

ANTIRACIST IN TRAINING

I was horrified, broken-hearted, and angered when I watched the video of the May 25, 2020 killing of George Floyd. The ensuing protests, news, and social media enveloped me. The refrain from Woody Guthrie's 1940s protest song "This Land Is Your Land" came to mind: "this land was made for you and me." I do not know who you are, but this land was really made for me because I am a 58 year old white man. And it is a long time overdue for me to speak up and actually do something about racism.

Who Do I Think I Am?

But who am I to spout off about racism?

I am not a spokesperson for white people. I am not a spokesperson for men. I am not even a spokesperson for 58 year olds. I am not a Republican or Democrat. I am a father. And I am in love with a black woman. But I am really just a white guy trying to face racism and do better. I never considered myself a "racist." Being racist was bad. I consider myself "good." And for a long time I believed that simply being non-racist was good enough. I believed that "I am non-racist" equals "I am good" equals "end of story."

Yet I know that I am not all "good" or "bad." While I don't recall uttering racial slurs, had I objected when folks around me did? Did I call out racist jokes told in my presence? Or did I simply ignore them? And is identifying as "good" or "bad" even helpful when assessing racism? Perhaps it is just a convenient white excuse so that I can reap the benefits of racism while rationalizing my own passivity. But the killings of George Floyd, Eric Garner, Trayvon Martin, Tamir Rice, Breonna Taylor, and so many more screamed out that neutrality is not enough.

So how do I tackle something as pervasive as racism? Well, I wasn't always an old white guy. So I started by reflecting. I recalled inflection points where I was aware of racism in my own life. And equally important, I identified points where I was blind to racism and my blanket of "white privilege." Maybe the first step in examining my relationship with racism begins with my hometown. It was like visiting Niagara Falls for a cup of water.

You Can Take The Boy Out Of Parma, But ...

I was born in the early 1960s, the third of four kids raised by a white father and mother in a northeastern Ohio suburb. Dad worked a blue collar job in Cleveland while Mom was a homemaker. I looked up to my two older brothers and looked after my younger sister. I have fond memories of riding a banana seat bike with raised handlebars, playing football on the front lawn, and running amok until the street lights came on.

However, I already had my first inflection point with racism just because of where I was born. My hometown was part of a huge suburban sprawl around Cleveland, Ohio

in the 1950s and 1960s. Parma had over 100,000 residents in the 1970s. While Cleveland had a 38% minority population in the 1970s, Parma was 99.7% white. This, I later learned, was no accident.

But I was focused on kid things like losing wrestling matches with my brothers and swimming at the local pool. Dad coached and officiated our swim and water polo teams. Mom came to our meets and helped with bake sales. We became incredibly close with other aquatic families. I competed with them in the pool, slept over at their houses, rode bikes with them, and lost “Sloppy Joe” eating contests. Yet I was surrounded by a blanket of whiteness not unlike the northeastern Ohio snow that I shoveled each winter.

One exception was an Asian American family of Japanese descent. The youngest son was my best friend. We each were the youngest of three boys in our families. He had an older sister. I ate my first seaweed salad at their home. His mom cut my hair. His grandma had a magical “feely plant” with leaves that closed to my touch. While our parents played pinochle upstairs, the six boys had lights-off, no-holds-barred pillow and bean bag fights in their basement. It felt idyllic. But he recently confirmed that he felt prejudice in Parma. I later learned that both his mom and grandma had been held in an internment camp during World War II. Yet nobody seemed to bother him when we were together. Maybe I just didn’t notice.

Perhaps my youthful ignorance was due to being teased myself. While my last name is Bohemian, both my mom’s and grandmother’s maiden names end in “ski.” Our family identifies as Bohemian and Polish. And being Polish in Parma meant constant ridicule. Late night Cleveland cable TV show hosts joked about the Parma “Polaks” who wore white tube socks (we did), ate kielbasa and pierogis (we did), and displayed pink flamingo lawn ornaments in their front yards (we didn’t). Yet, that was teasing, a far cry from racism.

But around age 10, I had my first two conscious inflection points with racism.

