



part one

THE SPIRITUAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY TOLD THROUGH THE LENS OF RACE

chapter one

JOHN PADDOCK

I am a white man.

I would never have thought to open a reflection on my life and spirit in that way until I participated, along with John Dorhauer, in a doctoral program where we were asked to write our spiritual autobiographies through the lens of race. Like John, I went through numerous drafts of “not getting it” until I came to my own “aha!” moment.

I remember the exact moment. I had completed the latest draft of my spiritual autobiography and was driving from Dayton, Ohio to Kansas City on I-70 to attend a meeting of our peer group where I would present my paper. Somewhere in western Indiana, the thought flashed through my mind that I was white. I was driving a late model car down the interstate without a care in the world that the highway patrol would pull me over for anything but an egregious traffic violation.

“I am a white man.” Scales fell from my eyes, and for the first time I was able to see my life and being in a whole new light—through an entirely new lens, if you will. I, John Paddock, have race. By that I mean something far more than being conscious of my skin color when I’m with a group of blacks. In the same way that a tinted lens will color everything seen

through it, seeing the world through the lens of race changed the way I see everything.

It began when I was able to see that I have race. Race belongs to me as much as it does to black, brown, yellow, and red people. Prior to that, to speak of a race problem meant that the problem belonged to someone else, because I didn’t see myself as having race. I was just the norm, which meant that I was oblivious to the implications and effects of my racial identity.

I had to tear up the latest draft of my “spiritual autobiography” because it was nothing more than a defense of what a great person I was when it came to supporting civil rights and working for equality. It was a whitewashed autobiography that paid scant attention to my blindness to privilege and its caustic effects on my own soul.

I grew up with stories that were part of the family lore. These stories worked to define who I am in the same way that “A wandering Aramean was my father and he went down into Egypt and sojourned there, few in number, and we became a nation...” (Deut. 26:5). The ancestors’ stories became those of their descendants and defined who the descendants were to become.

The first Paddock to these shores was Robert Paddock, who arrived in the 1630s. He was a blacksmith and served for a time as sheriff of Plymouth Colony. He had four sons. I am a descendent of one of them. Eventually, Robert and his family settled in Falmouth on Cape Cod.

There was a John Paddock who lived in Deerfield, Massachusetts at the time of the French and Indian War. He was in Boston when the Deerfield Massacre occurred. The town was attacked by a group of French and Native American soldiers from Quebec. Many of the men were killed, and the women and children were carried off into slavery. Upon his return to Deerfield, John Paddock organized a militia and followed the trail into Canada. He and his group recovered almost all of the captives and brought them home.

My great-great-grandparents, George Washington Paddock and Sophronia Sheldon Paddock, were abolitionists from Batavia, New York, where George was a Methodist minister. In 1854, Congress passed the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which created two new federal territories and established the doctrine of popular sovereignty, which allowed the new territories to determine for themselves whether they would be slave or free. The North and the South began to flood people into the region so that they could sway the outcome of the coming vote. George and Sophronia accepted a call for George to become a Methodist Circuit Rider in the Eastern District of Kansas. They traveled west and George kept a diary of some of their adventures. He had a number of

small Yankee congregations on his circuit, which he visited by horseback.

The diary describes a typical Sunday morning with G.W. Paddock conducting services in a small country church with sentries posted on the roof to detect gangs of Southern sympathizers who would occasionally descend upon Yankee congregations. It was an easy way to kill a whole group of them at one time. My great-great-grandfather often preached with a six-gun strapped around his waist and a double-barreled shotgun leaning against the pulpit. My father possessed one of those six-guns and a cane that doubled as a rifle. These were a part of the living room “furniture” as I was growing up.

One of G.W. Paddock’s outposts was in Lawrence, Kansas. In 1863, a Southern sympathizer, William Quantrill, led his Raiders, 400 strong, into Lawrence at five in the morning with the intention of killing a number of prominent Yankees in the town. They missed only a few who were on their list. George was one of the survivors, and he performed a funeral service for nearly 150 people.

The Rev. Robert Paddock was Rector of a parish in Manhattan when Tammany Hall controlled the city. He organized a group to fight against the corruption of the New York City Police Department and is credited with helping to bring down Tammany Hall. In order to do so, he had to fight against his own Bishop and Diocesan leaders, who were probably beneficiaries of the regime. He would patrol the streets at night among the prostitutes looking for police on the take.

Eventually he was given the nickname Red Light Bobby.

Later, he was appointed missionary Bishop of Eastern Oregon. He was eventually removed from that post after being found guilty of allowing Methodist clergy to preach in some of his churches. He returned to New York and engaged in chaplaincy and charitable work until his death in the late 1930s. While hospitalized during his final illness, he heard of a Negro woman who could not be admitted to the hospital because the Negro ward was full. He gave up his private room to her, arranged to pay all of her bills, and moved into a ward bed where he died soon after.

Shortly after my parents were married, they became missionaries on the Turtle Mountain Reservation in North Dakota near the Canadian border. At the end of their time there, they boarded a train to go back east. Dad asked my mom what she had missed most during their stay on the Reservation. He expected her to say something like “running water” or “indoor plumbing.” What she said was, “I missed the Negroes most!”

Never did I hear either of my parents say a negative word about blacks, Hispanics, Native Americans, or Asians. They had plenty of critical comments about racists and bigots and groups like the Ku Klux Klan. My mom’s younger sister lived with us for a short while when I was in grade school. One of her boyfriends made a racist comment and my dad ordered him to leave our house and never return.

I was born in 1946, among the first wave of baby boomers, and came of age in the ‘60s. I was an exchange student in Stockholm, Sweden for my high school senior year (‘63-64). During that year were the March on Washington, violence against blacks, and the assassination of President Kennedy. I count it as a gift that I was able to see my country critically through the eyes of others.

