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INTERNAL WORK

Antiracism in a Human Body

My heart races, yet again, as I'm about to utter the word *Black* in a large faculty meeting. As I feel my blood pressure rise, I begin to forget what I was going to say, and my own exasperated inner voice screams at me: *Why is this so damn hard? What's wrong with me?* The colorblindness that has been ingrained in me insists that I should stay quiet, and I feel my mouth stutter, caught between what I know intellectually to be right and the feeling that saying *Black* out loud is wrong. To get beyond this moment, I employ my compassionate inner voice and reassure myself: *It's okay. . . . It's okay. . . .* And with that reassurance, I'm back, present in the meeting and refocused on my comments.

While I couldn't bypass that first reaction, I have trained myself to recognize it and come back from it fairly quickly, much of the time. This practiced internal skill allows me to lean into, engage in, learn from, and act when faced with uncomfortable topics or interactions, even ones as simple as overcoming the taboos arising from colorblind socialization. These skills allow me to get myself unstuck over and over again as I attempt to operationalize my antiracist knowledge and intentions.

This is the essential rationale behind the Internal Work sections of this book: it's impossible to take antiracist action to any extent without enlisting our body's consent—regardless of how knowledgeable or well-intentioned we might be. And when I say “action,” I don't simply mean attending protests, organizing, voting, or speaking up. We are biological beings, and as such, anything we intend to do must enlist our physiology; this includes thinking, listening, empathizing, and staying in relationship. And most of us White people find it indeed challenging to talk with other White people about race, hear about the racism experienced by People of Color and Native people, and even just think about how race shapes our lives—not to mention act in antiracist ways.

Because we are socialized within white supremacy, most of us grow up believing that speaking about race is impolite, even shameful. So when we are asked to engage in conversation on race and racism—say, in school, the workplace, or the community—we promptly feel under threat. Given this anxiety on the one hand and our lack of knowledge and skills on the other, we can fear the topic in all its forms. Simply uttering the word *race* or using a term such as *Latinx* can be anxiety-provoking. And this physiological response only deepens as the curtains are pulled back on white supremacy and we come to understand that the racism experienced by People of Color and Native people is in fact true. Early in these conversations, many of us can start feeling bad simply for being White, as if we carry some kind of indelible original sin. When someone points out our microaggressions, we all too often internally shame ourselves, deeming ourselves hopelessly racist, or we desperately try to prove ourselves otherwise. In short, engagement with the topic of race is intense. The body perceives it as a threat to such a high degree that, more often than not, it activates the areas of our brains designed to protect us. It encourages us to shut down and step away. This is why no amount of antiracist intellectual understanding alone will lead us to antiracist action. We need our bodies to stop preventing us from listening and learning—and, by extension, from acting. When we don't train to meet these challenges, we manifest “fragile” behaviors (DiAngelo, 2018), and

we do so in very predictable ways, to the exasperation of our peers and allies—and often even to our own dismay.

The good news is that in spite of what our bodies have been taught, sound waves produced by words reaching our ears are not actually physically dangerous. No race-related word has intrinsic harming power. No truth spoken by a Person of Color, a Native Person, or a White ally is physically harmful to us; in fact, such truths are incredibly useful gifts along an antiracist path. We perceive race-related words or truths about racism spoken aloud as a threat only because we are trained to do so. And our bodies are great students, especially when it comes to our safety.

While our culture and educational systems teach us to privilege the part of our nervous systems responsible for higher-order thinking, which is where our antiracist knowledge and planning reside, that capacity is not always primary, nor do we have unconditional access to it. As it turns out, fear unhinges it quite effectively and without our volition: when our bodies detect danger, we go into survival mode, which in turn overrides our attempts to notice race, think about race, speak about racism, or follow through with our antiracist intentions. So, indeed, it can feel *that damn hard* to align our antiracist words and actions with our antiracist plans. Our bodies are, quite literally, blocking us. And if you have picked up this book, you are most likely all too aware of that very fact. Just think back to any recent unresolved racially charged event when you felt anger, frustration, anxiety, or shame. You probably felt your blood pressure rise, your heart rate quicken, and your mind speed up and get foggy. Your body detected danger and, without your conscious consent, initiated what is called a *stress response*.

Our Survival Mechanism: The Stress Response

Our bodies are evolutionarily, biologically, and genetically designed first and foremost to survive. We come into the world profoundly underdeveloped (more so than any other species) and take a very long time to reach full development (more than 20 years, when it comes to our brains). While our need for care to survive is most apparent during our earlier years, our likelihood of surviving outside of community at any point during our lifetimes is slim to none. To demonstrate this intrinsic interdependence, simply take stock of how many people you have relied on by the time you eat breakfast in the morning, including the people who ensure that you have running water, that your electricity works, that there was milk stocked at the store, and that it was brought to the store from the farm so that you could pour it on your cereal (to paraphrase Martin Luther King Jr., 1963/2010). Think about what it would mean not to rely on that broad network of human beings, not to mention animals and nature.

