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Preface

BEFORE I WROTE this book I accumulated a long list of reasons why it was an important project. Racism is pervasive, its effects devastating, the need to fight against it urgent. People of color are being blamed for our social problems and attacked on all fronts. Recent immigrants, African American women on welfare, youth of color, and affirmative action programs are just some of the current targets of white anger. It seems like gains we made in civil rights and social justice in the 1960s and 1970s are being rolled back in the 1980s and 1990s.

I could also see the huge impact racism had on my relationships with other people, on what my children learned in school, on how we dealt with economic issues at the state and federal level, and on what sports and music I paid attention to. Racism is everywhere, influencing us at every turn. There is no shortage of immediate reasons why writing a book like this one is a project that needed to be done.

In the workshops my co-workers and I were facilitating participants were eager to talk about these issues and anxious to become involved. Somehow, few of them were able to translate their understanding of the issues and their commitment to ending racism into concrete community action. When they asked me for resources there were no guides for critical thinking and social action I could point them to. What was available about racism or white people was theoretical—interesting but not practical.

With all this in mind, I sat down to write this book. I suddenly accumulated a long list of reasons why I couldn't do it. I wasn't qualified. The subject was too big. The issue was too important. How could I add anything new? The connections between racism, anti-Semitism, gender and economic issues were too complex. People of color have addressed all the issues much more powerfully than I could. I would make mistakes. I would leave important pieces out. People of color would be angry at me. Other white people would

call me racist. Jews would say I didn't write enough about anti-Semitism. Gentiles would say I wrote too much. People would expect me to have all the answers. The entire task felt formidable, scary, fraught with problems, and I felt ill-equipped to carry it out successfully.

I procrastinated. I hoped someone else would do it. "There must be someone else who knows more, or writes better, or knows how to say it the right way." "There's certainly someone who could do it without making mistakes or looking foolish." These thoughts went through my mind as I waited for someone else to step forward.

Then one day I recognized these feelings. They were the same feelings that white people experience in our workshops—the same "reasons" they give for not doing more to stop racism. I knew that if I let these feelings stop me from taking the risk of writing this book I would be succumbing to the paralysis that often keeps white people from taking action against racial injustice. When confronting the reality of racism we become sad, angry, overwhelmed, confused, numb, lonely, tired, bored, anxious and passive. When faced with the need to intervene, speak up, or take action against racism, we become tentative and uncertain, filled with questions and concerns, waiting for someone more qualified to step up.

There is no one who can take our place or do our part. I realized it was crucial for me to write what I could, that was my responsibility. Yes, it's scary. Yes, I will make mistakes. I don't know all the answers; I won't be able to cover everything; some people might not like what I write. But a book like this needs to be written, and I'm in a position to write it.

Many white people have stood up against racism. They used their feelings to guide them to action, not to stop their involvement. I needed to call on their examples of risk taking, moral integrity, and strategic action to realize that what I do makes a difference.

I'm sure you will experience many feelings as you read this book. Let them guide you, but don't let them stop you. It is easy to become overwhelmed by our feelings, by how much there is to do, and by how confusing and risky it seems. We need to concentrate on what it is we can do, how we can make a difference.

Whenever I become overwhelmed thinking about how much there is to do, I remind myself of a saying by Rabbi Tarfon. I hope it will guide you as well.

*It is not upon you to finish the work.
Neither are you free to desist from it.*

Introduction

*"Only Justice Can Put Out the Fire"**

THIS IS A book about racism for white people. It is not another book about how bad racism is, filled with facts and figures about inequality and injustice. In this book I want to talk to you personally about what it means to those of us who are white, and how we can make a difference in the struggle for racial justice.

There is fire raging across the United States—usually a series of brush fires erupting whenever conditions are right, sometimes a firestorm, always a smoldering cauldron. Whether it is major urban uprisings, intellectual debates, or everyday conflicts in our neighborhoods and schools, racism is burning us all. Some of us have third degree burns or have died from its effects, many others live in the charred wreckage. Most of us suffer first and second degree burns at some time in our lives. We all live with fear in the glow of the fire's menacing and distorted light.

