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Eleonora's Journey

A New Country, a New Mirror

I've been a licensed psychologist for more than 15 years. At no point in my five years of graduate school and three years of supervised training was I taught to apply counseling and psychology principles to social justice work. While my graduate program at the University of Chicago focused on the intersection of culture and mental health, it was devoid of any conversation about power and oppression. In fact, it wasn't until my final internship before graduation (in the early 2000s) that I was exposed to *multicultural* concepts that addressed how systems and power impact people's lives and experiences. I will never forget watching the now-iconic documentary *The Color of Fear* by activist, educator, and filmmaker Lee Mun Wah. *The Color of Fear* records a group of racially diverse men meeting over a weekend to discuss racism. I was transfixed by one of the characters, David, a White man, who struggled for most of the documentary to grasp his own privilege and collusion with racism. While I could tell that he was meant to be the foil, the one who didn't "get it" (to the exasperation of the other group members), I related to him. I had all the same questions he had and few, if any, of the answers. What I learned in watching that documentary explained much about my own observations of life in the United States, as well as my own life experiences.

I grew up in 1970s Italy as a cisgender woman in a loving but rather conservative family, where sexism was espoused and unquestioned. My family's attitudes toward women were echoed by the Italian culture of the time, so I internalized both the subtle and the overt misogyny I encountered as "truth." When I was nine years old, we moved from Rome to a small town near Venice, for financial reasons and to be closer to family. It was at that time when I became aware of the ethnic tensions between the North and South of Italy, with discrimination flowing from the former to the latter. The subtle Roman inflection in my speech easily marked me as a non-Northerner and engendered social ostracism. However, the social rejections I experienced were mitigated by the class privilege I held because of my extended family's status in the town. To complicate things further, while my class rank held much clout outside of my family, it did much less so within it, as my mother had violated familial, religious, and gender norms, first by marrying outside of "rank" and then by divorcing. While I embodied both dominant and marginalized identities that had tangible consequences, I did not have language or contextual knowledge to understand how my experiences were shaped by or connected to these identities, or how they influenced how I viewed myself and others.

At the age of 19, I was afforded the chance to come to the United States to experience the U.S. university system. What began as a one-year commitment, aimed primarily at learning English and living abroad, opened doors beyond my wildest imagination. I relished the ability to study multiple subjects—something that was not possible within the Italian university system. I discovered the world of graduate school. Attending college had already been a dim expectation for me as a woman; I had not been aware that educational opportunities past college even existed. I unexpectedly found much fulfillment in intellectual pursuits, which surprised me after a lifetime of being told that my intelligence was naturally lacking because of my gender. And I was astounded to find that I had professional prospects within academia, especially given that I had no social capital in that world, which would have been essential had I sought an academic career in Italy.

While I was learning English and acculturating into the U.S. academic system, I was also being indoctrinated into U.S. norms and the racial caste system (Wilkerson, 2020). Prior to arriving in the United States, my imagination was full of images of the American Dream; I thought of the "new world" as a place where individual freedom reigned (in contrast to the centuries-old restrictive traditions of the "old world") and where opportunities to become anything one might desire were boundless. It wasn't long before those beliefs were sorely

challenged. While no one around me would admit that there were rules of engagement, I kept bumping into what felt like invisible walls, which quickly curbed ways of being that did not fit what was, in fact, “expected” and deemed “proper” according to U.S. standards. I wasn’t shy about asking questions and had a lifetime of training for identifying safe ways to navigate my world, so I learned quickly: emotions were not welcomed; presenting as “doing great” at all times meant you were “normal”; one-upping other students in the classroom meant you were smart; asking anyone how much money they earned was intrusive; as a woman in the United States, I was supposed to dislike and be bad at math; and so on.

