guards about who we were and why we were traveling, and not infrequently

being asked to park our car and go into the immigration office for a more detailed interview.

Indeed, the crossing of borders seems to be one of the places where racism becomes most visible. The most striking example for me was a trip we took to the United Kingdom. Walking to the immigration area through long airport hallways, we passed a group of several dozen South Asian people sitting on the floor. Except for their worn clothing, this waiting cluster of travelers did not look very different from my husband. When we reached the immigration check post, Andreas and I found ourselves going through separate lines, perhaps because of a delay due to a bathroom stop, or the need of one of our children, or because there were different queues for Indian and American passport holders. I don't remember the reason. What I do remember is hearing Andreas shout my name as I began to merge with the crowd of travelers newly admitted to the UK. Turning back I saw him still at the check post talking animatedly to one of the officers. He pointed to where I and our children stood yards away amidst a stream of other passengers. The official turned, looked at me for a long moment, then turned back to stamp my husband's passport. My Whiteness gave my brown husband a pass.

I learned more about racism, Whiteness, and what it feels like to be a visible minority by living and working in India for twenty years. India's legacy of colonialism also gave me a new window into White privilege. An early example occurred when I became sick and the lingering symptoms prompted my husband and me to look for a doctor. Following a neighbor's directions to a nearby clinic, we were surprised to find the waiting area full and a line of people snaking out into the courtyard. Preparing for a long wait, we were urged by one after another in the crowd to go to the front of the line. Feeling weak and unwell, I was troubled by this but grateful for people's generosity in letting a stranger see the doctor first. For me, this was an example of kindness and gracious hospitality. As I spent more time in India, though, I began to realize that Whiteness brought privilege even in a country where most people's bodies were brown or black. Had I been of dark African rather than white European descent, I would have had a different set of experiences.

In 2004 I returned to the United States when my husband and I separated. I found myself living in a suburb across a narrow stretch of the Neponset River from Boston's Mattapan neighborhood. Raising a teen-aged daughter and finding my way in a country I had left when I was eighteen, I thought little about race beyond seeking out a town and a high school where my daughter would not be the only student of color.

Most of my energy was spent on the uncomfortable and dramatic shift from a Third World to First World perspective, and processing the grief I felt at the ending of my marriage. Eventually, however, I became aware of economic and safety inequities in Boston, with nearby Mattapan and Roxbury experiencing a level of violence and poverty that would not be tolerated in wealthy White neighborhoods in Beacon Hill or the Back Bay. By the time I took a position with The Episcopal Church in 2013, I was glad to be building alliances and programs that focused on addressing racism and social justice. While directing Episcopal Divinity School's Lifelong Learning program, for example, I initiated a pilgrimage that brought people together to revisit civil rights history in order to fuel a present day commitment to dismantling racism.⁵

When asked to write this chapter, I began thinking about local examples where I saw people working together to bring positive change. Among those with whom I spoke was Bithiah Carter, president and founder of New England Blacks in Philanthropy and executive director of the Grand Circle Foundation's Community Advisory Group, a body that works to increase high school and college graduation rates in some of Boston's most economically challenged neighborhoods. Carter and I met in a Cambridge tea shop to talk about her work. As the conversation progressed, she related a recent experience of seeking refinancing for her Boston home. An appraiser came to assess the property, a normal step in the process of ensuring lenders that their loan is in keeping with the value of the property. When Carter received the appraisal value, she was surprised. With a strong financial background and having done her homework, she expected a higher figure. Curious, she decided to conduct an experiment. She put away all family pictures and other items that suggested ties to Africa, and asked her White husband to receive the next appraiser. The new estimate was \$130,000 higher, nearly a third of the property's final value.

"And this is not 1960 we're talking about," Carter emphasized. "This is happening today." I did some research to put her anecdote into context, and came across an annual study of home-lending trends. A group led by University of Massachusetts economics professor Jim Campen has identified a persistent racial disparity in mortgage approval rates in the greater Boston area, even when people of color have the same income as Whites. In 2014, Black borrowers had their mortgage applications

5 For more information, see my 2014 blog post, "Bridging Past and Present: Reflections on the Jonathan Daniels Pilgrimage," accessed on September 11, 2015, <http://eds.edu/news/bridging-past-and-present>.

rejected 17 percent of the time; nearly three times the 6 percent rate for White borrowers. The rejection rate for Afro Americans with a salary of \$90,000 or more was double that of Euro Americans.⁶ An earlier study reviewing Boston's racial gap in mortgage lending confirmed that differences in credit scores and other legitimate measures of borrower risk could only account for half of such disparities; the rest was simply racial discrimination.⁷ For Carter this represents "the epicenter of racism" since mortgages and homeownership are crucial assets in people's overall financial health. How, she wondered, do we begin to dismantle this kind of racism?

