



Thank you

FOR YOUR
INTEREST IN
CORWIN

Please enjoy this complimentary excerpt from *Our Problem, Our Path*.

[LEARN MORE](#) about this title!

PART 1

BEGINNINGS

© Corwin, 2022

Prologue

By Ali Michael

“Do you want to start a White affinity group?”

These were the first words Eleonora ever said directly to me. We were sitting in an overheated classroom on a cold February day at Teachers College in New York, having just finished a workshop on how White people can talk with other White people about race and racism in an intentionally White, explicitly antiracist group.¹ I didn’t know Eleonora, but I had admired her boldness and conviction in how she talked about race throughout the workshop—I had never before seen a White person be so forthright and vulnerable in public. Apparently, she had noticed me, too. Inspired, I said, “Yes.”

At the time, Eleonora was a psychologist-in-training. I was studying for my M.A. in anthropology and education. I lived in a two-bedroom apartment in New York’s Washington Heights with my partner and my sister, both of whom were engaged in their own antiracism learning. We formed a group—Eleonora, my partner, my sister, my sister’s partner, and me. Every other month, Eleonora would travel from Philadelphia to New York and sleep on our couch, and the five of us would read books about racism and discuss them.

Whenever Eleonora visited, a 24-hour marathon of race conversation would commence. We’d begin preparing food and talk in the kitchen—five people in a two-person kitchen. We’d move to the living room, carrying dishes while we talked, for more intentional book conversation and self-facilitated discussion. After dinner, we’d take a walk while we continued processing, only to return for more conversations over hot tea and wine late into the night. When we read books with activities, we would do the activities together. When we revisited moments in which we had perpetuated racism or witnessed racism, we’d use the space to brainstorm and role-play how we could have responded more proactively and effectively. We came to love one another, and we loved the learning space we created. We could speak from the heart and head. We could get vulnerable. We would correct one another—not in a competitive way but in the spirit of mutual accountability, knowing we all had the same goal of taking the next step on our antiracist paths. *Not* correcting one another would have been a violation of the commitment we made to one another as allies.

This space gave Eleonora and me—as well as the other group members—the opportunity to begin learning what it looks like for White people to invite one another to an antiracist path and to help one another keep moving. Our ability to learn arose from the powerful combination of company, camaraderie, accountability, challenge, friendship, and love. It gave us the opportunity to ask all the questions we needed to ask—questions we were unable to ask elsewhere because we felt that we already should have known the answers. It helped us become more systematic in our own learning and gave us a structure in which we were accountable for the learning we set for ourselves.

That space served as the headwaters of a relationship that has now been flowing through our lives for two decades. Since then, we have grown as individuals, as allies and accountability partners to each other, and as colleagues. We have continued to talk—on long walks, over Zoom, in meetings, at birthday parties, and in somewhat larger kitchens. We have also gained insight from our different professional backgrounds and have come to see how a fusion of our distinct subject areas has propelled us forward as White people striving to fully participate in building a more racially just world.

This book is our attempt to share our learning with others, to convey not just the knowledge but also the love that has been so fundamental to fueling our commitment to engage in

a consistent antiracist practice. This practice is not restricted to our professional lives. We certainly engage in it as we do our work and teach our students, but we also apply it as we raise our children, make friends, decide where to live, connect with neighbors, choose schools for our children, ride public transit, choose which routes to drive through Philadelphia (a city we both now call home), stay politically active, walk, live, and breathe.

In these pages, we hope to infuse the spirit of our original group and our continued engagement in learning with each other, so that you have what you need to form accountable, challenging, loving, supportive, honest, antiracist relationships with the White people in your life. To have just, equitable, and loving relationships with People of Color and Native people, White people have work to do. And we need one another to do it well.

Note

1. This idea was presented in a workshop at the Winter Roundtable at Teachers College, Columbia University, by Elizabeth Denevi, one of the first scholars we encountered who was promoting the use of White “affinity” spaces, or White antiracist learning groups for the purpose of helping White people build racial competency.

© Corwin, 2022

About This Book

By Ali Michael and Eleonora Bartoli

Who This Book Is For

This book is for White people who identify as antiracist but who don't know how to engage—or who struggle to engage—other White people (their children, partners, neighbors, friends, students, colleagues, other White people in their voting district) in a way that builds momentum for positive social change. While it's important to look outward when engaged in social change, it is also essential to look inward. To this end, our book encourages readers to recognize that each of us is our own most effective tool in the struggle for racial justice—that we need to learn to care for, sharpen, and calibrate ourselves to be instruments for change.