The first was tied to our church. My family attended St. Anthony Catholic Church. Now I was raised at home to love, respect and be kind to others. At St. Anthony, I was taught to “do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” But I recall piling into our Ford country sedan station wagon after Mass one day. Something from the sermon didn’t add up. I asked my parents how can non-Catholics, like my best friend’s family and so many of our closest friends, not be going to Heaven?

I realize my question was more of a Catholic versus Non-Catholic question, or even more simply in my 10 year old mind, more of an “us” versus “them” question. I was part of “us,” but I already viewed “them” to be the finest people I knew. I swam, played, ate, and essentially lived with “them” throughout my youth. I had no idea about the series of papal bulls, including Pope Nicholas V’s *Dum Diversas* (1452) and Pope Alexander VI’s *Inter Caetera* (1493), whereby the Christian church authorized slavery,

the seizure of "non-Christian" lands, and sanctioned the development of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. That history was never part of any sermon I heard.

The second occurred at school. In fifth grade I was a finalist in State Road Elementary School's Spelling Bee. I studied all the primers before that big day. In the end, it was just a sixth grade girl and me in a spell-off for the title and a trip to the state spelling bee. After five words apiece, I misspelled a word that she correctly spelled to win. I was embarrassed and deflated. But in 1972 Parma, Ohio, I had never before seen or heard the word I had misspelled: emancipation.

So I paid extra attention to the "history" I was taught at Shiloh Junior High School. I learned about the Civil War, how the South had fought to keep slavery, and the Emancipation Proclamation. My junior high school was even named after the Battle of Shiloh in which Ohioan, and future President, Ulysses Grant launched a surprise morning counterattack against the Confederate forces in Tennessee. My teen self thanked goodness I was from Ohio and not the "South." I considered myself amongst good "northerners," even though my own ancestors had not migrated to the United States until the 1890s.

Yet, I didn't meet any African Americans in my school, or our church, or anywhere else in Parma. While we did not discuss race at the dinner table, I already gleaned that black people lived in Cleveland. I also perceived the city to be dangerous compared to our suburban neighborhood.

But I also swam for Brooklyn YMCA which was closer to Cleveland. I would hang out Tuesday and Thursday nights in the game room waiting for one swim practice to end so the other half of the team could practice. Dad coached both practices in the four lane, 20 yard long, basement pool. So while my brothers swam, I shot pool, played ping pong, and tried to outsmart the snack machine.

The other game room regulars were YMCA locals about my age: a wiry Latino boy with a red bandana around his head, a wise-cracking tall black kid, and his pudgy younger brother who had a bumper pool trick shot where he popped the ball over the bumpers right into the hole. We became friends after I won a game of 8-ball. But most important to my awkward teen self was that these different looking kids were absolutely cool with me. Perhaps this was another crack in my internal "us" versus "them" perception.

Fast forward to June 8, 1980, the hot, humid Ohio day that I was class speaker at Parma Senior High School commencement. Throughout school I was laser focused on my first love (water polo) and everything else followed: grades, girls, swimming, hanging with my buds, and music. Our class had 800 graduates in a school of nearly 2,500 students, but we had only a few black students in the entire school.

The United States government had taken notice of this racial disparity. Only three days before commencement, a federal judge ruled that from 1968 to 1975 Parma

had practiced a pattern of racial discrimination to keep Blacks out of Parma.¹ Our city asserted a litany of specious arguments and claimed that Blacks did not want to live in Parma or anywhere west of the Cuyahoga River. But the judge found that it took “little education and sensitivity” to perceive the attitude reflected by Parma’s City Council President when he publicly stated that “I do not want Negroes in the City of Parma.”² Parma’s Mayor claimed our city was already integrated since it had 3 black families (out of 100,000 residents).³ But Cleveland’s Mayor Carl Stokes, the first elected black mayor of a major U.S. city, testified that “blacks have not crossed the Cuyahoga River [into Parma] and ‘not because they couldn’t swim.’”⁴

The judge also pointed to a 1971 community meeting sponsored by the Ladies Guild of St. Anthony Catholic Church where attendees questioned a federal Housing and Urban Development (HUD) official about whether a proposed housing development was “public” housing and whether persons from the “East Side” of Cleveland could become tenants. Parma residents opposed the project because they expected Blacks to become residents.⁵ Remember my young “us” versus “them” question about non-Catholics being barred from Heaven? Well, this was a “ladies guild sponsored” meeting from that very church at about the very same time. Amen?

