

Talking Points Guide

Episode 31: Waking Up to Find Ourselves in the Story of Race

Guest: Debby Irving, author and Racial Justice Educator www.debbyirving.com

Debby is a white woman, who was raised in Winchester, Massachusetts during the socially turbulent 1960s and '70s. After a blissfully sheltered, upper-middle-class suburban childhood, she found herself simultaneously intrigued and horrified by the racial divide she observed in Boston. From 1984 to 2009 her work in urban neighborhoods and schools left her feeling helpless.

Why did people live so differently along racial lines? Why were student outcomes so divergent? Why did she get so jumpy when talking to a person of color? Where did the fear of saying something stupid or offensive come from, and why couldn't she make it go away? The more she tried to understand racial dynamics, the more confused she became.

Debby's book, *Waking Up White and Finding Myself in the Story of Race*, is the story of her two-steps-forward-one-step back journey away from racial ignorance. She continues to study racism and strategies for its undoing while working to educate other white people confused and frustrated by racism. She remembers these feelings all too well and is passionate about transforming anxiety and inaction into action, be it for an individual or an organization.

Now, put yourself in the story of race by thinking about these as they apply to your own upbringing and your current beliefs. According to Debby, there are four barriers that often prevent white people from effectively engaging in racial justice work.

BARRIER #1: Most white people were raised on a diet of white myths such as

- the level playing field
- race as a biological certainty
- "white" as the most responsible, hardest working, intelligent race
- racism is limited to bigotry
- history taught in schools and through media is the only history I need to know

ANTIDOTE: Education that explores

- race as a social construction and "white" as a U.S. legal term
- race and class as separate and entwined
- white subsidies, e.g. land grants, Social Security, GI Bill, education
- history of racial violence, e.g. attempted indigenous genocide, Black Wall Street, Indian Boarding Schools, Jim Crow tactics
- messaging/propaganda that targets specific groups, e.g. the black brute, lazy Latino, model minority Asian
- connections between current racial events to historical racial events

BARRIER #2: Most white people who want to move the needle on racial disparities fall into a white savior mindset that believes

- the role of “good” white people is to help people of color
- the white way is the right way
- because I have achieved, I will be able to help you achieve

ANTIDOTE: Cultural Competence training that

- educates about power structures in order to dismantle them
- educates about privilege in order to disrupt it
- identifies patterns of oppression in structures and systems
- identifies patterns of oppression in our own behaviors and attitudes

BARRIER #3: Most white people have been taught to fear

- saying something offensive or ignorant
- the “PC police”
- being labeled racist
- not seen as a “good” person
- acknowledging the bias that lives within us
- feeling guilty, ashamed, or humiliated

ANTIDOTE: Resilience training that moves people from

- a rigid either/or mindset to a nuanced both/and mindset
- fearing discomfort to normalizing it as a part of growth
- avoiding internalized bias to exploring it
- focusing on self-image to focusing on group well-being

BARRIER #4: Most white people collude with white silence based on the belief that

- talking about race is rude
- being colorblind is the best way forward
- if you don’t have anything nice to say, don’t say anything at all

ANTIDOTE: Shifting conversational culture so that

- conflict avoidance is understood as a limiting cultural norm
- the conversational playing field begins to level
- historically silenced voices are valued and validated
- interrupting conversational patterns of power and privilege becomes an intentional practice

Please read *Waking Up White and Finding Myself in the Story of Race* and visit Debby’s website to take her 21 day challenge. www.debbyirving.com