

**So you
want**

to talk

about

race

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What if I talk about race wrong?

WHEN MY WHITE MOTHER GAVE BIRTH TO ME, AND later my brother, in Denton, Texas, she became the subject of a lot of racial commentary in her conservative southern community. But surprisingly, my mother and I had our first really substantive conversation about race late in my life, when I was thirty-four years old. I was well into my career in writing about culture and social justice and my opinions and identity around race were pretty well documented by then. But the truth is, like many families, our conversations growing up mostly revolved around homework, TV shows, and chores.

While I was growing up, my mother had given the obligatory speeches that all parents of black children must give: don't challenge cops, don't be surprised if you are followed at stores, some people will be mean to you because of your beautiful brown skin, no you can't have the same hairstyle as

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your friends because your hair doesn't do that. But those conversations were one-offs that ceased to be necessary once we were old enough to see the reality of race for ourselves.

Having a white mother, my siblings and I likely had even fewer conversations about race than black children raised by black parents, because there was a lot about our lives that our mother's whiteness made it hard for her to see. My mother loved our blackness as much as was possible for any nonblack person to do, she loved our brown skin, our kinky hair, our full lips, our culture, and our history. She thought we were beauty incarnate.

Our mom never thought that our blackness would hold us back in life—she thought we could rule the world. But that optimism and starry-eyed love was, in fact, born from her whiteness. It was almost impossible for her to see all of the everyday hurdles we had to jump, the tiny cuts of racism that we endured throughout our lives. For our mom, we were black and beautiful and smart and talented and kind—and that's all that mattered. And in the confines of our home, it *was* all that mattered. But as we left home, and our mom began to see us interact as adults with the real world, she began to suspect that there was more to being black in this world than she had previously thought. I could tell that this made my mom uncomfortable, to know that the babies that she had birthed from her own body had entire universes she couldn't see, so the more that my world and my career became focused on race, the less my mom acknowledged it. She just really didn't know what to say.

It was in this context that I received a voicemail from her one evening in 2015. It had the same unnecessary enthusiasm

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that all my mom's voicemails seem to have, but the topic was definitely new.

"Ijeoma, call me. I've had an epiphany. About race. It's important."

I talk about race for a living, which means I have had a *lot* of uncomfortable conversations on the topic. Quite often, well-meaning white people will attempt to show me how much they "get it" by launching into racial dialogues filled with assumptions, stereotypes, and microaggressions that they are completely unaware of. I have cringed my way through so many of these discussions that you'd think they would have less effect on me. And while that is in some ways true—these conversations have become a bit easier with time—I was in no way ready to have this conversation with my mom. This is not because my mom means any harm or is in any way a worse offender than those who approach me after speaking engagements or readings (she's not), it's just—she's my *mom* and nobody likes to discuss race with their mom.

Here's the thing about my mom, my mom is the kindest, most generous person I've ever known. And she is a wonderful mother and grandmother, beloved by just about all who meet her. But she's also exhausting. My mother does not think before she speaks, nor does she at least take the time to collate her subjects before shouting ten different conversations at you (she refused to get hearing aids for a very long time, so when I say "shouting" I mean shouting). My mom is at times a nonsensical tornado of emotion, enthusiasm, and whimsy. A conversation with her about grocery shopping (which will inevitably wander to a conversation on organic gardening, which will remind her of a joke about potatoes she heard but

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cannot remember the punchline for) can utilize all of my patience and conversational skills. I love my mom dearly, but I have been rolling my eyes at her for thirty-six years—I am forever a bratty teenager in her presence.

I was trying to think of anything I'd like to do less than call my white mother to hear her epiphany about race, when she did what all mothers do—she immediately called back, and kept calling, until I picked up the phone.

“Did you get my message?” she asked.

“Yes,” I sighed, “You had an epiphany?”

“OK,” she dove in before I could run away, “So I was telling a joke at work, and it had a black punchline—not like, a punchline *about* black people, but a punchline *for* black people . . .”

This is the part of the conversation where I start cringing. I need you to hear my mom's chipper Kansas accent as she says this.

“ . . . and this coworker of mine, he's black, says, 'What do you know about being black?'"

This is the part of the conversation where I'm inhaling sharply. I really don't want to know what happens next because I cannot imagine any way that it is good.

“Like, he was challenging me, you know? Probably thinking, 'this white bitch.'”

At this point I'm regretting the invention of the telephone.

“And I was so mad, I was like, this man doesn't know me. He doesn't know what I went through, he doesn't know that I have three black kids.”

