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# Free to Be - Understanding and Eliminating Racism

## Chapter 1: We are all Related

It is human nature to sort, categorize, and rank things. This begins at a young as (children sorting blocks). This lead to humans creating the idea of race. Chapter one drives home the point that we are all the same race: human, *Homo sapiens.* We all share a common ancestor. Humans have evolved physical differences due to the effects different environments around the world. For example, dark skin evolved in regions nearest to the sun to help protect people from the sun. Barrel chests (big lungs) evolved in areas of high elevation, such as Nepal, to help people take in more oxygen. These concepts are the main ideas of evolution. I believe that teaching evolution and genetics can young people break the misconception that races are genetically different. This chapter also makes it clear that stories and examples can be very powerful in showing how harmful racism can be.

Racism is something I rarely think about, but this chapter made me remember the few times I have witnessed it. In college, I was shocked to hear that my (Floridian) roommate was not allowed to have black friends over to her house. Here in Rochester, I have heard people refer to the parts of town where many Somalians live as “ghetto.” This doesn’t make sense because, in my experience, they are well-educated and hardworking citizens. I think that people are often wary of other races simply because they look different from themselves.

After reading this chapter, I wonder what I can do as a teacher to prevent and alleviate racism.

## Chapter 2: Who am I?

The story at the beginning of this chapter made me question why it seems so difficult to defend others. Wouldn’t we want somebody to defend us if we were the target of racism? It seems this apathy to racism can be attributed to a fear of being targeted ourselves.

After doing the “who am I” activity at the beginning of the chapter, I came up with the following list: daughter, big sister, teacher, tutor, coach, choreographer, dancer, friend, student, young adult, Wisconsinite, singer, chocoholic, light-sleeper, curious, reader, fashionista, hard-worker, small, and girl. Only two of these roles (small and girl) describe what I look like, and none of them mentioned my race. According to this chapter, it is common that white people do not describe themselves as white, but others do attribute their race with their identity. This is because they are often described by others as being black, Hmong, Puerto Rican, etc.

This chapter pointed out that racial identity becomes especially important in adolescents. This means that I must be especially careful to affirm the contributions of non-white scientists and students in my teaching. This may be especially important for my mixed-race students, who may feel rejected by all races. It is also important to model non-stereotypical attitudes for my students. This extends to other characteristics besides race such as socioeconomic status, language, religion, education level, sex, weight, age etc. All of these traits contribute to a teenager’s view of themselves.

## Chapter 3: Racism throughout History

Talking about race can definitely be uncomfortable, but we must remember, learn about, and talk about the past in order to prevent similar acts of racism in the present and future. While this is done (partially) with the racism toward African-Americans with regard to slavery and the civil rights movement, many other instances of racism are ignored. This tends to make people think that the only instance of extreme racism in this country was towards African-Americans. People barely talk about the massacre of Native Americans and internment of the Japanese during World War II. Although I have read a Danielle Steele book that described a Japanese internment camp from the perspective of one of its prisoners, I did not know that some Japanese Americans spent five years in these camps! The killing of Native Americans after the arrival of Christopher Columbus is something that only briefly mentioned in my history classes. It is estimated that 10 million North Native Americans were killed between 1492 and the twentieth century. Not recognizing this in history classes is ignoring a HUGE genocide that occurred and had significant impacts on “white” historical events. This makes it even harder to prevent racism towards Native Americans in the present.

I learned about the terrors of racism in the past through reading historical fiction books such as “The Road to Memphis,” “To Kill a Mocking Bird,” “Anne Frank,” “The Secret Life of Bees,” and “The Watsons go to Birmingham.” Books like these provide an easier way to discuss race in school and help students empathize with those of other races. These books were certainly memorable for me and have continued to remind me of the effects of racisms throughout my life.

## Chapter 4: Unconscious and Unintentional Racism

This chapter talked a lot about the concept of “white privilege,” something we have discussed in our summer classes. White privilege basically refers to the things that white people take for granted, that people of others races don’t experience. For example, I take for granted that 99% of the scientists I have learned about are white (though they are also mostly male). I have always seen people of my own races in popular movies TV shows, and magazines. My teachers have almost always been the same races as me. When I make a mistake, nobody uses it as evidence that my race is somehow inferior. I have never experienced being the only white person in a room full of people of another race. I have never felt that my race is “not normal.” I have never questioned the intentions of the police. I have never been the subject of cruel joke because of my race.

This chapter warns of the heavy influence that parents have on their children (regarding racism). Teachers can heavily influence their students as well. Part of the cause of negative stereotypes and misinformation is that different races are still segregated from each other. If we are not exposed to different races and cultures, we only have stories and news reports to base our opinions on. As the chapter concludes, simply acknowledging that racism exists is the first step in changing things for the better.