Past the hurdles of learning English, wrapping my head around the U.S. educational system, and trying to function within U.S. cultural norms, I began noticing racial disparities and tensions, all while unconsciously absorbing racial stereotypes. Again, being willing to ask questions, it became apparent to me that race was a very sore subject, which was either vehemently avoided or consistently brought up with negative connotations. In other words, it was never a simple descriptive or positive factor. Early in my clinical training, I worked in an adolescent inpatient psychiatric unit, where, as part of my training, I joined a seasoned Black psychiatric nurse in co-leading a therapy group. The group members were all Black youth, except for one White teen. I remember struggling to follow the conversations filled with idioms, while trying to discern how to be helpful by watching the experienced nurse. In one of the group meetings, the conversation became animated, and suddenly the nurse reprimanded the youth while pointing at me as a White person, a symbol of what they had to contend with outside of the hospital. I did not understand the context in which the comment arose or the content of the comment itself. My language difficulties could explain some of that but not all of it. I don’t know what the youth made of the comment, but as a White person (in a position of relative authority), at best, I looked like a deer in the headlights, and at worst, I showed utter incompetence when it came to matters clearly central to the youth’s well-being. This is one of my clearest memories of learning that being White was problematic and that as a White person I was not expected to belong in race conversations—or to be able to contribute to them. I had not been trained to do so, nor did I have the skills I needed.

Around the same time, I had asked my White male supervisor about the hierarchy among the mental health staff that very obviously coincided with race: all the psychologists and psychiatrists were White, while all the lower-ranking staff and the vast majority of the patients were People of Color and Native people. It was such a visible, patent fact that I had simply become curious about its potential significance. Without missing a beat, my supervisor replied that my observation was, in and of itself, a sign that I was racist, because why else would I have noticed? Having already been the target of overt sexism by this same supervisor, I didn’t give much credence to his answer, per se, but I still learned from the interaction that race was clearly a taboo subject.

In addition to these moments when I was taught about my place as a White person, I have a flurry of memories where in retrospect I can see that I invalidated experiences of racism conveyed by my fellow Students of Color. In my eagerness to understand what I was missing, I revealed my biases and ignorance, quickly frustrating whomever I was speaking with. While I cringe at these past microaggressions, I also grieve the message I kept receiving: as a White person, I wasn’t expected to learn or understand much when it came to race. I had undoubtedly failed to understand many other aspects of U.S. culture, but I can’t think of any that engendered as much pushback as race. Being White was obviously significant, just as I had learned early in life that being a woman was significant. Specifically, the significance was a sign that there was something *wrong* with these identities, albeit in different ways. I can only dream about what a difference it would have made to have had White allies to learn from during my early years in the United States.

In the absence of that, watching *The Color of Fear* was nothing short of revolutionary. It openly spelled out and answered many of the “inappropriate” questions I had been asking. Through David, I could witness the same resistance I had encountered throughout my life when I had attempted to challenge sexist notions. I noticed that this same resistance now lived within me when I felt challenged to see myself as a White person (rather than as Italian or as a woman). While racism and sexism cannot be necessarily equated or compared, my

own experiences of being silenced, gaslighted, physically unsafe, or otherwise marginalized allowed me to relate viscerally to the dialogue I witnessed in the documentary. These new lenses felt so deeply meaningful and useful in understanding my personal and professional worlds that from that point forward, multiculturalism became the primary focus of my career.

Building an Antiracist Path

After completing my clinical training and becoming licensed as a psychologist, I opened a small private practice while pursuing an academic career. I worked in academia for 15 years, including 12 years as the director of a graduate program that trained master's-level counselors. In addition to pursuing research on White racial socialization and multicultural counseling competence, my position as director of the program enabled me to do systemic work. Over the years, our leadership team hired a diverse faculty wholly committed to infusing social justice principles into both the program's curriculum and the administrative structure, much to everyone's benefit. Every decision we made within the program tried to counteract the ways in which racial injustice manifested within the program and in the field, with the aim of creating opportunities for healing and transformation within and outside of the curriculum.

