

**Communities of Colorfulness**  
**How to Finally End White Supremacy and Racism in America**  
**By**  
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I realize the title of my sermon today is audacious. For some, the suggestion that after 500 years of White Supremacy and racism, anyone, let alone a white American male, can say how to finally end this scourge, may even sound insulting. But, as another American male has proven, we can always have the audacity of hope.

So I want to begin talking a little of my own experience of race and racism growing up in America. Firstly, I don't believe I was born a white male, but, was immediately labeled as such by others. They even put it on my birth certificate. I'm not sure when I first began identifying as a boy, but it must have been early on since I have no memory of it. It probably started as soon as I began differentiating between "mother" and "father," and "sister" and "brother," and recognized the different roles and responsibilities society assigns to boys and girls.

But I do remember very clearly the day I became white. It was the morning after we'd moved into the small house I'd grow up in, when I was only five years old. Until then, we'd been living in an apartment in South City, just beneath the San Bruno Mountains. The less than thirteen-hundred square foot, three-bedroom, one-bathroom home, sat high on a hill in Pacifica, California, and had a glorious view of the mountain range and ocean, at least when it wasn't too foggy to see them, which was most of the time. The day we moved in—my parents, my older sister, younger brother, and newborn sister, that is—we met the three kids living across the street, who happened to be our same ages and genders, and played gleefully together the entire time my parents were busy moving in. I couldn't believe we were so lucky, to have moved into a place with instant friends.

The next morning, while I was out exploring the playhouse in our new backyard, I was delighted to see Jan, Tony, and Jerome Wilson come outside. But as I greeted them with an eager smile on my face, looking forward to a repeat of the day before, I was stunned to hear them say, "Don't talk to us you white-bald-ass-eagle." "We're not your friend, you honkey." I wondered what I'd done wrong to make them so angry. Given what they were saying, I first thought it must be the buzzcut my father insisted on, but, when I found out what a honkey was, I quickly realized it was because of the color of my skin. That's the day, in 1969, I found out I'm white.

I remember earlier that same year, while still in our apartment, July 24<sup>th</sup>, 1969, my mother watching news coverage that had preempted her usual soap operas on our little black-and-white TV. When I asked her what was happening, she told me, matter-of-factly, "men are returning from the moon." That's all she said about it, and, as amazing as it seemed to me, that we can go to the moon and back, I didn't realize I was witnessing history. I just presumed, given my mother's simple reply, it must have been an ordinary event.

This tells you how little my parents ever talked in our home, let alone to us, about important matters. As a little fellow, I didn't know anything about what was going on in the world I'd been born into. I didn't know anything about our nation's racist history, not about slavery, let alone the civil rights movement of the day, the assignation of Dr. King, integration, busing, race riots, or any of it. Even though it turns out my parents, especially my father, were racist, at that point in my life, just like going to the moon, I knew nothing about what was going on in the world or in their heads. I'm sure I'd seen lots of people considered nonwhite by the time I was five but wouldn't have noticed it any more than I'd have taken note of someone's hair color.

But the morning after we'd moved into our new home on 574 Heathcliff Drive, in Pacifica, California, I became a white boy. Although I didn't realize it at the time, it so happened that in 1969 I had also moved into one the first integrated neighborhood in the country, which included integrated public schools. And when I say integrated, I mean white Americans and African Americans, as well as lots of other ethnicities too, Chicanos, Latinos, Filipinos, Samoans, Asians, Iranians, and so many others. In fact, when I was growing up, the first question kids learned to ask each other is, "What nationality are you?"

In retrospect, I'm pretty sure my new friends received a lecture from their parents the night we moved in about hanging out with white kids. I'm also sure, as a black couple in 1969, having, no doubt, experienced the cruelties of racism first hand, the Wilsons had good reason to teach their kids not to associate with white folk. Unfortunately, most kids in the hood were learning the same thing, and, it seemed to me, learned to despise us white boys most of all. I was often bullied and assaulted because of it. On one occasion, for instance, I was walking a couple blocks to the convenient store, when an older Latino kid passing by suddenly punched me in the nose for no reason. "Slimy ass white boy," he said, as my mouth filled with blood.

