

# SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY & BECOMING MINDFUL OF RACE

## AN EXCERPT FROM *MINDFUL OF RACE*

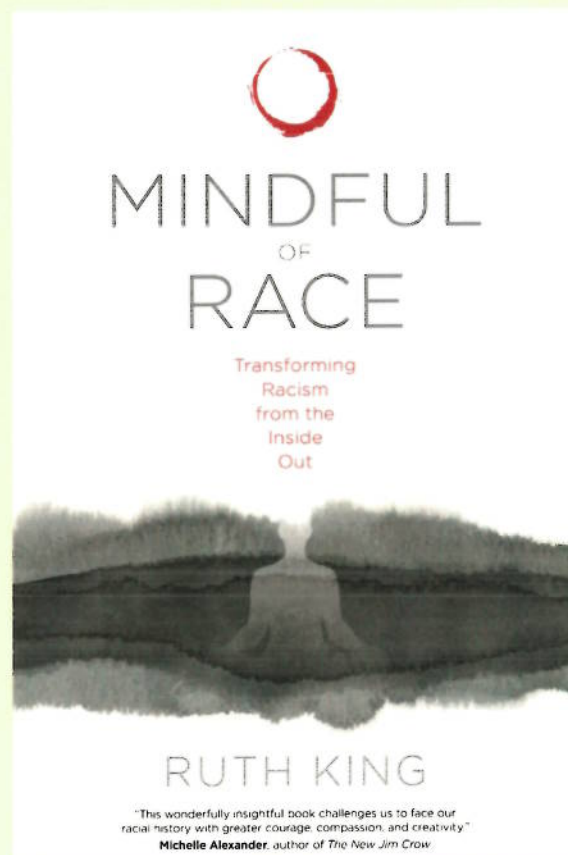
by Ruth King

*"I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character."*

- Martin Luther King, Jr.

*"A country is only as strong as the people who make it up and the country turns into what people want it to become... We made the world we're living in, and we have to make it over."*

- James Baldwin,  
*Notes for a Hypothetical Novel*



The article here is an adapted excerpt from *Mindful of Race: Transforming Racism from the Inside Out* by Ruth King, Sounds True, June 2018.





*Realm of Light* / 28 x 26 / Oil on Canvas / by Virginia Peck



**A**s you become more mindful of race, there is a social responsibility you can't easily escape. For example, if you are doing harm, you feel the need to put a stop to it. If you see someone else doing harm, you feel the need to stop them. If you see systems at work that harm others or that harm the planet, you feel the need to join with others to make sure the harm stops. When you don't act, you are an accomplice to injustice. As Desmond Tutu is said to have advised, "If you are neutral on situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor."

To cultivate a culture of care is to be in relationship with humanity with a wise heart. This includes having moral character wrapped in compassion. What I mean by moral character is that we understand and aspire to live by three principles of social harmony:

- **Interdependence:** This is the practice of remembering that we are part of something larger than our individual selves—a karmic web of humanity—and what we do has impact.
- **Compassion:** The practice of compassion is a weapon of mass healing.
- **Harmlessness:** The practice of nonharming in body, speech, and mind is essential for respect and safety.

*"Ultimately you are not a person, but a focal point where the universe is becoming conscious of itself."*  
- Eckhart Tolle, Spiritual Author

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One way I have come to understand interdependence, compassion, and harmlessness, particularly in relationship to race, is to see that we all coexist in a vast, skinless body held together by the gravitational pull of Mother Earth's love, shaped in a unique cell suit that we call "self." In this proprioceptive relationship with all existence,

each "cell self" represents the whole of existence. As cell selves, we arrive in a variety of colors and races, each serving a purpose that supports the whole — all arising and passing away. In this skinless body is a vast nervous system sensitive to the movement of mind and the beating of hearts. As we become more conscious of our conditioning as racial beings and as one collective force, we enhance the whole of humanity through our lived example. There are notable examples of individuals, cultures, and movements that have influenced—and are still influencing—social well-being.

