

**DOING
NOTHING
IS NO
LONGER
AN
OPTION**

**ONE WOMAN'S JOURNEY INTO
EVERYDAY ANTIRACISM**

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WHITE GUILTY GIRL

No one ever talks about the moment you found out that you were white. Or the moment you found out you were Black. That's a profound revelation. The minute you find that out, something happens. You have to renegotiate everything.

TONI MORRISON

“I WANT TO DO MORE THAN SMILE at Black people when I pass them on the sidewalk,” I said earnestly to the woman seated on the couch across from me.

We were in her basement office, I was twenty years old, a junior in college, and had just made it to the interview round for a trip my university sponsored each year called Sankofa. *Sankofa* (SAHN-koh-fah) is a word in the Twi language of Ghana that often translates to “looking back to move forward.” Once accepted, I would be one of forty students who left Chicago, boarding a bus to the South, for a deeper dive into the racial history of our country, gaining a deeper awareness and understanding primarily of the Black and White experiences and histories in the United States.

During our sophomore year, one of my closest friends, Megan, had gone on the trip. It was a powerful, important experience for her and it changed so many perspectives she had held her whole life. Megan was a White girl from Minnesota who had spent much of her childhood as a missionary kid in Bolivia, so I thought maybe it was a trip for people like

her—people who had lots of crosscultural experiences or spoke a language besides English or had some reason to willingly step into an experience that at the time felt optional to me. My crosscultural experiences consisted of taking German in high school, going on a church trip to Europe, and convincing my university that an internship in New York City at NBC News should count toward my study abroad credit.

“You should go next year. I think it would be really good for you,” Megan told me after she returned.

I wanted to ask, “Why me? Do you think I need this more than other people? That I’m some sort of racist in need of an intervention?” Instead, I nodded as I told her that I would definitely consider it, even as I wondered why I should sign up to sleep on a bus and travel across state lines in search of answers to a problem I didn’t understand or even fully see. I would later realize that what had initially felt like a call-out was actually an invitation.

Over the course of the next year, I watched Megan’s friend circle diversify beyond our group of girlfriends (sadly, that didn’t take much—as I look back at pictures from college, not only were we all White, but most of us were Swedish and blond), and I saw her engage in new causes and advocacy with the Black Student Association on campus. Something had shifted in her as a result of that trip.

I was drawn to this change, to her sense of purpose, to the stretching and widening I was witnessing. I had always been an idealist. From a young age, I learned about problems or injustices and felt a personal responsibility to make them better. I remember spending many childhood hours poring over a book called *It’s Our World Too*. It was filled with stories of kids from all over the country fighting hunger, or raising awareness about AIDS, or standing up to gangs. It inspired me with possibility. It also felt worlds away from where I was growing up.

My childhood years were spent outside of Chicago as the middle child of three to my parents, who had made their way to the northwestern suburbs by way of Iowa. They met on a blind date at Iowa State in the 1960s: my father, the sweet and nerdy English major with his love of

words and story and knowledge, and my mother, the whip-smart education major who came from a long line of independent and accomplished women. Despite the disappointment of infertility, they started our family through the adoption of my older sister. Ten years later, my mom was five months pregnant with me before she learned that—miracle of miracles—she was expecting. A few years later after another unexpected but wanted pregnancy for my mom, my younger brother was born.

As we grew up and learned about my sister's adoption story, the details were almost always told the same way: "We didn't even think adoption would be available to us. Our close friends were actually supposed to adopt your sister, but they got pregnant and asked us," Mom would always begin. "I remember getting the call that they had chosen us, hanging up the phone, and literally jumping up and down on our couch. We were so excited," Dad would continue.

The fact that my sister's adoption came through so easily felt like a miracle to my mom and dad. "To adopt a healthy White infant in the United States in the early 1970s was almost impossible, and you would likely be waiting for years," they would often say. But it wasn't just the excitement of a baby coming to our family; it was the marvel that it was a healthy *White* baby. There was no reason stated why a White baby was preferred, but their enthusiasm made it clear.

I can count on one hand the times I remember my family talking about race growing up. This story about my sister's adoption was so ingrained in our family's story that it was years before I recognized it as my first conscious racialized experience. It was the first time skin color had been assigned unequal value, and the first time a hole was poked in the philosophy of sameness and colorblind thinking I was steeped in. I don't believe my parents intended to uphold some sort of White supremacy thinking. But in some ways, it was understood that a White baby would be "easier," partially because it would be less likely to invite complicated questions about our family. Not until many years later did I realize that maybe my parents didn't feel prepared to raise a Black child, or that the "solution" might not have been as simple as White parents adopting kids of color.

But while I learned the words to the song “Jesus Loves the Little Children” and sang earnestly that all the children of the world were indeed precious in his sight, I had this very unexplored experience that led me to wonder if some were more “precious” than others.



By the time I turned eleven, I had my Saturday morning TV-watching routine down. I usually had the whole basement to myself, but this Saturday my dad was downstairs working on his computer. That week’s episode of the teenage sitcom *California Dreams* was called “Guess Who’s Coming to Brunch,” and it was more hard-hitting than the show’s usual formula of a high school rock band. Tony, the Black drummer, started dating a rich White girl named Kimberly—but when Tony went to meet her parents, Kimberly’s dad handed him a check for one thousand dollars to stop dating her.

Kimberly’s dad: It just doesn’t work. You’re both from different worlds.

Tony: Different worlds. You mean because I’m Black?

In the next scene, Tony sits with his all-White bandmates.

Tony’s friend: I can’t believe he actually asked you not to date Kimberly because you’re Black! What did you do?

