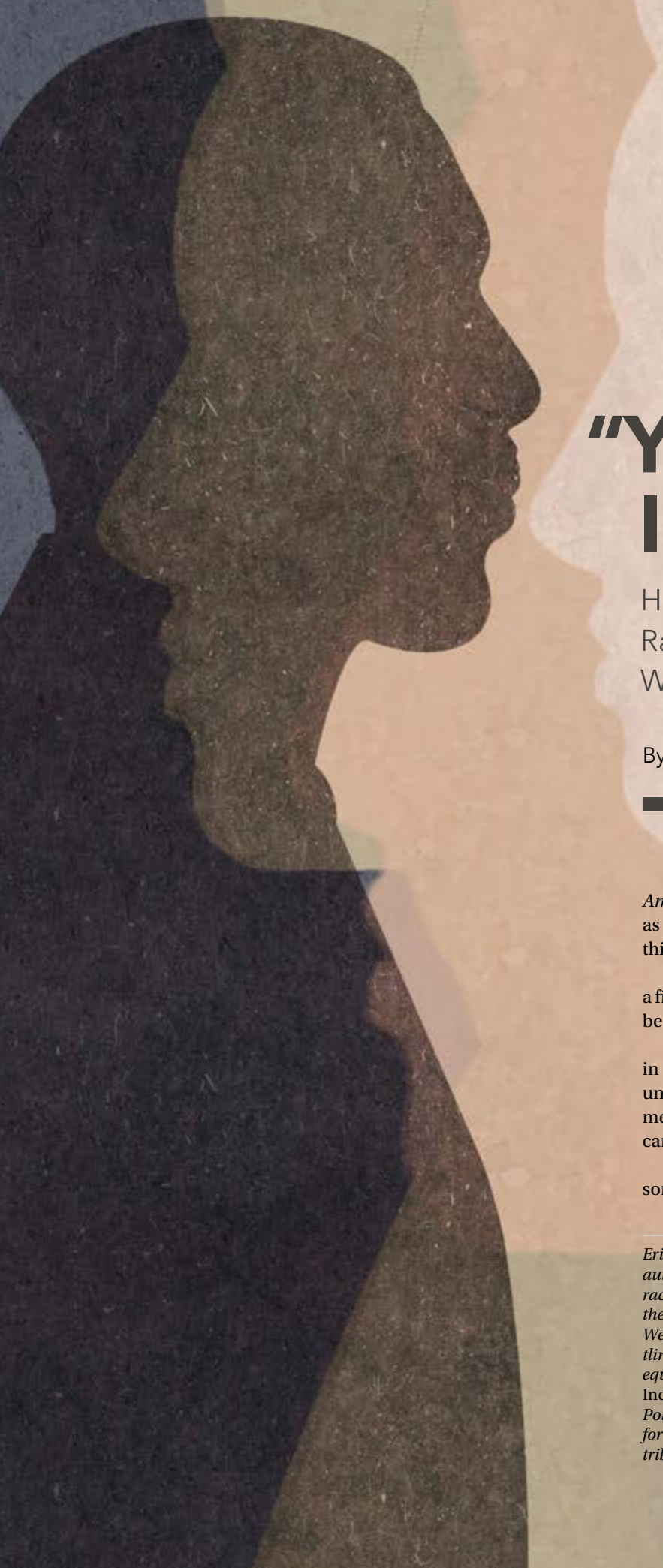


"You're My Inspiration"

How I Came to Understand Racism in America—and What We Can Do About It

By Eric K. Ward

There are two fundamental questions underlying the nationwide debates about racial equity, mask mandates, local control, and other controversies bedeviling public education today: *Who is an American?* and *What is America becoming?* This is always the conversation we're having as a country, even when it seems like we're talking about something else.

Early in my 30 years of leading racial equity trainings, I became a firm believer that how we have this conversation matters. We do best when we ground ourselves in stories.

This is the story of how I came to understand race and racism in America. This story has everything to do with how I came to understand unconscious bias, white nationalism, and the fundamental threat to democracy we face today—and what each of us can do about it.

I'll take you back to my early years. But where I want to start is somewhere in the middle, about 25 years ago.

Eric K. Ward, a nationally recognized expert on the relationship between authoritarian movements, hate violence, and preserving inclusive democracy, is the recipient of the 2021 Civil Courage Prize—the first American in the award's 21-year history. He currently serves as the executive director of Western States Center, which created one of the first widely used Dismantling Racism organizational change programs in the 1990s and currently equips educators with the Confronting White Nationalism in Schools *and* Indigenizing Love *toolkits. Ward is also a senior fellow with the Southern Poverty Law Center, the chair of Proteus Fund, and an advisor to the Center for Entertainment & Civic Health. He is grateful to Race Forward for contributing the framework and teaching tools presented here.*

Not in Our Town

In the mid-1990s, the documentary *Not in Our Town II* told the story of communities following in the footsteps of Billings, Montana, as neighbors united in response to a series of racist and antisemitic hate crimes.[1] I was the field organizer for the Northwest Coalition Against Malicious Harassment at the time, working with over 120 local anti-bigotry community groups in six western states. We were cosponsoring dozens of screenings with discussions featuring local anti-hate leaders.