None of this was discussed in my high school civics class. Maybe my head was sunk too deep underwater at the pool. But I recently spoke with other classmates and they also do not recall this ever being discussed. Did I mention our high school mascot was a Native American chief in warpaint and headdress? We were nicknamed the “Redmen.”

But I was leaving Parma for college.

Do The Right Thing — I Got It, I’m Gone

The first “racial” thing I noticed just a two hour drive down Interstate 71 at The Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio was that there were black students and plenty of them. And there were people of all colors, and not just students, but professors and administrators too. It felt worldly and vibrant. I aced my classes, captained the water polo team, and frequented the High Street bars.

In the spring of my freshman year, a 3 time Olympic water polo player from Egypt volunteered to coach our team. Samir Gharbo was a remarkable man with a thick accent, spectacular smile, and huge heart. He led us to many Big Ten Championships. He even jumped in the pool with us one time, still remarkably fit and skilled at sixty years old.

¹ The United States v. The City of Parma, Ohio, 494 F. Supp. 1049, 1052 (N.D. Ohio 1980).

² U.S. v. Parma, at 1065, 1079.

³ U.S. v. Parma, at 1066.

⁴ U.S. v. Parma, at 1103, fn. 18.

⁵ U.S. v. Parma, at 1081.

He was also Muslim, which I discovered early one morning when I found him deep in prayer at a host home during an “away” tournament. I later learned he was a leader in various Islamic foundations and associations. By the grace of God, or Allah, Coach Gharbo was the first Muslim I met. He became a lifelong friend, chiseling away at another “us” versus “them” perception.

Sophomore year I bussed to west campus to work at a bagel shop. One repeat customer caught my eye. I teased her when I found out she grew up in Michigan, that rival state up north. She flashed a great smile. One day she was on the same bus back to main campus. Soon we were walking along the Olentangy River that bisects campus. We sat down on a bench overlooking the river. And we kissed.

I cannot recall much about that kiss other than it did not unleash the Apocalypse. What I do recall is that we talked about how neither of our families or friends would condone us dating because she was a black woman and I was a white man. While she brought it up, I had no rebuttal and we never saw each other again. Yet I never bothered to ask my family or friends back then if my perception was even accurate. When I reflect on it now, I had absorbed white bias into my world view while conveniently blaming family and friends for my perspective.

That summer, Grandpa Zak died. In the months before his death, I witnessed my Grandpa, Grandma, and parents interact with his final caregiver who opened her heart to all of us. She was a black hospice nurse. When Dad hugged her at the funeral, I still recall the tears in his eyes, the tears in hers, and the tears in my own. Even if my internalized color divide had not fallen, there was perhaps a passage way through tied to compassion.

I graduated in 1984 and was admitted to Ohio State’s Law School. But since the water polo team held “club” status, I competed throughout law school. So I did not hang out with many fellow law students. No study groups. Few law school mixers. I just studied law and equity and justice from excellent professors while water polo served as my release from the pressures of law school.

Thank goodness, or perhaps Sidney Poitier, for Spike Lee. I watched my first “Spike Lee Joint” while still in law school and became a huge fan. “Do the Right Thing,” released in 1989, rocked my world view. By then I was married to a white woman from Ohio and working for a primarily white Los Angeles law firm. “Do The Right Thing” is brilliant and unfortunately still timely. One particular scene forever stuck with me.

Spike’s character Mookie, hurrying down the sidewalk to deliver a pizza, passes Da Mayor (played by Ossie Davis) who is sitting on the steps of a brownstone. Da Mayor calls out to Mookie to get his attention, slows him down, and looks him in the eye to tell him: “Always do the right thing.” Mookie stares back and asks: “That’s it?” Da Mayor replies: “That’s it.” Mookie says: “I got it. I’m gone,” and hurries away. I’ve repeated those lines so many times they absorbed into my consciousness.