Carter's next question caught me unprepared. "When you talk about race among White people, what's the tenor of the conversation? How do people talk about it when only White people are around?" I was stumped, finding it hard to picture myself in a strictly White tableau. My circle of relations and friends are diverse, my children are biracial, their father Indian, and during my twenty years of living and working in India, my closest family and work colleagues were all Indians. I tried to explain my feeling of disconnect to Carter, saying I did not know if I had ever been in that kind of conversation with only White people. Why not? she wanted to know. The silence lengthened while I thought about my various experiences. I realized that there usually was someone of color in the group when I had deeper conversations about racism. Carter pressed on: What about when you are just with your White friends—how do you talk about racism then? I pictured sharing coffee or a meal with a small group. Again I was stuck. I explained that when we were together we usually talk about our lives, telling stories, rarely discussing the "isms." Forget deep analysis, Carter pushed. How do you talk about the racism happening all around you: the deaths of unarmed Blacks at the hands of police, the wealth and income gaps? I felt uncomfortable realizing that my deepest discussions about racism were usually in spaces where I knew people shared my passion and beliefs, and those spaces usually included people of color. Listening for an answer that did not come, Carter finally remarked, "Well, maybe that's why we have so little progress. If we can't get even the most well-meaning

6 Jay Fitzgerald, "Black, Latino Mortgage Rejection Rates Still High," *Boston Globe*, December 22, 2015, accessed January 3, 2016, http://www.bostonglobe.com/business/2015/12/21/blacks-latino-still-rejected-for-mortgages-higher-rates/kng3Kuc4v3uIK1pmDqBSjO/story.html?s_campaign=bostonglobe%3Asocialflow%3Afacebook.

7 Dennis Glennon, and Mitchell Stengel, "An Evaluation of the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston's Study of Racial Discrimination in Mortgage Lending," working paper 94-2 of the Office of the Comptroller of the Currency, Economic and Policy Analysis, 1994.

White people to think about racism when they don't have to, I guess racism will never change."

I felt shame in the face of Carter's challenge. Her questions not only forced me to use Whiteness as a frame for my social interactions, it pushed me to think about where and when I addressed racism. Although in some ways my life could be seen as a story about crossing boundaries of race and privilege, her pointed questions suggested ways I still might be holding back. As I reflected, I realized that the stories I felt most drawn to tell about dismantling racism were those led solely or collaboratively by people of color. I valued spaces where people worked hard to come together across barriers like race and class. What about the responsibility Whites like me have for working within our own communities to dismantle systemic oppressions? Could the injustice of Carter's refinancing experience ever change if we did not leverage our power and privilege to engage other White people? And how might that engagement be most transformative?

Reflecting on these questions and processing this uncomfortable encounter strengthened my commitment to work more intentionally in White spaces. I'm grateful to Bithiah Carter for risking honest engagement, and helping me to grow by challenging my ideas. I have new energy and curiosity for designing creative, encouraging, and transformative processes that help galvanize White people to reconciliation and action. I also am inspired by local groups who are engaged deeply in this work, including Community Change, Inc., a Boston-based nonprofit that has been addressing the roots of racism in White communities for almost fifty years; and White People Challenging Racism: Moving from Talk to Action, a grassroots initiative that for more than fifteen years has been helping White people gain tools to challenge and change attitudes and actions that perpetuate racism. I am excited by the national network Showing Up for Racial Justice (SURJ) that since 2009 has been motivating, training, and connecting White individuals and groups in an effort to build a strong movement of collective action.

It is not those stories, though, that I wish to tell. I focus in the rest of the chapter on initiatives led by people of color, or Blacks and Whites together. These are local stories of people working to dismantle racism: a community health center that identifies how racism impacts health and decides to do something about it; community organizers who discover a collective trauma inhibiting people's public engagement and devise a process to revisit and learn from that painful history; and an initiative catalyzed by business leaders that helps students gain new connections

to and energy from the American civil rights journey. I have chosen to focus on efforts taking place in the greater Boston area not because this city is a leader in dismantling racism and building Beloved Community, but to encourage readers to explore your own towns, cities, and states to discover the courageous, transformative often unheralded work going on there.

Mobilizing around Structural Racism

The Southern Jamaica Plain Health Center (SJPHC) designed a model of racial reconciliation and healing that connects health to the empowerment of communities around social and racial justice. Like most community health centers, this one has a mission to improve health and well-being by educating community members about ways to preserve and promote health. SJPHC is part of a Boston network of twenty-five health centers reaching underserved communities, and offers primary care to 12,000 racially and economically diverse residents of Jamaica Plain and surrounding neighborhoods. The choice to focus on racial reconciliation sprang from Executive Director Tom Kieffer and others realizing that people's sickness or wellness are less a product of their lifestyle choices than larger societal factors. The Health Center staff decided to address these head-on.

Data from Boston shows persistent racial inequity in health outcomes and mortality rates.⁸ The most dramatic example of this is a 33-year gap in life expectancy between people living in an affluent White Back Bay neighborhood between Massachusetts Avenue and Arlington Street (91.9 years), and those living in a similar-sized Roxbury neighborhood demarcated by Dudley Street, Shawmut Avenue, Massachusetts Avenue, and Albany Street (58.9 years). Infant mortality in the city is twice as high for Black babies as it is for White ones, and hospitalizations of young children with asthma is three times higher among Blacks than Whites. The Boston Public Health Commission's annual *Health of Boston Report* regularly chronicles a long list of other appalling health inequities.⁹

Data shows that racial disparities of this magnitude are not caused by lack of access to health care. Health and longevity are affected most

powerfully by factors such as safe, affordable housing; job opportunities; socioeconomic status; education; environmental exposure; access to fresh, healthy food; and so on. These social determinants of health are, in turn, heavily influenced by deep, structural racism. For example, unfair mortgage practices and unequal job opportunities make it more difficult for people of color to own homes, while red-lining and other more subtle discriminatory practices have limited financial resources and other services in neighborhoods of low-income residents or people of color. In addition, segregated, poorer localities like Roxbury and Mattapan contain a disproportionate number of direct health risks, including environmental hazard sites, polluting industries, and waste processing centers. On the flip side they offer only limited access to health-enhancing resources, whether safe places to play and exercise, high quality child care, excellent schools, or grocery stores supplying fresh, healthy food. Data shows that such indirect "upstream" factors have the greatest impact on people's long-term health.¹⁰

Aware of these facts and supported by a shift in understanding at the Boston Public Health Commission level,¹¹ Kieffer and his staff decided not only to put resources into "downstream" interventions like education programs for Black men threatened with diabetes, but also to educate and mobilize the community about the institutionalized racism that increases Black men's risk for diabetes; for example, food access, and inequitable housing and employment policies. The focus thus has shifted from palliative treatment to illness prevention; from health disparities to health inequities. Staff now help residents understand the systemic roots of racial differences in sickness and wellness, and support and encourage them to collaborate on efforts to bring change.