A question posed in the chapter understandings at the end of this chapter is an interesting one. Is telling racial jokes any different from telling blond jokes or “you mama’s so fat” jokes? I think that the problem with these jokes is that so many people actually believe the stereotypes that they encourage.

## Chapter 5: The Missing Stories

The beginning of this chapter reminded me that I am lucky to live in a country with such diverse cultures. It is a shame that my experience with most of these cultures has been limited. Part of the reason my exposure to other countries/cultures *histories* has been limited is because history was often an elective class. Looking back, something so important should not have been optional.

This chapter pointed out how important it is to teach about other cultures. While I was taught some about Native-Americans in elementary school, my education on their culture could have been *much* better. In addition, I did not learn anything about Eastern cultures, art, literature, government, philosophers, or history until my Non-Western Heritage classes in college. These classes were eye opening to say the least. I also did not know that Cleopatra was a black woman. I have even read a historical fiction novel about Cleopatra as a Princess with a picture of her on the cover that portrayed her as white. I wonder why her race is so often misrepresented. She would be a perfect example of a woman of color who is not a “victim.”

The problem of a lack of diversity in teachers is a tough one to solve. If people of color never see teachers (or doctors, or politicians, or reporters) who are also of color when growing up, it is unlikely that they are to ever going to pursue that career.

## Chapter 6: In-Your-Face Racism

In your face racism is something I have had to witness with two people that I respect. One time I was camping with two older people and something important (I don’t remember what) went missing. One of them decided that the black person he had seen earlier in the day had stolen it. I have also heard another adult that I respect make comments about Native Americans on the “Indian” Reservation near my cabin. When there was a series of break-ins, she blamed it on them. When I lost my bike, she blamed it on them and even went as far as driving by their houses to look for it. She also makes frequent stereotypes of those on the reservation being drunks and alcoholics. I also worked with a woman how would tell me about how lazy the “Indians” are. These were all very uncomfortable situations.

It is hard to hear people that you think of as “good” and “wise” make comments like this. I can’t imagine what it would be like to be the target of these words. If “good” people like this are spreading negative stereotypes about certain races, it’s no wonder that these kinds of thoughts continue to persist. I don’t believe I can tell older people that their comments are inappropriate (as this chapter suggests). However, I think it is appropriate to correct students and other your people. I will make sure to consistently model non-stereotypical behavior for the young people in my classes.

## Chapter 7: The Best Scouts in the Cavalry

Again, this book made me aware of “new” instances of slavery. Native American scouts were used to track other Native Americans. Jewish people were guards at Nazi death camps. Many of these people repressed their own cultures because they saw the fight as hopeless. Others persecuted their own races because they had internalized the racism of others. Some simply did it to delay their own deaths.

The presence of “whiteness” in American culture is rampant. I think that this is particularly true with women. Even Beyoncé, who is considered a black role model by many, takes steps to make her hair and her skin more “white.” I have been shocked to see how much time (and money) African-American girls spend on their hair. When I asked friends about it, they all had the same response. They told me that, to other black people, it is unacceptable to have natural hair. This meant that their hair had to be either chemically straightened, in braids, or short with straight haired extensions. It is possible that this was an example of internalized racism and that they subconsciously believe that their natural hair is not good enough.

After reading this chapter, the fear of freedom is still difficult for me to understand. This may be because freedom is something that I take for granted.

The “Crab Bucket” effect is even more common in teenagers, because it is a form of peer pressure. This effect does not have to be caused by race, but is seen in all races. When one student is more academically successful than their friends are, they are often teased for being geek or teacher’s pet.

## Chapter 8: To Be Free

Throughout this book, I have been reminded of Junior from the book “The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian” that I read for class this summer. The way he was treated by whites is very similar to the prejudices that this author (Thomas Peacock) has faced.

I don’t think we will ever be free of racism. As previously stated, it is in our nature to categorize and rank each other. However, there is lots that can be done to reduce the presence of racism. The first step (according to this chapter) is to look within ourselves and examine our current believes. We should determine if there is anything that we need to change about ourselves before moving on to others. Simply being conscious of any racist thoughts and the idea that one is privileged, can begin to train our minds to think differently. It is also important to understand the causes of racial conflict. One of the root causes is the gap between the “haves” and the “have-nots.” Addressing this gap would decrease future conflicts.

The next step in reducing racism is simply to talk about it with others. This is often an uncomfortable topic, especially for whites. This book (Free to Be) was written as a discussion starter for the issue of racism.

The final step is to take action in order to prevent, reduce, and alleviate racism in our schools, communities, and neighborhoods. This can be done by donating time and money, and by encouraging others to also join the fight. Educating others about racism today is especially important. If people believe that racism no longer exists, they certainly will not join the fight against it. This is where teachers can help. Curriculum for all subjects and all grade levels should include voices from all ethnic backgrounds.