Letters to Our Younger Selves

Guidance for Writing a Letter to Your Younger Self

I sincerely believe that in order to engage in the collective healing necessary to do this work authentically, it is helpful for us to address our own gaps, connect with the parts of ourselves at the ages of the students who will benefit from this book, and share learnings that help to reimagine a better future for all of us.

One of the ways I'd like to connect with the readers is for them to learn from other White people who are engaged in antibias, antiracist (ABAR) work—particularly through the therapeutic tool of writing a letter to your younger self. These letters are intended to be letters of care, advice, guidance, and encouragement written to your younger self that will provide a road map for what it can look like to create ABAR learning experiences for White students.

For example, here's something I would want to share with younger Afrika:

Dear Little Afrika,

Around the time that you're fifteen, you're going to go to camp in northern Minnesota for three weeks. You will have been to overnight camp before, but this will be your first time going so far away from New York City and your family on your own. You'll enjoy making friends from across the country, the fresh air, and the opportunity to learn that you're capable of more than you think—especially on that three-day canoe trip in the Canadian boundary waters.

What will be hard, though, is that, at one point, you and the other campers who look like you will be called to the gym, and you will be told that the camp director has received complaints from the White campers saying that when you all sit together in the dining hall it makes them uncomfortable, and you'll be encouraged to spread out during meals. Beverly Daniel Tatum will not have written Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria *yet, and no one will acknowledge that the White campers are all sitting together too.*

You'll be angry and confused. You won't be sure how to feel about being in that space after that meeting, and you'll be far from home, not about to return anytime soon. Even if it scares you . . . even if you tremble, whether out of fear, anger or both . . . say something. The other kids will want to speak up, too, but they won't, just like you won't want to.

You need to speak. Don't accept that feeling of being otherized and accused of something when you've done nothing wrong. Tell the camp director that he is being unjust and oppressive; that there's

nothing wrong with Black kids sitting together, and if the White campers perceive the Black campers as a threat, they're the ones who need to be told to change.

It'll be awkward, and I know how much you hate confrontation, but it's important for the camp leaders, the other campers, and for you especially not to internalize the message that your skin, your joy, your celebration, your loud talking, your laughter, your being make you dangerous.

Love always,

Afrika from 2022

Your letter, should you choose to write it, can speak to the tip of the iceberg regarding something related to race that you wish had been different, or you can go beneath the surface. The letter can be as long or as short as you'd like for it to be. Here are a few links to articles that provide more guidance about writing a letter like this:

- "A Letter to Your Younger Self"
- "An Open Letter to Myself as a Child"
- "My Breakthrough Moment: Writing a Letter to My Younger Self"

The following pages contain letters that White educators have written to their younger selves. These may bring up connections for you as you write your own letter—or you may choose to discuss them with a colleague or in a book study.

Alexis Johnson (she/her/hers)

Alexis Johnson is a career educator and school leader who has worked for schools in Boston/Roxbury, Massachusetts, and in Brooklyn, New York. Her early experience as an AmeriCorps service member tutoring high school students in Boston made it clear that she had found her path. From teaching English and writing to middle and high schoolers to her role as a high school principal, and even now in her experiences as a leadership coach, Alexis has found that there is nothing better than working in service of young people and their schools. She believes that this work must begin and end each day with an unwavering focus on equity, freedom, and justice. Originally from New Jersey, Alexis now lives in Weymouth, Massachusetts, with her husband and her two children.

Dear Twelve-Year-Old Alexis,

I am you at thirty-seven. And I'm happy to report that I've accomplished a few of the goals you set for your adult self in so many of your childhood journal entries:

- I do have children: two of them. Ellis is almost seven and James is three.
- I am happily married to their dad, Ben, and we are about to celebrate our 10-year wedding anniversary.
- I am an educator and spent many years teaching Writing and English literature to middle and high-schoolers in Greater Boston and in New York City. I became a high school principal after that, which wasn't one of your goals, but it feels important to tell you anyway.
- You've probably already gathered this from the previous, but I did live in New York City (for seven whole years); it is still one of the places where I feel most alive.

I'm sure you're wondering where your family and extended family are in my life since some of your goals and dreams involved building a life near them. I have some difficult news on that front. Grandpa Ted, Grandma Willie, Gigi, Mom-Mom, and Pop-Pop have all passed away. Grandma Joyce is still living in New Jersey; she writes my children the same kind of sweet cards and notes that she sends you.

Unbelievably, Dad died last summer. He spent fourteen months fighting lung cancer with a lot of help from Mom. We are all still in shock. Mom is living in the house in Pennington, and I live near Rae (and her husband and her baby) outside of Boston.