My college roommate was a black man who suffered deeply from prejudice, racism, and (in hindsight) internal oppression. While in seminary, I spent an intern year working in Richmond, Virginia in a juvenile reform school (prison) largely populated by black youth, and watched overt racism up close.

My wife and I were foster parents for over thirty years in three different states. We fostered more than 70 infants and toddlers, both black and white. We adopted six black children, four of whom still live with us. We have experienced discrimination first-hand. We’ve watched our children suffer and struggle. I saw myself as an enlightened ally to blacks in the struggle against racism.

Perhaps you can now understand what an earth-shaking moment it was for me, at age 55, with all this history and experience, to suddenly understand in a profound way that “I am a white man.”

At first it was devastating to see my life through the lens of race, to comprehend that I am complicit. To be born white in America is to experience advantages at almost every turn that are regularly denied to others.

At first it was devastating to see my life through the lens of race.

Jobs, education, where I can live, who I can associate with, loans and credit, even having a genealogy that can trace my people back to the 1630's—these all provide unearned bonuses merely because I am a white man. My whole life is built on this system that continuously disadvantages people of color and benefits me—and for most of my life I was unaware.

Rather than standing outside of the problems of race, I am actually in the middle of them. My power and privilege are, indeed, part of the problem. Mine is a guilty conscience for thinking that I was such a good guy and such a great ally when all the while I was in denial. My soul was numb to my basic reality.

But at the same time, I was liberated. I am now free to engage race, not from a distance believing that race is something that belongs to someone else, but as a participant. And I have a new vocation—a calling to reach out to my fellow whites and invite them to think about their lives and spirits through the lens of race.

One of the small research projects we did during our doctoral work was to read over a number of spiritual autobiographies of past students. It was a requirement of that program that a spiritual autobiography be included in every dissertation. None of the earlier students had been asked to reflect “through the lens of race.” A professor familiar with the former students selected an equal number of autobiographies written by blacks and whites. We discovered that every black writer mentioned his or her race on the first page. Only one white ever mentioned his race, and it was buried deep in the document. (At one point he had done an internship in a black church, and he mentioned how uncomfortable he felt as the only white.)

I am not alone among my white brothers and sisters to have lived most of my life unaware of my race and its implications.

Part of privilege is that, as a white man, I can walk away from dealing with race—blacks cannot. I can simply move back into denial while others have to continue to live in a world of systemic racism, prejudice, implicit bias, angst over possible brutality, and racialized politics.

This is not intended as an exercise in navel-gazing. It is a first step in opening our eyes to truths to which many of us have been blind for too long. It is the beginning of a new engagement in the work of justice.



Reflection Questions and Discussion Topics

I invite you to write your own spiritual autobiography through this lens of race. Where and when have you been aware of your race? Think about where you were raised, your neighborhood and schooling, friends and acquaintances, church and work, family stories and traditions. Ponder how you think about yourself. Meditate on the ways that white privilege, power, and racism have touched and influenced your story.



chapter two

JOHN DORHAUER

I was 42 when I began my doctoral studies on White Privilege. My first assignment was to compose a “Spiritual Autobiography through the Lens of Race.”

A what?!

I had to unpack that. Truth is, I had no idea what I was being asked to do. I made one false assumption that sent me down the wrong path. That would be an easy fix, but it wouldn’t come until it dawned on me that there would also be a larger problem to be fixed.

The false assumption was that “Spiritual Autobiography” roughly translated into “Faith Journey.” After 16 years in ministry, I could fake that part. And so I did. But it didn’t—translate to “Faith Journey,” that is. What I was being asked to do was tell the story of my “spirit.”

Has anyone ever asked you how it is with your soul? It is a way of digging a little deeper into your well-being. Think of the unfolding of a spiritual autobiography as a way of telling how it has been with your soul. This is what I was being asked to undertake. Clearing up that false assumption was the first step to helping me get this assignment right. That was the easy part to fix.

What was the hard part?

As a white man, being asked to tell my story through the lens of race was the hard part. It may not sound that hard, but I had to rewrite this first assignment five times before I understood how to do this.

The first time I tried, I thought to myself: well, can’t you find some black people to put in your biography? That’s what I set about doing.

It wasn’t easy. I grew up in a neighborhood, church, and school that were pretty white.

I brought my black grade school teacher into the story. Although I didn’t have a black classmate, there was a black family in the church who had a son a year younger and two sons who were twins a couple years older than me. I put them into my story.

Needless to say, this isn’t what was being asked. This only made my professor angry.

What he asked me to do to correct it made me feel awkward and uncomfortable—and it made no sense to me.

First, he asked me: “Why do you only identify the

race of those who aren't white? You talk about your 'black teacher,' your 'black friend.' Why don't you write about your 'white father,' your 'white teacher,' your 'white coach?'"

My first thought in response to this was something like: "Why would I do that? Everyone knows that these people are white. It's simply stating the obvious." I didn't say those words out loud, but even thinking them made me aware of a whole new dynamic around white privilege that I will spend the rest of my life trying to unpack and unlearn: that there is a way of growing up white in America that teaches you that you are the normal one and everyone else is different.

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I rewrote the paper and inserted "white" as an adjective in front of every person that entered my story who was white. It seems like such a small thing to ask—and it felt utterly ridiculous to me. But it slowly dawned on me that I racialize everyone who isn't white while I act like whites are somehow above that. Being forced for the first time to attach racial identity to myself and other white people opened a door of insight and understanding that had

heretofore been inaccessible to me. It kick-started a journey of discovery that I still find myself on.