The Health Center chose to put special effort into educating and mentoring young people on this issue. Abigail Ortiz, the director of Community Health programs, and Dennie Butler-MacKay, a clinically licensed social worker with specialties in trauma, adolescence, and racism, started the Racial Reconciliation and Healing project in 2010. The yearlong program unites White youth and youth of color with the explicit goal of dismantling racism in all areas where social structures

8 Emily Zimmerman, Benjamin F. Evans, Steven H. Woolf, and Amber D. Haley, *Social Capital and Health Outcomes in Boston* (Richmond: Center on Human Needs, Virginia Commonwealth University, 2012), accessed September 15, 2015, http://www.societyhealth.vcu.edu/media/society-health/pdf/PMReport_Boston.pdf.

9 Available on the Boston Public Health Commission website: www.bphc.org/healthdata/health-of-boston-report/Pages/Health-of-Boston-Report.aspx.

10 For a compelling explanation of this, see the seven-part documentary film series, "Unnatural Causes: Is Inequality Making Us Sick?": <http://www.unnaturalcauses.org/>.

11 Nashira Baril et al., "Building a Regional Health Equity Movement: The Grantmaking Model of a Local Health Department," *Family & Community Health* 34, supplement 1S (2011): S23-S43, accessed December 10, 2015, www.bphc.org/whatwedo/health-equity-social-justice/racial-justice-health-equity-initiative/Documents/BuildingaRegionalHealthEquityMovement.pdf.

impact people's health. Each year the Center recruits and awards a modest stipend to sixteen students between the ages of sixteen and twenty-two, bringing them together twice weekly to create an intentional space for processing the enormously painful data around what is making people sick. Ortiz and Butler-MacKay encourage students to stay for multiple years if possible.¹²

Each "racial rec" cohort is half White and half students of color and mirrors the inequities of life in Boston. Young people of color largely come from low-income families and attend poorly resourced public schools. Ortiz notes that most have a heightened awareness about racism but lack the language or analysis to talk about it. White students generally attend better ranked schools and have access to greater opportunities. These and other differences are integrated into the process, underscoring the fact that people of color and Whites come at racism—and the work of dismantling it—from different perspectives. Latino and Afro American youth begin with an initial healing process, while White students start with a focus on reconciliation.

Ortiz and Butler-MacKay stress that racism has traumatized people of all races, and encourage participants to recognize and deal with emotions that come up while engaging it. They see the program as more than an academic exercise. Uniting head and heart is essential if people are to sustain a long-term commitment to addressing and dismantling systemic racism. Readings, racial affinity groups, workshops, healing circles, speak-outs, and fieldwork all help young people deal with issues head-on and explore pathways to change. In the process, young men and women learn how to better express themselves and interact safely with people from different racial or class groups. Students who stay for a second year design a fieldwork project, directly applying what they have learned.

One of the most challenging areas in this work is recognizing the different roles White people and people of color play. Many Whites tend to see racial justice work as led by people of color. Looking to the civil rights era, we see African Americans defining the problem, shaping strategies, and leading the movement. White people yielded leadership and expressed solidarity by showing up at rallies, marches, and sit-ins; doing whatever was necessary to support the struggle. For many White activists, grassroots organizing provided a clear frame for engagement: work in solidarity with people who have been oppressed, respect their strength and leadership, and do not seek to dominate the space or decide

12 Personal communication, May 15, 2015.

for others what can or should be done. Over the years we have deputized people of color to be our diversity officers, having them take on the role of educating White people and holding them accountable on issues of racial oppression and justice.

But now, says Ortiz, "it's racism 2.0." Racism is so deeply ingrained in our social policies and practices that we can perpetuate it unknowingly in environments that are race silent. In such a climate we no longer can afford the illusion that this is a problem only for people of color. We are very clear, says Ortiz. If racism is an exploitive system set up by White people, maintained by White people, and benefiting White people, who has the primary responsibility for dismantling it? Although Euro Americans may stand in solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement, for example, their primary role is in White spaces where no one is talking about race. This might be a workplace where all the employees are White and the company is planning to buy a building that will displace local residents of color in a gentrifying neighborhood. Or it might be a procurement meeting where once again all the businesses the company chooses to work with are White owned. Or a neighborhood school where White teachers and administrators explain away a persistent achievement gap between Black and White students.

It can be uncomfortable to speak up about equity and diversity, advocating in White spaces for a different reality. It can be risky to be known as the person who always raises awkward questions. Yet this is work crucial to the spiritual well-being of *all* people; it is not work Whites do on behalf of Afro Americans or Latinos or others. It is only by taking ownership of dismantling racist systems and overcoming our own racial assumptions that we can create the just, loving, compassionate world for which we long.