I'm told that Standing Rock, an indigenous-led resistance movement in North Dakota against intimidating and violent corporate and political forces in favor of the Dakota Pipeline, which violates indigenous treaties and threatens water necessary for life, was organized around an indigenous template for wise choice from several Lakota values. These values include prayer, respect, compassion, honesty, generosity, humility, and wisdom. Such values in action are examples of collective resistance to social injustice that take into consideration all beings and the planet. Standing Rock and the core values lived by the Lakota people of North America reflect care for our kinship, compassion for all, and harmlessness.

Nelson Mandela, the heroic activist against apartheid, was another example. After years of cruelty and harassment, Mandela was sentenced to life in prison and served twenty-seven years, five of which were in hard labor, in a cell less than 10 feet by 8 feet in size. In his years of confinement, Mandela taught the world about nobility, compassion, and the resilience of the human heart. Those of us hungry for hope were deeply inspired by his inner revolution and the people who supported him. Over decades, many of us watched his face and faith grow wise, warm, and content with unwavering grace, determination, and goodness. Through his example and his care for

all of us, we saw sacred activism—we saw that it was possible to insist on justice with heart.

Mandela cultivated spiritual maturity and was free in heart and mind well before his physical release from prison in 1990. He knew that resentment is like drinking poison and then hoping it will kill your enemies. The depth of his intention for freedom and unity was refined over time. Shortly after his release, he was elected the first black president of the Republic of South Africa, representing the African National Congress in the first open election in the country's history. Mandela credited his prison experience with teaching him his nonracial outlook and the tactics and strategies that would make him president. A bit of humor also helps—as he once wrote:

"In my country, we go to prison first and then become president." I don't relate Mandela's story to justify the actions of an unjust white supremacy apartheid system, nor do I ignore that as late as 2008, Mandela was on the US terrorism watch list. Instead, I share a bit of his story to illustrate what our hearts and minds are capable of despite our circumstances.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. is a profound example of moral character. His long-standing commitment to the civil rights movement was about nonviolence, compassion, and freedom for all races, not just African Americans. I also put Barack Obama in the category of moral character. A few examples include the Affordable Care Act, which provided health insurance to more than twenty million uninsured Americans; his eventual support for the LGBTQ community's fight for marriage equality; his commutation of the sentences of nearly twelve hundred drug offenders to reverse "unjust and outdated prison sentences;" his success in lowering the veteran homeless rate by 50 percent and increasing Department of Veterans Affairs funding; the Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act to improve school



nutrition; his repealing of the military's "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy; the Hate Crimes Prevention Act, which makes it a federal crime to assault anyone based on sexual or gender identification; and his nomination of Sonia Sotomayor to the Supreme Court, making her the first Hispanic ever to serve as a justice. Nelson Mandela, Dr. King, President Obama, and other such leaders were not perfect. Rather they found a way to use their individual power for collective well-being.

It isn't just individuals who embody the principles of interdependence, compassion, and harmlessness. Black Lives Matter began in 2012 after vigilante George Zimmerman was acquitted for murdering Trayvon Martin, a seventeen-year-old unarmed black boy, inside his gated community. *The Guardian* reported that in 2016 alone, across the United States, police killed approximately 258 black people, 34 percent of whom were unarmed black males. That's roughly twenty-two each month or five each week. In an interview on Krista Tippett's onbeing.org, Patrisse Cullors, artist and cofounder of Black Lives Matter, said that this movement is not just about her or even just about all of us. It also brings our ancestors and all people passionate about justice into the movement. She described the movement as healing work, not just about policy:

*"You can't policy your racism away. We no longer have Jim Crow laws, but we still have Jim Crow hate... Black Lives Matter is a rehumanizing project... We've forgotten how to imagine black life. Literally, whole human beings have been rendered to die prematurely, rendered to be sick... Our imagination has only allowed for us to understand black people as a dying people. We have to change that... Someone imagined handcuffs; someone imagined guns; someone imagined a jail cell. How do we imagine something different that actually centers on black people, that sees them in the future?"*

*Let's imagine something different."*

Van Jones, best known as a commentator on Cable News Network, is the founder and president of The Dream Corps, a nonprofit that works to solve America's toughest problems through several initiatives, including reducing the number of people in prisons and jails; building a diverse pipeline for homegrown tech talent; building an inclusive green economy that lifts people out of poverty; and forming the Love Army, which is working for an America where everyone counts through education, connection, and action.