I still didn't know what a spiritual autobiography through the lens of race was, however, or why it was so important for me to write. I had another two or three writings to go before it clicked for me: both how to do it, and why it was so important.

Somewhere along the way to that discovery, a single sentence was composed, and once it was, I understood how to write my spiritual autobiography through the lens of race.

The sentence reads: "My father was a racist; and I hated my father."

Not long ago, my father died. Over the years, we learned to respect, trust, and love one another.

But there was a time when, for me, that love and respect did not come easily.

And while it is true that my father was much more than a racist, and even at times showed remarkable love and respect for people of all races, my childhood was marked with hateful words from my father that filled me with deep shame and confusion. His words, in the privacy of our own home, were hurtful and bigoted and spiteful and angry and arrogant and prejudiced. They reflected the teachings of his own father. For many generations, being a Dorhauer meant being a part of a white clan that taught its children to feel superior to other races.

When I filter my story through the lens of race, those words from my white father and my white uncle and some of my white teachers and white role models all resurface. And because this is a spiritual autobiography, what dawned on me for the first time was that the health and well-being of my spiritual self was deeply impacted by all of this.

I carry a great deal of shame, of guilt, of remorse, of regret that attaches to my spirit as burden. There is a wound that festers. I was never permitted to even name it, and so could never begin to heal in any real way.

It is the pain of being ten years old and hearing my white father rant about N-----s, who, according to his wisdom, were different than Blacks. It is the pain of working in East St. Louis with Buck Jones, a black activist pastor and prophet, and then listening to my dad tell me how disappointed he is that I did that. It is the pain of listening to family members through the years tell jokes meant to deride black men and women, attaching to them caricatured aspects that reflect less the nature and abilities of a proud people than the prejudices of my family.

At 42, I had an awakening. I was allowed for the first time to examine a spirit that through those 42 years had been asked to accept and embrace a way of living that shamed and embarrassed me, but also, without my ever coming to grips with this hard truth, traumatized me.

The rehearsal of this part of my story has been healing. It has helped me to see things differently. It

has laid bare a spiritual wounding that can now be tended to with love and care after 42 years of being allowed to fester and damage.

My father was a racist; and I hated my father.

Writing that line helped me to tell stories that needed to be told.

Writing that line helped me know things about myself that had been repressed.

Writing that line helped me discover new pathways to insight and healing that were heretofore inaccessible.

Writing that line engaged me in telling my spiritual autobiography through the lens of race. Whatever insights were to follow in pursuit of a doctoral degree on the subject of White Privilege would have been mostly academic but for this effort. Being able to unfold my narrative for the first time through the lens of race transformed an academic endeavor to a spiritual journey.

I would like to invite you to try the same thing.

Write and rehearse your story. You will choose which stories to tell. You will choose which stories matter. You will choose which stories have had an impact on the shaping and health of your spirit.

How did you first come to learn about and recognize the difference between races?

Who told you what it means to be white; what it means to be black; what it means to be Hispanic; what it means to be Native American?

What value did they attach to whiteness or blackness, to light skin or dark skin, to speaking in a foreign tongue or worshipping another God?

What do you remember feeling in those moments when words or actions expressed what others in your household or community thought or felt about racial identity?

What do you feel retelling or rehearsing those stories again?

Did the actions of those who taught you about the difference between races match up with the words that were used?

What did you see and experience in the world around you that affected how you relate to people of other races?

Growing up in America is an exercise in racial disparity. Even those of us who were raised with a healthy and genuine and deep appreciation for all people, regardless of their race or creed, did so in the larger context of a culture committed to racial inequity. The systemic injustices that perpetuate are a byproduct of the complicity of all whites, even the allies who struggle to free themselves from a legacy of racial hate and white supremacy, and who remain the beneficiaries of privilege afforded them because they are white.

Part of the deal for privileged whites is to grow up not having to announce your race as a primary descriptor of who you are. Our stories often unfold devoid of any need to be told through the lens of race. A conscious effort to do so opens up an opportunity to enter the process of enlightenment from a different starting point. It also enables us to name and identify the way in which our culture and/or our families have asked us to carry spiritual wounds that will not heal without truth-telling, without clear commitments to racial equity, and without a very conscious effort to dismantle the privilege that exists.

My story told through the lens of race revolves around a myriad of childhood experiences that forged a deep and lasting impression upon me about what it meant to be white and what it meant to be black.

Those experiences include moments like these:

- Sitting on the couch watching a football game with my white dad, and when the white quarterback throws a game-winning pass to a black running-back who drops it, my dad saying to me: “Son, never throw to a n----r in the clutch. They’re great athletes but they don’t know how to think.”
- A white uncle driving me through the city and, avoiding a collision with another car driven by a black woman, sharing this with me: “Blacks are bad drivers; women worse. But the worst are black women.”

- Driving any street where we saw a black man walking on the sidewalk and my white dad telling us to lock the doors.
- My white dad repeating over and over again: “Always learn to tell the difference between a black and a n-----r.”
- Hearing many white role models repeat this line: “Never forget: the most persecuted person in America today is the white man.”

Every one of these moments, and so many more besides, lingers as a burden to my soul and spirit. They wound this white child of white ancestors who perpetuated social constructs that privilege one race while they oppress all others. Healing these wounds, crafting a different narrative about race for my children, aligning myself with communities committed to racial equity—these things opened up for me when I began to see my story through this lens of race.