You've often taken yourself to be a product of your life with your family, so I wanted you to know about these losses—especially about losing Dad. I also wanted you to know that you are your own person and that you are doing ok. The time you spent with these members of your

family will always be a part of who you are, for better or for worse, and you are moving forward into a life where you have the incredible privilege of making your own choices.

It's important that I also draw your attention to the loss of Mom-Mom. Of course, Dad was the closest to you, and I will be honest in saying that my daily grief for Dad is still very painful and very present. But I think about Mom-Mom a lot too. Not because I miss her any more or any less than anyone else who I've lost, but because there are so many things I wish I could have talked to her about while she was still alive.

Alexis, you already know that you will argue with Mom-Mom; your arguments with her have already been some of the most uncomfortable and confusing parts of growing up. She took such good care of you as a child and she loved you and she taught you how to be proud of yourself and how to be unafraid. But she also taught you, both explicitly and indirectly, beliefs and values fraught with prejudice and white supremacy.

In your youth, as you read this, Mom-Mom's racism is sort of a running joke within the family; this in itself is a big part of the problem. You're becoming more and more aware that it's not a laughing matter.

You're old enough now that you've felt what it's like to square up, take a deep breath, and show her that you mean to oppose her when she goes "too far." You know what her voice sounds like when her teeth are clenched and she's practically hissing with anger—a powerful anger that you would ever "have the nerve" to correct her. She wanted you to learn how to defend yourself, but she didn't think that it would ever be against her. It's a lot for a kid to take from a beloved grandmother, and there won't be a single time when it doesn't cost you something.

Perhaps I can offer this as consolation: you will have a conversation with Mom-Mom when you are twenty-two years old that is a lot like the conversations you wish you could still have with her today.

At your college graduation, Mom-Mom is going to make a racist comment about a fellow graduate's family sitting nearby because she hears them speaking in a language other than English. You won't be there to hear it because you're sitting in alphabetical order elsewhere wearing your cap and gown, but your sister will be there to hear it, and she will turn and bravely tell Mom-Mom to "please shut up."

A year will follow when your grandparents won't speak to anyone in your immediate family. But eventually, one afternoon, you will end up on the phone with Mom-Mom for over an hour. You will yell and you will cry because you still can't believe you've been more or less disowned by your grandparents. And she will have steely, nonplussed responses for each of your concerns and accusations.

At one point, out of sheer desperation, you will ask her how she can have so much hate in her heart—for people she doesn't know, for people whose lived experiences she doesn't understand, for even her own relatives who disagree with her . . . and she will finally be silent for a moment. Then, she will tell you, with profound sadness in her voice, that she doesn't know. She will add that she doesn't know where the hate comes from or when it first arrived. At the

time, I immediately wanted to ask what she meant, but I didn't. The conversation ended, and we never spoke so openly again.

Alexis, I hope you'll take that moment as an invitation to be both curious and hopeful even though what she shared that day was troubling. Sadly, I think I believed that then that the time had passed for me to feel either curious or hopeful about my grandmother. I thought she was too unwell or too angry or too hateful. But it's also true that she was still my grandmother and that I still loved her. Perhaps, had I given myself the permission to see that all of those things could be true at the same time, I could have continued speaking honestly with her.

And maybe that would have helped both of us see ourselves and understand ourselves a little bit better.

Love,

Alexis

Amy Perrault (she/her/hers)

Amy Perrault is an instructional math coach who formerly taught high school and middle school math, science, STEM courses; she's a former director of Curriculum and Instruction with suburban and urban experience in Metro Boston independent schools. Amy is in her third year as an instructional coach; she has over twenty years in education, in both teaching and administrative roles. Amy is a lifelong educator and learner, who is currently engaged in making math education more student-centered, curiosity-driven, and full of joy. Also a lover of books, she is working toward better integration of literacy in the math classroom to engage students in new ways. She is unlearning and relearning each day to be a better educator and is proud to be part of this journey and this publication. When she's not working with teachers on their craft, you'll often find her in classrooms, spending time with students exploring math and talking to them about their math learning, or engaging with fellow educators to share ideas and build community. Amy is a proud mama of a sweet, independent boy who keeps her on her toes and inspires her every day.

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Dear Young Amy Lynn,

I notice that you're feeling a little frustrated this week at school, especially in music class—strange for a girl who *loves* to sing. Everyone else seems SO excited that it's nearly St. Patrick's Day, but you're not. All these songs about being Irish, and how wonderful it is to be Irish, are nice but you feel . . . well . . . left out. I bet you're thinking "What about the songs that celebrate *me*?"