Swimming With The Current

But I interpreted “do the right thing” to mean simply love, respect, and be kind to others. So I worked hard but kind. I relocated to San Diego and became an attorney in mostly white law firms with mostly white clients. I became a father. And I continued my love affair with the water, playing Masters water polo, surfing, and annually swimming the La Jolla Rough Water Gatorman 3 mile race.

By 2004, I had a big house and comfortable life, but I was also divorced and burnt out from the legal grind. My 13 year old son asked me the simplest of questions: if you want to write and surf why don't you just sell this house and do it? From the mouth of babes. I sold the house, closed my firm, and moved to a village on the island of Crete in Greece. For the next three years, I wrote, swam, surfed, and read a lot, seeking out a higher consciousness. I bounced between San Diego and Greece, but also Bali, Costa Rica, Mexico, Thailand, Cambodia, Argentina, and Chile. My aquatic connection grew even deeper.

A long ocean swim, much like a self awareness sabbatical, takes a lot of determination, stamina, and perseverance. There is chop and swell and sting rays and jelly fish and kelp and chafing and tedium and sometimes even sharks. But it is much easier to swim with the current. When you do, you never even notice the current. Turn to swim against the current, however, and it pummels you. No matter how hard you stroke it feels like going nowhere.

I began to realize I had been swimming with the current my whole life simply because I was white. The people of color I met during my sabbatical, with whom I was practicing and receiving so much kindness, blasted away at my internalized “us” versus “them” divide. I came to believe that the two great motivators in life are love and fear. I chose love, challenging myself to apply the most loving solution to any dilemma. I also created a black female character in the novel I was writing. I named her Isabella.

Love Illuminates Everything

I returned to San Diego in 2007 to revise my novel and save for my son's college tuition. By the grace of perhaps Poseidon this time, I became General Counsel to a dynamic financial services company and managed a diverse legal department. But in 2013, my father died and I recommitted to finally publishing my novel.

The next year, at the ripe old age of 52, my life forever changed. I like to say we met the old fashioned way because she was standing by a keg of Abita Purple Haze at a mutual friend's birthday party in Silverlake, California. We spoke for hours and connected on everything under the moon, and for me everything over the moon too. A week later we had our first date. We kissed and something greater than the Apocalypse unleashed: an absolute beginning. We've been together ever since. Her name is Kyona and she is a certified yoga therapist and holistic healer. She is also a black woman.

In 2015, I released my debut novel The Poet's Secret and dedicated it to Kyona. We embarked on a whirlwind book tour sandwiched between my corporate travel for my day job. I fell in love with her family. She fell in love with mine. We suffered family losses together, some relatively expected and some devastatingly tragic. I've had many race-based conversations with Kyona's Baba John, a retired licensed clinical social worker and percussionist who used to play with their family friend, singer, and activist Eartha Kitt. He still plays with Dembrebrah, a drum and dance group that celebrates the beat of African history and culture.

For Kyona's parents' 50th anniversary we rented a historic mansion in New Orleans, her mother Aggie's home town. Built in the 1860s, it had a porticoed entry, eighteen foot ceilings, a grand foyer with curving staircase, and a fireplace in every room. One morning, I found Kyona's mom staring at the remarkably worn wooden steps on the back staircase near the kitchen. She had tears in her eyes. It was a powerful remembrance of those who had tread those back steps. We hugged. The old saying is that love is blind. But love illuminates. I just have to be open to the light.

Good and Plenty

In 2019, I retired from the corporate world and formed a private foundation to support sustainability, conservation, and social equity. My successor, a Latina attorney, is a dear friend who worked alongside me for over a decade. Yet I realized I had not encountered enough female attorneys of color in my legal career. So the foundation kicked off by funding a scholarship at Ohio State's Moritz College of Law for a student from a diverse background. Our eminent scholar recipient is a black woman from Ohio now in her second year.