Reflection Questions and Discussion Topics

1. *I invite you to prayerfully consider taking time to reflect on those moments that shaped your understanding of race. I invite you to write those stories down, and if you are willing, share them with others.*
2. *How is it with your soul and spirit?*
3. *Do your stories, told through the lens of race, leave you wounded or whole?*



chapter three

DA VITA D. MCCALLISTER

I wish I could remember the year of the great storm in the DMV (D.C., Maryland and Virginia tristate area). Back then we didn't call it the DMV, it was simply the D.C. or Metro Area. Perhaps I don't remember the year because it was during that time in life when you haven't learned to record such things. What I do remember is that I was in elementary school and we had more snow than I had ever seen. The entire D.C. area had come to a screeching halt... no school, no work for my parents and NO Church.

I didn't know such a thing was possible. How could you close church? It was like putting God on hold while you played elevator music. The reason this storm sticks out in my mind is not the lack of school or even the lack of Church, instead it was one simple act by my mother. She sat her three children down at the dining room table to have CHURCH. She was, and still is a, Sunday School teacher. On that cold Sunday morning my mother pulled out her Sunday school lesson and my siblings and I all sat at the table and had church.

This was a big deal for a couple of reasons. Number one, this was our formal dining room; as children we were only allowed in this space on Christmas morning for our egg-nog toast and on Thanksgiving for the table blessing. On Christmas and Thanksgiving, we

sat at the 'kid's table:' a temporary accommodation for all of the members of the family who were NOT elders. Number two, the dining room table was reserved for grown-ups and the occasional birthday party celebration, but only during the cake-cutting. Yet, on this day we sat at that dining room table as my mother offered her Sunday School lesson as a make-shift sermon. I must confess I don't remember the lesson, the scripture or even her words; what I do recall, as vividly as any sunrise, was the real sense that church mattered.

It mattered whether the doors of the sanctuary were open or closed; it mattered whether the roads were clear or impassable; and it mattered even if my father didn't leave my parent's bedroom to attend our table fellowship. Taking the time, each week, to offer God praise mattered.

We are and have always been people of faith. A family deeply committed to the earth and rooted in a specific faith tradition. We were Baptists: both sides of my family have been Baptists for generations. To be clear we are (and I was) the "Baptist-born and Baptist-Bred and when we die Baptist-Dead" kind of BAPTIST. My maternal great grandfather was a Baptist preacher and pastor for over 65 years in rural Florida. I was baptized into the faith at the

historic Alfred Street Baptist Church, in Alexandria, Virginia. Nestled in the shadow of the nation's capital our church was filled with middle class and upwardly mobile families. Each week my home church heaped praise and awareness on both the joys and the responsibilities of Blackness. These two characteristics were intertwined in my mind as a child. I didn't know you could be Baptist and NOT Black. There were two things I knew to be true: we were BLACK and we were BAPTIST. All else was negotiable.

The youngest of three children, I was the apple of my father's eye and his namesake. We lived in a neighborhood filled with single family homes, two parent households and two car garages. All of the schools I attended were on Allentown Road in Fort Washington, Maryland. I began at Tayac Elementary, walked a few feet away to Lord Baltimore Middle School and then a mile or two down the same road to Friendly Senior High, home of the Patriots. Many of the teachers in my schools were men and women of Color, as were the school administrators, the news anchors that my parents watched nightly, my pastor, postman and neighbors. My school was diverse and so was my neighborhood. The pastors at my church, both male and female, were seminary trained, and the school of choice was an HBCU (Historically Black College and/or University) in Richmond Virginia: The Virginia Union University (VUU).

I loved VUU, the campus, the sororities and fraternities, the fact that I could do my undergraduate and seminary work on the same campus. I visited

the campus as often as I could (my older sister was a student there); drinking in the traditions, familiarizing myself with Richmond, attending chapel and sneaking into freshmen orientation, years before I had graduated high school. My family had instilled in me the value of HBCUs and the inherent benefit in attending.

Though my heart was set on VUU, I carved my own path at the second oldest HBCU in the country, Lincoln University in Pennsylvania. Our alumni include the likes of U.S. Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall and Harlem Renaissance poet, activist and author of "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," Langston Hughes. During the heyday of "The Cosby Show" (long before the eponymous star became mired by allegations), Vanessa Huxtable, the fourth child of Heathcliff and Clair Huxtable, attended Lincoln University. I remember the pride I felt each time my alma mater was mentioned on the popular show. When I graduated from Lincoln with a Bachelor's degree in Religion and Psychology, I enrolled in the Interdenominational Theological Center, the largest consortium of African-American theological schools in the United States. Both my undergraduate and graduate degrees were earned at HBCUs.

My church, my family, my institutions of higher learning all highlighted the beauty and brilliance in blackness. I was surrounded by strong and loving black men, caring and doting black women and infused with a sense of expectation for my own excellence. All of this served as a buffer against a

world that worked diligently to convince me that I should not expect excellence of myself and that my black was anything but beautiful. “Blackness” in the eyes of others was a source of scorn, something for which I should feel shame. This wasn’t shouted at me, with “White Only” signs but was whispered in the denial of Black Culture and the silencing of Black Contributions to the greatness of this country. It was whispered in the external presumption that white schools were better than HBCUs, whispered each time a white classmate intimated that we should not date because we did not share the same complexion. Whispered in the magazines I saw, outside of my house, that did not feature black and brown faces.

Our home was filled with the complete set of the *Encyclopedia of African-American History*, ordered in protest by my mother, when one of my siblings wrote one paper too many that failed to recognize the role of people of Color in American society. The coffee table in our home was covered with *Essence*, *Ebony* and *JET*, all African-American owned publications dedicated to highlighting the lives, passion, creativity, beauty and brilliance in the Black Community. Each week I scrolled through the pages of *JET* to find the “beauty of the week.” Yet, these were not the faces I saw staring back at me in the checkout line at the super market.