While as a faculty and staff we worked collaboratively, we were strategic about who was going to be the face of each initiative. For example, as the program director, I used my position to take the lead in educating students about the prejudice faced by Faculty of Color. I introduced newly hired Faculty of Color into our program in intentional ways, in an attempt to reduce the bias they would face. I also advocated for the program to be staffed by a majority of Faculty of Color, making sure they taught a variety of clinical—not exclusively multicultural—content, while we hired White faculty with the competency to deliver portions of our multicultural curriculum.

The development of our formal multicultural curriculum was a massive collaborative undertaking, which took a decade to design and fully implement. It included self-awareness labs where students could learn about their sociopolitical identities and support one another in seeing how these played out in real time while in the program. We invited speakers who expanded students' knowledge of specific populations (e.g., Arab Americans, trans people, undocumented immigrants) and issues (e.g., visible and invisible disabilities) that they may not have been exposed to previously but would be critical to their clinical effectiveness.

Each year we added topics or shaped the conversations to address the prevailing sociopolitical narratives of the moment, explicitly tying our professional ethics to current social justice issues. We integrated a study of U.S. multicultural history in several classes, thus educating students and faculty about the social context that created the injustices we witnessed around us. We emphasized understanding the cultural context from which counseling theories and techniques emerged, as well as how best to tailor them to each individual client given their unique identities. We envisioned and created an orientation that invited students and faculty to use the concepts of growth mindset and stereotype threat, so that students—especially those from marginalized groups—had resources for combating the predictable and unfairly onerous impact of marginalization on their educational attainment. Students were closely mentored by faculty, and they were also invited to participate in the shaping of their educational experiences via mutual feedback loops. Our intention was to teach students how to become agents of social change in the very process of learning how to advocate for themselves within our program. All the while, we instituted a self-care curriculum that acknowledged the challenging histories that many of us bring to the counseling profession, as well as the toll that clinical and social justice work can take on top of that. Not all strategies were successful or reached their full potential; however, taken together, they created a widespread sense of community and allyship, and our program became well known for graduating multiculturally competent counselors.

The journey to envisioning and implementing these strategies was neither linear nor smooth. At each step, I could lead the operationalization of our social justice agenda only to

the extent that I was aware of the ways in which white supremacy operated around me and through me. For those of us who are White, this is not an easy feat. We navigate a world that is not invested in having us see the ways in which we collude with or promote white supremacy; the status quo requires our participation and ignorance, and the norms, policies, and procedures of our institutions all but ensure that we remain complicit. What made all the difference for me was having the opportunity to develop authentic and loving relationships with Colleagues of Color—through whose experiences I could see a reality that I was otherwise not privy to—as well as friendships and allyships with other White people—with whom I could process what it means to be White in the United States, as well as the numerous blunders I made along the way. I was also fortunate to develop my template for collaborating with other White people through the antiracist learning group described by Ali in the prologue. In both of those sets of relationships, two skills were key: my ability to stay in relationship and my capacity to emotionally regulate. No real learning would have been possible without both of these skills.

Trauma-Informed Antiracism

Seven years into my director position, I took a sabbatical, during which I retrained as a trauma specialist. Treating trauma now integrates neuroscience and mindfulness-based principles, in addition to the traditional behavior and cognitive behavior strategies. After returning from my sabbatical, I took on the coordination of our program's trauma concentration, through which I emphasized the contextual (versus simply individual) forces that produce trauma and consequently our responsibility as clinicians to assess the impact of, and respond to, social power imbalances. So there I was, a licensed psychologist specializing in trauma and social justice, steeped in multicultural research. But I still kept coming to my work mostly from an intellectual, scholarly standpoint. In other words, my strategies relied on the knowledge I learned from books, research, and my relationships with allies in antiracist circles. This knowledge was immensely helpful and effective in enlarging antiracist spaces and antiracist practices within the institutions and individuals I was working with. But such enlarging still operated mostly within the confines of what was permissible by white supremacy. I was missing a fundamental understanding of how white supremacy infiltrates our physiology. In other words, I was missing the role of our human bodies.