Our intrinsic vulnerability and interdependence have profound implications for our biology, and the ways in which we maximize our chances of survival are encoded all over our nervous systems. Some of our neural survival mechanisms are reflexive and completely out of our control (e.g., blinking when an object approaches our eyes). Others depend on judgment calls, which still happen very quickly and often bypass our higher-order thinking centers. Think again about a recent tense conversation about race—chances are that you were already flushed and ready to react by the time you even registered what might have triggered you, and once you were triggered, I bet you felt all but clear-headed.

While we might not be able to control our reflexes, we can absolutely modulate our response to perceived danger. This Internal Work is about understanding what happens in our bodies when we engage in any antiracist practice—when we push back on the white supremacy myths that Ali will describe in Chapter 2. To be sure, our stress response is a supremely powerful, deeply hardwired neural strategy. Simply knowing about it is not enough to change its grip on us. But if we train to work with it, it does not have to prevail, either. The Internal Work sections in this book will help you do just that.

What exactly is the stress response, and how is it involved in our deep discomfort about race? It is the same neural mechanism designed to protect us from imminent danger. It became encoded into our genes a very long time ago, and it's present throughout most of nature. While this part of our nervous systems can be quite effective at allowing us to survive moments of acute danger (e.g., when we step onto the curb while a car is fast approaching), it's a rather blunt instrument: it reacts to all threats in the same exact way. Our stress response does not distinguish between real or imagined threats to our physical integrity, social status, or emotional well-being. Inconveniently, all these threats feel equally deadly and are responded to as such. Evolutionarily, this makes sense. Because communal support was essential to our physical survival, our bodies evolved to experience threats to our standing within the community as lethal, in the same way a saber-toothed tiger posed a lethal threat. However, the social and environmental contexts in which we live today are quite different from the milieu in which our genes evolved. Therefore, our neurological bias for overestimating what might constitute imminent danger can cause serious problems at a time when imminent threats from the natural world are not what we contend with most in our daily lives.

How Do Our Bodies Respond to Perceived Danger?

I am going to outline next exactly what happens when our nervous systems perceive danger. Before I do that, I want to specify that here I am not talking about the perceived danger generated by our bodies because White people are often taught to be afraid of People of Color and Native people—to see Black men as dangerous and to see Brown Muslim people as terrorists. Although our stress response is activated in these instances as well, this is not what causes most of our angst on an antiracist path. In fact, these might be some of the easiest and most obvious fears to recognize as unfounded. Here, I am pointing to the perceived danger our bodies detect in merely talking about race, in taking a risk of getting something “wrong” and unwittingly offending a Person of Color or Native person, or in being excluded from a respectable social circle. In other words, People of Color and Native people are not the threat that triggers our nervous systems in ways that impair us from acting in antiracist ways. It is challenging racism in other White people or in our institutions that scares us and limits us. It is the intensity of our guilt or shame that we find profoundly threatening. It is the fear of losing community and belonging that makes us retreat and stay silent. These pitfalls plague us the most while being the least visible to us.

What exactly happens, then, in our nervous systems when we detect danger in any form, real or imagined? In response to threats, our stress responses initiate a cascade of events, implicating a number of hormones, which compel us to enact one of three strategies. Which strategy we enact depends on our nervous systems' assessment of our ability to confront the threat:

1. If our nervous systems think we can overcome the danger, they propel us to *fight*. This strategy can manifest as physical or verbal aggression but also as intense thinking or ruminating and overplanning. It can look like blaming the victim, complaining about the timing and form of the feedback we receive, or replaying over and over what we should/could/would have said or done. It is most often associated with feelings of anger and frustration.
2. If our nervous systems think we can outrun the danger, they propel us toward *flight*. This strategy can manifest as physical avoidance or emotional/psychological withdrawal. It can look dramatic, like changing careers, quitting a committee, or physically leaving a conversation; it can also be more subtle, like disengaging

emotionally or verbally or letting the urge to give up prevail. It is most often associated with feelings of fear and anxiety.

3. If our nervous systems think that there is no chance for either overcoming or escaping the danger, they make us *freeze*. This strategy is meant to lessen the psychological and physiological pain of succumbing to the threat. Personally, I know I'm freezing when my mind goes blank. On the outside, we might look like a deer in the headlights or appear to be checked out. On the inside, we feel stuck, even utterly exhausted, all the energy draining from our bodies. We could go as far as feeling outside of ourselves or no longer in contact with what's happening around us. The freeze response is most often associated with feelings of shame and helplessness.

The more we feel unsafe, the more our nervous systems deploy these fight, flight, or freeze strategies. The more these strategies are deployed, the less access we have to the parts of our brains that allow us to think, learn, and empathize. In other words, in moments of perceived danger, our physiology is designed to concentrate all its energy on reestablishing safety and minimizing pain. Those moments are not the time to look around, get some perspective, befriend the enemy, or recall stored information. As you think back on a recent unresolved racially charged event in your life, you might begin to identify how these specific strategies manifested specifically for you.