If it had not been for the protection of my parents, the extraordinary example of my siblings, and the foundation laid by my church family, I might have been convinced that I was NOT created in the image of God. If I had listened to the constant whisper that my Black was not Beautiful, or believed the stories of my people were NOT germane to American history; or accepted that the trajectory of my talents was limited by institutional and interpersonal racism, it might have COST me my sanity. I might have even been seduced by the images of a *White Jesus* into believing that God was white and unconcerned with the plight of my people. I might have been rendered silent after I discovered that I could not be a member of the cast of one of my favorite television programs. I would never be Pinky Tuscadero¹ from *Happy Days*²; and Bo and Luke Duke³ would never welcome me to *Hazzard County*⁴.

*I could see the breadth
of the Black experience
in my own family.*

Those slights might have cost me my spirit or dampened my sense of call, but I had a grandmother who worked as domestic and a mother who worked in the insurance industry. I could see the breadth of the Black experience in my own family. I had Jacob

1 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Happy_Days#Minor.2Frecurring. Fictional character on *Happy Days*.

2 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Happy_Days. *Happy Days* is an American television sitcom that aired first-run from January 15, 1974, to September 24, 1984, on ABC.

3 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Dukes_of_Hazzard. Fictional characters on *The Dukes of Hazzard*.

4 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Dukes_of_Hazzard. *The Dukes of Hazzard* is an American television series that aired on the CBS television network from January 26, 1979 to February 8, 1985. *Hazzard County* is the fictionalized location of *The Dukes of Hazzard*.

in my blood, a small town in Florida populated entirely by my kinfolk. (Though I failed to appreciate the sheer will and strength that owning that little town must have required for my family. I was too concerned with the menace of Southern insects as a child to notice.) I recall stepping onto the edge of the fields my great grandfather owned and recognizing that as far as the eye could see was my family's land.

Even today these stories provide strength for the journey: when my son is harassed by police for carrying a hair comb in plain view; when I am rendered invisible in a restaurant or store; when individuals reach for my hair or a piece of jewelry that I am wearing because they believe it is beautiful and therefore in their purview to touch. I am rooted and grounded back to my Black-Self when I recall: My mother gathering her children around a beautiful wood dining room table for church when snow made driving impossible; the insistent questions from my youth leaders, at Alfred Street Baptist Church, about which college I would attend and the watchful eye of my college and seminary professors that I not WASTE my God-given talents.

I am no longer a Baptist; I received special dispensation from my great grandfather to be ordained in another tradition. I haven't disavowed my heritage, I proudly embrace it and the other traditions that have informed my faith. Today, I describe myself as a "Baptimethocostal of Christ" and a same-gender-loving Black Woman. A strong proud Black Woman; resilient, brilliant and beautiful in my own right, because every day someone tries to

kill my spirit and deny my sense of pride and every night I rejoice that they failed!⁵

Reflection Questions and Discussion Topics

1. *If you had to write a Spiritual Autobiography, what would the race of the majority of the characters be during your early childhood, elementary school, middle/junior high school/ high school?*
2. *If the majority of the characters from any of the time periods mentioned in Question 1 were "white;" what if anything did you learn about Persons of Color during that time period? If the majority of the characters from any of the time periods mentioned in Question 1 were Persons of Color; what did you learn about "white" people during that time period?*
3. *What race and/or ethnicity were the biblical characters in your Sunday School and/or Church settings (stained glass windows, photos or icons, etc.)? If the biblical characters were "white," were you ever exposed to a NON-white biblical character, icon or picture of the Divine? How did you feel when you saw the NON-White biblical character, icon or picture of the Divine?*

⁵ <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/resources/learning/core-poems/detail/50974>. A play on the poem "Won't you celebrate with me" by Lucille Clifton.



chapter four

TRACI BLACKMON

*The Lord is my Shepherd. I have everything I need.
Psalm 23:1*

For people of faith, how one sees God is critical to understanding how one sees self.

I was taught early that God is male. And I learned to love this God before I knew God is also white. This socialization happened through a host of overt and covert mainstream messages.

My formative years were filled with affirmations of God's maleness. The way our prayers were addressed to "our Father;" not just the special one that Jesus prayed, but even the ones we made for ourselves. The fact that all the key positions in the Bible and in church were held by men.

Men preached the sermons and men served communion. Men performed the baptisms and men counted the money. Only men sat in the pulpit and men made the big decisions. In hindsight, I have known I was to preach since I was 16 years old, but my reality offered no linguistic context for such a call until later in life.

My discovery of God's whiteness was more deductive than instructive. There were no images of God in my

home or at my maternal grandparents' house where I spent most of my days, or at Lily Grove Baptist Church where my paternal grandfather served as pastor, or at Emmanuel Church of God in Christ, my grandmother's church where I felt God in the rhythmic beat of the praise.

I knew God danced.

I knew God listened.

I knew God spoke.

I knew God loved me.

And I knew God was male.

But God's whiteness was deduced from Sunday school books, and *The Ten Commandments* with Charlton Heston as Moses, and the statues of Mary that adorned every Catholic home in my neighborhood. Then there were the stained glass windows. Stained glass was common in the church of my youth, and either the glass depicted no image, or a cross, or a white Jesus. One popular reproduction was Jesus sitting on a rock surrounded by children: all white children, sitting with an Afro-Semitic Palestinian who is falsely portrayed as white. It's easy to miss

such an irony if one sees oneself included. Not out of any maliciousness, but simply, inclusion calms our fears.

I am reminded of when I took my 6-year-old daughter, Kortni, to interview for first grade at a Lutheran school in our neighborhood. Kortni attended daycare and kindergarten in a black faith-based school. I don't remember any images of Jesus in that school, but they learned about Jesus from teachers and workers who looked like them.