Such movements are expressions of interdependence, compassion, and doing-no-harm, and they aspire toward racial equity, freedom, and harmony. They show the power of fierce clarity and an understanding of what must be done and how we must go about it to create more social balance and harmony. They demonstrate the need to address systems of oppression with an understanding of our interdependence, along with caring and persistent resistance. We can perhaps sense this transformative twinship from Martin Luther King Jr.'s report to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in 1967: "Power without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is love correcting everything that stands against love."

As we turn to our own lives, we don't have to be as grand in our efforts as these political greats. These beloveds, and all who supported them, simply and humbly show us what we are capable of. They leave us to choose for ourselves how we embody moral character. Consider the following principles as you clarify and establish your own practices to cultivate moral character.

## DO NO HARM

When we are unconscious of how we affect each other, we are more likely to

cause harm. However, when nonharming is at the forefront of our awareness, it becomes an anchor, a way of reminding us, moment to moment, to pay attention—to live mindfully.

We all know our habitual impulses as they relate to racial harm and distress. Some of us lash out, some of us hold it all in, and some of us tune out, putting little energy into what distresses us or harms others. How does it feel to be so defended? Can we choose not to respond in habitual ways? Our habitual patterns are good places to begin noticing and renouncing habits of harm and to shift toward caring presence, a condition that is favorable to racial awareness and healing.

For example, what might you discover about yourself if you were to spend the next four hours (or days) not taking anything unless it were offered to you? This includes not initiating and not making anything happen. Not reaching for or being on your various devices. Not asking for anything. Not offering an opinion or judgment or criticism. Not starting conversations or fixing them. Not preparing your food and not purchasing anything. Not reaching for anything. Just receiving. Where would refusing to "do" or "achieve" or "affect" leave you?

Or what might you discover about yourself if you were to renounce comfort for a period of time? My Tibetan teacher of several years, Aba Cecile McHardy, instructed me to practice taking a warm shower and then turning the water from warm to cold without mentally recoiling. This was not intended to be oppressive but more as an experiment in embracing change without preferences—to interrupt the habit of comfort, of having things your way all the time. What thoughts, emotions, or beliefs arise in you at the thought of such a practice? At a minimum, mindfulness will be heightened with such experiments.

Renounce a racial habit of harm and



use it as a mindfulness practice for a few hours, a day, or longer. Here are some examples:

- For the next week, I will stop judging the media and notice what I feel in the absence of judging.
- For the next three months, I will only spend money if it is absolutely necessary and notice how it feels to want something without having it.
- For the next week, I will not offer advice unless I am asked.
- For the next two hours, I will allow myself to feel the pain in my lower back without hating that it is here.

Notice how the quality of your awareness is impacted through such a deliberate intention. Once you feel you have an understanding of your relationship with allowing and letting go, renounce another habit and give it your mindful attention.

Renouncing has a very real effect on the function of our brains. Every time we renounce cruelty, greed, righteousness, and hate, we strengthen neuro pathways in the middle prefrontal cortex of the brain (for more information, see the discussion of the function of the prefrontal cortex in chapter four of *Mindful of Race*).

By intentionally choosing restraint and knowing it directly, we do less harm to others and ourselves. We become less habituated, impulsive, and anxious because we know what we can do without. We become stronger, more stable, and more full of choice. Most importantly, we discover what our minds can endure and what our hearts can metabolize.