White leadership on the frontlines of dismantling racism is important for another reason: people of color need to do their own work. "If Whites took down the structures of White supremacy tomorrow and people of color have not done their own healing work," says Butler-MacKay, "the impact of racism would not end." Helping oneself and one's community heal from internalized oppression is especially challenging because we tend to overlook the value of this kind of work. Healing gained through protest and struggle is more readily acknowledged and valued. To make progress in this area and create lasting change, we need the most talented people of color working within their own communities. The painful conversations about internalized racial oppression need to take place among people of color. They are not White conversations. If working to educate

White people or dismantle racism in White spaces takes all the attention and energy of leaders of color, we have depleted a crucial resource for bringing healing and change to our society.

The chief outcome of the Racial Reconciliation and Healing program has been to grow the number of people able to talk about racism and to initiate efforts to transform it. The program has created ties among an activated and empowered multiracial group committed to racial equity.¹³ Some of the fruit is already being seen in initiatives begun by former participants, including the Get Health Information Project (GetHIP) that encourages young men of color to be advocates for health equity, designing media campaigns about specific issues from oral health to incarceration.¹⁴

The Southern Jamaica Plain Health Center's initiative is a concrete and powerful form of reconciliation and healing work. Part of its power lies in bringing the painful truth of systemic racism to the center of community awareness, and supporting people to envision and create change. It offers a space where people confront racism head-on and talk through the anger, guilt, and other emotions arising from the harsh reality of health inequities. Participants not only learn skills that help them advocate for racial justice at key structural levels, they also deepen a commitment to engage, challenge, and support each other in doing this work together.

Revisiting Uncomfortable Parts of Our History

As a newcomer to Boston in 2004, I rarely heard about the court-ordered desegregation of Boston's schools mandated in 1974. When I did, it was referred to as "the busing crisis." White friends explained it as a crazy and violent time when community was pitted against community. I was confused about what really happened but never heard enough of the story to get a full picture. It is a period many Bostonians prefer to put behind them. Sal LaMattina, a member of the Boston City Council and an employee of the city since 1989, recently confessed, "As a White politician, I was always told we don't talk about busing. We are a better city

13 For a powerful introduction to this program, see the 2012 documentary produced by Intercultural Productions in collaboration with SJPHC, the Boston Public Health Commission, and the Kellogg Foundation: www.youtube.com/watch?v=84imro3UVig.

14 For more information about the Racial Reconciliation and Healing program, see the page on Racial Justice and Health Equity Work on the website of Brigham and Women's Hospital (the licensing body for SJPHC): www.brighamandwomens.org/Departments_and_Services/medicine/services/primarycare/sjphc/RacialJustice_and_healthequity.aspx?sub=0.

than we were forty years ago."¹⁵ Yet it is this very history that community organizers stumbled over when trying to mobilize people to improve Boston's public schools. The Union of Minority Neighborhoods eventually realized that in order to create positive change in the present, Boston residents would need to speak about and learn from an ugly and traumatic part of their past.

According to the 2010 census, roughly 53 percent of Boston citizens identify as something other than non-Hispanic White, making this state capital a "minority majority" city. The student body attending Boston public schools is among the most racially and ethnically diverse in the nation—87 percent are students of color, and nearly one in two speaks a language other than English at home. Race and zip code are closely intertwined, however. When combined with neighboring Cambridge and Newton, the Boston area becomes the seventh most highly segregated metropolitan region in the nation, somewhat less segregated than Nashville but more than Birmingham.¹⁶ Not surprisingly, this segregation reflects economic and educational disparities as well. Forty-two percent of children living in the core neighborhoods of color—Roxbury, Dorchester, and Mattapan—are economically disadvantaged, the largest concentration of child poverty in the state. This is also where ten of Boston's twelve chronically "underperforming" schools are located. Inequitable access to resources, low expectations for success, and the criminalization of school discipline are among a host of factors contributing to a stubborn achievement gap along the fault lines of race and economic security. The largest casualty are Black boys who currently test out to be half as proficient in English and math as White ones.¹⁷

Many people have suggested that fixing race and class inequities in Boston's schools requires the involvement of local families and communities. For the Union of Minority Neighborhoods (UMN), this strategy is primary. Founded in 2002 by community organizer and activist Horace Small, the UMN aims to unify and train people of color to successfully address neighborhood, regional, and national problems. Early in 2010

15 Yawu Miller, "Busing Forum Bridges Decades-Old Divide," *The Bay State Banner*, online edition, June 25, 2014, accessed September 11, 2015, <http://baystatebanner.com/news/2014/jun/25/busing-forum-bridges-decades-old-divide/?page=1>.

16 Alexander Kent and Thomas C. Frohlich, "America's Most Segregated Cities," accessed October 23, 2015, <http://247wallst.com/special-report/2015/08/19/americas-most-segregated-cities/2/>.

17 Boston Public Schools, "Every Student, Every Day: Eliminating Achievement and Opportunity Gaps," last modified November 5, 2014, accessed October 24, 2015: www.bostonpublicschools.org/cms/lib07/MA01906464/Centricity/Domain/162/AchievementGap11052014.pdf.

they initiated Black People for Better Public Schools, bringing together parents, residents, and others invested in local neighborhoods to share their perceptions of public schools and their ideas for how to improve them. After quite a few such town hall meetings, the leadership team identified a pattern in the community's deep cynicism and distrust of the school system. People's experiences of school desegregation in the 1970s had left a legacy of pain, including a residue of unprocessed anger and grief. Individuals and whole communities had experienced trauma and loss. So many students from this period had dropped out or received a shaky education that their cohort was sometimes referred to as "the lost generation." The UMN team concluded that any movement to imagine and create a new future for Boston schools required revisiting and processing that traumatic time together.