By the time Kortni was 6, she could recite a Bible verse for every letter in the alphabet. So when we arrived at the Lutheran school and I saw this huge mural of Jesus surrounded by children and one of the children was black, I was ecstatic a black child was included. I knew this would be the perfect place for Kortni. After the interview, the teacher asked Kortni if she had any questions and Kortni responded, "I have one."

"Why do you think Jesus is white?"

Neither the teacher nor I understood right away, and then Kortni reminded us of the mural. She did not mention the little black girl holding Jesus' hand. She wanted to know why this school did not think Jesus looked like her. The teacher responded that we do not know exactly what Jesus looks like, so many artists paint Jesus to look like themselves. This is true in some places, but in many places where black children worship and play, it is not.

In 2009 I travelled to Ghana, where I found everything black, except Jesus. Recently, I had the

same experience in Egypt. I asked a minister from our hosting congregation in Ghana why there were so many images of white Jesus in their sanctuaries. He cautioned me not to look at Ghana through American eyes. "The word 'white' means something different in places with a history of racial oppression and marginalization. For Ghanaians, white is just a color," he said. It has been a long time since white was just a color.

The minister's explanation dismisses the psychological impact of Ghana's colonization just as our dismissal of this white Jesus phenomenon as inconsequential dismisses its psychological impact. Although most cultures display deities as recognizable reflections of themselves, black people, both in America and across the diaspora, have been slow to depict ourselves in the image of God.

If the possibility of those sacred images changing is uncomfortable for you, or difficult for you to imagine, I ask you to lean in to that feeling and ask yourself why.

What does it mean to love this white God in my black skin?

It is the social construct of whiteness as normative that allows us to ignore a narrative of scripture that clearly negates the imaginings of the Christ that adorn so many of our sanctuaries and fill so much of our Christian literature. If the possibility of those sacred images changing is uncomfortable for you, or difficult for you to imagine, I ask you to lean in to that feeling and ask yourself why.

I was in high school before I saw a depiction of a black Jesus. I was in a church whose congregation was predominantly white and I remember walking in and seeing this huge crucifix behind the altar with a black crucified Christ.

*I was in high school
before I saw a depiction
of a black Jesus.*

I was strangely uncomfortable in its presence.

I do not remember why I was there. I do not remember what happened while I was there. I only remember that Jesus. Until that moment, I had not thought consciously about the color of God.

It is fascinating the things we notice, and the things we dismiss, when we are immersed in environments that celebrate our being and normalize our experiences.

He leads me beside the still water for his name's sake ...

By the time I entered kindergarten, I was reading, and by third grade I had become the teacher's helper for some children who lagged behind. At that point, Mrs. Hill, my former kindergarten teacher who was also my next-door neighbor, recommended that my parents transfer me to a more academically challenging school on the "other side of town."

My mother did not walk me into my new school. She dropped me off at the carpool, and I found my way to my class through a sea of strange students and overly

friendly teachers, only to discover no one in my class looked like me. No one.

This was the beginning of a very long trajectory of appreciation of two worlds. I would not share any formal class with any other person of color until college, and Mrs. Sturdivent, my third grade teacher at my old school, would be my last black teacher until seminary.

On the very first day of fourth grade in my brand new school, my brand new classmate, Michael, called me a "nigger."

I had never been called that before, and I wasn't quite sure what it really meant, but I knew that it was something awful and disgusting because of the way he spewed that word from his mouth.

"You're a nigger," he said loudly enough for the entire class to hear.

My mind raced to search for a response and I reached for the only word I could find.

"Well, you're a peckerwood!" I exclaimed, a word I'd heard my father use under his breath when some white person made him angry. But somehow today this word just didn't seem to hold the same force as the one Michael used.

Imagine my surprise in my first chapel service at school when I learned that Michael's father was the school's minister.

I never told Michael's father, or mine, about the name calling, and eventually Michael stopped. Yet every Wednesday morning as we entered chapel, I wondered whether Michael had learned "nigger" from his father just as I learned "peckerwood" from mine.

Yea, though I walk through the valley . . .

Fourth grade was my first experience with a room filled with white people, and for some of my classmates it was their first experience with a black girl.

*There is church. And then
there is black church.
There is American cuisine.
And then there is soul
food.*

The first weeks were filled with questions about my blackness. Can I touch your hair? Why is your skin dark? What color is your blood? Kim became my best friend at school, and she never asked me questions about being black. I am still fascinated by such questions and the assumptions they reveal.

The questions are less frequent now, but they have not stopped. Questions about my hair, or my food, or my neighborhood, or my church. Requests from confirmation classes to attend worship during their

week of mission so that children can have an "urban experience."

I often surprise myself with my capitulation to such "exoticism." Exoticism in this context is my acquiescing to white culture as normative, thereby making it necessary to subtly and often unconsciously define my actions, my being, and even my worship as an exception to the norm.

I can hear you asking, "Then what should we do?" The answer is: I do not know. It will take all of us working together to discover ways of being that defy our learned behavior.

What I do know is our present way of being is not a sharing of cultures, but rather an explanation of one culture as seen through the lens of another.

There is church. And then there is black church. There is American cuisine. And then there is soul food.

There is history. And then there is black history.

There are neighborhoods. And then there is urban mission. There is Jesus...and then there is black Jesus.

One of the unnamed benefits of white privilege is the absence of any need to explain whiteness.

I will fear no evil . . .

My dream school was Harvard. My entire class, there were only 32 of us, visited the campus during our

sophomore college tour and I fell in love. I knew that it would be difficult to get in, but I believed I had a chance.

I was excited when a Harvard recruiter visited our school campus in my junior year. It was another opportunity to hear about the program and the requirements, and also an opportunity to make myself known to the recruiter.