Another donation related to my younger sister who I "looked after" as a kid. She became a teacher I now "look up to." She teaches middle school students and is affiliated with Facing History and Ourselves, a non-profit that uses authentic lessons from history to challenge teachers and students to stand up to bigotry and hate.

And earlier this year, as we celebrated the centennial of our 1920 craftsman bungalow home, we found a 1912 restrictive covenant attached to our deed that prohibited sale to anyone other than the "White or Caucasian race." While illegal and unenforceable, this wording had nonetheless been recorded in the sale of the property for 100 years. California law provides a simple, but little known, method for homeowners to redact such racist restrictive covenants from the official records. So we did. I wrote a "how to" article that got picked up in the local news.

Nothing about any of this is heroic. It is just trying to do good with the plenty we became fortunate to manage.

Rest In Power

Then came May 25, 2020. George Floyd's death was yet another blatant reminder of racism. I had to own it. As a lifelong beneficiary of white privilege, I had also inherited a responsibility. Racism was my problem.

I could not get an official Black Lives Matter sign fast enough, so I made one in the garage. Yet we had never displayed anything other than an Ohio State flag on football Saturdays. Even though I was living with the woman of my dreams, in the protest charged environment I wondered whether displaying a Black Lives Matter sign might target us for racist hate. The sign went up.

The next day a neighbor asked where I got my sign. I told him I made it. He offered to pay for another. I joked it would cost too much. But I had felt something while coloring with those magic markers on cardboard. I was finally joining the movement. I wanted him to feel that feeling, but I made him a sign anyway. And I made three more for other neighbors and one for my son.

I began drawing a weekly series of chalk art on the sidewalk in front of our house. The first piece was a list of names surrounding Rest in Power / Honor Our Brothers And Sisters / Be the Change / Make History / Now / Do The Work / Choose Love. Besides George Floyd, I wrote 70 more names before running out of sidewalk. Each was the name of an unarmed person of color killed by police. I knew some of the names, but as I researched others I wondered how could I be so oblivious? I added John and Jane Doe for the legions I left off. When I wrote the name of Tamir Rice, the unarmed 12 year old boy killed in Cleveland, I thought a lot about my YMCA game room buddies from years ago.

I added short quotes to some of my later chalk art, like Thoreau's "Let Your Life Be a Counter-Friction To Stop the Machine" and Maya Angelou's "We Are More Alike." Folks often stopped or turned around to review the chalk art. Some took pictures. Our foundation donated to The Equal Justice Initiative, NAACP, and United Negro College Fund. I donated to Black Lives Matter. We marched in protest. All of this felt necessary and urgent and long overdue. But "thoughts and prayers" and donations were not enough.

I needed to do the real work and learn more. It turns out that knowledge is nearly free with a library card and internet connection. So I began to read with a new set of eyes and urgency. In some way, all of the reading felt familiar to my sabbatical, except now I was raising my racism awareness.

I knew race itself is a cultural construct. I found a succinct summary in Subtle Acts of Exclusion, How to Understand, Identify, and Stop Microaggressions by Tiffany Jana and Michael Baran. Racial groupings are not a description of actual biological difference. Any racial "differences" are based upon long debunked theories. Debating this point is like claiming the earth is flat. An old high school friend nicely summed it up: our DNA is all the same, the rest is cultural propaganda. My own ancestry test of course confirmed that my ultimate origins, like every human, trace back to Africa. That should

be the all caps boldface opening of every ancestry report: We are biologically one human family. Africa is our origin.

So how can I better embrace this truth?

Shedding the false history I was taught felt like a good next step. Both the church and state created and promoted racist ideas to differentiate black people from white people to justify the enslavement of Africans. False distinctions about race have been perpetrated for so many centuries that too many still unconsciously accept them. Ibram Kendi's brilliant book, Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America connects the dots of how systemic racism built and to this day permeates the United States. Racism is an insidious form of brainwashing that affects us all, myself included.

