

# Spiritual Practices for Recovering from Racism, for White People like Me

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**By Leslie Anne Leasure**

One day in 1999, back when I was in grad school, I walked into our student lounge where one of my African American classmates, an acquaintance, was sitting. She had done her hair in a new way, and without thinking at all, I reached out to touch her braids. I don't remember why I did this. Maybe I thought it was cool, maybe it just looked different. She leapt out of her chair, turned to me, yelling, and took the palm of her hand and messed my hair up. Then she stalked out of the room.

I felt shocked, humiliated, and angry. *What the hell?* I thought. *I've done that to my white friends before and no big deal. She's totally over-reacting.*

Then I thought: *well, maybe I shouldn't have done that, but her reaction was way over the top.* But here's the thing: I was in the wrong. So. In. The. Wrong.

Aside from the more general personal boundary fail on my part, I was doing what many of us white people do – being totally (and in some ways, willfully) ignorant of a long history and the context of my actions.

There is a massive body of literature and commentary out there about why white folks shouldn't touch a black person's hair. (Seriously, if you don't know, go google it.) I was absolutely clueless about this. I was taught to be clueless about it. And more: I chose to be clueless about it.

I wish I could say this was the only time I made this kind of mistake. It wasn't.

I've been thinking a lot about racism lately. It's not the most comfortable thing for me to do. And I'm aware, that as a white person, I've had the luxury of not having to think about it for most of my life.

Here's the thing: despite priding myself on being a good white progressive, despite the fact that as a queer woman I have my own experiences of oppression, despite ongoing opportunities to educate myself, and despite friends who are exponentially more aware than I am, I've somehow managed until fairly recently to avoid really confronting my own racism.

But ever since Trayvon Martin was killed I've been feeling convicted. I've had flashes of this before, but have tucked them away. *I'll deal with it later*. But with black bodies piling up in the news every day, with young black men being criminalized and shot for (maybe) shoplifting (something many young white women joke about doing as a rite of passage), with a young white man walking into a black church and shooting nine African Americans in order to 'start a race war', with continuing examples of systemic racism in our justice system, I know I must engage, and engage whole-heartedly with dealing with my own racism AND with the systemic racism that to some degree poisons us all. I now work for the Center for Spiritual and Social Transformation, which focuses on spiritually-based leadership development and resiliency for people who are working towards or want to work towards social justice, especially in the area of economic and racial justice.

Much of our work centers around teaching and encouraging spiritual practices that allow people to develop empathy, compassion, resiliency, and what we call moral imagination – the ability to not only resist systems of oppression, but to also imagine solutions and *act* in ways that are based in love, compassion and justice.

I can offer a few thoughts on the spiritual practices that have been helpful to me as I attempt to confront and eradicate both my own racism and the cultural racism that surrounds us. I believe one of the most productive practices for white folks might be the act of making amends, which is actually really different than saying: "I'm sorry."

To make amends means to make change. In order to do this in a context of racism, I needed to first learn how to say to the person I offended: "I'm sorry. I was wrong. Is there anything I can do to make amends for my behavior with you?"

Saying this, I needed also to remember to not put the pressure of educating me about racism onto the African American people around me.

And then I needed to take action.

To make amends in this context means continually asking myself, my spiritual guides, and my communities of accountability: How can I/we do better next time? How can I/we improve this system so it doesn't keep replicating itself? How can I be an effective ally?

It's tough to say "I'm sorry," in our culture – never mind actually making amends. To say 'I'm sorry' is generally an acknowledgement of wrong-doing. It's pretty difficult for people to do this in a way that is productive. Maybe someone has made that notable apology/not apology to you, the one that goes something like: "I'm sorry you feel that way," (*I'm not sorry, but I want you to think it's your problem*) or "I'm sorry if you are so sensitive that my thoughtless actions bothered you." (*It's your fault for being so sensitive*). #sorrynotsorry.

I would argue that much of our culture is intensely shame-based; it seems that we frequently are afraid that admitting a wrong doing might be evidence that we, ourselves, are wrong or bad. In this context, if I admit I committed a racist action, I would be afraid of being labeled racist. But the thing is – denying the behavior and pretending it wasn't what it was, or blaming the other person – are both inherently defensive acts and not faithful or authentic acts.

Sometimes I think the hardest three words to say are: "I was wrong."

So if we can't manage a glib "I'm sorry," how can we manage a more rigorous process of making amends?

A friend has a useful saying about the general process of spiritual practice – she says, "it is important to know *who* you are, and *whose* you are."