Still, we all lived in the same neighborhood, played in the same streets, and went to the same schools. Whether we liked it or not, whether our parents wanted it or not, we were in relationship to each other. After a few years passed, we found we could play together, so long as we acted like we didn't like each other, which was weird, because we did like each other. By the time we got to high school, like most teenagers, we didn't care what our parents thought and just decided we'd be friends. I came to love Tony Wilson like a brother. We especially loved playing chess together. We also use to play a game called, *BB Britches*. It was pretty simple, if anyone in the game said a word beginning with the letter B, they'd get punched until they said, "BB britches." Tony, who was a lot tougher than me, and I were walking and talking at school one day when he let a B-word slip and I instinctively smashed him in the chest. He bounced against the outside wall of the school gym and looked as if he were going to kill me. I then let loose, and he remembered the game. "BB britches," he shrieked, "BB britches." We both had a good laugh. I was sad to learn only recently that he died of a drug overdose when he was only 40 years old.

My absolute best friend in high school was another African American young man, Danny Bester. Danny was my protector from school bullies, taught me how to drive, and turned me on to Gandhi. This was way before the Internet, in the era of costly long-distance phone calls,

so I lost track of him after I left home at age 18. In recent years I've unsuccessfully conducted searches for him on Google, and, just a few months ago, paid for a records search. It turns out this dear boy, this brother, this kind soul with so much potential, has spent most his life since then in and out of prison on drug related charges. It's still hard for me to believe. He was such a great guy, well liked, kind hearted, and I know the only difference between us is the color of our skin. The privilege of having white skin allowed me to escape the scrutiny of the police early in my life, and opened doors allowing me to overcome the poverty and troubled nature of my childhood. It's not fair. It's racist.

Growing up, I didn't have many white friends, none whom I can recall by name. But I remember my friend Ricky Rodriguez, and my other friend, Richard Rodriguez, and Paul Selu, my biracial friend whose father was Samoan, who has recently reconnected with me on Facebook and asked me to conduct his wedding ceremony this summer. I remember Derik Ayala, a popular kid afraid to answer the question about his nationality because he was Iranian, going to high school during the Iranian hostage crisis. And I remember Tony Wilson, and Danny Bester. These were the kids I loved and grew up with, and still remember and miss. These were the kids who realized, despite all the horrors of our past, or the fears and prejudices our parents tried to pass on to us, that within just a few years we could learn to live together and become good friends, and that, just a few years later, this same generation, born before Civil Rights legislation was even passed, would go on to elect our country's first nonwhite President.

Even in high school, however, I didn't realize how unique my experience growing up in the San Francisco Bay Area during the 1970s was. I remember playing outside with Tony and Jerome one summer when their cousin from Mississippi had come for a visit. We played outside in those days because we didn't have video games or the Internet, or anything else to do inside. We got to wrestling together, which, their cousin was at first reluctant to do, even though he was, no doubt, the toughest guy in the group. He later confessed that he'd gotten into a fight with and beat up a white boy once, speaking in almost a whisper, as if it were both a badge of honor and something to be afraid of admitting. I thought, "What's the big deal. I get beat up by black guys all the time." That's when I first realized my integrated neighborhood and friendships were unique.

When I left Pacifica, California, to attend college in Brownwood, Texas, it was a whole different ballgame! That's when I further realized most the rest of the country remains segregated. When a traveling businessman I knew found out I was moving to the Lonestar state, he exclaimed, "Texas! I hate Texas. Those people still think the Civil War is going on!" Given that the Civil War seemed like an ancient part of history to me, I couldn't imagine what he meant until the first time someone called me a Yankee just a few days after my arrival.

Sure, kids of different backgrounds went to schools together, but, for the most part, they came from and remained relegated to racially segregated neighborhoods. From Brownwood, Texas, to Louisville, Kentucky, to Spokane, Washington, I've experienced a mostly segregated America ever since. Fortunately, my college roommate and best friend was of Mexican heritage. Danny Alejandro was an ordinary American kid, who majored in Spanish, just so he could learn to speak it. I remember us once going to a barbershop together, near campus,

and the barber took one look at him and refused to give either of us a haircut. I couldn't believe it! It was the early 1980s, and this bigot still refused to serve nonwhites in his establishment and could get away with it. Danny shrugged it off like it was no big deal, but I could tell it scared and embarrassed him.