Tony: What do you think I did? I told him to forget it. It’s not like I never met prejudiced people, it’s just that the dude seemed so cool.

Jenny’s dad (Mr. Garrison) walks into the room, having clearly overheard their conversation: Well, don’t be surprised, Tony. A lot of people pretend to be open-minded until they have to deal with someone who’s different.

Tony: What about you, Mr. Garrison? Would you have a problem if I started dating Jenny?

Jenny’s dad: Of course not.

At this point I looked up from the worn loveseat and caught my dad's eye. I couldn't tell if he had been listening.

As my dad wrapped up his work at the computer, I asked if he had heard any of the episode. He hadn't, so I filled him in, watching his face more intently as I got closer to the crucial, revealing question that would tell me if my dad was like Jenny's dad or Kimberly's dad.

"Would you have a problem if I dated a Black guy, Dad?"

"No," Dad replied. Immediate relief washed over me. My dad passed the test!

And then he continued, "I would just be concerned that if you got married and had kids, it would be hard on them. Mixed race kids often don't know where they belong, and that can be really confusing."

Now I was the one confused. First of all, I was eleven, so even talking hypothetically about dating felt like a stretch, but hypothetical marriage and hypothetical biracial kids? I was not expecting this. More importantly, I still didn't understand my dad's concern, and I walked away from the conversation feeling unclear.



As I look back now, there were other elements of my childhood environment that were puzzling, disparities I noticed about the demographics of my elementary school (the buses that went to single-family houses contained all White kids, while the students who walked to the nearby apartment complex were mostly Black and Brown) and the neighborhood we lived in. But *thankfully*, much of what confused me or made me feel uncomfortable while I was growing up I was merely a witness to, not an active participant. At least that's what I thought. Then one day I found the finger I had been unconsciously pointing at others staring me right in the face.

I worked at Old Navy over winter break of my sophomore year in college. For those four weeks I folded clothes, attended the dressing rooms where I answered questions about fit and whether or not these jeans came in another size, and listened to holiday remixes of all the classics.

It was company policy for employees on the floor to wear headsets. Mine always got too close to my mouth and I almost never had to say anything, so I often wore it with the mic adjusted away from my face, wrapped into the headset band like a headband. It was mostly quiet, but managers would get on to let us know if someone needed to take a break or if there was a line in the dressing room.

Then one afternoon, a shift manager got on and asked me to meet her in the baby section. I adjusted my headset, pushed the “talk” button, and indicated that I was on my way. She was in my ear again before I reached her, her voice lowered to almost a whisper. “There’s a family that has been stealing from our store and they are back. I need your help.”

“Okay, so do you want me to talk to them or . . .” I started to reply. I could feel my cheeks getting warm and my words trailing off. I was confused as to why she was asking for my help and unsure what to do. At my interview they had only asked about coworkers stealing; they hadn’t trained us on how to deal with shoplifters.

“No.” The urgency in her voice snapped me back to the moment, to the task at hand. “Just follow my lead and help me catch them.”

We left the baby section and turned the corner into the girls section. My manager and I started making our way toward the pair. When I saw the direction she was headed and who was at the center of her search, two Black women came into focus. I couldn’t tell how old they were or what they were wearing, but I can tell you that they picked up their pace as we came toward them. And then they made a dash for the exit. I heard my manager shout something that made me instinctively pick up my walk to a jog, and I felt my body carry me out the door after them. I watched them race to their car in the suburban shopping center, clearly empty-handed. And as I slowly walked back into the store, my manager’s face showed she was irritated.

“What happened?” she asked.

“Nothing. They got in their car and drove away,” I replied as I felt the adrenaline leaving my body and became aware that I had just run outside in December wearing nothing but a thin cotton T-shirt. I realized

that I'd just blindly followed my manager and that maybe it wasn't "nothing" that had just happened. Because I couldn't know for sure if I would have chased them if they had been White.



A year later when the Sankofa trip dates were announced and the process opened up, I felt an urgency in my spirit as I turned in my application. For the first time I was starting to be aware of patterns and themes in what I understood before as a smattering of isolated incidents. I wanted to push past a minimal examination that had mostly satisfied me until this point.

When asked in my interview why I wanted to go, I took a few moments, my heart racing and all of these memories whirling as I struggled to form the right response. After what felt like a tad too long to process what should be a simple and obvious question, I heard myself say something about smiling at Black people.

They accepted me on the trip despite my answer. Or more likely because of it.

I cringe at that answer now. And I also still understand it—genuinely feeling the need to be extra friendly in public, to reassure Black strangers on the sidewalk that I wasn't the type of White person they had to worry about (clearly, I had stuffed some of my earlier behavior way down). For most of my life up to my Sankofa interview, the beginning and the end of my thoughts and actions regarding race was: *What should I do to let people know I'm not a racist? Because we all know being racist is really bad. And super mean. So to not be racist probably means to be nice. Smiling is nice. I'll do that. It's such a bummer that African Americans are incarcerated at five times the rate of White people. I've decided the best course of action against this injustice is to smile. Have a great day!*

But here's what I didn't know at the time: that this trip and this antiracism work wasn't reserved for a certain type of White person. It didn't care if I smiled or if I frowned, if I was as nice or as mean as can be. I would come to learn it did not discriminate.

There is nothing wrong with smiling or being nice. The problem is when that becomes the test for how one might actually be complicit in racism. And if as White people our main objective in entering into activism or conversations about race is to prove that because of x, y, or z we couldn't possibly be a racist, we are missing the point. And perhaps, even more importantly, we are missing out.

I most certainly was.

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