On one particular night, I travelled down to Eugene, Oregon, where I'd gotten my start as an anti-bigotry organizer and helped found a program called Communities Against Hate. Before the screening started, I was standing under the lights outside the entry to the venue, a public utility meeting hall that was in a pretty deserted part of town, greeting people. We'd heard that neo-Nazis might attempt to disrupt the event. All of a sudden, I saw them marching our way: about a dozen Aryan Pride members decked out in full regalia. I hustled everyone inside and turned to face the group approaching us. At my side was a local rabbi, the only person who had refused my plea to go indoors. He made it clear: he simply wasn't going to leave me, let the chips fall where they may.

These were serious guys, violent guys. As they surrounded the rabbi and me, I knew it could go one of two ways. De-escalation was the direction I was determined to try. So I started asking them who was who. Who was a Klan member, who was a Christian Identity adherent, who was neo-Nazi? These were among the subculture variants of white nationalism at the time.

They weren't sure what to do with my curiosity, my willingness to engage them without showing fear or launching a counterattack. One of them asked if they could come in. "Sure," I said. "It's a public event. But you can't have your bandannas covering your faces." I explained that doing so could get them arrested, and it wasn't my goal to see people get caught up and further drawn into the criminal justice system.

After some negotiating, they took off their face coverings and came into the screening. After a while, I saw their leader head into the restroom. I gave him a minute, then followed him in there. I stuck out my hand and introduced myself. "My name is Eric Ward. What's yours?" Here, he faced another dilemma. Shake the hand of a Black man? Or decline and look cowardly? He shook my hand. We rejoined the rest of the audience, and I got the program started.

After our speakers and the screening of the film, we did a Q&A. I took some of the neo-Nazis' questions, and in response I drew a line and made an offer. "We're not here to have a debate," I said. "You can organize your own event for a debate. But if you want to have a real conversation, I'm sure plenty in this town would be willing to sit down and talk with you."

The rabbi raised his hand and said, "I'd be willing." Then the head of the local NAACP chapter raised his hand: "I'd be willing."

We left that night without any violence taking place. And over the months that followed, the leader of those neo-Nazis—I'll call him Doug—reached out to the rabbi and the NAACP leader and started having conversations with them. This didn't make him renounce his white power position. Neither did being chased down and physically assaulted by a grouping of anti-fascists and anti-racist skinheads in town. But one day he turned on the TV so that his beloved young daughter could watch her favorite show. After her program ended, *Sesame Street* came on. He glanced up and saw the screen filled with characters of color. Infuriated, he marched over to turn off the TV. His daughter burst out in tears. It broke him emotionally. Doug told me later that it was his shame in that moment that signaled the beginning of his departure from the white power movement.

After Doug renounced his neo-Nazi ties, his former comrades beat him so severely at his job site that he was hospitalized. That didn't stop him from engaging in public events where he apologized and sought repair for the harm he had caused. We're still in touch decades later. He's become a sought-after artist whose work I greatly admire. I've told him more than once, "You're my inspiration." He responds, "What do you mean?" I tell him, "Each night when you go to sleep, you're proof a better world is possible. Everyone is redeemable."

I tell you this story to convey a point. When Doug saw the world through his daughter's eyes, he was connecting through values instead of ideology—that's where change can happen. Doug's story proves that racial prejudice and violence are learned and can be unlearned.

Racial prejudice and violence are learned and can be unlearned.

Most folks might look at Doug and me and see two opposite ends of any number of spectrums. But there's not much difference between us. The truth is, just like the increasing number of people of color joining violent hate groups, I could have been an unrepentant Doug. The reasons I didn't explain how I've come to understand race in America.

The Air I Breathed

As a young Black male who came of age in the Reagan years, I wasn't destined to become a civil rights leader. In fact, I very easily could have become Proud Boys leader Enrique Tarrio, or Brandon Rapolla, one of the increasing number of people of color from my age group joining the white-nationalist-driven coalition known as the alt-right.[2]

I grew up in Southern California. Two generations before me, my family arrived as refugees from Shepherdsville, Kentucky, after they witnessed the lynching of Marie Thompson, a Black woman who had dared to stand up to a white man against the beating of her son in the early 1900s. When I was in sixth grade, my mom and I moved from Los Angeles down to Long Beach just as the school district was going through court-ordered desegregation.