Most religious & spiritual traditions discuss the importance of really acknowledging and being who you are or who you were made to be. There is a story from the Buddhist tradition, when Mara (who can represent doubt, anger, jealousy, craving, despair or skepticism) demands that someone confirm that Siddhartha was worthy of attaining enlightenment, Siddhartha touches the earth "with all his mindfulness and said "The Earth will testify for me." Suddenly the Earth trembled and appeared as a Goddess, offering him flowers, leaves....After that Earth looked directly at Mara and Mara just disappeared." [i]

When Jesus was in the wilderness, the devil asks him to throw himself off the temple so God would save him to prove he was who he said he was. Jesus doesn't. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus continually acts as himself, living the proof of who he is.

If you're an atheist or agnostic, it might be helpful to think of a touchstone or ethic for this kind of love or clarity – I don't think it has to be a deity – just something that guides our behavior.

Part of knowing who I am is knowing and owning my experiences and actions. I don't have to hide or evade them. I believe I am a perfect and beloved child of God — to be clear: I am a perfect and beloved child of God who frequently screws up.

Acknowledging my own failings can all help me to not fall into that terrible trap of self-righteousness.

And there is something about knowing that I am loved that provides me with the space and grace to take a hard look at my behavior and actions. This knowledge of “whose I am” also gives me the courage to make amends without collapsing into self-loathing or using that manipulative strategy of saying something like: “I'm broken/ignorant/etc , pity me but don't hold me accountable.”

The practices that support me in this work include regular prayer and meditation, being in a spiritual community that includes people of different races and backgrounds, and being willing to do a regular spot check inventory of my thoughts and behavior. I also have to be willing acknowledge to myself the pain or shame I feel, and still open myself to be more aware of the pain of others.

What I've learned is this: when I stop trying to avoid and run away from my own shame, I am able to stop playing the rationalize-and-blame-other-people-game. I am no longer afraid of my own pain; and experiencing it helps me develop compassion for others and it helps me develop the kind of moral imagination that calls me to work for justice.

And by working for justice here, I don't mean learning how to avoid embarrassing moments – I mean working to stop the school to prison pipeline, I mean confronting police violence against African Americans, and confronting the continuing discrimination in housing and employment among other things.

I think that from the knowing of exactly who we are and whose we are – and allowing love and compassion to change us – we can risk being vulnerable by admitting our mistakes and ignorance, we can risk confrontation when we see racism and we can stand up against it, we can be engaged in the process and know this isn't a one shot deal.

Finally, as I write about how difficult it might be for white folks to learn how to make amends, I am aware that it is still a much, much easier task than just *living* as a black person in this country. I gave a draft of this article with a friend who is African American and she shared this story:

*“A few years ago, when I was on the staff of [a local graduate school], so many African American students — male and female — shared stories about being touched inappropriately by White students who were either openly curious about the texture of Black hair or simply unaware that they were violating a boundary by touching a Black person’s hair. One of the students, an African American man, began referring to these experiences as “the Negro petting zoo.” The first time he described it as such, we all laughed until we cried, and then ... we all actually cried — not so much for ourselves as for our slave ancestors who were forced to bear in silence the unwelcome touch of White people preparing to buy them or sell them or (God help us) rape them. I sometimes wonder if we, as Black people, somehow carry “primordial” memories of those experiences.”*

In the face of such stories, the words: “I’m sorry,” are woefully inadequate. The fear I carry as a white person of admitting to my own racist actions is nothing when I think of the fear African Americans live under every day.

I can't imagine what it's like to fear a traffic stop, I can't imagine the terror of thinking your kid might be wearing the “wrong” thing at the wrong time and get shot, I can't imagine the fear of knowing the justice system is more likely to hurt me than protect me. I know even if my ancestors did not own slaves, my own thoughts and actions have been shaped to be oblivious to this pain, this fear, and to my own privilege as a white person in this country.

I am responsible.

And it is my responsibility to pay attention and believe when those who are marginalized speak their experience of oppression, instead of thinking they are too sensitive or over-reacting. It is my responsibility to nurture my own ability to stay awake to these realities and to stop rationalizing racist behavior or systems.

But, my dear white friends, what we can do is learn to begin to make amends, to begin to open ourselves to change, and to act to resist this system we live in: we can do this, not perfectly, maybe not gracefully, but I believe we can start to move forward in new and faithful ways.

It's a place to start.

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[1] *Touching Peace: Practicing the Art of Mindful Living*, Thich Nhat Hanh.

<https://transformationpsr.wordpress.com/2015/07/20/spiritual-practices-for-recovering-from-racism-for-white-people-like-me/>