

Blog Post

<https://onbeing.org/blog/courtney-martin-the-painful-and-liberating-practice-of-facing-my-own-racism/>

The Painful and Liberating Practice of Facing My Own Racism

by Courtney E. Martin (@courtwrites), columnist

I want to get A's. Even as an adult, over a decade out of any formal schooling, I realize that I sometimes walk through the world looking for a gold star. I subconsciously ask myself: Am I good mother? A good friend? A good collaborator?

A good white person?

That last one might sound strange, but I've come to realize as of late that one of the delusions of white (progressive) culture is the assumption that if we stay vigilant enough, if we do enough "work," that we can achieve some sort of permanent state of goodness; i.e., prove that we are definitively not racist. It's as if somewhere along the way being labeled "racist" became our biggest fear. My friend Mia Birdsong explains her take:

"An unintended outcome of the Civil Rights Movement is that white (liberal) people developed a binary understanding of racism. Racists are cross burning, hood wearing, hate spewing people. If they are not that, they are not racist."

So progressive white people frantically read the right books, proclaim adoration of the right thinkers, learn and integrate the right language, buy our kids dolls with varying skin tones, donate to organizations that fight white supremacy, etc.

But you can't study, consume, or perform your way out of racism.

If you are white, if you've been socialized in the United States of America in the 21st century, you are racist. You will be racist until the day you die. There is nothing you can do to escape that fundamental fact.

In some ways, that's a frightening reality to reckon with. But in another, it's freeing. If there is no chance of escaping my own internal racism, then I don't have to work so damn hard all the time to prove just how not-racist I am. Instead, I can spend energy doing things that are much more liberating — particularly building my resilience around confronting my own racism when it surfaces and building relationships with people who will call me out on my racism and support me in confronting it.

This happened recently. A black woman and friend of mine was lamenting how frustrated she is that so much money is still being invested in organizations led by white people when the presidential election (among much else) proved that it is the leadership of women of color that is so direly needed at this moment. In discussing an organization that friends of mine started,

with an overwhelmingly white leadership team, I was immediately defensive. I wanted to explain why they were the exception, why they deserved understanding, why they weren't part of the problem. In retrospect, I was wrong. In that moment, my racism surfaced. After a couple of weeks went by, she sent me an email describing her experience.

It was hard to process. My first instinct was to shame spiral and get defensive. She caught me off guard. I was having a rough day, not to mention month. I didn't found the organization. All of that was true, but didn't change the fundamental truth of what she was pointing out. As I let that first emotional wave run its course, there was something after it that felt like accountability, like acceptance, like integrity. I apologized and recommitted to supporting women of color in leadership.

I remembered that interrogating my own internal racism is not a one-time show, but a life-long journey. The only way to keep at it is to build relationships that can surface it and withstand holding it up to the light. It's painful, but it is liberating because it releases me from thinking I can "win" or that I'm capable of perfection. I can't and I'm not.

There's something in me that relaxes when I'm real about that and get on with the work of really living, building interracial relationships, not because they garner me the appearance of being conscious, but because they mean a lot to me, force me to grow, give me opportunities to love while flawed and to love flawed humans (which we all are).

Shame has become such a fundamental part of the way white people, progressives especially, relate to their own whiteness. It's not an unfounded reaction, of course; there's a lot to be ashamed of. But as Brené Brown writes:

"Shame erodes our courage and fuels disengagement."

When white people dwell in shame, we tend to grow meek and fragile, try to play it safe or perform, get defensive, try to distance ourselves from the "bad white people," and a whole host of other reactions that don't actually repair anything — relational or systemic.

Alternatively, when we move beyond shame (or at least don't let it be the driving emotion), we recognize that while we can never cure ourselves of the culture in which we were raised, we can transform it. It will take generations, but so be it. Now is the time to be on the right side of history, *not* by purifying yourself of racism, but by grappling with it one humbling, sad, liberating, loving moment at a time. It won't get you A's, but it will make you more human.