The recruiter reminded us once again what an honor it would be to attend Harvard. He also reminded us that Harvard receives enough applications each year to fill its freshmen class with 4.0 students, and warned us that if our grades and extracurricular activities were lacking not to get our hopes up for Harvard.

I was not a 4.0 student, but I had a solid 3.6, good SAT scores, and a huge amount of extracurricular activities, including the state oratorical championship, local winner of the French oratorical contest, debate team, thespian with lead roles in plays, summer scholar with college credits, and community theatre, on top of working a part-time job.

After the presentation, I was excited to share my accomplishments and see whether the recruiter agreed Harvard was worth a shot. But before I could tell him my story, he said to me, “If you can just graduate with a 2.5, you can get into Harvard.”

I was the exotic.

My hard work didn’t matter. It didn’t matter that I actually qualified for Harvard on my merit.

Another consequence of white privilege is the normalization of the soft bigotry of low expectations of entire groups of people.

I attended one of the highest ranked high schools in our state. I was fully engaged, sometimes at great cost to myself. I not only did well, I excelled in some areas. But assimilation does not eradicate assumptions.

I wonder how often this has really been the context of affirmative action interventions. Not to accommodate the less qualified, but rather, to counteract the less aware.

I did not apply to Harvard.

You prepare a table before me . . .

I do not share these memories to generate pity or guilt. Everyone has a story. We are all made in the image of God, yet we are also molded by our experiences and our encounters with one another.

My experiences have prepared me to walk in the world as a black woman who preaches. My relationships challenge me to often wrestle with deep love and deep despair simultaneously. It is a journey of self-discovery, deep awareness of the other, and new understandings of God.

I have decided to pack lightly.

Reflection Questions and Discussion Topics

Choose a listening partner. Each partner will be given 3 minutes to reflect on the following questions:

1. *What is your first recollection of your whiteness?*
2. *What images of God do you recall from childhood?*
3. *How has your whiteness helped to shape who you are today?*

The purpose of a listening partner is to give their partner all of their attention, without commenting in any way on what is being said. Simply listen. When it is the other partner's turn to speak, the one speaking is to tell only their story. Commentary on what one hears is not allowed.



chapter five

Stephen G. Ray, Jr.

It is best to begin with a statement my mother would occasionally make as I was growing up. When some individual white person or larger organization did something unfortunate, or seemingly disappointing, my mother would intone: “Eh, white folks. Some is different, most ain’t.” I say seemingly disappointing because, for my mother, disappointment was not a lively option because she thought so little of white people as moral agents in the world. In fact, when a white person or organization did something that would normally be considered simply behaving by minimal moral standards, my mother would be genuinely surprised and often talk about the instance for days.

The moral nihilism my mother expressed with this phrase was born of her experiences as a domestic worker in the homes of wealthy white families in a small town in North Carolina. It was born of her coming of age in New York City during the high tide of Southern migration to the North, with the attendant backlash of the white community, and those ethnic communities aspiring to be white. It was born of beginning a career as a single parent in a city bureaucracy shot through with paternalistic racism and genuine comity based on the large presence of Jewish persons whose families were just now coming

to terms with the ravaging reality of the Shoah (the Holocaust).

So hers was a complex, though somewhat nihilistic, moral vision informed and shaped significantly by race. My own experiences of growing up Black in New York during the tumultuous years of my own forced school busing odyssey, white flight, and the consequent financial crises it left in its wake left me hard pressed to see that she was mistaken.

I begin my spiritual autobiography with this reflection on my mother because in both faith and life she has shaped me by her simple dictum, “God will provide.” Throughout my childhood, this simple (not to be confused with simplistic) faith gave her the strength to meet the many challenges facing a single mother in New York in the 1970s and ‘80s. So my faith in God, like hers, has been unshakable, deep, and *simple*.

A significant upshot of this is that the questions which have driven my ministry and career as a theologian—issues which have focused on social sin and evil—have rarely brought God onto the docket. Put another way, issues of theodicy have always seemed beside the point to me, given my sense that what evil there is in creation is of its own making.

God is, of course, implicated because God created a universe in which suffering could be acute and be used as a weapon, thus materializing evil—but not finally responsible for that use because the tools of hate and suffering could just as well be used for flourishing and wholeness.

For me, then, the most pressing questions of evil have been those connected to “man.” It is this turn from God, if you will, in framing the workings of evil and faithful response which creates the space in which race is and has been a theologically significant category which has shaped my interpretation of my life, ministry, and their unfolding. In other words, I cannot narrate my life without significant resort to my narration of the workings of race precisely because the absurdity of trying to be human *while Black* in American society, to use Cornel West’s framing, has left me no alternative.

My own life’s experiences, while perhaps predisposing me to ways of thinking about God, faith, and life, did not in themselves crystallize a particular theological conviction beyond a simple faith in God. It was through my study of African-American history and the Shoah, which began in high school, that I came to be a dyed-in-the-wool Calvinist in my mid-30s. The finding of a home in Calvinism resulted from my observation of how easily humans make peace with evil—how its workings become banal and the ways in which we absolve ourselves of responsibility for its dominion.

As well, it was many experiences, both in ministry and in basic human fellowship with many “good”

white people, that belied for me any un-nuanced understanding of how people could be so human and yet so complacent in the face of evil. There is then something which rings true for me about the idea of the total depravity of humanity. By this, Calvin means simply that however good our intentions, we, as humans, will always find ourselves mired in sin because we think too much of our abilities to be able to overcome it.

It was through my study of African-American history and the Shoah, which began in high school, that I came to be a dyed-in-the-wool Calvinist in my mid-30s.

