



# Messenger of Hope

## On Whiteness

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As a Catholic Worker, I have often seen myself as somebody deeply concerned about social justice, and have taken pride in my work with and for those who are oppressed. In high school, I marched for the right to life for the unborn; in college, I fought for those across the world working in sweat shops; in my adult life, I have participated in campaigns against war in Iraq and Afghanistan, genocide in Darfur, and apartheid in Palestine/Israel. In many ways, I have found my identity by participating in these movements. Despite my good intentions, however, for most of my life I have failed to notice how I have been living in a totally separate world than most people of color; when I have noticed, I have not made it a priority to address the systemic racism that exists in my own society. This is most likely because such a system benefits me, and it is easy for the privileged to remain comfortably blind.

Thanks in large part to the persistent effort of courageous and dedicated anti-racism activists, and particularly those who have kept this issue in the forefront over the last year, my consciousness is beginning to awaken. Part of this awakening has involved checking out Tim Wise's *White Like Me* from the public library after I had heard him speak at the University of Dubuque last February. In one section of his book, at once a memoir and a deconstruction of white privilege, Wise describes his experience in college as a prominent activist against apartheid in South Africa. Fancying himself a champion for social justice, Wise had to go through his own "awakening" during a public debate about divestment, for which he was a key speaker:

*"The moderator for the evening called on a young woman in the dead center of the small but packed auditorium, who would get the last question for the night. Because she was black, I assumed she would be on the side of divestment. She was, of course, but she hadn't come that evening to praise the movement."*



*'Tim,' she asked. 'How long have you lived in New Orleans?'*

*'Four years,' I replied.*

*'Okay,' she continued. 'Then tell me, in that four years, what one thing have you done to address apartheid in this city, since, after all, you benefit from that apartheid?'*

*She crossed her arms in front of her, and stood, and waited."*

Over the next few paragraphs, Wise details the excruciating awkwardness he experienced in those moments (which felt like hours) after the young woman asked her question — a discomfort born of the recognition of his own hypocrisy and blindness.

*"I'm sure no more than a few seconds had passed, but in those seconds, enough truth was revealed to last a lifetime... It's the same lesson still not*

*learned by white activists in most cases, whether in the anti-sweatshop movement, the justice for Darfur movement, or the anti-war movement. Too often the same mistakes are made: mostly white radicals, who have the luxury of picking and choosing on which side to get active, refuse to connect the dots between the oppression taking place in another country, and the oppression going on down the block."*

Like so many other white people of my generation, and particularly white activists concerned with social justice, I have come quite late to the following realizations: 1) that a deep-seeded racism still exists in our society, and within me (even though I don't want it to); 2) that this racism permeates every aspect of my life, mostly in negative ways; and 3) at the same time as I am hurt by this racism, I also greatly benefit from the system of white supremacy that has been in place for the last four hundred years. I grew up in a majority-white town, and went to majority-white schools. All of my good friends have been, and continue to be, white. Most of my colleagues are white. My community members in the Catholic Worker are white, and my neighbors are white. Without meaning to, I have isolated myself in a world where people look more or less like me. Because of this, I have been able to grow up with the understanding that, as long as I act decently, work hard, and am a "good person," that the system will work in my favor. Also because of this, I have not had to notice the system of segregation that has been set up by centuries of institutional discrimination. Thus, I have unwittingly played into, and perpetuated, that system.

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My education that such a system still exists began in earnest a few years ago when I read Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in an Age of Colorblindness*. Alexander offers almost irrefutable anecdotal evidence about how the "war on drugs" of the past several decades is actually a war on people of color – particularly people of African-American descent, and particularly black men. As I read her description of this "war" taking place in majority black neighborhoods, I could hardly believe she was talking about the United States. Her descriptions sounded more like those of war zones in military-occupied Palestine or Afghanistan. Not *here*. Not down the block.

Afterwards, I committed to reading more about the experiences of black people in this country. I began checking out books from the library by James Baldwin and other, more contemporary authors of color. I also began to look more seriously into the history of deliberate, institutionalized racist practices and policies in the United States, beginning (though certainly not ending) with 250 years of slavery: Jim Crow, public lynching, state-sanctioned redlining, block busting, and on and on. Upon reading Ta-Nehisi Coates' "The Case for Reparations," published last summer in *The Atlantic* (which I believe should be required reading in every high-school), I was embarrassed at my ignorance. How could I have not known such basic history?

A "Now Art" project by damali ayo, "I Can Fix It!" summarizes the answers 2000 people gave when asked for five things individual people could do to end racism. For white people, the suggestions were the following: 1) Admit it (admit racism exists, admit "white" is a race); 2) Listen (and honor people of color's experience); 3) Educate Yourself (by reading books about the history and experience of racism); 4) Broaden Your Experience (by putting yourself in

environments predominantly attended by people of color); and 5) Take Action (by *always* confronting racism, becoming involved with organizations led by people of color). Among anti-racism activists, there seems to be a consensus that white people must do some serious work in steps #1-3 before they can proceed to steps #4-5. I am one of those people still working on the initial steps.

Prompted in large part by the encouragement of the St. Louis community, the Catholic Worker movement in the Midwest has also begun this slow, confusing, and difficult process. We are asking ourselves how, as a majority white movement, we have unconsciously upheld and perpetuated the unjust power structures in which we have been raised and through which we continue to benefit. Last March, over a hundred of us gathered to examine the ways we have been living out our core values, and how we might start to shift our consciousness and amend our practices by using an anti-racist lens.

Over the past year, it has been made abundantly clear in this nation that our shameful history does not disappear when we ignore it and try to "move past it." Rather, the legacy of such a brutal racism will continue to permeate every aspect of our lives until we are able to acknowledge it, properly grieve it, atone for it, and be vigilant so that it cannot happen again.

During this summer season when many celebrate the Fourth of July as the birth of this nation, I suggest that those of us who are white make a "New Years' Resolution" of sorts: to make a commitment to seriously investigate how this country was built through institutional racism and to begin to reflect on ways we might repent. Jennifer Harvey, Baptist minister, professor, and author of *Whiteness and Morality: Pursuing Racial Justice through Reparations and Sovereignty* points to the two most egregious crimes on which this nation is built:

1) Stealing from and committing genocide against the peoples and nations who originally inhabited this land. (Harvey points out that "there is no evidence that Native peoples consented at any point to the permanent settler occupation of their land.")

2) The unpaid labor and horrifyingly cruel treatment of people who are of African descent. (Just the unpaid wages that slaves would have received from 1620 to 1840 *alone* would equal from \$6.5 trillion to \$10 trillion today. This is not including stolen land, unjust imprisonment, separation from families, Jim Crow, lynching, redlining, and on and on...)

Harvey suggests that, for those of us in the United States who are both white and Christian, if we do not make serious, material amends for the oppression that has been done, or engage with the real, present-day demands of sovereignty from indigenous people or reparations for African-Americans, our very souls will be in danger.

**The following is a modest list of suggested material for further reading:**

*The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in an Age of Colorblindness* by Michelle Alexander

"The Case for Reparations," *The Atlantic* by Ta Nehisi Coates

"Dangerous 'Goods': Seven Reasons Creation Care Movements Must Advocate Reparations," from *Buffalo Shout, Salmon Cry: Conversations on Creation, Land Justice, and Life Together*, by Jennifer Harvey.

*White Awareness* by Judy Katz

*Why are all the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* by Beverly Tatum

*White Like Me* by Tim Wise