## GET POLITICAL

What is notable about the nobles mentioned earlier, as well as the many brave souls who supported them, is that there did not appear to be a distinction between their personal, political, or

spiritual lives—they were one and the same. While many of us are challenged with balancing our lives, the truth is there are no lines—we take ourselves everywhere we go, we all get twenty-four hours in a day, and we all make choices.

In the United States, we exist within a federal republic governed by the constitution controlled by the president, the Congress, and the federal courts. Many of our ancestors experienced much abuse in fighting for the right to vote—they insisted on participating in a system that was never made with them in mind. It is now both a right and a privilege that we must take seriously because this system governs every aspect of our day-to-day lives.

Dr. Barbara Riley tells us in her book *Are You Ready for Outrageous Success?* to “Be bothered with the twinges in your gut, when you know something is going on even if you are not totally clear about what... Be bothered with the individual and group reactions that are similar to and different than yours.” To become politically literate and involved, we need to know the racial biases of our state representatives, governor, mayor, city council, senators, federal and Supreme court officials, and other party officials. We should know the jurisdictions in which we live, the school districts in our state and how they are funded, and how legislation is proposed and laws passed. This also means that when we receive those convoluted and intimidating voting ballots, we must get together with one or two other people and do a bit of research to be better informed of our choices—and then go vote. But we can’t stop here. We must also hold those elected accountable for their promises and actions.

When we opt out of this civil responsibility, we become both victims and targets. Poor people and communities of color are often targets of infrastructure neglect, inadequate schools, unhealthy food, crime, racial profiling,

water testing, oil drilling, and poor natural disaster response. Political neglect and greed agendas are influenced by our involvement or lack thereof in the political system. To ignore the significance of the political systems that control our lives is to dishonor the work of our ancestors, abuse the generosity of the earth, and work against a culture of care.

The voting process is what put the people who govern our lives into office. If we do not participate in the electoral process, we can’t change its dysfunction and we cannot influence decisions and policies that impact our communities. We may not like the system or trust it, and many of us may not understand how it works, but it is the system we have. And we need to know how it works before we can change it or create a new one. Do a Google search to learn how the system works and get proactively involved. There are people within the community who are politically savvy and resourceful. Seek them out, learn from them, and support them.

## WATCH YOUR SPENDING

A strong branch of racism is rooted in economics. When we become more mindful of how we earn money and how and where we spend it, we can have a tremendous impact on systemic racism. A practice that served us well during the civil rights movement was not to support institutions that discriminated against blacks and other people of color. We might also consider whether, when we spend or invest money, we are supporting institutions that fund the prison-industrial complex, weapons, labor exploitation, and other endeavors of harm. It may be difficult to track the money trail and impossible to totally disinvest, but bringing more awareness to our habits of earning and spending can help us discern whether our actions are helping or harming the planet, each other, or ourselves.

We can also assess our habits of excess, assess our level of debt, and in-



quire into when enough is enough. We can explore whether we are spending to feel better or to look good or to have what we need—and at whose expense. There are basic things that all of us need—shelter, food, health care, and water. Many of us have more than we need, while others struggle just to meet their basic needs. Support this imbalance as best you can. Beyond the basics, it's wise to be mindful of when enough is enough.

Spend time redefining the meaning of prosperity with loved ones and examine how money and other resources are used in your family and community. For example, when we try to comfort our children by showering them with material things, their spiritual growth is interrupted, as is our own. Talk to children about self-reliance, about how less is more; demonstrate how we can show our care for each other without consuming or acquiring more, more, more.

When I asked an activist I work with to give me one example of what a culture of care look likes to her, her response was, "A culture of care is when no one purchases a second home until everyone has shelter." Another civil rights activist stopped eating meat after becoming aware of the ecological harm of meat packaging and the harm to animals. The point is not to beat up on ourselves or others but to align as best we can our spending with our values.