It would be helpful to identify two recurring experiences which have left me so convicted.

My first religious response to this realization was not a turn to Calvinism, but rather a turn from Christianity altogether. For several years in my teens, I was a member of the Five-Percent Nation of Islam, an offshoot of the Nation of Islam. While never a wholly comfortable fit, the Nation provided a theological, historical, and cultural answer as to why Black people suffered so much. This was something

my experiences with the Christian faith had utterly failed to do.

While there was indeed something existentially affirming about the cosmos the Nation invited me into, there remained the reality that I personally knew many white people who were decent; never a majority of the white folks with whom I interacted, but many. The inscription of evil upon the very persons of all whites while interpreting most Blacks as morally ambiguous did not ring true for me. So, in my early 20's, I left the Nation and returned to the Church of which I had been a titular member since my baptism: the United Church of Christ.

Throughout my teens, I had continued to attend Nazarene Congregational Church UCC in Brooklyn, New York, because Sunday was the day that my father and I had our weekly visitation. As life is wont to do, something transformative was happening of which I was only liminally aware. During the time when I was simply “attending” Nazarene, the church was pastored by and lay led by strong Black leadership. The two pastors of the church during my adolescence were deeply interested in the emerging field of Black Theology. A voice and vision was being given to the Christian faith which centered explicitly on the recovery of our Black humanity and on the assertion of our dignity and joy in the face of the daily onslaughts of the racist structures in which we lived and had our being. Beyond a vision of integration that was turning out to be a bad joke for my generation, this community embodied a way of dignity and joy in our Blackness. While all of this had little effect on me then, I realize looking back

that my experience at Nazarene would be decisive upon my “return” to the faith.

When my wife and I joined Horace Bushnell Congregational Church in Hartford, Connecticut, it was a church in the midst of transition to a wholly Black congregation. It was not an easy transition because of the place the church held in our association and conference. We were transitioning from a donor white church to a “needy” Black church largely because, in the midst of the transition, the treasurer embezzled several hundred thousand dollars, decimating the endowment.

I was not accustomed to being either an object of mission or the only Black person in the room.

What made the transition particularly messy was that we were the only church to go through such a transition in either our association or our conference. The other Black churches were all historically Black churches. This was also the time and space when I accepted the call to ministry in the United Church of Christ. So here I found myself, a particularly militant Black man, shaped and formed by a Black church community of proud Black people who gave no quarter and asked for none in return, beginning ministry in a church in transition whose continued existence relied largely on white largess in a denomination, conference, and association that were overwhelmingly white. I was not accustomed to being either an object of mission or the only Black person in the room. Such was my life for the first 15

years of my ministry, with interspersing experiences of ministry in wholly independent Black spaces.


Having been a life-long member of the UCC and unfolded my ministry in the midst of this church, the “social justice” bent of our church has not been simply grafted into my own Christian DNA, but I have witnessed it in that of my sisters and brothers in the UCC. Yet, I have also witnessed the ways that so many have made peace with the ways of residential and educational segregation, many with full knowledge of how these realities ravage the lives and futures of the Black community in which their sisters and brothers in the faith live. My personal experiences and studied observations of the ways that white people and the structures which they created have marginalized and oppressed Black people, indigenous peoples, other peoples of color, and the Jews have led me to be something less than sanguine about the basic goodness of human “nature.” So Calvin’s view of the complexity of human nature and the ways that mires us, always, in the ambiguities of sin in our lives and in the world resonates.

My career as a professional theologian over the last 18 years has unfolded in spaces and during a time in which the Black presence in theological education has been receding and the general tenor of our society has been one of animus toward the well-being of Black people and our communities. For most of this period, I have taught in institutions in the Midwest. It was during my time here that I came to use the descriptor “drowning in the vanilla sea” to describe my experience of vast swaths of

geographic and cultural space rendered bereft of any meaningful presence of Black people because of the successful campaigns of ethnic cleansing in the early part of the 20th century (as described by James W. Loewen in *Sundown Towns: A Hidden Dimension of American Racism*). My experiences as a teacher in theological education in classrooms in Kentucky and Illinois and as a pastor of a historic African-American congregation in Kentucky all contributed to continuing reaffirmations of my Calvinist bent.

Calvin’s view of the complexity of human nature and the ways that mires us, always, in the ambiguities of sin in our lives and in the world resonates.

This confirmation came in the form of the subtle yet ubiquitous animus I experienced as a Black person in virtually every sphere of my life while living in the Midwest. These experiences were heightened by the intersections of race and class. This nuance was simply that my life unfolded in upper-middle-class spaces in which Blacks were seldom present and certainly not warmly welcomed. This animus ranged from active expressions—many more than I had ever experienced in my life—to the more seemingly frequent expressions of surprise and discomfort at



my presence. Were these experiences confined to particular geographic spaces, they could be avoided; one cannot avoid one's classroom as a teacher or home as the resident of a neighborhood in transition, though. Nor can one avoid the Church.

I close, as I began, with the observation that because of the ways that sin has structured the very geography of our lives, race renders us all sufficiently ambiguous in a moral assessment of our lives. This does not, however, give license to be bad actors. When the world is shaped in such a way to reward such proclivities, it takes an act of faith to live otherwise. The substance of such faith is, I assume, in Christ, in whom there is neither Jew nor Gentile, Male nor Female, Black nor White. So, being a man of simple faith, I will continue to navigate the currents of the Vanilla Sea even though my preferences would be for a life in a land far away.

Reflection Questions and Discussion Topics

1. *What do you think Calvin means when he writes: "We will always find ourselves mired in sin because we think too much of our abilities to be able to overcome it"?*
2. *How does this point of view help you understand or process your understanding of race relations in America?*