This book is written by White people and addresses White people directly. When we refer to White people and use the term *we*, this is to indicate that we count ourselves as White—and that anything we say about White people applies to us as well. This does not mean that People of Color and Native people cannot or should not read this book. Janet Helms's seminal book on White identity is subtitled *A Guide to Being a White Person or Understanding the White Persons in Your Life*. Books about White people can be helpful to People of Color and Native people who seek to understand the work that White people need to engage in to challenge the racial hierarchy and their place in it. But let's say you are one of a few People of Color on your school faculty. The 135 White teachers on your faculty are reading this book as part of a professional development program or book group. Maybe you're glad they are reading it, but at the moment you do not want to spend more time understanding White people—not because you don't think it's important but because it's just not what you need right now. Perhaps your goal is to understand how to navigate racial stress, practice self-care, learn about the experiences of other groups of People of Color, or challenge racism in your sphere of influence. If that is the case, we encourage your school to provide options that are more focused on you and your own learning needs.¹

Why is it important that White people engage deeply in antiracist work now? In this historical moment, the United States is divided by politics and racism. A good portion of the country, including a large number of White people (as evidenced by the protests following the police killing of George Floyd in 2020), recognizes the possibility and the need for building a healthy multiracial society. But another sizeable, predominantly White chunk of the population believes that we can still have—indeed, should have—a nation in which White people continue to hold the majority of power and access to resources. While none of us has direct control over the myriad systemic and historical factors that have created this divide, we do have control over our own actions, as well as how we talk with other White people about racism.

They say that in social movements, 20 percent of the people are already willing to get on board, 20 percent will never be on board, and 60 percent could be on board if given the right combination of knowledge and support. This book is not about reaching the most overtly racist White people. It's about sustaining and buttressing the 20 percent who are already engaged or are willing to engage. And it's about building momentum among the 60 percent who could be actively antiracist if given the opportunity and support. If you count yourself among the 20 percent who are committed to antiracism no matter what, this book is designed to help you think about yourself and the ways in which you share and model antiracism so that you can be highly effective in your conversations and can bring more people along with

you. It will help you recognize how you talk to yourself when you are stuck, find the support you need, and get unstuck so that you can keep moving forward. It will also help you create, run, and participate in White antiracist discussion groups. If you count yourself among the middle 60 percent, this book will clarify why antiracism is good for you. It will help you get on an antiracist path and learn how to talk with other White people about it—and in so doing help shift society toward a healthy multiracial whole.

What This Book Aims to Do

Our goal is to catalyze millions of White people to act for racial justice in their own lives. But this book is not a guide to designing a million-person march, or a “how-to” on mass action. The mass movement we envision is one in which millions of White people seek to engage in an ongoing, daily, lifelong, antiracist practice exactly where they are. First and foremost, this means locating and uprooting the racism that lives inside us. It involves millions of White people engaged in the antiracist action of self-reflection focused on undoing the internalized dominance that comes from living in the top tiers of a centuries-old racial caste system (Wilkerson, 2020). It involves millions of White people engaging in deep, empathetic relationships with People of Color and Native people that help us connect with the feelings, experiences, and realities of those who are positioned differently from us in the racial hierarchy. It is this empathetic connection that can bridge our often separate worlds. It involves White people seeing clearly, advocating for, and then passing antiracist policies in their townships, schools, businesses, streets, and communities. It involves White people unabashedly intervening with the racism of other White people in a way that *calls them in* to an antiracist path. It involves picking ourselves up and dusting ourselves off when we have made a mistake or acted out of bias and can’t stop shaming ourselves. It involves White people supporting one another to keep traveling along this path, day in and day out, for the rest of our lives and for generations to come.

Why This Book Matters

The system of racism in the United States today was created over the course of 500 years through billions of micro-moments, macro-policies, interpersonal interactions, historical myths, bogus science, stereotypical ideas, second glances, bad jokes, legalized violence, the banging of gavels, automatic thoughts, and unconsidered words and deeds—all of it uninformed and deeply intentional. As Isabel Wilkerson (2020) notes in her seminal work *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents*, slavery was legal in the United States longer than it has been illegal. Those timelines will not be balanced chronologically until the year 2111.