## A WORD ABOUT WISE SPEECH

Habits of harm are often expressed in our speech. Sometimes our speech, to our surprise and often embarrassment, can tell us what we are really thinking. My mother kept my brother's parrot for several months. I recall visiting her one day, and the parrot began to mimic her one-sided conversation on a recent phone call—her laugh, her criticism, her pace, her tone. She was shocked, and we swore each other to secrecy (until now)! The point here is to ask yourself, "What would your parrot say about your speech?" In Buddhism, we

are taught that there are four types of harmful speech:

- Lies—words spoken with the intent of misrepresenting the truth;
- Divisive speech—words spoken with the intent of creating rifts between people;
- Harsh speech—words spoken with the intent of hurting another person;
- Idle chatter—words spoken with no purposeful intent at all.

Some of us impulsively speak when we feel racial discomfort. When this happens, we may instead set an intention to pay more attention to our impulse to speak. When we attend to the discomfort that kindles unwise speech, we discover that unwise speech is a habitual strategy that attempts to disguise the anxiety we are experiencing in the moment. Once we give kind attention to the impulses of our speech, we are more likely to uproot the habit of uttering unwise speech.

Speaking wisely is a mindfulness practice. It is an intentional shift from self-interest to self-reflection, and it wakes us up to our responsibility to each other. Nonharming speech can de-escalate racial distress and enable us to feel less defensive and more hopeful. Pick one area of wise speech to pay attention to for a certain period. Notice how it supports inner stability, well-being, and confidence and how it supports more care in your interactions.

Poet David Whyte offered a fresh perspective through his concept of a "conversational identity." The idea is that we are constantly changing and evolving, always in the middle of something; therefore, our relationships should be fluid, more conversational, where we are not completing the work but rather beginning the conversation. He explained that such conversations should reflect a language of affection in order to enter the hearts of others. Offering

a language of affection is the spirit of wise speech, where, with each encounter, we are kind, present, and curious about the human life that stands before us. We should speak the truth respectfully, in ways that lead to connection and wise action.

## MAKE KINDNESS A PRIORITY

Kindness requires effort. The untrained mind inclines naturally toward fear and often ill will. The kindness or metta practice I offer in chapter eight of *Mindful of Race* relieves our racial distress by cultivating goodwill. It supports us in consciously shifting from ill will to non-ill will to goodwill. With practice, we experience warmth and ease and discover the spaciousness we need to make wise choices. Kindness cannot be left out of the moral equation. In this practice, we invite the heart to open to warmth and to genuine acceptance, and we prime the mind to embrace racial fear and distress in an atmosphere of non-hatred. This is a fundamental practice for cultivating moral character. Don't leave home without it!

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Moral character requires that we use the challenges of racial ignorance, injustice, and distress to sharpen our awareness of our interdependence, the need for compassion, and the power of nonharming. How this occurs for each of us is as diverse as the races, but what is core is that we must start—even if it feels impossible or even if we don't finish in our lifetime. We must own our membership in a collective humanity and realize again and again that what must be done must be done for the benefit of current and future generations.

Social change that tugs at the hearts of the oppressed has historically required mass movements, and this necessity will likely not change in our lifetime. However, what can and does change is the quality of heart and clarity of mind we bring to it. This is the work of being mindful of race. §



KINDNESS  
CANNOT  
BE LEFT  
OUT  
OF THE  
MORAL  
EQUATION.

- RUTH KING

## EN ROUTE

Do people sing there? Do they,  
when they see that shadow  
not a shadow but a shift, a falling,  
find some words and try a melody?

Do they lift one another?  
Reach out their hands and pull  
sorrow to its feet, urge it to dance?  
What instruments shape the air?

The time? What do they sing of  
there in that ravaged country?  
Who might instruct me, patiently,  
to hear their songs and understand?

Do they know I intend no harm?  
Who might teach me restraint?  
A hand on mine, a finger to lips  
to bid me silent, whisper, "Listen."

by Richard Hoffman

