

The Emotional Lives of White People

Questions for Reflection

Please read two papers entitled "The Emotional Lives of White People" and "The Anatomy of White Guilt."

Then reflect on the questions below that have particular importance for you.

We will be breaking into small groups at the next meeting. At that time participants will have an opportunity to talk about the emotional dynamics of whiteness that are most significant in their lives.

The paper entitled "The Emotional Lives of White People" describes the variety of feelings we have as white people including fear, hatred, indifference, amnesia, anesthesia, denial, loneliness, anger, and hopelessness.

FEAR: The author contends that as some level all white people fear people of color - that the emotion of fear is a part of being a white person. Do you think this is a true statement? How fearful are you of people of color? Did you learn to fear people of color as you were growing up? If you are fearful now, why do you have these fears?

INDIFFERENCE: Have you lived in communities isolated from people of color? Have there been times in your life when you felt an attitude of indifference towards the legitimate needs of people of color for justice and equity?

AMNESIA: Amnesia is not knowing the real history of racism in our country. How much are you affected by amnesia when it comes to issues of race and racism? Do you think you got an adequate education about the impact of racism in our country's history? How much misinformation or lies about American history did you learn in school? Were the accomplishments of whites lifted up at the expense of people of color?

ANESTHESIA: Do you experience yourself to be shut down emotionally because you are white? Do you find it difficult to have strong feelings about matters of race (anger, sadness, grief) because of your conditioning as a white person?

DENIAL: How much is denial a part of your experience as a white person? This could be denial about the crimes against people of color in our history, the current injustices that people of color experience, or the power and privilege enjoyed by white people in our society. Has your denial been so strong that you deny that you are denying?

SHAME: Can you remember times when you were shamed into being white by your parents or by other white people? As an adult have you felt so ashamed about being white that you wanted to become a person of color? If so how well has that pursuit worked for you?

LONELINESS: Because of fear or guilt have you avoided being with people of color? Have you felt disconnected from people of color during your life? Do you feel cut off or isolated from other white people because of your perspectives on racial issues?

ANGER: Anger is often a difficult emotion for those of us who are white. Is this true for you? If so, why is it difficult? Have you had the experience of being dismissed for expressing anger about the racial injustice in our society? Have you found effective ways for channeling your anger?

GRIEF: Do you feel grief or sadness because of the tragic history of race and racism in our country. So many horrible things have been done by white people to people of color. Have you been able to express your pain? If so, how have you done so?

HOPELESSNESS: Have you felt overwhelmed by the ways that racism permeates every part of our culture, our institutions and our personal psyches? Do you feel hopeless about making any changes in the current realities regarding race in our society? Do you question the ability of white people to make change? Do you wonder about your own capacity for making change as a white person?

GUILT: The paper "The Anatomy of White Guilt" describes some of the ways that white people experience guilt. Which of these forms of guilt is part of your experience as a white person? And how do you work with these different manifestations of guilt so you can make positive change?

SINS OF THE FATHERS AND MOTHERS: Do you have relatives who were involved in the slave trade or wars with Native Americans? If so, how do you deal with this part of your family's history?

SINS OF COMMISSION: Have you personally committed racist acts? Have members of your family or community committed racist acts? If so, have you taken steps to make amends for these transgressions?

SINS OF OMISSION: Have you felt guilty for not speaking out against racism and for not taking more action to end racism?

FEELINGS OF MORAL FAILURE: Do you feel guilty because you experience the moral failure of racism (the experience of the guilty man/woman)? Do you feel "moral pain" because white people benefit from white power and privilege at the expense of people of color?

FOCUS ON OUR FEELINGS OF GUILT: Have you ever focused more on your feelings about racism – and not wanting to feel bad – rather than working to end racism?

EMOTIONAL COSTS OF WHITENESS: In what ways has being white distorted your emotional life and impacted on you as a person?

FEELING JOY IN THE STRUGGLE: Have you ever experienced joy, felt new life, or made deeper relationships because of your involvement in racial justice work?