As helpful as this mechanism is to survive a real, imminent threat to our physical integrity, it causes problems for the routine day-to-day interactions in which there is no real, tangible threat but toward which we initiate an all-out, out-of-proportion defensive response. Further, our stress response is actually toxic to us in the long term. Short bursts of a fight, flight, or freeze response stress our physiology just enough to strengthen it, like a good workout. But when these responses become too frequent, they are poisonous and have serious health consequences—just like our muscles are meant to be used but not overtrained. Chronic use of our stress response is not only detrimental to our health (e.g., by fostering heart disease, impairing our immune system, dysregulating cell repair, increasing inflammation, impairing learning and memory) but also highly problematic when it comes to race conversations. To the extent that these conversations feel scary, this mechanism will make it difficult to remain in relationship, use our antiracist knowledge, or notice all that is said to us or that is taking place around us. All these capacities are physiologically diminished. So you are not wrong—white supremacist training has made it *that damn hard* to practice antiracism in all its forms. But contrary to other species, we have a choice: we can follow the path of least resistance and remain reactive to what scares us, or we can train for courage and keep access to all our capacities, even when our bodies detect danger.

It is crucial to our antiracist effectiveness to realize that this is the biological context within which we receive messages about race. As Ali will describe in laying out five of the myths of white supremacy in Chapter 2, we are overtly trained to fear conversations about race by one part of our society—and then harshly judged by another part as intrinsically defective (read: racist) if we don't enter such conversations smoothly and with full competence. Even if others don't berate us for failing to do so, we berate ourselves. To make things worse, we are taught to suppress our emotions, which means that we often don't even know when we are having a fight, flight, or freeze response. And we are certainly not taught emotional-regulation skills that would help us manage our stress response.

In sum, very little in our cultural and social contexts prepares us to handle tensions around race in nonreactive ways. In fact, it would be more accurate to say that we are actively trained to be reactive. But we can't build racial competence on our reactivity. In fact, racial competence depends on our ability to recognize our reactivity and moderate it.

Strengthening Your Antiracist Practice

Notice Your Stress Response: Graduated Exposure

Graduated exposure is a great way to build your ability to notice when you are in a flight, fight, or freeze state and the particular forms these states take in your life under different circumstances. To start, list a few racially charged events that are distressing for you. You should list a mix of both mildly and intensely distressing events. For me, a mildly distressing racially charged event would involve becoming aware that I'm taking too much space as a White person in a conversation or realizing that I did not see how another White person's behavior was racist before a Person of Color or Native person pointed it out to me. I feel a lot more distress when I am told I have acted in racist ways. I still cringe thinking back to having mistaken a Neighbor of Color for someone else and remembering the expression on his face when I called him by the wrong name. We might even experience distress after speaking up against racism or while planning an event that challenges our institution to think differently, as we begin to imagine the potential for backlash.

Here are the steps to practice exposure:

Step 1: Identify five to ten racially charged events that are clearly distressing for you, thinking back to racially tense experiences you've participated in or witnessed in the past few months.

Step 2: Rate each experience from 0 (not distressing at all) to 10 (most distressing). Your distress scale should reflect your level of distress in general, not just as it pertains to racial tensions, so a rating of 0 reflects times when you were completely relaxed, and a rating of 10 indicates times when you were the most distressed you have ever felt, in any situation. In counseling, we call these Subjective Units of Distress.

Step 3: After you assign a Subjective Unit of Distress to each event, select any one event with a rating of 5 to 7 as your initial focus for exposure, and commit to working on it for few minutes each day—perhaps while you are commuting to work, doing the dishes, or brushing your teeth. Working on an event means

- *thinking* about it for a few seconds;
- *noticing* when your body begins to initiate a fight, flight, or freeze reaction;
- *watching* the physiological sensations that begin to emerge, again for a few seconds;
- and then spending as much time as needed re-grounding your body, by taking some deep breaths or mindfully tracking physical sensations (I offer a few additional practices in the Internal Work section following Chapter 2).

Once you feel relaxed again—whether it takes a few seconds or a couple of minutes—*repeat the process* a few times: go back to thinking about that same event again, notice and watch your fight, flight, or freeze reaction, and then re-ground yourself.

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Step 4: Once you become relatively quick at re-grounding yourself, select an event that has a higher Subjective Unit of Distress, perhaps around 8, and repeat the same exact procedure for this new target. But don't rush the process! No one's watching; no one's keeping tabs on how quickly you move through the list of events you have created. Only you can know when each event you have selected to work on still offers good practice—or when it has become too easy and is not offering you a challenging enough opportunity to practice pausing and re-grounding. The point is to train the muscle of re-grounding, and moving too quickly—but not thoroughly—up the ladder will not actually build your skills.

As you work through each of the scenarios you have selected, you will become quite proficient at handling not only the specific instance you've practiced and trained for, but also most instances that provoke a similar level of distress. In other words, the re-grounding muscles you develop in one context will automatically generalize to others with similar emotional undertones. So don't worry about working with all the events that you rated as a 5, for example, or that feel very similar. Keep challenging yourself to move up the scale or through different kinds of situations.

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