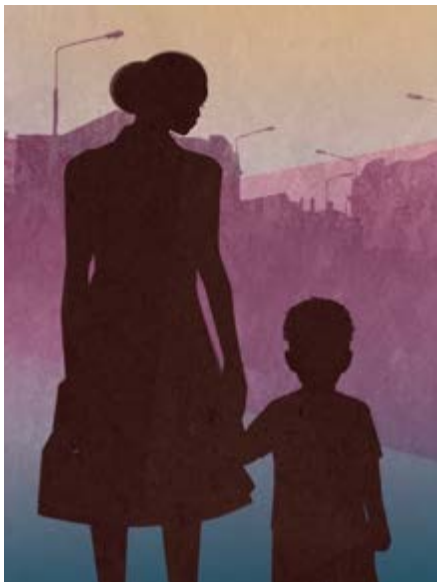
Long Beach is planted on the line that locals call the Orange Curtain, the borderland between the working-class and immigrant neighborhoods of southern Los Angeles County and the white conservative suburbs of Orange County. By the time I arrived in the mid-1970s, this endless sprawl of white flight was

ILLUSTRATIONS BY ERIN K. ROBINSON

increasingly interrupted by people of color looking for affordable housing in safe neighborhoods. White nationalism was part of the scenery. Just down the street from our apartment was an outpost of the John Birch Society, which fought the civil rights movement and described the communist menace as an international cabal.

I was bused to school in a middle-class suburb through the fanciest neighborhoods I'd ever seen, neighborhoods where white adults rolled down their car windows to call us monkeys or tell us to go back to Africa. At school, white kids initialed "SWP" on their desks: Supreme White Power. One of our local celebrities was Wally George, a public access television star whose show, *Hot Seat*, was a forerunner to the hate radio of shock jocks like Rush Limbaugh and Tucker Carlson. As teenagers, we'd get stoned and watch George's show for laughs. But there was fear beneath the laughter. Neo-Nazis, a kid on the bus told us one morning, were marching in a nearby park.

I was raised by a working-poor single mom. We weren't anything anyone would call political. We were a Black family in a conservative town in a conservative time. The civil rights and social movements of the 1960s and early 1970s had been demobilized by government harassment or self-destructed through political violence and infighting. The political motivations of the Black Panthers were being replaced by the economic desperation of the Bloods and the Crips. Ronald Reagan was governor of the state for most of my childhood, then president when I was in high school.



I knew from an early age that I was headed for the military. Long Beach was a Navy town. All through high school, I was an enthusiastic member of the Naval Junior Reserve Officers Training Corps. I was promoted to third in command as a cadet. I even won leadership awards from the Daughters of the American Revolution and the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks. I spent spring vacations on naval warships attending mini boot camps, including one that had its own mock prisoner of war camp. I preenlisted in the Navy when I turned 17 and went off to boot camp just after my 18th birthday.

I've always seen myself as patriotic. Not because I think there is something inherently special about the place I was born, but because there are things unique to it that I've become familiar with. Back in high school, I don't think "America First" would have sounded as ominous to me as it does now, depending on whose mouth it is uttered from. I clearly wasn't as xenophobic as most of the white folks around me, but like all Americans, Black folks grew up immersed in xenophobia, sexism, homophobia, and racism—it was the air we also breathed.

So how did I escape becoming a product of my environment? How did I not end up as Enrique Tarrio?

First, I knew what it was like to be a target of bigotry and an "other." I remember distinctly the day I decided I wasn't going to run from it anymore. That day in ninth grade I stood my ground as a group of white college students pulled over to attack my friends and me for simply walking to our bus stop in what they considered their neighborhood. I took a beating. But it was in that moment when I realized that the fight against bigotry is important, that all of us are obligated to draw a moral barrier against hate. I didn't tolerate bullying among my friends, either. I was always trying to find ways to interrupt and de-escalate.

Second, I was fortunate to find my place in a music scene where my musical identity became as strong as my racial identity. After a medical discharge from the Navy, the diverse punk scene became my home. It gave me friends for life—Black, white, Latinx, Asian, and Pacific Islander, US born and undocumented. Those relationships and the alternative identities the scene conferred took me off the path of ultranationalism.

Third, when I moved in my early 20s to Oregon—from the values-contested but multiracial scene in Southern California to the proclaimed liberal but predominantly white college town of Eugene—I was directly challenged by the contradictions of the national mores with which I'd been raised and socialized. I'd been shaped by these beliefs: *You have to pull yourself up by your bootstraps. The world is what you make it. You might encounter oppression, but keep a stiff upper lip and work harder than the rest, and you shall overcome.*

Facing the Reality of Systemic Racism

Interestingly enough, it was when I got to Eugene that those false narratives shattered before my eyes. At first, Eugene seemed unreal. It was so clean compared with the neighborhoods I had grown up in. The air smelled amazing! When I called home to my mom, I told her, "It's so green, it's like Disneyland!" I had nothing else with which to compare the green trees.

Everyone seemed nice. But strangely, this kid who had been working since he was 13, with a nice thick résumé, a great smile, and loads of charm, somehow couldn't get a job. I applied at workplace after workplace, thinking, "It must be me." I had no understanding of the impact of systemic racism at the time.

Finally, someone decided to take a chance on me. It's important to note that the only person who would hire this young Black male in liberal Eugene in 1986 was a conservative white Republican man who lived on the rural outer edge of town. We spent eight to twelve hours a day together, five days a week, installing insulation in crawl spaces under houses.

