

## Mindful of Race:

### Transforming Racism From The Inside Out

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#### Chapter 13: The Wake-Up Call: Racial Affinity Groups

It is not enough to think we can simply get a racially diverse group in one room and “hash it out”—many of us have been there and done that to no avail. We show up with good intentions, but we are afraid, unclear, unskilled, angry, and cautious, all of which get in the way of us connecting and being real. And with regularity, we put our foot in our mouths and then become frustrated or belligerent—or just shut down.

There is no shift in consciousness around race without the grit that relating to each other makes possible. However, given the unintended harm caused from unawareness and cumulative impact when we gather across races, we need a different way, or perhaps an alternative way, to explore the ignorance and innocence of our racial conditioning and racial character with those of our same race. I recommend racial affinity groups (RAGs) as an ongoing forum for investigating and transforming our individual and collective habits of harm.

In a RAG, we put ourselves in intentional spaces with people of our same race, where we can be safe enough to be vulnerable, challenged, and unedited; to examine the stories we have been told and the stories we tell ourselves; to lean toward what is unfamiliar and away from what is habitual; and to understand what is difficult to acknowledge, feel, and attend to within us and among us as a racial group.

RAGs offer a structure of inquiry and can address many needs. They support us in exploring what has been forbidden, forgotten, and unhealed. For example, in a RAG, white people can discover together their group identity. They can cultivate racial solidarity and compassion and support each other in sitting with the discomfort, confusion, and numbness that often accompany white racial awakening. They can also discern white privilege and its impact without the aid of or dependence on POC. White people who have formed RAGs report that they recognized their collective commonality and shared history, as well as the impact that their privilege has had on other races and on each RAG member.

While many POC may not need an affinity group to help them relate to their racial group membership, they may need to explore the diversity that exists among POC and across POC without having the distraction of having to educate white people on whiteness and its harm. A habitual focus on white people can distract POC from knowing themselves as a diverse body. Exploring this tender territory in a RAG can be a

wholesome alternative to expecting white people at large, who often are not aware of being racial beings, to relieve the intense distress experienced by POC.

In a RAG, whether for POC or for whites, we have the opportunity to share our experiences and histories, examine our impulses, reinterpret meaning, and see clearly our role in racial harming and healing. Such groups support us in being more vulnerable and in grieving the ignorance, shame, and disgrace that often accommodate racial inquiry.

A RAG brings us into clear intention and is a critical step in developing, from the inside out, racial intimacy, literacy, and skillfulness. To separate into same-race groups, in this sense, is not intended to divide us but rather to leverage the fact that, in relative reality, we are racially divided. In a RAG, we use separation to more deeply understand this conditioning.

RAGs are fundamental to transforming habits of harm and to healing racism. Regardless of how you identify racially, no one is exempt from the need to intimately examine racial conditioning.

### **Forming a Racial Affinity Group**

To begin, invite two to seven people of your race to join you in raising self-awareness and literacy for the purpose of reducing racial harm and increasing racial harmony from the inside out. Most groups have reported that to stay focused on race, it is helpful to select people similar to your racial identity and/or gender. For example, all white groups, or all black women, or all white men, or all white women, or all black men, or mixed race groups, or immigrant groups, etc. I encourage groups to make a minimum of a yearlong commitment, meeting at least monthly for no less than three hours. The following structure could be useful in your RAG meeting:

- 30-minute silent meditation
- 60-minute sharing/discussion
- 15-minute gratitude and reflections
- 15-minute silent meditation
- 15-minute next steps discussion

Group tasks should be shared or rotated. Many RAGs also include meal sharing. Tasks may include meeting location, sending reminders, determining meeting topics, leading guided meditations, guiding discussions, and scheduling. Sharing responsibility supports group kinship and cohesion.

Make coming together as simple as possible. In the first few meetings, as the group is still forming, I encourage members to simply meditate together, share intentions, and explore how to best support each other's commitments. Initially, the focus should be on listening and connecting.

Before engaging in the racial inquiry questions that follow, however, RAG members should have met consistently and feel ready to commit to deeper inquiry.