UMN began by asking a small group of leaders with strong ties to local communities whether they thought such an endeavor worthwhile. The answer was a conditional "yes": it had value as long as it helped address contemporary challenges. Encouraged, the UMN team launched an active neighborhood listening process to find out how the era had touched Asian, Afro and Euro American, and Latino communities. The stories revealed important differences in language: in White circles people talked about the "busing" crisis, while Black folks usually spoke about "desegregation"—busing was simply about transportation. Honoring these differences, UMN called their initiative the Boston Busing/Desegregation Project (BBDP), and stressed their commitment to learning from the stories, lessons, and questions of people whose lives were directly impacted by this tumultuous period.

By June 2011, BBDP had reached out to potential collaborators and funders and enlisted media producer Scott Mercer to capture some of people's stories in a short documentary film. Project Director Donna Bivens and a small staff and team of volunteers then partnered with dozens of community based groups across the city to screen *Can We Talk? Learning from Boston's Busing/Desegregation Crisis*. At each viewing they asked the audience what about this history was relevant for today. The listening exercise surfaced three themes that were important during and leading up to the 1970s watershed period and continue to have relevance today: racial and class equity, democratic access to resources and decision making, and demanding excellence of public institutions.

BBDP committed itself to building leadership that could find contemporary meaning in these themes and work to collectively address them. They pulled together a Learning Network to guide and support

a process of community truth-telling. This diverse and evolving group of men and women brought together wide-ranging knowledge and skills to help learn from and refine the truth-telling process and to support communities through it. The team hoped that deep, respectful listening to people's stories in community would bear witness to individual and collective wounds and hopes, and would help people move beyond old misunderstandings to see and embrace successes and shared values. Bivens and her colleagues also hoped that it would energize a cadre of leaders to transform Boston into a city that honors the need to speak honestly about the realities of the color divide and concentrated wealth, and works together to transform these barriers.

BBDP began to convene "story circles," an artistic and community-building technique that rests on the premise that everyone has a story to tell, and that externalizing one's story, constructing a narrative, and through it reconstructing history, is therapeutic.¹⁸ Emerson College professor Robbie McCauley trained facilitators in the process, and BBDP began holding circles throughout the city so that people could speak about their relationship to busing/desegregation history. Acknowledging that there are many aspects of truth about what happened during this era, leaders encouraged people not to judge others' experiences but to share their own: What do you remember? How do you understand and connect to this history? How has that history affected you today? What can we learn from it? A choice was made to convene racial affinity groups so people could better hear and understand their story within a single race context. It soon became clear that this was complicated by class, culture, and ethnicity, with leaders learning that there are many stories outside the simple context of "Black" or "White." A later phase united people across race to talk about their shared history. By the end of 2014, more than 3,000 people had participated in story circles and other BBDP forums.

The process highlighted that there are at least two separate narratives about this history. The dominant one, voiced by the majority of Whites living in Boston, framed the story in terms of a 1974 court order mandating children be bused between predominantly White and Black neighborhoods. For over two years violent racial protests and rioting pitted

18 John O'Neal and his colleagues at Junebug Productions in New Orleans developed story circles as a way to create oral history of African American experience. For more about this technique, see the 2006 unpublished report by New York University's Research Center for Leadership in Action Leadership for a Changing World, "Using Art and Theater to Support Organizing for Justice," accessed January 8, 2016, <http://www.racialequitytools.org/resourcefiles/nyuwagner.pdf>.

working class communities in South Boston, Charlestown, and Roxbury against each other. Protesting parents, students, and others hurled rocks, bottles, and racial epithets at buses of students, and demonstrations and sit-outs led schools to close for days at a time. The State Police and the National Guard became a visible presence on local streets and in schools, and for well over a decade control of the desegregation plan remained with the courts. The turmoil accelerated the flight of the White middle class from the city to the suburbs, and 30,000 mostly White students left Boston public schools for suburban, parochial, and private ones. The era was traumatizing for Whites as well as Blacks. As Georgianna Johnson, a South Boston resident described, "We had children who witnessed adults at their ugliest, who were pulled out of school, who learned only to have contempt for education and authority, and who then gave birth to their own children."¹⁹

The second narrative, framed by Afro Americans, located the tumultuous events of the 1970s within a long justice struggle around the distribution of public resources. The first time the Boston School Committee's efforts to racially segregate schools had been contested was in 1849 when Benjamin F. Roberts challenged the requirement that his five-year-old daughter Sarah enroll in an all-Black public school. She and other Afro American children had to walk past five neighborhood elementary schools in Beacon Hill before reaching the poor and densely crowded Abiel Smith School. Eventually the Massachusetts Supreme Court ruled against Roberts, arguing that "separate but equal" facilities were legal, a principle that became popular in advancing educational segregation across the nation until it was invalidated by the Supreme Court in the 1954 *Brown v. the Board of Education* ruling. Yet even after Roberts lost his case, Boston's free Black community continued to agitate against denying children the right to attend neighborhood schools. The community engaged in boycotts, protests, the strategic use of White allies, and the creation of new outlets for their message. Within five years they had pushed Boston to become the first major city in the United States to open public schools to children of African descent.²⁰

¹⁹ Georgianna Johnson, "There Was Much City Could, and Should, Have Done before Garrity's Ruling," letter to the editor, *Boston Globe*, June 28, 2014; downloaded November 24, 2015, from www.bostonglobe.com/opinion/editorials/2014/06/27/there-was-much-city-could-and-should-have-done-before-garrity-ruling/3EptUymHQhhR34obwQX4ZJ/story.html.

²⁰ More about this history can be found in Stephen and Paul Kendrick's wonderful book *Sarah's Long Walk: The Free Blacks of Boston and How Their Struggle for Equality Changed America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004).