A year later, when I enrolled at the community college, I got a work study job as the receptionist at the campus multicultural center. A bunch of us on staff were sent to a three-day training on racism, hosted by Clergy & Laity Concerned (which later gave me my first professional job as an organizer).

The first day opened with a reading from Christopher Columbus' diary, recording his genocidal disdain for the Taíno people. "With fifty men they can all be subjugated and made to do what is required of them," he observed.[3] The trainers proceeded to outline a history of racism in America. "There's a *history*?," I thought to myself. "How come I never heard *this* before?" I real-

ized what I'd experienced when I struggled to find a job. *This is a system—a set of patterns that have played out historically in the United States. It doesn't matter if I pull myself up by my bootstraps or work 10 times harder. At the end of the day, those things will never balance out.*

I went home to my multicultural household, the close-as-family friends I'd grown up with who'd persuaded me to follow them to Eugene. I was enraged. I stormed into my room, put on my favorite music, and dropped out for the rest of the day. I felt I'd been taken advantage of, manipulated. I sat there listening to my music while my brain tried to process the anger I was finally feeling.

The next morning, I was back at the training, clearly agitated. The trainer asked how I was doing. I had no idea how I was doing. I was just so enraged. He said something I've held to this day: "There are going to be days you'll wish you could unlearn what you know now. Days where you wish you could close the door again and go back to how you thought you knew the world. But you can't. You have to carry this. It's called truth. The choice you get to make is *how you carry it*. You can hold on to the rage—but it will consume you and everything around you. Or you can decide to transform that rage to redemption."

This is what it means to me when I hear the phrase "redeem the soul of America."[4] The invitation—to transform expressions of my rage over injustice into work that could redeem the soul of our country—tapped into everything I knew about being an American. The rage hasn't gone away; it's still right below the surface. But I've chosen not to internalize or export it. I've tried instead to find a path toward the construction of a patriotic ideal: inclusive democracy.

Sorting, Prejudice, Racism

It's scary to admit that most of us aren't so different from those who became neo-Nazis or alt-right leaders. In fact, research[5] Western States Center commissioned recently found that about 40 percent of Oregonians agree with statements that align with two core arguments of white nationalism and other far-right groups: "America must protect and preserve its white European heritage," and "White people in America face discrimination and unfair treatment based on race." (Importantly, 86 percent agree with protecting America's multicultural heritage and 70 percent agree that people of color face race-based discrimination.)

The white nationalist movement is very clear about the type of society they want for America.[6] Most Americans do not seek that version of the future; even those who agree with some of the movement's underlying beliefs do not buy into the full white nationalist vision. But what is the future most Americans want?

Being honest about the appeal of core white nationalist beliefs to many Americans in this moment is a good place to anchor our conversation about what it means to be an American and how we create that America together. Talking about these beliefs tunes into a lot of vulnerability. As I have learned from Race Forward, an organization committed to racial equity where I have served as a senior fellow, research shows that anxiety is not uncommon in interracial interactions, and that anxiety—even without any negative intent—can result in unfriendly behaviors.[7]

There is a painful, persistent legacy of racism in this country that affects every one of us, every day.[8] What we have to remember is that while many of us are not responsible for creating that legacy, we are responsible for what we choose to do with that legacy today.

All of us grew up learning how to sort our world. I remember being praised as a toddler when I fit different geometric shaped blocks into the corresponding cutouts in one of my earliest toys. I remember the *Sesame Street* jingle, *One of these things is not like the others; one of these things doesn't belong. Can you tell which thing is not like the others by the time I finish this song?* Sorting is how the world is structured. We need it to avoid chaos, to recognize danger and move out of its way. The problem is, sorting can be inequitable. Sorting into "in" and "out" groups creates stereotypes and prejudice.

I remember a dramatic example of the power of stereotyping from the late 1980s, at a rally for Indigenous religious rights. I was there with one of my most influential mentors. Her young daughter started tugging on her jacket for attention. "Mom! Mom! Are these Indians?" Mom answered, "Yes." Her daughter replied, "Indians are bad!" This mentor was a longtime anti-racist white feminist, one of the three women who taught me my foundational knowledge about race and racism. She was fearless, spoke truth to power. I'd watched her stand up to US Immigration and Naturalization Service agents and be arrested for civil disobedience. The belief uttered by her child is not something her child would have been explicitly taught at home.

While many of us are not responsible for creating the legacy of racism, we are responsible for what we choose to do with that legacy today.

My mentor told her daughter, "That's not true, but we'll talk about it when we get home." Later she relayed the rest of the story to me. She reminded her daughter of two people she knew who were Native Americans. So where did her daughter get the idea that Native Americans were bad people? Earlier that week, she'd seen a *Popeye* cartoon that featured stereotypical racist images of a character with a headdress and tomahawk chasing the heroes around and trying to hurt them.