As white people we do many things to survive the heat. We move to the suburbs, put bars on our windows, put locks on our hearts, and teach our children distrust for their own protection. We believe the enemy is "out there"—and we can be safe "in here." We never talk about what it means to be "in here" with other white people and why we are so afraid of people with darker skin colors "out there." Since we don't talk about our fears, we are precluded from doing anything effective to put out the fire.

Poll after poll shows that most white Americans are scared. We are scared about violence, we are scared about the economy, we are scared about the

* A line in a song by Romanovsky and Phillips.

safety, education and future of our children. Much of the time those fears are directed toward people of color—long-term residents or recent immigrants. It is easy for us to focus on them, and yet doing so is devastating to our ability to address the critical national issues of jobs, education, social infrastructure, family violence and economic development.

Since the uprising in South Central Los Angeles in 1992 white people are even more afraid than before. Once again the injustice of racism was brought to our national attention by people of color. We saw the fire flare up and again we were frightened. Many of us wanted to do something, to pick up a bucket and throw water on the flames, but the size of the blaze seemed to make our individual efforts useless. Besides, many of us thought that we were too far away from the cause of the fire to make a difference. People of color were defined as the problem and the inner cities as the site.

In fact, there are already flames in our (all too often predominately white) schools, churches, neighborhoods and work places. Poverty, family violence, crime, drugs, fear, suicide and despair are not limited to somewhere “out there” nor to “those people.” Our houses are burning out from under us, and we need to pick up our buckets and start carrying water now. But just like the volunteer fire departments in rural communities and small towns, we need to be part of a fire line where everyone realizes that when the sparks are flying anything can catch on fire. We need to be a community which is alert for the signs of sparks and embers so they can be put out before a bigger blaze develops.

We don't need scare tactics. They just reinforce the fear and paralysis. We don't need numbers and statistics. They produce numbness and despair. We need to talk with each other, honestly, simply, caringly. We need to learn how to talk about racism without rhetoric, which fans the flames, without attack, fear or intimidation, which keep people off the lines. We need to share fire fighting suggestions, advice, exercises and approaches so that we can work together to fight the fire.

Racism is often described as a problem of prejudice. Prejudice is certainly one result of racism, and it fuels further acts of violence toward people of color. However the assumption of this book is that racism is the institutionalization of social injustice based on skin color, other physical characteristics, and cultural and religious difference. White racism is the uneven and unfair distribution of power, privilege, land and material goods favoring white people. Another way to state this is that white racism is a system in which people of color as a group are exploited and oppressed by white people as a group. Although we can and should all become more tolerant and understanding of each other, only justice can put out the fire of racism. We will certainly have to examine our fears and misconceptions to see why we stay home while the fire sweeps our nation. Our primary purpose in doing so will

be so that we can get as many strong, able and committed bodies on the front lines as quickly as possible.

As we have witnessed many times in European and American history the fires of racism include the flames of anti-Semitism. Most of the Jews in the United States are of European background. Sometimes these Jews are considered white and sometimes not, just as Asian Americans are sometimes considered white or not, depending upon the complex responses of white people. Jewish people are vulnerable to the same kinds of violence, discrimination and harassment that most people of color have experienced. At the same time those Jews who are of European descent are buffered from racism's worst aspects by the benefits of being white, as are many people of Southern and Eastern European heritage. Because of this complex dynamic in American society, understanding and confronting anti-Semitism is a crucial link in the struggle to end racism. In this book Jews of European descent will be referred to as white *and* as targets of racism. Jews of color are always targets of racism from white people and even from Jews of European descent. They are also vulnerable to anti-Semitism from other people of color.