This win did not resolve racism in the schools, however. Unequal educational opportunity and ongoing racial discrimination catalyzed protests in the 1960s, culminating in the state's 1965 Racial Imbalance Act requiring schools to desegregate if their student body was more than 50 percent of one race. Boston's School Committee, whose five elected members were all White, refused to comply, arguing that the racial profiles of schools reflected population demographics not intentional segregation, and that all school children had equal resources and opportunities. Black parents protested, boycotting city schools, organizing separate "freedom schools," and arranging buses and carpools to take their children from neighborhood schools to suburban White ones. In 1972 with the help of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, fourteen Black parents and their children filed a class action lawsuit against the Boston Public School Committee. The court ruled in favor of the parents and children after reviewing evidence that the School Committee unequally allocated materials and resources, kept schools racially segregated by gerrymandering neighborhood boundaries, and discriminated along the lines of race in hiring, assigning, and promoting faculty and staff.

Thus, for Black residents of Boston, the events of the 1970s did not occur in isolation. Framing this era as a crisis over busing evokes an imagined harmonious past that was disrupted only by a divisive court order. Such a portrayal not only minimizes a complex history stretching for centuries, it also fails to examine the power dynamics that have kept systems of oppression in place. BBDP leaders hope that creating and learning from a shared story will energize people to question the stories they had inherited, and ultimately shift the underlying, repeating pattern of the use of power to benefit some individuals and communities while excluding and oppressing others.

- After more than four years of listening and learning, Bivens and her team are clear that reconciliation from the trauma and wounds of this period has barely begun. Lessons carved out in community have surfaced a number of questions including:
 - » Whose story is it and how do we navigate the power differences that allow a master narrative to continue to reassert itself and drown out more marginalized stories?
 - » Whose city is it when longtime residents and communities are displaced by "luxury" condos and cookie-cutter high rises?

- » Is [the issue] about racism or is it about class and how do we attain the race and class literacy that can help us escape that either/or choice?
- » What is excellence [for example, in our public schools] when access to it is such a function of privilege?²¹

BBDP is currently focused on a public-learning campaign that takes questions like these back to local community-based partners. The aim is to work collaboratively on creating "race and class literacy" through neighborhood workshops and the development and distribution of educational materials. Change will come, says Bivens, as people better understand how race and class shape their everyday lives, including through decision making at governing levels in Boston, the state, and the country. BBDP is strengthening a core group of people of all races who can address such issues and together create new solutions to problems like the ones plaguing Boston's public schools.

Indeed, one of the tangible fruits of BBDP's work has been inspiring and supporting the rewrite of the desegregation curriculum of Boston Public Schools (BPS). For years when history and social studies teachers taught about race relations, discrimination, and the work of desegregation, they drew on examples from Arkansas and other southern states. In 2015 BPS leaders reached out to Donna Bivens and a team of colleagues, including Jose Lopez and Paula Elliott, to help devise a new curriculum. Together with other organizations and individuals, they assembled resources to help students better understand what happened in Boston, from the red-lining of neighborhoods, to segregated housing, to the violent struggle to desegregate schools. The new curriculum not only helps students learn about a history that affected their neighbors and family members, it helps them become more aware of patterns of structural racism and class privilege that continue today.

The power of the Boston Busing/Desegregation Project lies in naming and engaging a traumatic and painful part of our past that continues to influence our present. Traditionally, the making of history has been a process of selecting which stories to tell and which to leave out. In contrast, BBDP has committed to convening spaces where every story has a

21. From UMN's December 18, 2014, blog post "BBDP Year-End Update & Request," accessed December 20, 2015, <http://bbdproject.org/2014/12/18/bbdp-year-end-update-request/>. BBDP's work has been distilled in several reports available on its website <http://bbdproject.org/>, including the 2014 "Unfinished Business: Linking Boston's 'Busing/Desegregation Crisis' to Struggles for Equity, Access and Excellence for All in Boston Today" that highlights seven key learnings from the work. Accessed on October 23, 2015, from <https://bbdplearningnetwork.files.wordpress.com/2014/09/7-lessons-bbdp-9-11-14.pdf>.

chance to be heard, valued, and mined for the lessons it offers. Leaders realized that the process of creating a narrative is of equal or greater importance than the narrative itself. It is the process of listening, discovering, and learning together that helps to mitigate lingering trauma and to empower people to begin creating a new story together.

Energizing Deeper Engagement

Our final example of dismantling racism began with a "What if . . . ?" question at a 2014 dinner party in New York City. Prominent Afro American business leaders and philanthropists had come together for an intimate New Year's Eve celebration among friends. A few among the group had attended early screenings of the movie *Selma* and talk around the table was enthusiastic and energized. Eventually someone wondered what might happen if every child in America—Black and White—could see this powerful portrayal of a defining moment in our history. How might it nurture, strengthen, and inspire young people, creating even more energy for change? These simple wonderings set in motion an unprecedented campaign that underwrote the costs for 300,000 students to see the movie in theatres across the country, and culminated in every high school in the nation receiving a DVD copy of the film and a curriculum guide with suggested ways to use it.

Selma chronicles the dangerous American civil rights campaign to secure equal voting rights in the face of violent opposition. Part of the film's power lies in offering a glimpse into the organized yet fractious movement that was the driving force behind the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act. Set during a tumultuous three-month period that culminates in the 1965 march from Selma to Montgomery, it brings to life the complicated, brilliant, flawed man who was Martin Luther King Jr. and accurately shows the civil rights movement as shaped by women and young people as well as men. It also captures the tensions between key groups, including King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference and the young activists of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. Director Ava DuVernay and her racially diverse and highly talented cast and crew not only offer viewers a window into the sacrifices, victories, and losses behind a defining moment in US history, they also illuminate the complex and nuanced story of how real change takes place.