Fortunately, the intervention by her mother helped this child to move past the fears generated by the cartoon. Her mom connected her back to real-world relationships she had with real-world people of Indigenous descent. But imagine if they hadn't attended that religious freedom rally, if the daughter hadn't had an opportunity to express her fears. How long would they have stayed with her? Most likely, after five or ten years she wouldn't have remembered the cartoon, but the feeling probably would have laid dormant for much longer as an unconscious anxiety in relationship to "the other."

Real-world people and relationships are beneficial for reducing biases.[9] This is why persistent residential segregation is such a danger to America's democracy.[10] It's also why public schools continue to be centered as cultural battlegrounds by those uncomfortable with America's shifting demographics.[11] Schools

are one of the few places where folks more regularly interact across lines of race, national origin, religion, class, and gender (even though white students still tend to be clustered together,[12] despite school integration having increased somewhat over the past 25 years[13]).

Our Shared Humanity

I am convinced that the single greatest barrier to unifying "We the people" is racial segregation. Systemic racism ensures that most of us spend far too little time with those who differ from us. We barely know each other. It's part of what allows so many to see governance structures as "them" and not "all of us."[14]

America *is* possible. What's complicated is sustaining the *desire* to become a singular, multiracial, united country.

Strangers put in a house together may not get along right away—especially strangers who've been told lies about each other, whose ancestors did harm, or who've been taught that somebody else's human rights are their loss. But when we have a chance to tell each other our stories and to feel fully heard, we reconnect to what we've forgotten: our shared humanity. On the level of basic needs and values, we're not as different as those politicians who profit from the chaos of division would like us to believe.[15]

A certain amount of tension is always going to be present in a pluralistic, multiracial society. The goal of a functioning democracy is not to make intergroup tensions go away. Rather, the goal of a healthy democracy is to provide a means to manage those tensions so they don't undermine opportunity and justice for all. When systems of bias ensure that we can't get to know each other, when we remain separated by the stereotypes and prejudice of systemic segregation, we all lose. There's a real cost, not just socially and ethically, but also economically.

A 2020 study[16] put a price tag on how much discrimination against African Americans has cost the US economy: $16 trillion over 20 years. That's three-quarters of the entire gross domestic product (GDP) of the United States in 2019.[17] In addition, if the United States were to end discrimination against Black people in education, wages, housing, and investment (e.g., business loans), GDP would grow by $5 trillion over the next five years, according to the study. Imagine, $1 trillion a year generated simply by not discriminating! Think of the good that we as a country could do with those newly freed resources.

Another recent study documented the economic costs of discrimination, finding that raising the average income of people of color to the average income of white people (by eliminating disparities in education, health, and opportunities) would increase total US earnings by 15 percent, representing a gain of $1 trillion.[18] Similarly, a 2013 study estimated that closing the earnings gap by 2030, when people of color are expected to comprise 46 percent of the working-age population, would increase GDP by about $5 trillion per year.[19]

So what do we do about the cost of racism? How do we move from this broken legacy to a future that works for all?

Understanding Racism: A Framework

I believe that the more folks understand about racism, the better able they are to intervene.* More knowledge is generally a good thing—and so is the opportunity to practice that knowledge. That said, understanding racism is not that complicated. Race Forward has a simple, practical framework we can all put to use.

My goal in sharing this framework with you is to help you (and those you work with and teach) understand key concepts central to advocating for racial equity, including how to recognize and address implicit bias. I'll touch on what you can do to be a stronger advocate for racial equity and how to navigate resistance to change.

The concepts and tools I'm about to share—those I began learning from the trainers and organizers who first taught me to understand racism in Eugene and that I continue to use in the work I'm privileged to do today—have deeply impacted my life. They've made me a better American and allowed me to embrace my own patriotism in relationship to my community and country.

Let's start with what should be a given: racial inequity in the United States is not merely a matter of opinion. Race is still the leading determinant in life outcomes in America. Pick any area of life—education, health, jobs, housing, criminal justice—and one's race is likely to determine one's success.[20]

The most powerful statistic that came out of an examination of changes needed in local government and policing in Ferguson, Missouri, was the fact that racial segregation is so severe, and some Black communities are so under-resourced, that the difference in life expectancy by zip code is up to 35 years.[21] *Thirty-five years*—let that sink in. That's a full lifetime for some!

Persistent racial disparities are not natural or inevitable. They were created. For hundreds of years, governments and other institutions in America have built and maintained racial inequity through policy and practice.[22]

For much of our nation's history, America has been two societies, separate and unequal. This led the historian and civil rights leader Vincent Harding to write a seminal essay, "Is America Possible?"[23] I embrace Harding's answer: "Yes, yes, yes, America *is* possible. It *will* be. It *must* be."[24] I see myself as a citizen of a country that has yet to fully exist. Our country has struggled in earnest through many generations to become *one* country, an actual *United* States. Much of that struggle is the terrain of the racial equity work we're focused on here.

America is possible. As indicated by the studies referenced earlier, it is even *profitable*. What's complicated is sustaining the *desire* to become a singular, multiracial, united country.