Passivity and kindness would not undo my racist indoctrination. To oppose racism I had to study and practice antiracism. Fortunately, Dr. Kendi's How to Be An Antiracist provided the map I needed. The entire book is incredible, but one particular phrase resonated: "the heartbeat of racism is denial, the heartbeat of antiracism is confession." I had to face my ego. Even with all of my hard work I have been swimming with the current of white privilege every stroke of my life. That is a humbling realization.

Robin DiAngelo's White Fragility and Ijeoma Oluo's So You Want to Talk About Race helped me identify and work on my embedded white defenses. Dismantling my internalized good/bad binary became critical. Perceiving myself as "good" is great for protecting my ego, but it only clouds addressing my bias. I had used almost every "color blind" defense ("I don't see color") and "color celebrate" defense ("I am in love with a black woman") to avoid wrestling with my bias. Once I identified and understood these defenses, I heard them everywhere. I needed to internalize and practice what I was learning.

My neighbor who had asked for that homemade Black Lives Matter sign paid a visit. A week later, BLM was mysteriously yellow taped in 20 foot tall letters on the blacktop of a nearby intersection. The city removed it. A few days later a second BLM sign was yellow taped in the same spot. The city blacktopped over the tape.

Kyona's sister sent a picture of a yellow taped BLM on a parking lot near her boyfriend's neighborhood in Arizona. But the picture of their yellow taped BLM seared into my conscience. His five year old black son is walking across the letters with a training wheeled bike in the foreground. I never had to stop my white son's play time 25 years ago to protest racism. I never had to have "the talk" with my white son about how to avoid being killed by the police because of the color of his skin.

It turns out I didn't have to look very far to practice antiracism. An editor who printed my "how to" article about removing racist restrictive covenants wrote an editorial in the local paper. She opined about how "painful and shocking" the property damage at

some of the protests, questioned removing historical monuments, and suggested that this Independence Day needed to be more reflective about the “ideals” our nation was built upon.

I emailed her a response entitled “It’s Time We Face History and Ourselves,” noting that our country was born of protest. Protesters are not trying to forget or destroy history, but instead face up to history and spark long overdue change. Independence Day should be quiet and reflective every year until we finally address our collective past, apologize to those wronged, and attempt to repay them via the “democracy” we built off their land, labor, and lives. It helped that I had just read [RAD American History A-Z](#), by Kate Schatz and Miriam Klein Stahl. The editor never replied.

I wasn’t the only neighbor who wrote to that editor. By now, we were openly discussing racism at our socially distanced neighborhood happy hours. Yet in describing a dispute a white neighbor made a comment about how if this were a “mixed” neighborhood shots might have been fired. Kyona pointed out that we are a mixed neighborhood. And why would shots more likely be fired in a “mixed” neighborhood? Another white neighbor chimed in with “but I don’t see you as black.” This was the world Kyona lived in every day.

We unpacked and addressed each racist comment in turn, including the difference between intent and impact, white folks claiming to not “see” color, and racial bias. I am as guilty as many. I need to call out racism so Kyona does not solely carry the burden of doing so when we encounter it. I need to do even more to correct acquaintances who mispronounce her name. The neighbors apologized and so did I. But with that conversation we all inched into a deeper awareness of racism. We also gifted [Antiracist Baby](#) by Dr. Kendi to our “colorblind” neighbor’s 4 year old son.

Given the Covid pandemic, Kyona and I began taking longer walks. The further we walked, the more Black Lives Matter signs we saw. It felt good to know we weren’t alone. Awareness seemed to be spreading. But I also spoke with several old friends who did not share my views about removing monuments, or “defunding” the police, or white privilege. I practiced patience, listened, debated, and planted antiracism seeds by recommending books and films that had opened my eyes. These conversations were taxing, sometimes difficult, and still ongoing. But each time I grow weary I compare my white ally difficulties against the suffering of the oppressed.

One day the Executive Director of our local Business Improvement District contacted me to renew some promotional lamppost banners for my novel. With zero expectation that she might actually accept, I told her I’d only sponsor two Black Lives Matter banners. Her response: “how soon can you get me the art?” Thankfully, Kyona had me photograph my homemade Black Lives Matter sign while the ink was still glowing bright.