I'm at this point holding the phone a good six inches away from my ear in the hopes that it will make this conversation

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less painful. Please tell me she didn't actually say these things to this man.

"But then I realized . . ."

Oh no.

" . . . that he's probably gone through so much racism in his life, he doesn't know who the good white people are."

What is she saying? WHAT IS SHE SAYING? HAS SHE NOT READ ANY OF MY WORK? Please let the earth open up and swallow me so I can get out of this conversation.

"And if I were black, I'd probably be really angry all the time, too."

Aaannnd we've now officially entered the worst conversation in the world. I'm talking with my white mom about race. Why can't we be talking about, I don't know—her sex life, or *my* sex life, or my period, or why I'm an atheist—*anything* but this.

"So now I'm not angry at him anymore. I'm just going to go to him tomorrow and explain that I have three black kids and I understand where he's coming from."

And here is where I shouted "NOOOOOOO!" like in those movie scenes where your buddy is about to open a car door that will so obviously set off a bomb that will kill him.

As uncomfortable as this conversation was, it needed to happen. The initial discussion led to a very long talk about race and identity and the differences between being a white mother who has loved and lived with black people, and *being* an actual black person who experiences the full force of a white supremacist society firsthand. She asked if she at least got black credit for doing my hair for all of those years. I said no. She asked why I didn't identify as "part white" when my

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mother, her, was white. I explained that while I had definitely inherited light-skin privilege due to my mixed heritage I did not feel that whiteness was something that any person with brown skin and kinky hair could inherit, because race doesn't care what your parents look like—just look at all the light-skinned slaves sold away from their black mothers by their white fathers. We talked about how to discuss race without placing undue burden on people of color to educate you. We talked about when to not discuss race (say, in the middle of the workday when your black coworker is just trying to get through a day surrounded by white people). We ended the conversation exhausted and emotional, but with a greater understanding of each other.

After this conversation, the way in which my mom interacted with me changed in ways that I was not expecting. She still calls me to talk about work drama, but also this funny movie she saw, and also perhaps her dream of us all building a cabin in the woods together one day. I still roll my eyes like the thirty-something teenager that I am throughout most of our conversations. But my mom has become more fearless in her support of my work, now that she better understands the role she can play. My blackness is no longer a barrier between us, a symbol of my world that she does not have access to and therefore must avoid fully acknowledging. My mom has shifted her focus on race from proving to black people that she is “down” to pressuring fellow white people to do better.

My mom is now an outspoken advocate for racial equality in her union. And now that the awkwardness has passed, and now that my mom and I have a better understanding of

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each other, I can talk with her more freely about my life and my work. And while one conversation did not do all of that on its own, it opened up a new way of seeing each other and how we can truly come together as a black daughter and her white mother. So for all its awkwardness, the outcome of that conversation makes me so glad we talked. I'm also glad we talked because I'm pretty sure our conversation stopped my mom from leaving her next conversation with her coworker in tears or being dragged into HR.

NOT ALL OF US ARE LUCKY ENOUGH TO HAVE CONVERSATIONS on race with white people willing to take the emotional risk of investigating the role they play in upholding racism. Not all of us are lucky enough to leave an office discussion on race with no worse than a snide comment and a slightly bruised ego. These conversations, when done wrong, can do real damage. Friendships can be lost, holidays ruined, jobs placed in jeopardy. For this reason, many people avoid the topic of race altogether and recoil when it's brought into conversation.

But you are reading this book because you realize that we *have* to talk about race. Race is everywhere and racial tension and animosity and pain is in almost everything we see and touch. Ignoring it does not make it go away. There is no shoving the four hundred years' racial oppression and violence toothpaste back in the toothpaste tube.

In fact, it's our desire to ignore race that increases the necessity of its discussion. Because our desire to not talk about race also causes us to ignore race in areas where lack of racial consideration can have real detrimental effects on the lives

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of others—say, in school boards, community programs, and local government. And while it may seem that people of color always need to “put race in everything,” it’s the neglect of the specific needs of people of color, which exist whether you acknowledge them or not, that necessitate it in the first place.