Normalizing the Conversation

Whether you've been nodding your head in agreement with me thus far or registering some doubts or objections, I'd like you to

*For research on how increasing knowledge of historical racism increases awareness of and desire to end current racism, see "Learning History, Facing Reality" in the Spring 2021 issue of *American Educator*: aft.org/ae/spring2021/salter.

consider three baseline questions. Try not to overthink your responses. Just notice what comes up right away.

True or false?

1. All hiring and promotion decisions should be based solely on merit.
2. To get to greater equity, some of us must lose something.
3. I believe we can end racial inequity.

Asking these questions of each other and being curious about how we respond is part of normalizing the conversation about race and racism. This is a conversation that does not benefit from political posturing. It's a conversation about our values and about aligning our values when it comes to race.

According to a 2019 survey, we're conflicted regarding talking about race. Although nearly two-thirds of Black and Asian adults said they often or sometimes talk about race, only about 50 percent of white and Hispanic adults did so. Most white adults reported being comfortable talking about race, but the majority (63 percent) were much more likely to have these discussions with only or mostly people of their same race. This contrasts with people of color, who reported a lower percentage of conversations about race being restricted to their same race or ethnicity: for Black respondents, 50 percent; Hispanic, 42 percent; and Asian, 37 percent.[25] Consider those facts for a minute.

Clearly, we have a way to go to normalize this conversation, to create a shared history and relationship with the subject. Race is often the elephant in the room, and racial anxiety is on the rise.[26] Racial inequities are deep and pervasive—but many of us are not even clear about what we mean by racial equity.

Equity and Equality

What's the difference between equity and equality? Let me offer a simple example.

My partner Jessica and I enjoy going out to see shows and games in large stadiums and auditoriums. Inevitably, we have to use the restroom. These venues constructed their stalls based on equality: an equal number of stalls for each gendered restroom. You already know what that means. I'm in and out in a minute, left to wait for her as she stands in a seemingly endless line. Equity would add more women's stalls or make some of the facilities all-gender.

As Race Forward defines the terms, *equality* "is sameness; everyone gets the same thing. Equality focuses on everyone getting the same opportunity, but often ignores the realities of historical exclusion and power differentials among whites and other racialized groups." *Equity*, by contrast, "ensures that outcomes in the conditions of well-being are improved for marginalized groups, lifting outcomes for all."[27]

Lack of equity is not only unfair, it has larger repercussions. Stadiums lose money as a result of the restroom wait lines. During the time I wait for Jessica outside the bathrooms, I'm not buying anything at the concession stands—I'm not engaged in community—and neither is she.

Equity is about improving how our society functions for the betterment of all. It can be thought of as the justice component of the diversity-inclusion-equity continuum. *Diversity* is essentially about *quantity*: the range and number of different identities and cultures in any given system. *Inclusion* is essentially about *quality*: the quality of participation across identities and cultures. *Equity* is about *justice*: the policies and practices that ensure equitable outcomes.

Early Learning About Race

Many of us do not learn these basic concepts in school, as my story illustrates. We tend to learn mainly from our environment when it comes to race.[28]

Take a few moments to reflect on how racially diverse your neighborhood was growing up.

- What message(s) did you get about race from living there?
- When was the first time you had a teacher of a *different* race? How often did that occur?
- When was the first time you had a teacher of the *same* race? How often did that occur?

The first time I had a teacher who was Black like me was 11th grade.

Cognitive science is revealing so much about *schemas*—the "frames" through which our brains help us understand and navigate the world. Schemas help us sort into categories, create associations, and fill in the gaps.[†] That's what was being developed in my early play with colored blocks of different shapes and when my mentor's daughter became fearful of a category of people based on a cartoon.

Racial bias, which we breathe in beginning in early childhood,[‡] tends to reside in the unconscious networks in our brains.[29] None of us is immune. Multiple studies have shown, for example, that Black educators treat Black students, especially young Black males, with bias, although to a lesser extent than white educators.[30] (Importantly, research also shows that having a Black teacher in the elementary grades increases educational attainment among Black students, particularly Black males from families with low incomes.[31])

Implicit Bias

I do lots of work to counter the white nationalist movement, where racist beliefs are explicit. But most Americans disavow racism. So why are racial inequities still so prevalent? The issue is *implicit bias* that we're not even aware we're holding.[32] It operates subconsciously and is expressed indirectly. In job searches where applicants' résumés are otherwise identical,

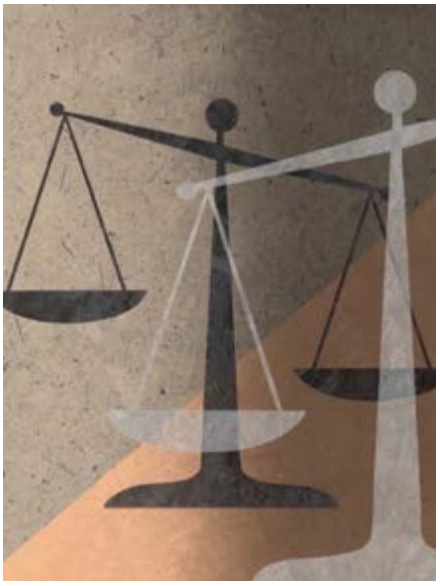
[†]To learn more about schemas, see "Liberatory Education: Integrating the Science of Learning and Culturally Responsive Practice" in the Summer 2021 issue of *American Educator*: aft.org/ae/summer2021/hammond.