Growing in our awareness of the dynamics of power and oppression is most often a drop-by-drop process. Yet occasionally we are gifted with insights that propel us exponentially forward. In fall 2019, I attended a weekend workshop by writer, activist, and ordained Zen priest Reverend angel Kyodo williams, co-author of *Radical Dharma: Talking Race, Love, and Liberation*. Attending Reverend angel's workshop was one of those moments. Early in the workshop, she stated, "If you are not talking about the body, you are not talking about race."¹ Despite the fact that I had been reading, writing, and teaching about multiculturalism for almost 20 years, that statement gave me pause. I could not quite tell what she meant. Reverend angel repeated the statement twice and then asked us to consider what we thought had to happen to a White woman's body in the 18th century as she walked through an open market to shop for her family. What feelings did she have to suppress in order to nonchalantly witness the brutal selling and parceling out of Black enslaved families, all while holding the hand of her own child? What part of her own humanity did she have to disengage from in those moments to deny the humanity of Black people? While this might feel like a shocking image, anti-Black terrorism is what we have been witnessing in various forms daily for decades—not to mention the past few years. What must happen to our White bodies to make terrorism against Black people tolerable to us?²

And there it was, in plain sight: the realization that, indeed, if we don't talk about the body, we are not talking about race. If we are not talking about the body, we are not talking about antiracist action. This insight became the thread that tied together my knowledge of trauma and social justice in ways I had not been able to do before. Our bodies are designed for survival first and to thrive only after that. As White people, we are taught that survival means

upholding the current system. Our safety is directly proportional to the extent to which we do so. Without understanding what is happening to us *physiologically* when we encounter injustice, our bodies will stand in our way of doing anything about it. Because so many White people have been *trained* to be numb to the pain of People of Color and Native people and to be complicit with racism, we have to untrain and retrain in order to be antiracist. Without *training* our bodies to reenlist our innate capacity for presence, perspective-taking, and empathy first and foremost, it's unlikely that any antiracist knowledge or intention will yield concrete actions. Empathy, as we'll see, is a force that allows us to resonate so deeply with the terror and pain we witness that it all but propels us to act. This is where our bodies matter very much.

By the time I was learning from Reverend angel, I had already left academia with the intent of sharing the tools of counseling and psychology in the service of social justice. But this newfound perspective brought into focus the extent to which counseling and psychology have the power to transform antiracist practice from an aspiration into a concrete and persistent path. Conversely, it made me realize how unlikely we are to take antiracist action—in spite of all our aspirations—when we don't incorporate an understanding of the body.

To be sure, knowing how our bodies are designed to protect us from real and imagined dangers, learning to discern their messages, and enlisting their support as we attempt to operationalize racial justice may not be all we need to create a just world. But our ability to work with our physiology is nothing short of essential for our antiracist effectiveness. When we don't consider our bodies, it is almost inevitable that our good intentions will remain mostly just that: aspirations—to everyone's frustration and consternation.

Throughout this book, I offer tools and practices that you can employ to work with your physiology so that you can take action toward social justice while connecting and collaborating with People of Color and Native people and with other White people. If some of this feels confusingly theoretical, don't worry. Getting unstuck doesn't rely on a sophisticated understanding of biology or complicated practices. The principles and practices I offer will make intuitive sense and are fully within your grasp. I hope they support your work as much as they have supported and continue to support mine.

Note

1. It wasn't until summer 2020 that I came across and read *My Grandmother's Hands* by Resmaa Menakem (2017). As a trauma and multicultural specialist, he details in profound ways the connection between our historical legacies of violence, our physiological responses in the presence of People of Color and Native people, and how these in turn inform and support our racist social structures.
2. What I describe in this paragraph is my recollection of what I took from Reverend angel's workshop, and I take responsibility for any misinterpretations or misapplications.