Trauma expert Resmaa Menakem (2021) says that completely ridding our society of racism will take the work of eight generations: “If enough white bodies commit to this foundational practice—and stay committed, year after year and generation after generation—perhaps in nine generations (or eight, or ten) our descendants will be born into an embodied antiracist culture” (para. 35). The idea that it will take eight generations to root racism out of our systems and institutions does not mean that it’s inevitable that we will succeed. It does not mean that we can simply let history take its course. It means that if we work *collectively* as hard and as consciously and as persistently as we can during our lifetimes to root out racism, and if we teach our children to do the same, perhaps our children’s children’s children’s children’s children will live in a more loving, respectful, inclusive world. And in the meantime, the work we do today can shift our communities and society as a whole in the right direction—toward a “more perfect union”—and make a significant difference in the lives of People of Color, Native people, and White people.

Does this sound like a lot? It is. This is why White people need one another. We need to travel an antiracist path together, to help one another recover and keep going when we tire or fall, to remind one another of the critical importance of racial justice to our humanity and

our collective future, and to help one another withstand and heal the shame of looking at our history and seeing how its assumptions and biases still live in us.

We are aware of the pitfalls of this work—especially how, too often, White people can push less racially conscious White people off an antiracist path by trying to validate their own standing as antiracist people. Sometimes, in what is sarcastically called the “Woke Olympics,” White people compete with one another to prove to themselves and others that they are the *most antiracist*, that they are one of “the good ones.” We address this issue in the book as well. The goal should never be to alienate other people from a liberation movement that needs more of us. And we hope it’s obvious that it’s not enough to have a handful of super-woke, antiracist White people doing their thing. We literally need millions of White people to journey an antiracist path in all the different corners of our world. This book will help White people who are trying to travel an antiracist path work on themselves—their skills, knowledge, and mindset—as well as with other White people.

How Can Two White Women Write a Book About Racism?

This is a great question—one we would be asking if we picked up this book. We would know very little about racism without the People of Color and Native people who taught us through friendships, work relationships, books, movies, podcasts, workshops, and role-modeling. For White people, racism—unless overt and violent—is often very hard to see. Our Colleagues of Color and Native colleagues have helped us see how, for all intents and purposes, we live in different worlds, even when we share the very same space or role. Being a Black woman professor is a wholly different experience from being a White woman professor, whether one teaches about race or math. Being a Vietnamese American teacher and parent is a wholly different experience from being a White teacher and parent, even if both individuals live in the same neighborhood or work in the same school. People respond to and interact with us differently based on our racial backgrounds in ways that create radically different experiences of the same environment. And while our experiences as White people are widely portrayed in the mainstream, the experiences of People of Color and Native people are often invisible to—and therefore easily ignored by—that same mainstream, which includes us.

In our personal and professional relationships, we often work with People of Color and Native people who spend their days—like us—trying to help people understand and unlearn patterns and assumptions shaped by racism. We often collaborate strategically, knowing that White people are going to hear things differently when/if it comes from a White person. For example, one of us (Ali) has a Black colleague who asks Ali to step in when a White person says something racist, so that she can step back and take a breath. However, when People of Color and Native people question how they can respond to racism, Ali’s colleague usually steps forward, knowing that her experiential knowledge of their question will help address the concern in ways Ali cannot.

In every collaboration, it’s clear that there are things that White people cannot say about race or racism because we haven’t experienced racism viscerally and from an early age in the way that People of Color and Native people have. But it’s also clear that there are things we need to say and do as White people because we are on the same antiracist journey as other White people. We can teach through modeling in a way our Peers of Color and Native peers cannot. We do know viscerally the stages of questioning, doubt, confusion, and fear that so many of our White peers and colleagues experience.

As you read this book, know that we are deeply rooted in relationships with People of Color and Native people who have asked and encouraged us to share our knowledge and strategies with other White people. You will find many of their names in the acknowledgments: People of Color and Native people who have taught us, mentored us, shaped our learning, and read drafts of this book. This doesn’t mean that there won’t be People of Color and Native people who disagree with what is written here; one of the truths about living in a complex society is that every question has myriad responses. While we cannot

be accountable to all People of Color and Native people in our work, all our work on racism must be deeply accountable to close Colleagues of Color and Native colleagues who work toward similar ends.

While many White people know that they cannot travel an antiracist path without learning from or being in relationship with People of Color and Native people, too often we think we can do so *without* other White people. There is a lot of learning, unlearning, and feeling that White people need to do *in order to* build deep, authentic relationships with People of Color and Native people. It's critical that White people support one another in doing that. When you hear someone say, "White people need to *do their own work* before they can help end racism," that is the work we seek to help readers do here, in community with one another.