The film struck a powerful chord with the group gathered in New York City that New Year's Eve. It came at a time when the killing of unarmed black men including Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Tamir

Rice, and Eric Garner had elicited a feeling of hopeless frustration within the Black community. Anyone with a Black son—whether they worked in a gas station or were CEO of a major corporation—knew this could happen to their child. It was always part of dinner and cocktail party conversation, observed Bennie Wiley, former president and CEO of The Partnership, Inc., a Boston-based organization that supports multicultural professionals and helps corporations and institutions attract, develop, and retain talented leaders of color. People did not know what to do beyond expressing concern, frustration, and fear for their own children. The movie not only provided a sense of historical context for current struggles, it also brought to life the courage and determination of a generation of men and women on whose shoulders everyone stood. It helped leaders like those gathered in New York City to see more clearly the arc of their own journey.

Bennie Wiley and her husband, Fletcher "Flash" Wiley, were the only Bostonites present that evening. All others were New York City-based social and business powerhouses, including Bill Lewis and wife, Carol Sutton Lewis; Kenneth and Kathryn Chenault; Tony and Robyn Coles; and Charles and Karen Phillips. The group began to discuss ways that young people might have a chance to see the movie. Charles Phillips, a member of the Board of Viacom, offered to reach out to the leadership there to get in touch with Paramount Pictures, one of its subsidiaries and the distributor for the movie. Perhaps if they could raise the money for tickets, Paramount might streamline students' access to them. All agreed to commit themselves financially and try to get the project moving quickly since *Selma* was scheduled to open widely in theaters in just over a week.

When she returned to Boston, Wiley didn't give the proposal too much thought, expecting it to be just one more good idea raised over cocktails. A week later one of her friends called from New York to share news of the unbelievable response they had received and to encourage Wiley to mobilize in Boston. Reaching out to friends and acquaintances, the New York circle had raised \$280,000 in a matter of days. Paramount Pictures agreed to let its network of theaters honor any student who showed a valid ID or report card, and offered to charge benefactors a special rate of \$10 for each student ticket. Now the group was spreading the word to everyone with a connection to seventh, eighth, and ninth grade students, from the New York Public Library to the Harlem Children's Zone, the Apollo Theater to the Abyssinian Baptist Church. The Mayor's Office and the Department of Education announced their support, and by the

time the campaign was over, more than two dozen Afro American business and community leaders had enabled 75,000 New York City-area school students to see *Selma* the first weekend of its wide theatrical release.

Wiley knew the Black community in Boston did not have the same wealth as the one in New York, but she figured there was nothing to lose in trying a similar effort in her city. Setting a goal of \$100,000, she started going through her rolodex contacting prominent leaders who might make sizeable contributions. She deliberately chose to focus on the Afro American community, forgoing White, corporate, or foundation support. She knew that having the Black community extend their own resources to sponsor children of all races to see this film was itself a strong, empowering message. The Boston Foundation, where she is a longtime board member, made available a tax-deductible account to receive donations for the project. People's immediate and enthusiastic responses were exhilarating and within five days the campaign had raised \$120,000.

By then Wiley had shifted her energy to seeing that children took advantage of the sponsored tickets. Since the movie had already opened, the target became getting middle and high school students into theaters over the long Martin Luther King Jr. weekend. Everyone who contributed was asked to spread the word, while Wiley and other volunteers reached out to Black political figures, the Black ministerial community, and school and nonprofit leaders, urging them to pass the information on to their constituencies. Boston Public Schools and local charter schools sent word out to teachers, parents, and students, and the Boston Foundation informed their large network of nonprofits. Teachers, youth workers, and church leaders began organizing field trips, and many parents and relatives took their children on their own. When the campaign finally ran its course, nearly 11,000 students in the Boston metropolitan area had seen the film.

The wave continued beyond Boston. Bennie Wiley joined New York initiators in contacting friends across the country, urging them to coordinate similar efforts in their own communities. The group began a website and social media campaign, inviting students and teachers who made use of the opportunity to share their reflections using the hashtag "#SelmaforStudents." By the end of February, 2.5 million dollars had been raised and 300,000 students in thirty-three cities and regions had attended local theaters. These results were unprecedented: never before had business leaders coordinated and underwritten such a massive

national campaign to enable people to view a film with an important message. But the group continued to dream bigger. What if every student in the nation had the opportunity to see the film? What if teachers and other leaders could draw on strong resource materials to help young people process what they saw? With the invigorating support of this community of changemakers, Paramount announced in April 2015 that it would send a DVD of the movie to every US high school free of charge. In addition, an extensive curriculum guide offering interdisciplinary lesson plans in history, English language arts, mathematics, art, and geography was made available through BazanED, an online source for free multicultural teaching materials.

The power of this initiative lies in people recognizing that a film like *Selma* creates opportunities for real conversation about issues that collectively feed, divide, trouble, and traumatize us. For many people in the Euro American community, there is a deep discomfort talking about racism. Yet if we want to develop strategies and solutions that can dismantle it, we need open, candid talk among everyone who is part of the system. Racism is so deeply ingrained in American culture that there is little chance it will dissipate quickly. But long-term change is built in part through spaces uniting media that powerfully engages our emotions with conversation that inspires us to honesty and vulnerability. The *Selma* for Students initiative has increased the number of such spaces.