But here I am, in 2018, and I'm still living in a segregated country, led by a racist President who has appointed several notorious White Supremacist to his cabinet, and wants to further segregate our world by building walls, physical and figurative, to keep nonwhites down and out. So I guess the fact a barber could refuse service to a Mexican kid 35-years-ago, shouldn't surprise me. But the real impetus for this sermon isn't the wakeup call, or should I say, wakeup tweet, Trump's election has given us all, but something his opponent, Hillary Clinton said, during one of their debates that I found gravely disturbing.

It was just a few days after police had killed two more unarmed African American men in Tulsa, Oklahoma and Charlotte, North Carolina. In light of these kind of shootings, and the civil unrest that followed, CNN moderator, Lester Holt, asked "how do you heal the divide?" to which Clinton replied (in full);

Race remains a significant challenge in our country. Unfortunately race still determines too much. It often determines where people live, determines what kind of education in their public schools they can get, and, yes, it determines how they are treated in the criminal justice system. We've just seen those two tragic examples in both Tulsa and Charlotte. And we've got to do several things at the same time. We have to restore trust between the communities and the police. We have to work to make sure that our police are using the best training, the best techniques; that they're well prepared to use force only when necessary. Everyone should be respected by the law and everyone should respect the law. Right now, that's not the case in a lot of our neighborhoods. So, I have, ever since the first day of my campaign, called for criminal justice reform. I've laid out a platform that I think would begin to reform some of the problems we have in the criminal justice system. But we also have to recognize that in addition to the challenges that we are faced with policing, there are so many brave police officers who equally want reform. So we have to bring communities together to begin working on that as a mutual goal. And we've got to get guns out of the hands of people who should not have them. The gun epidemic is the leading cause of death of young African American men, more than the next nine causes put together. So we have to do two things, as I said, we have to restore trust, we have to work with the police, we have to make sure they respect the communities and the communities respect them, and we have to tackle the plague of gun violence, which is a big contributor to a lot of the problems that we're seeing today.

This response immediately and deeply troubled me for several reasons. Firstly, it was a response coming from one who was the only real choice I had in the election, and, in my opinion, reflected the same old racist thinking at the root of the problem. Secondly, like many political responses, it was two minutes of gobbledygook that never really answered the question and threw us all off track with red herrings and strawmen arguments about gun epidemics and respecting the law. Thirdly, these two points, that missed the real point, blamed the victims of racism for the problem of racism. It may be that some people don't respect the law, but that does not justify police officers killing them. It may be the

unregulated gun industry is the leading cause of death among African American youth, but that does not explain police killing unarmed black men and teenagers.

But, what bothered me most of all, by Clinton's response, was the way she referenced "our communities," which, in the context of the question, could only have referred to "communities of color," that is, to nonwhite communities. When she said, for instance, "We have to restore trust between the communities and the police," I'm quite sure she wasn't talking about most neighborhoods, certainly not the neighborhood I enjoy living in today. (By the way, this statement reflects another logical fallacy, begging the question, because it presumes there was a time such trust once existed to begin with.) It was her presumption that whatever the solution is to racial unrest, it must include the continued targeting, over-policing, and perpetual existence of, so-called, "communities of color," that bothered me most of all. For, I believe, such segregation is the problem, and racism cannot end until all our communities and neighborhoods are made whole by reflecting the diversity of our nation.

In his book on the subject, sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva says, to this day, "blacks and most racial minorities lag behind whites in terms of income, wealth, occupational and health status, educational attainment, and other relevant social indicators."<sup>1</sup> A social indicator is the technical term the United Nations uses in reference to the statistical data it compiles regarding things like health, education, wealth, environment, employment, and housing for various demographics. The indicator I'm focusing on here is the latter, housing, or, more precisely, those systems that continue to house nonwhites in segregated communities, and to keep them in their place through racist law enforcement policies and practices, even though our national mythology would have us believe segregation was a Southern problem that ended in the 1960s.

