

# Disrupting My Legacy of Privilege

Right after George Floyd was murdered, I posted a picture of my son and daughter online. In a comment to the photo, I stated that it is a strong symbol that motivates me as I work to be antiracist. My comment solicited quite a few private emails and texts telling me that I am a good person and not racist. My friends wrote to reassure me, help me feel better. I am writing now to let everyone in my network know that my work on anti-racism isn't about me and feeling better about myself. It is not a matter of personal feelings or opinion. It is a matter of my white privilege and what I am doing to end ongoing policy brutality and other systematic oppressions created by racism. My personal feelings don't matter, my role in this construct does.

My youngest two daughters came home in 2007. They were born in Liberia, West Africa. I remember the beginning of our life together with amazing clarity. My family and community embraced them, and our days are happy and joyful. In the early years of our life together, I made some very ignorant statements in the context of my interracial family because I had no concept of my privilege. Like Ijeoma Oluo's mother, there is a lot about my daughters' lives that I had a hard time seeing. In Oluo's book, she writes: "Our mom never thought that our blackness would hold us back in life – she thought we could rule the world. But that optimism and starry-eyed love was, in fact, born from her whiteness." Oluo goes on to tell a story about walking her mother through the difference between being a white mom who lives with and loves black people and actually being black. Reading Oluo's book, *So You Want to Talk About Race*, gave me tools to talk with other white people about privilege and racism. I examined white privilege and my ignorant assumption that my life experience would be similar for my daughters. Most importantly, I realized that if I am not actively working to end racism – taking steps to address the systematic issues we have in this country - then I am part of the problem.

Racism is not just individual bigotry. It is our history, our culture, and part of our institutions. The killing of black people at the hands of police, and in particular, the murder of Mr. Floyd, demonstrates how deeply racism is ingrained in our culture. Racism is so normalized in the U.S. that four law enforcement officers participated in Mr. Floyd's death, knowing they were being filmed, and without concern for the outcome. Nine minutes, four white men, a live audience and no compulsion to stop. This event and the resulting outrage did not prevent an Atlanta police officer from shooting Rayshard Brooks in the back three times as he ran away. I interpret these events as deep and pervasive racism empowered by complacency and ignorance by white people. The racial hierarchy that brought us to this moment must be dismantled and it is essential that I step up. I see it as my responsibility to protest, to demand change and make new laws, to make donations, to start conversations, to donate time.

A few of the notes from my friends in response to my post ask, perhaps rhetorically, what can white people do? Here is what I do:

First, I continually educate myself. I read everything I can find to help me understand and learn about this issue. In other words, I am working to undo the racial socialization of my upbringing and dedicating time every day on how to be antiracist. As I mention above, I was completely ignorant of these issues three years ago. I am a "well-educated" professional woman and somehow this information was outside of my awareness and never part of my education. To change that, I attended the Phase I Program by the Racial Equity Institute in April of 2019. I have also read many of the books which are found on a NYT list by Ibram Kendi. For anyone

new to these issues, a great place to start is with Layla Saad's book, *Me and White Supremacy*. Layla designed an Instagram challenge after the white supremacy rallies in Charlottesville, VA on August 11 and 12, 2017. That 28-day challenge evolved into a workbook that was downloaded by over 100,000 people in the U.S. It is now available in book form published earlier this year. If you are more inclined to listen instead of reading, Layla also has a podcast. I also recommend the *Seeing White* podcast for information on being white in America, race and the history of racism.

Second, I use my voice and my pen to call out racism when I see it regardless of the source. I have always characterized myself as a progressive. But I have not always used my voice against oppression and for justice. Uncertainty, avoidance of conflict, concerns about my reputation have silenced me. I have no intention of exercising restraint any longer. I am not perfect in this work and I am sure my own privilege still gets in the way, but that concern will not stop me any longer – I'm speaking out and I'm getting loud.

Late in 2018, my daughter experienced racism at school. When I walked into the meeting with the administration and the perpetrator, I observed a look of surprise by the teacher who did not know that my daughter had a white mom. Afterwards, I wrote to a few close friends and ask: Are there people of color who are afraid to act as I did? Without any hesitation to defend my daughter? If a woman of color showed up and got as angry as I did, standing up and shouting in that racist's face, how would it have gone? I am not certain of the answer to that question, but I suspect that it would not have gone as well if a woman of color was in my shoes. What I do know for sure is that I have the power to use my voice, my ability to write, my advocacy and teaching skills to point out racism and white supremacy when I see it.

Third, I share what I learn and am working to build community around the concept that white supremacy, institutional racism and social injustice against people of color must be dismantled by white people who benefit from the system. I am open to discussing these issues with anyone. I write about and share what I learn in order to increase dialogue. Let's talk about what is going on, how we have been complicit in perpetrating racism, and what we might do together to dismantle it. This is not intellectual work. In the words of Layla Saad, this is emotional, heart-wrenching work. I can't do it for you. But I do stand ready to do it with you. Let's shine a light on our role in this and join together to work collectively to end white supremacy and racism.

Fourth, I hold myself accountable. Accountable for the work. Accountable when my white privilege or white fragility is getting in the way. Accountable for my interactions around this issue and calling myself out when I screw up. Accountable in my work to dismantle the systems and culture that promotes whiteness and oppresses people of color. Accountable that I spent most of my life being racially illiterate and still have a lot to learn to undo that perspective.

Fifth, I support business owned by people of color and non-profit organization that benefit people of color. I actively avoid any business that does not have diversity and inclusion as a key pillar and I boycott businesses that discriminate.

I know this isn't perfect and there is more I can do and there is more I will learn. I hope to continue to find solutions and to deepen my awareness in all aspects of my life. I especially hope that I do not cause harm. Three to four years ago, I was complacent and ignorant. Now, I have some awareness. I am going to mess up. I am going to say stupid things that I will regret. But I am going to try and learn every day because I can't sit still or stay quiet.