As a black woman, I’d love to not have to talk about race ever again. I do not enjoy it. It is not fun. I dream of writing mystery novels one day. But I have to talk about race, because it is made an issue in the ways in which race is addressed or, more accurately, not addressed. When my employer enforces hairstyles in their dress code that ignore the very specific hairstyle needs of black women (see military restrictions against small braids, for example), then my employer is making race an issue in their attempts to ignore it. When my son’s school only has parent-teacher conferences during school hours, they are making race an issue by ignoring the fact that black and Latinx parents are more likely to work the type of hourly jobs that would cause them to lose much-needed pay, or even risk losing their employment altogether, in order to stay involved in their child’s education. When I take my kids to movies and none of the characters they see look like them, it’s the studio that is making it about race when they decide to make up entire universes in which no brown or black people exist. I just want to go to work, educate my kids, and enjoy a movie.

The truth is, we live in a society where the color of your skin still says a lot about your prognosis for success in life. This is the reality right now, and ignoring race will not change that. We have a real problem of racial inequity and injustice in our society, and we cannot wish it away. We have to tackle this

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problem with real action, and we will not know what needs to be done if we are not willing to talk about it.

So let's all get a little uncomfortable. If my mom and I can do it, so can you.

YOU'RE GOING TO SCREW THIS UP.

You're going to screw this up royally. More than once.

I'm sorry, I wish I could say that reading this book would guarantee that you'd never leave a conversation about race feeling like you've gotten it all wrong and made everything worse. But I can't. It's going to happen.

It's going to happen, and you should have these conversations anyway.

So now that I've thoroughly bummed you out, let's work on what we can do to lessen the number of times you screw this conversation up, minimize the amount of damage you do, and maximize the benefit to all involved. Here are some basic tips that will increase your chance of conversation success, or at least decrease your chance of conversation disaster:

- 1) **State your intentions.** Do you know why you are having this particular conversation? Do you know why this matters to you? Is there something in particular you are trying to communicate or understand? Figure it out before moving forward and then state what your intentions are, so that the people you are talking with can determine whether this is a conversation they are willing to join. Very often, these

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attempts at conversation fail because two people are entering with two very incompatible agendas and proceed to have two very different conversations, and that doesn't become clear until it blows up in anger and frustration.

- 2) **Remember what your top priority in the conversation is, and don't let your emotions override that.** If your top priority is understanding racism better, or addressing an incident involving race, or righting a wrong caused by racism, don't let the top priority suddenly become avenging your wounded pride if the conversation has you feeling defensive.
- 3) **Do your research.** If you are going to be talking about an issue you are not familiar with, a quick Google search will save everyone involved a lot of time and frustration. If terms or subjects come up that you are not familiar with, you can ask for some clarification if you are in person, but know that if you are a white person talking to a person of color—it is never their job to become your personal Google. If you are online and these topics or terms come up, you can Google faster than it takes to hold up the entire conversation begging people to explain things to you. Even if you are a person of color, making sure you understand more about the topic you are trying to address, beyond your immediate experience with it, will give you more confidence in your conversation and will help you get your point across.
- 4) **Don't make your anti-racism argument oppressive against other groups.** When stressed, when angry,

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when tired, or when threatened, our worst selves can come out. It is fine to be angry, there is a lot about racism to be angry about. And it is fine to express that anger. But it is never okay to battle racism with sexism, transphobia, ableism, or other oppressive language and actions. Don't stoop to that level, and don't allow others to. We must be willing to fight oppression in all of its forms.

- 5) **When you start to feel defensive, stop and ask yourself why.** If you are talking about race and you suddenly feel the need to defend yourself vigorously, stop and ask yourself, "What is being threatened here? What am I thinking that this conversation says about me?" and "Has my top priority shifted to preserving my ego?" If you are too heated to ask yourself these questions, at least try to take a few minutes away to catch your breath and lower your heart rate so that you can. This is something that happens to people of all races, and not only can it stop us from hearing things that need to be said, it can stop us from saying what we really mean to say.
- 6) **Do not tone police.** Do not require that people make their discussions on the racial oppression they face comfortable for you. See chapter 15 for more details.
- 7) **If you are white, watch how many times you say "I" and "me."** Remember, systemic racism is about more than individuals, and it is not about your personal feelings. If you find yourself frequently referring to your feelings and your viewpoint, chances are, you are making this all about you.

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- 8) **Ask yourself: Am I trying to be right, or am I trying to do better?** Conversations on racism should never be about winning. This battle is too important to be so simplified. You are in this to share, and to learn. You are in this to do better and be better. You are not trying to score points, and victory will rarely look like your opponent conceding defeat and vowing to never argue with you again. Because your opponent isn't a person, it's the system of racism that often shows up in the words and actions of other people.
- 9) **Do not force people of color into discussions of race.** People of color live with racism each and every day with no say over when and how it impacts their lives. It is painful and exhausting. When people of color have the rare luxury to choose to not engage in additional dialogue about race, do not deny them that. Even if this discussion is really important to you, you never have a right to demand it. There will be other opportunities.