Although the inquiry questions will likely deepen group cohesion, it is a higher-risk intervention as a starting place. Take the time for the RAG to establish consistency and stability among its members before taking more vulnerable risks.

The intention of a RAG is to be mindful and to create a safe place to explore racial ignorance, aversion, and urgency. Discussion topics should be focused on understanding group member racial conditioning at the individual and group identity levels. The group should not focus on addressing social issues or learning about other races. Rather, RAG members are to discover intimately their relationship with their own race. Some groups have studied various books or explored genealogy, family programming, racial trauma, or history museums. The idea is not to have a tight script but to have a firm inner focus and safe container for deepening understanding.

Waking up together in a RAG is not insignificant. The intimacy of a small group makes the emotions and vulnerability more intense. Our experiences will fluctuate from being aware that we are unskilled, to having what we are unaware of pointed out, to noticing and even being surprised by our own goodness. When we add the shame and embarrassment that leaks out when we discover what we don't know, or when we say or do something that exposes our imperfections, ignorance, aversion, or selfishness, we may want to withdraw from the group to avoid embarrassment and discomfort. For these reasons, I offer the following guidelines, which have been helpful in forming and sustaining a RAG.

- Attend your RAG eager to listen, learn, share, and be heard.
- Commit to your RAG. Inconsistent attendance or distractions by outside interests negatively affect safety and the quality of disclosure.
- Throughout your RAG gathering, maintain respect for the humanness of each person participating.
- At the beginning of each meeting, commit to confidentiality, pledging that whatever is said in the RAG stays in the RAG.
- Only the person sharing should speak. There are no interruptions or cross-talking. As the group becomes more stable, engagement or dialogue can be added.
- When sharing, you determine the level of disclosure and vulnerability you will express.
- When speaking, take your time. Speak slowly and experience your words.
- When someone else is sharing, pay attention to what is being said and recognize the courage it takes to say it.
- Relax and release expectations. No opinions, judgments, or dislikes are to be expressed (verbally or nonverbally) toward the person sharing.
- Tune into your own experience—how you are being touched and shaped by the gifts offered. Be curious about your inner experience, not just your thoughts.
- No questions should be asked of the person sharing. Listeners should receive what is being said as a gift that is being slowly unwrapped. You can't know what the gift will be until it has opened, and it is always opening. Maintain compassionate patience and curiosity.

- While gentle, clarifying questions can be useful, listeners are not to probe, argue, seek agreement, or invoke anger or passive forms of retaliation. Nor should listeners speak of their own story when someone is sharing. Do not in any way take attention away from the person speaking.
- When you feel uneasy, turn inward to how you feel, while also staying present to what you are sharing or to what is being shared.

At any time during your RAG, when things become too intense or if you feel uneasy, you can request that the group pause in silence together. Stillness and breathing may be all that are required. You may also track your experience in silence by applying the RAIN inquiry (recognize, allow, investigate, and nurture). Or, if the person speaking is willing, they may track their experience out loud while others bear compassionate witness. Should you want to talk about something that was said during your RAG once the group time has ended, ask permission of the person before engaging.

Whenever you are expressing your concern, make presence and deepening the relationship a priority.

### **Reflections at the Close of RAG**

- How does it feel to sit together and talk about race?
- How do we support each other in waking up and healing?
- What I hope can happen for all of us as we continue this work is . . .

**After a RAG gathering has ended**, you may find it helpful to reflect on how you feel about the inquiry itself. For example, you might sit quietly or journal your thoughts on the following questions:

- How am I doing right now? What's the mood of my mind and heart? Am I sad, frightened, hopeful or hopeless, enraged, ashamed. . .?
- How do I feel about what I am discovering?
- What keeps me committed to being mindful of race and transforming racism?
- What can I appreciate about my life and my choices today? What can I celebrate about the life of others?

### **Racial Inquiry Questions**

The following questions might be helpful reflections for your mindfulness sitting practice or to be explored within your RAG. Spend some time each day reflecting on a question or two from the list that follows. Some of the questions may serve as a stimulus, and others may invite you to do a bit of research outside of your sitting or RAG practice. Still other questions may arouse more questions. Use these questions as a mindfulness practice to become more aware of how you are relating to the questions themselves. Drop them directly into stillness and notice how you experience them. Notice whether the question brings you distress or release. There is no rush to get through the list or anywhere other than here. And feel free to create your own questions.