Two weeks later a canvas Black Lives Matter banner with my artwork flew from a lamppost at the end of our street, right above the patch of blacktop that covers the prior

yellow taped BLM signage. The other Black Lives Matter banner flies from a lamppost at the top of a long hill entering our neighborhood. Had I remained passive those BLM banners would not be flying. We celebrated with a toast at the neighborhood happy hour.

A couple weeks later, San Diego installed a series of Black Lives Matter banners downtown. The City, like many others, had commissioned a local artist to create diversity and inclusion art. Maybe this could happen. Maybe we could build an antiracist community, and even an antiracist country. But we need an antiracist government and antiracist businesses and antiracist institutions. That's a lot of work.

As I thought about all of the work to be done Congressman John Lewis died. I was reminded how he, and so many others, had given their entire lives to fight racism. I chalked out on our sidewalk "The John Lewis Bridge" with yellow footsteps to follow across. At the foot of the bridge I wrote "We Can Cross Together" and on the other side "Equality and Justice for All."

But can we really adopt and infuse antiracism on a systemic level? Those in power do not just give power away. Kyona and I were recently on a call with folks discussing this topic. One weary participant asked was there ever enough that can be done? By then I had also read The Autobiography of Malcom X by Alex Haley, Five Days by Wes Moore, I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings by Maya Angelou, James Baldwin's Go Tell It On The Mountain, Ta-Nehisi Coates' Between the World and Me, Michelle Alexander's The New Jim Crow, and The Collected Works of Langston Hughes. I had watched Kasi Lemmon's film "Harriett," Ava Duvernay's "When They See Us" and "13th," and Spike Lee's latest "Da Five Bloods." I thought back to my sabbatical and reframed the question. When do I stop seeking awareness? When do I stop seeking equality and justice?

To Bella, With Love and Awareness

With new eyes I revisited Isabella, the character I had created in The Poet's Secret. My novel had sold well, won the Best First Book Silver Medal from the Independent Book Publishing Association, and been called a "lyrical tour de force" by Foreword Reviews. Nobody had ever mentioned any potentially offensive descriptions of Isabella. Yet there were my own words staring back at me. Not many. But even one offensive, stereotypical description, no matter how subtle, was too much. Did I need to reference Isabella's skin color again in Chapter 23? Did I need to describe her hair texture as spongy? I felt like I had misspelled emancipation again, some forty years later. I was embarrassed, deflated, and angry at myself.

So I released a third edition of my novel to rectify my own prior subtle acts of exclusion. All proceeds shall be donated to antiracism causes, other than the previously committed 1% of sales for environmental and sustainability non-profits and \$1 per book sale to Surfrider Foundation. Even though it was years ago, I acknowledge my wrong,

and I apologize. I am sorry. I also hope to make up for my wrong, not just in words but also in deeds, and pay it forward. I do not think this is, or should be, a novel concept.

Work In Progress

People often ask what can they do about racism? In a word: antiracism. Dr. Kendi writes “If we each make antiracist policy the law of our life it can become the law of the land.” I believe this. I disavow the “us” versus “them” mentality thrust upon me from birth. It is a fear based lie.

I also realize that I am really late to the game and will make mistakes in my antiracist practice. I will grant myself forgiveness as an antiracist-in-training, but I will no longer grant myself excuses. Racism is my responsibility. Thanks to writers like Austin Channing Brown, author of I’m Still Here, Black Dignity In a World Made for Whiteness, I too feel the distance between history and myself collapsing. That is a powerful feeling. It will take a lot of determination, stamina, and perseverance, but I am training for the long swim.

I am grateful to those who inspired me into antiracism by opening their hearts and minds so that I can open mine. I pledge my words, my voice, my actions, my art, and my vote in support of antiracism. Why? Why would a white privileged man bother to become an antiracist-in-training? I think the answer is that I am selfish. I want a better world for myself and Kyona and my son. I want a better world for all of my family. And whoever you are, you are part of that family.

Kenneth Zak
October 2020