These tips should help you have more healthy and productive conversations on race and racism. Look through the list and try to recognize where you have had trouble in the past and make a concerted effort to practice the tips that may address where things have gone wrong.

But even with all of your practice, and with the best of your intentions, there will be times where this all goes to shit. There will be times where you truly lose the plot and you aren't sure what has happened, but you do know that you have really messed it up.

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It is important to learn how to fail, to learn how to be wrong in a way that minimizes pain to you and others and maximizes what you can learn from the experience. Here are some tips for when your conversation on race has gone very wrong:

- 1) **Stop trying to jump back in when a conversation is beyond saving.** When things have gone really wrong and everyone is upset, and every additional word feels like a knife in the chest, stop trying to force a resolution. I know that it is very hard to leave an emotional conversation unfinished. It is hard to leave feeling unheard or misunderstood. A resolution can still happen, provided you haven't already burned all the conversational bridges around you, but not right now. It's obvious, by how things have been going, that you are not in a state to find a whole new, productive path for this conversation. Step away, and take some time to calm down. Then think about where things went wrong, and what, if anything, can be done to revisit that conversation later in a productive and healthy way.
- 2) **Apologize.** If you can see where you screwed up, where you made assumptions, where you got overly defensive, where you hurt someone—own up and say sorry. And mean it.
- 3) **Don't write your synopsis of this conversation as "the time you got yelled at."** Remember why you had been in this conversation. Remember what the core issue was. Do not revise it in your mind so that

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instead of “an important conversation on race that didn’t go well,” it becomes “that tragic time you got yelled at for trying and felt bad.”

- 4) **Don’t insist that people give you credit for your intentions.** If you screwed up and you hurt people, your good intentions won’t lessen that hurt. Don’t insist that people act less hurt or offended or angry because your intentions were good.
- 5) **Don’t beat yourself up.** Yes, you should feel bad when you say or do something that hurts someone else. And it’s natural to feel frustrated when you aren’t communicating as effectively as you need to. But you also need to keep in mind that this happens, a lot. If this was something that we were good at talking about, well, I certainly wouldn’t have felt the need to write this book. You shouldn’t expect those hurt by your actions to just brush what happened aside, but that doesn’t mean that you should consider yourself a monster. Instead of drowning in guilt, or ignoring your wrongdoing in order to escape guilt altogether, take some time to really think about what was said and what you could have done better. There is a good chance that the person you were talking to was trying very hard to let you know where you were going wrong. Even if you don’t get the chance to make things right with the person you were talking to, you can use what you have learned to make sure you don’t screw up in that same way again with other people. You can and will do better if you learn from this experience.

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- 6) **Remember that it is worth the risk and commit to trying again.** Okay, this conversation didn't go well. In fact, it went horribly. And now you know that you have more to learn and more you have to do to get better at this. But you have to just keep trying, because the alternative is your complacency in the continued oppression of people of color.

No matter what, when you are having a conversation about racial oppression, you will not be the only one who is nervous and you will not be the only one taking a risk. These conversations will always be hard, because they will always be about the hurt and pain of real people. We are talking about our identities and our histories and the ways in which these are used and exploited to elevate and oppress. These conversations will always be emotional and loaded to various degrees—and if they are not, then you are likely not having the right conversation.

Racial oppression should always be an emotional topic to discuss. It should always be anger-inducing. As long as racism exists to ruin the lives of countless people of color, it should be something that upsets us. But it upsets us because it exists, not because we talk about it. And if you are white, and you don't want to feel any of that pain by having these conversations, then you are asking people of color to continue to bear the entire burden of racism alone.

Have these conversations, not just with people of other races—and I know that's why the majority of you are reading this book. You should be having these conversations with people of your own race as well. White people—talk about

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race with other white people. Stop pretending that you are exempt from the day-to-day realities of race. Take some of the burden of racism off of people of color. Bring it into your life so that you can dismantle racism in the white spaces of your life that people of color can't even reach. People of color, talk to your people about race. Feel the therapeutic effects of honest and safe conversation about race. Examine and confront your internalized racism. Make space to heal and rejuvenate.

Take care in your conversations, remember that you are dealing with the real hurt of human beings. But be brave in that care, be honest in that care. These conversations will never become easy, but they will become easier. They will never be painless, but they can lessen future pain. They will never be risk-free, but they will always be worth it.