Each time you begin, take three intentional deep breaths, focusing on your exhale. Start with a body scan, inviting any physical or mental tension to soften as you bring kind attention to each area of the body, starting at the top of the head, moving slowly and with ease throughout the body down to your toes. Allow yourself to experience this softening on the inside of the body—not just the sounds of your words but also the actual experience of the movement of awareness through your own body. As you feel more settled, imagine your mind resting in your entire body. Take a few breaths here to simply linger and rest in awareness. When you feel settled, contemplate the following questions with as much ease as possible. As you explore these questions and begin to notice tension in the body or mind, take a few breaths and regroup in the body before returning to the question.

### Exploring Individual Identity

- Why do you believe matters of race are still matters of concern throughout the world today?
- What traumas marked your youth? How do they impact and inform your life today?
- As a child, what were you taught about being a racial human being? What were you not taught?
- When did you first discover you were a race? What circumstances surrounded this discovery?
- What are the roots of your racial lineage? Given your lineage, what has your race gained or lost throughout the generations? How have these gains or losses influenced your racial views today?
- As you reflect on your racial history, what is disturbing to recall?
- Where in your life do you feel numb, shut down, dismembered, disrespected, or disconnected? What is your earliest memory of feeling this way? What events or circumstances do you believe gave birth to these experiences? What do you believe such feelings keep you from knowing?
- What views did your ancestors, elders, parents, or caretakers have about race? How did their views impact you? In what ways were/are your views similar or different?
- What elders or caretakers are still alive in your family? Would you be willing to have an open conversation with them about race? If not, why not? If so, what would you want to ask them? What would you want to tell them? In what ways might you “keep the peace” and stay with the status quo?
- How has racial fear, shame, anger, or guilt gotten in the way of you having more intimate relationships with your own race? With other races?
- What has your relationship to your own race kept you from experiencing, knowing, or understanding about other races?
- What recurring hardships do you personally experience as they relate to race and to racism?

## Exploring Racial Group Identity

- What racial identities or ethnicities have shaped how you have come to know yourself as a race?
- What personal beliefs or actions—past and present—could have jeopardized your membership in your racial group? What risk can you take today that you could not take in the past?
- Under what circumstances do you notice race? Talk about race? What thoughts, feelings, and emotions are commonly stimulated in these situations?
- What role did your ancestors play in racial oppression and racial healing?
- What's racially unfinished, forgotten, or ungrieved in your racial lineage? What impact might reclaiming this unfinished business have on social harmony?
- What has membership in your racial group protected you from knowing, experiencing, or trusting about other racial groups? Why was this believed to be necessary? What's at risk in challenging such protections?
- What do you have in common with others in your racial affinity group? What diversity exists among you?
- In what ways do you feel you need to distinguish yourself from your racial group? Why is this important?
- What beliefs do you have about other racial groups that create inner distress? How do these beliefs impact your relationship to your own race and to racism?
- What questions about race do you want to ask of your racial affinity group members?
- What are you reluctant to share or speak out loud with your members of your race? With other races?
- What can you talk about or own about your racial history that you couldn't talk about in the past (the past could be earlier today)?
- What stops any one race from knowing another race?
- How do you as an individual and as a RAG work with members of your race to raise racial awareness and challenge habits of harm?

In this mindfulness inquiry, it is common to experience distrust, embarrassment, and fear when sharing personal and racial information, or to collude in silence and presumed solidarity to maintain membership within your RAG. These feelings can trigger the impulse to strike out, shut down, or remain superficial or guarded in our interactions. Don't be discouraged! Choosing to remain engaged without judgment or fear often results in a more honest exchange and deeper connection.

Remember, engaging these questions within a RAG is not the end game; rather, it prepares us to better engage across racial differences. In this inquiry of compassion, we are strengthening our commitment to non-harming and learning how to be honest and to share the weight of racial ignorance and distress among our own race. As self-awareness grows, we begin to extend this same care, curiosity, and respect to everyone we encounter within and outside of our RAG. Such intentional acts contribute to a culture of care.