Ingredients for Creating Change

The above practical examples of dismantling racism involve a few common elements. The biggest is the creation of space where people can have conversations neither simple nor superficial about racism. These occasions may take the shape of truth-telling about a painful part of our history or our present, debriefing a film that stirred our emotions, or some other form. They may occur through facilitated meetings, in classrooms, or among small groups of friends, neighbors, or parishioners. Wherever and however they happen, they are sacred spaces. They are sacred because countless men and women, children and the elderly have lost their lives and continue to lose them through the evil of racism. They also are sacred because they touch a place where our spirits have been wounded and where our brokenness makes us vulnerable. This is not true only for people of color; it is true for Whites as well. My own brokenness becomes visible when a person's skin color elicits my response and diminishes my connection to a unique human being. My spirit is

wounded by being a part of a church, community, and nation that all have gained wealth and security through the unacknowledged exploitation of people of color. Finally, these spaces are sacred because when people intentionally come together for real and difficult conversations, they bring with them the seeds for transformation and new life.

A second common element, indivisible from such spaces, is deep listening. People take a risk when they choose to tell their stories or share painful emotions with others. Taking such a risk is an act of intentional and heroic vulnerability. Our response helps to create or diminish a climate of trust between the speaker and his or her listeners. White people like myself have much to learn about sacred listening in racially diverse spaces. In his honest and impassioned 2015 sermon at Bethel United Church of Christ in White Salmon, Washington, Afro American writer John Metta admitted that he has spent a lifetime not talking to White people about racism. His choice is based on experience, for whenever he has tried, even with beloved family members, the conversation quickly shifted to the White person seeking to prove that they themselves were not racist or arguing that racism does not exist because they had never experienced it.²²

Metta suggests that in the United States we do not talk easily about racism because we are part of a society that prioritizes the feelings of White people over the lives of Black people. Our focus on taking care of White people, on safeguarding the feelings of those of us who do not want to see ourselves as racist keeps us from engaging, understanding, and dismantling the racist systems we help to sustain. Denial and defensiveness shut down dialogue and inhibit trust. White people like myself need to take responsibility for listening well and for processing any hurt that we feel in response to the testimony of people of color. We need to unpack our defensiveness, coming to grips with whatever shame, anger, fear, or guilt we uncover. This is perhaps most effectively done in affinity groups. Doing such work in spaces where people come together across race can take time and energy away from learning how to think about and dismantle the systemic racism our Whiteness gives us the privilege not to see.

A third common element to all three accounts of dismantling racism is that the leaders of each initiative leveraged their own unique power to fuel change. The success of the *Selma* for Students campaign, for example, is tied to the gifts and resources business leaders brought to

²² Published online July 6, 2015, as "I, Racist" in the magazine *Those People*. Accessed on January 5, 2015, from <https://thsppl.com/i-racist-538512462265#.cn36ee9py>.

the task, including a network of contacts, strong organizing and promotion skills, access to capital and key decision makers, and their influence as men and women whose opinions others respect. Leaders at the Southern Jamaica Plain Health Center inspired and trained residents to confront the structural racism behind health inequities by leveraging the power associated with being part of Boston's health network, including a dedicated staff, community connections, and awareness of funding sources. The Union of Minority Neighborhoods continues to expand a climate in which all Boston children have the opportunity to flourish by leveraging deep community networks, a commitment to respecting the stories of each individual and group, and skills in creating transformative processes where people can speak and hear each other. Dismantling racism needs more than vision, inspiration, and a thirst for justice. It also requires us to recognize and mobilize the power we have to catalyze change.

I began this chapter by offering a window into my own journey of recovering from racism. There is an inherent messiness to this work, for we are learning still how to do it well. In our attempts to recover from racism, we cannot avoid tripping over unexamined assumptions, biases, pain, and hurt. Changing the very soup in which we swim is no easy task and will take the work of many generations. We will feel uncomfortable at best, enraged, saddened, despondent, and despairing at worst. Can we compassionately accept that this is part of the process as we strive to create Beloved Community? Can we value honesty, courage, and compassion as we hold each other accountable and celebrate our achievements? Can we keep returning to spaces where we try, fail, and rise again so that together we can explore what brought us to our present circumstance and build pathways to a different future?

Catherine Meeks reminded us earlier that recovering from racism is a spiritual discipline and part of our individual and collective journey toward wholeness. One of the tools that has given me strength along the way is one of the baptismal promises made by Episcopalians. In my worshipping community we regularly affirm five vows.²³ These are uplifting reminders for me of our collective and individual spiritual quest. In one, for example, we promise, "to strive for justice and peace among all people and respect the dignity of every human being." The vow that has been particularly life-giving in my work of recovering from racism is to "persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever [I] fall into sin, repent and return

to the Lord." This promise reminds me that I will fall into sin, including tripping on racism that exists within and around me. There is no "if" in the vow. But it also offers me two clear steps to take when this happens: to see my mistake and choose to change, and to reclaim my place in the mysterious and all-encompassing love and compassion of God. This love and compassion is often expressed most powerfully through Beloved Community. The stories of the Racial Reconciliation and Healing program, the Boston Busing/Desegregation Project, and the Selma for Students campaign are all efforts worth celebrating, supporting, lifting up, and learning from. There are thousands of others across the country and around our world. Each represents an individual or collective choice or action, perhaps like a point of light in a vast expanse of stars. Maybe that's the secret of transforming our soup. As we step back, we can see the beauty of the light amidst the darkness, and know that as one star goes out, others are born in our ever-evolving journey toward wholeness.

²³ The full Baptismal Covenant can be found in the Book of Common Prayer (New York: Church Publishing, 1979), beginning on page 304.