Anti-Semitism is similar to, different from, and intertwined with racism. Groups holding political power in Europe have exploited, controlled and violated other groups of people based on religion, race, culture and nationality (as well as gender, class and sexual orientation) for hundreds of years. There is tremendous overlap in the kinds of violence that have been directed at these groups and the kinds of justifications used to legitimize political, economic and cultural exploitation and dominance. Racism and anti-Semitism are two primary, closely related tools that groups in power have used to maintain their advantage. I will make connections between the two throughout the text. The section on Jews in Part Four will explore these complexities in more detail.*

When I wrote my book *Mens Work*† I quoted a statement from Alice Walker in the preface. The statement was about how the fear of not being perfect can inhibit committing oneself to public action about a particular issue. She was talking about speaking out against cruelty to animals even though she occasionally ate meat. I referred to writing about sexism even though I wasn't perfectly non-sexist.

* The inside/outside status of Jewish people is a result of the inconsistencies of racism and anti-Semitism and the complex interplay between the two. The complexity can be confusing to both Jews and non-Jews alike. These issues will be explored in more detail later in the book.

† *Men's Work: How to Stop the Violence that Tears Our Lives Apart* (Hazelden/Ballantine, Center City, Minnesota and New York, 1992.)

It is crucial that we speak up about issues of injustice, violence and inequality. It is true that our words have more moral credibility if we are leading the good, clean life and are totally consistent in what we say and what we do. We have to “walk the walk” not just “talk the talk.”

However issues of social justice are not fundamentally about individual actions and beliefs. This book is about white racism, which is a social system. Although my personal attitudes and actions can either support or confront racism, racism is completely independent of me. In fact, even if most of us were completely non-racist in our attitudes, there are many ways that unequal wages, unequal treatment in the legal system and segregation in jobs, housing and education would continue.

Our beliefs and actions are important. We are responsible for how we treat the people around us and whether or not we are fighting against injustice or contributing to it. But as long as we focus only on individual actions and ignore community and organizational responses, we will leave the system of racism intact.

This book is about uprooting the system of racism. We need to re-examine our individual beliefs and actions in order to participate effectively in that uprooting. This book will help you look at how you have learned racism, what effects it has had on your life, what have been the costs and benefits to you, and how you have learned to pass it on. More importantly, this book will help you become a member of a network of people who are committed to eliminating racism. It offers you connections, strategies, perspectives and guidelines for becoming involved in the struggle.

Don't take it too personally. You did not create racism. You may have many feelings while reading this book. Confronting racism may trigger guilt, horror, embarrassment, defensiveness, anger, excitement, discovery, anxiety, inspiration, jealousy, competitiveness, loneliness, despair or confusion. Acknowledge the feelings, talk about them with others, get support, but don't get stuck in the feelings. If our feelings immobilize us we cannot strategically plan how to sabotage the system.

This book is not about unlearning racism.* It is fine for us to unlearn racism. But many of us live in highly segregated or highly stratified communities and have only limited opportunities to pass on racism in our daily encounters. Unlearning racism makes it easier for people of color to live and work with us but it doesn't necessarily challenge the system to change. Unlearning racism may or may not be a path to taking action to eliminate racism. In a society where individual growth is so often not only the starting

* Unlearning racism refers to workshops where participants can “unlearn” the lies, myths and stereotypes about people of color and white people that foster racial prejudice.

place but also the end point of discussion, strategies for unlearning racism often end in complacency and inaction.

Racism has existed in this hemisphere since Columbus and his crews invaded the shores of the West Indies and slaughtered, raped, enslaved and exploited the native peoples living there. Since his arrival there has been continuous active resistance from people of color. Throughout that time there has also been a strong and steady stream of white people who have supported that resistance and contributed to the struggle to end racism. This book is an invitation to join that tradition of white people. It offers you some guidance about how to be more effective in that struggle.

This book does not document the existence of racism. There are many books and thousands of studies showing the direct, devastating impact of racism on the daily lives of the tens of millions of people of color in this country. That there is inequality and injustice in our educational, political, legal, medical, housing and employment systems is amply documented and indisputable. I will present few statistics and little information proving racism exists.*

This book provides some suggestions and starting points based on the fact that racism exists, it is pervasive, and its effects are devastating. Because of this devastation we need to start doing everything possible to end racism. The first step is for us to talk together, as white people.

* There are some excellent resources listed in the bibliography which provide that kind of information.