[‡]For practical ways to engage young children in anti-bias education, see "Teaching About Identity, Racism, and Fairness" in the Winter 2020–2021 issue of *American Educator*: aft.org/ae/winter2020-2021/derman-sparks_edwards_goins.

white-sounding names like Susan Smith will receive more callbacks than African American–sounding names like LaKeisha Washington.[33] Property managers use criminal background screenings to exclude more Black rental applicants than white applicants.[34] Worse, some whole communities adopt "crime-free housing ordinances," which capitalize on our history of overpolicing and mass incarceration of people of color to reduce rental housing access (many of these ordinances exclude those with arrests without convictions and encourage landlords to evict people they suspect have committed crimes).[35] And yet, these hiring and housing managers and local government officials likely do not consider themselves racist.

So what do we do about our implicit and unconscious biases? It's critically important that we strive to identify and openly acknowledge them. Suppressing or denying biased thoughts can actually increase prejudice rather than eradicate it.

Every day I have to remind folks that none of us is responsible for *creating* this system of inequality. But we are responsible for *confronting* the inequality that exists today and for designing equitable solutions. We need to help each other recognize where implicit bias is influencing our individual and organizational behaviors. We need to ask ourselves and each other: What might I be missing right now about racial inequities in this situation?



We need to normalize those conversations and invest in training and cultural shifts at the organizational level to increase capacity to shift away from racial bias in day-to-day operations. This isn't about punishing or blaming anyone. It's about developing policies and protocols that limit the opportunities for individuals' biases to come into play—that's what makes our organizations, classrooms, and communities more resistant to implicit bias.

Here's the bottom line: designing policies and protocols where racial equity is built into the way decisions are made in our schools (and our unions and other settings) means we are more likely to achieve positive, effective, and unbiased results.

An Outcome That Benefits Us All

I know many people glaze over when we start talking about policies and protocols, so let's cut to the chase. We know that our goal is to fulfill the idea of America—that all are created equal—by achieving racial equity. How will we know when we've succeeded?

We will achieve racial equity when race is no longer a determinant of life outcomes and when, through addressing racial inequity, we have improved outcomes for everyone, including white people.

This is not simply about parity. It's about lifting the floor for everyone. For example, as of the 2018–19 school year, only 80 percent of Black students graduated high school, while 89 percent of their white peers graduated.[36] We don't just want Black students' graduation rate to match that 89 percent. We want *every* student to graduate.

When we focus on and include those subjected to the greatest inequities in changing policies, practices, and procedures that produce racial disparities, we don't take anything away from anyone—we are more likely to improve outcomes for *everyone*.

The winner-loser scarcity approach to rights and opportunities feeds the myth of "special rights" and the mistaken idea that racial equity only benefits some of us. Sadly, those misunderstandings can warp behavior: in a recent survey of white Americans who had applied to a college or university, an astonishing 34 percent (48 percent of male respondents and 16 percent of female respondents) admitted to having lied about being a racial minority on their application.[37]

Those of us working for racial equity are not trying to dominate anyone. We are simply trying to move forward as a single nation, a racially unified nation that works for all.

Racial equity is both our process *and* the outcome we seek to achieve. It is an *inclusive* approach to transform structures toward access, self-determination, redistribution, and equitable sharing of power and resources. That means shifting our focus away from blame, shame, guilt, and grievance. Instead, we need to lower the temperature and focus on

- *causes*: the history of systemic racism for which we are not to blame and the unconscious bias we are not aware of;
- *effects*: the thoroughly documented reality of racial inequities and their costs to all of us;
- *systems*: the hierarchies, structures, and policies that people before us created and that we can change; and
- *solutions*: the actions we can take individually and collectively, keeping in mind that the broader our coalitions, the more powerful our solutions will be.

Practice Asking Different Questions

Instead of asking the blame-game question, "Who's a racist?," investigate the causes: "What's causing these racial inequities?"

Instead of fixating on intentions, "What did they mean? What was their attitude?," focus on the effects: "What were the actions? What are the impacts?"

Rather than stop with individual prejudice, "What beliefs made them do it?," explore the larger context: "What institutions or systems are responsible for encouraging or perpetuating this?"

Lastly, along with focusing on today by asking "How can we fix what just happened?," prioritize our forward momentum with systemic responses explored through questions like, "What are proactive strategies and solutions to prevent this from happening again?"

We haven't always been as skillful as we need to be when it comes to asking the right questions and focusing on the most constructive path forward. All of us can point to examples of conversations on race going badly, even those led by racial equity activists. The white nationalist movement and other opponents of racial equity are quick to find those examples and try to use them to block the progress we are making. But we can't let those examples confuse us. We can't let the backlash to racial equity discourage us.