Far earlier than this, however, toward the end of WWI, Southern Blacks began fleeing to the Northern states in the hope of a better, fairer life, in such great numbers that historians refer to it as the "Great Migration." As historian, Ibram X. Kendi, explains, "Over the course of six decades, 6 million Black southerners left their homes, transforming Black America from a primarily southern population to a national and urban one, and segregationist ideas became nationalized and urbanized in the process."<sup>2</sup> The result has been that, today, Northern cities are even more segregated than Southern cities. As Bonilla-Silva's research indicates, "The index of residential segregation for the North is around 80 and for the South around 70."<sup>3</sup> To translate, if a 0 index reflects no segregation and 100 reflects complete segregation, Northern communities today are, again, even more segregated than in the South.

Here in Spokane, black pioneers, who were among those who first who came to Spokane, could live wherever they chose, but by the mid-1940s, in response to the Great Migration, Spokane's real estate and housing policies fell in line with national trends. The Spokane

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<sup>1</sup> Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo, *White Supremacy & Racism in the Post-Civil Rights Era*, Lynne Rienner Publisher, Boulder, CO, 2001, p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Kendi, Ibram X., *Stamped from the Beginning*, Nation Books, New York, NY, 2016, p. 309.

<sup>3</sup> Bonilla-Silva, *ibid.*, p. 95.

Realty Board's National Code of Ethics prohibited realtors from, as it reads, "introducing into a neighborhood a character of property of occupancy, members of any race or nationality, or any persons whose presence will be detrimental to property values in that neighborhood."<sup>4</sup> In other words, they weren't allowed to sell or rent to Blacks if doing so would harm property values. The Code of Ethics goes on to call doing so, "unethical."<sup>5</sup> Mortgage companies, additionally, refused to extend loans to Blacks, all of which left twenty percent of the local Black population with no choice but to move into the City's poorly constructed housing projects. There were even perfectly legal neighborhood covenants stating, "no persons of any race other than white"<sup>6</sup> shall be allowed in unless they were "servants" of the white homeowners.

I won't go into the generational poverty our continued systems of segregation have caused and will continue to cause until we bring them down. I would rather go back to my personal experience of having grown up in an extremely diverse community. It may have been difficult for us at first, mostly because of the fears and prejudices our parents were passing on to us—racist feelings and beliefs we couldn't help but take in to a degree—yet, having no choice but to live together, we were able to soon shrug off those fears and prejudices, to become good friends, to love one another, and to be part of the very same generation to help elect our first African American President, far sooner than anyone in the 1970s could have ever imagined possible.

During his prestigious Ware Lecture to the Unitarian Universalist General Assembly in New Orleans last year, Bryan Stevenson, author of *Just Mercy*, says one of the keys to finally ending racism in our country is to "get proximate," meaning we have to get close to the problem and to the people who suffer most from it, in order to become true agents of transformation and healing. And I use the word "healing," because our communities, all our communities, need to be made whole, by becoming "Communities of Color-Fullness." Today, I mourn the loss of my friends, of Tony Wilson and Danny Bester, and Ricky and Richard Rodriguez, and Derik Ayala, and others I lost touch with once I moved away from the unusually colorful neighborhood I had the rare privilege of growing up in. And I grieve for the country I've discovered in its place, a racist, segregated country, that makes us all suffer because we are not whole. But I am also hopeful because, despite all the problems our ancient systems of White Supremacy have caused, I know integration works, integration brings us together, integration enables us to fall in love with each other and to make our neighborhoods and our lives whole.

And, as I say often, ending White Supremacy and racism isn't about changing peoples' minds and hearts, or forcing them to use white-washed language, or even tearing down decrepit racist monuments and tattered flags. The solution, rather, is to tear down the perpetual racist systems that continue to make our society harmful and unjust. And I'm further suggesting this can only begin with real integration, by going after the now informal redlining that continues to put up invisible walls that keep nonwhites out. Toward this end, I recently

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<sup>4</sup> Mack, Dwayne A., *Black Spokane*, University of Oklahoma Press: Norman, USA, 2014., p. 45.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 48.

purchased the web domain, [colorfulness.org](http://colorfulness.org), to launch a national movement bringing socially responsible bankers and realtors together with community leaders and civil rights activists to work together to make our neighborhoods whole, to make our neighborhoods, and our lives color-full. I've begun preliminary conversations with acquaintances in the local banking industry, and with my friend Rev. Happy Watkins, who is extremely excited about us working together on this project. And it is my hope that as a congregation we can seize upon this effort as an opportunity to fulfill our mission to champion diversity, and to create real community by making all our communities whole, by creating communities of colorfulness.