Choice Points: Which Path Do You Choose?

Our nation stands at the crossroads of change. Do we allow the gains of the 20th-century civil rights movements to be rolled back and the legacy of centuries of structural racism to persist? Or do we choose the changes that will benefit all of us, the changes that are necessary if we are to be truly one nation?

Choice points are key decision-making opportunities that influence outcomes—in this case, racial equity outcomes. If we stick with the same old choices and actions—whether out of fear, uncertainty, inertia, overwhelm, or outright resistance—we will get the same outcomes: inequities, exclusion, racism. If we choose equitable options and actions, we will achieve new outcomes: equity, inclusion, humanity.

Since you've made it this far, I'd like to congratulate you and challenge you to take the next step. Pull out a pen or tap some notes on your device. Take five minutes to note some choice points you encounter daily, weekly, monthly, and annually. On a personal level, this might be where to shop, what to buy or boycott, what causes to volunteer with or organizations to support financially, which candidates or causes you vote for, or who you spend time with socially.

On a school, college, or other institutional level, choice points might include: What should you change and prioritize in lesson plans and in programs for students, families, and staff? What items should you prioritize, add to, or cut from in the budget? Which students should you develop as leaders? What policies should you propose or modify? Which practices and organizational habits or cultural norms should you continue, change, or cut?

Now identify one choice point in your own work or life where you have some influence on a decision or course of action that could affect racial outcomes. For that choice point, identify some alternative actions that could lead to different and more equitable outcomes. Decide which option could leverage the most equitable change. Then find a buddy. Tell them about your choice point and ask for their support. Report back to them once a week until you've made some headway and are seeing results.

Ideally, involve your whole team. Your team might be the other teachers in your grade level or the other professors who teach similar courses. Or you might form a team of faculty, staff, students, and community members. Make this a team-building challenge—not a competition. I believe strongly in the power of cohorts to break isolation and support change. It's a way we can learn from each other, a mutually supportive system of accountability that allows our choice points to become more explicit and more informed by racial equity.

One example: Western States Center's Northwest Racial Equity Leaders Project brings together two dozen racial equity practitioners from local government, labor, and nonprofit organizations in Oregon and Washington for monthly calls. Through group consultation, they strengthen each other's capacity to support multiracial, democratic social movements and to center racial equity as a strategic lens that connects the diversity-inclusion-equity field to systems transformation. Having this shared community of practice provided each of them with essential support for the challenges in their own workplaces in the aftermath of George Floyd's killing and the pandemic. Can you create a similar network of your own?

By focusing on choice points within a supportive system of mutual accountability, you're less likely to perpetuate the status quo.

Small Choices That Change the Status Quo

The cumulative impact of many small choices can be as significant as the impacts of big decisions. Each of us has the power to catalyze the change we want to see in the world. That's one of the reasons educators are among my personal heroes and heroines.

Nora Flanagan, a longtime high school English teacher in Chicago, illustrates the power of a small choice and the difference between holding back and stepping out of one's comfort zone. As she told public radio station WBEZ in 2019, she grew up watching the growth of a neo-Nazi youth movement in her neighborhood on Chicago's Southwest Side. It wasn't taken seriously by adults; they "didn't think it was a big deal or weren't that bothered by it or passively condoned it."[38]

If we choose equitable options and actions, we will achieve new outcomes: equity, inclusion, humanity.

Even with that hindsight, she was initially stymied when her son, then in fifth grade, told her about Nazi graffiti in the bathroom at his school. He didn't want her to go to the principal. So she showed him how to remove the graffiti and said, "He would go in there every day and clean swastikas off the wall with an alcohol wipe."[39]

With the recent surge in white nationalists' online recruitment of middle and high school students,[40] Nora regretted not reporting the hate symbols to the staff at her son's school. She turned that regret into fuel for action, partnering with another educator, Jessica Acee, and Western States Center program director Lindsay Schubiner, to coauthor *Confronting White Nationalism in Schools: A Toolkit*.[41] (For an excerpt from the toolkit, turn to page 12.) Oregon's largest school district drew from this toolkit for its "Hate Speech Protocols"[42] distributed to parents and educators in the context of civic engagement and unrest leading into and after the 2020 presidential election.

With more than 10,000 copies now in circulation in every state in the country, Nora, Jessica, and Lindsay's work has inspired the formation of a growing network of over 200 educators who are replicating the training in their communities, sharing best practices, and piloting new curricula and response strategies to prevent students from being influenced and harassed by hateful ideologies online, in school, and in their communities. These new collaborations have resulted in a six-part resource for caregivers, *My Child Is Sharing Conspiracy Theories and Racist Memes. What Do I Say?*[43]

When it comes to getting along with each other as humans in the imperfect but still possible democracy that is this country, few of us are without regrets. My own story illustrates that working for racial equity and an inclusive multiracial democracy was not inevitable. I was fortunate to encounter some good life teachers and some key choice points. I hope my story and the other stories I've shared with you here help you embrace the necessary choices, the courageous conversations, and the commitment to equity that this moment requires. □