Your music teacher means well—she's trying to celebrate something that, in your neighborhood, is pretty important to most people. The entire month of March is a sea of green there, and she's trying to embrace it. Maybe she doesn't realize that not everyone shares in this celebration and that it doesn't feel good to you, that you feel like you don't belong. It's especially hurtful to hear someone say, "Well, if you're not Irish, what ARE you? I thought everybody who lives here is Irish!" Is that true? Is it just you? You feel like you must be the only one who feels this way, so you don't say anything. You just mouth the words and wish for the week to end.

I know it's hard, but I want you to remember how this feels and what you wish your music teacher had known, or that she had done differently—maybe that she saw you not singing along and took the time to ask why or maybe that she thought about other celebrations that she could include during the year for families that were of different cultures. Remembering this feeling will help you recognize when your own students feel unheard or unseen, when

they are not recognized or celebrated in the classes you teach, or in the schools where you work. Think back to this moment when they are othered, the way you felt othered that week; you can't go back and heal your own hurt, but you can work to help change the outcome for them.

Remember that hurt feeling, of being unseen and misunderstood, when a colleague says to you, "Oh, those *city kids* are really the problem" at your privileged, suburban, all-girls high school, when what *city kids* really means is the Black and Brown girls that now make up a sizable portion of the student body. Remember that feeling when you push back on her comment and tell her the curiosity, the talent, and the joy you see in those *city kids* every day that she dismisses as a *problem* make you want to be a better teacher and that she's clearly not seeing them.

Just like you wish someone had seen you and stood up for you in that music class, you need to do that for them, in that moment and always. It's going to cause tension, and it's going to make you want to scream. Sometimes the othering will come from colleagues; sometimes it will come from outside sources who say with a tone of pity, "Oh, you teach *those* kids . . . that must be hard." They may never truly see, but you'll see—in the moment, and years later, when these girls become young women of the world, women who are the rule breakers and change makers, leading their generation—that it's worth the fight.

You'll make mistakes as you go along, you'll mean well and mess up . . . a lot; you'll find allies and co-conspirators who will push *you* and hold *you* accountable when you mess up. It will be a challenging journey, but if you keep your focus on making sure that your students don't feel the way you did that day, if you keep pushing yourself to do better and be better, for you and for them, it *will* make a difference.

So find your song, and help them find theirs, and keep singing . . .

Love,

Amy Lynn from 2021

Brianna Young (she/her/hers)

Brianna Young is an education consultant and innovation coach—a self-described school redesign strategist. She has taught all things middle school, but mostly loves humanities, project-based learning, and social-emotional learning. She launched her own consulting firm, constructED, to support schools in their journey to design better learning environments on behalf of kids.

Oh, you.

I wish there was a way I could simply tell you the truths I now believe so you could simply know them as you grow, but the journey of learning, and failing, is the path that is yours to walk.

You probably won't believe me when I tell you that the boy who asks you to prom will be the man you marry. You'll really love coffee and public radio, things you swore you would never like. You'll make friends from other states and other countries and move out of the Midwest with that guy you marry. You'll finally get your ears pierced and get quite a few tattoos.

Also, the low-rise jeans you love so much will (fortunately) go out of style.

But something that shouldn't surprise you: you will make a career out of your oldest child traits, following that tug in your heart and mind to be a teacher. What's ironic about this is how you view school and teaching now will change in so many ways as you grow, but your passion to make education better never will. Eventually, how you see and understand the world, and your experiences in it, will shift drastically, but it is when that happens that you come into who you are, and you will be a better teacher and human being because of it.

So I think it is sufficient for me to say: you have so much to learn.

As a senior in high school, you will read a book by an author named Toni Morrison. Her style of writing and the depth of her characters will draw you into something you have not experienced before. You won't totally understand it. Then, you will fall in love with Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, and Maya Angelou. The heights of their joy and the weight of their lamentations will speak beyond what other authors have conveyed to you, and you will begin to wonder what their life was that made them write in such a way.

You will take a class in college called "Ethnic and Gender Studies," where a professor will challenge whiteness for the first time, and you will feel confused, defenseless, and angry. You won't even have a concept of whiteness as part of your identity and will honestly not understand the history he is beginning to share as you learn about the experiences of Indigenous people. These horrors clash with the heroism you were taught, and you will try desperately to fit what you're learning into non-existent categories in your mind.

You will talk about race and racism with your Black roommate, and your ignorance on this topic will be fully on display. She will tell you about the Black Student Union, and you won't understand why that is such an asset for your small, vast-majority white campus to have. You won't understand the definition of racism as she explains it, and the conservative pundits' catchphrases will come out as a defense because you haven't tried to know better up to this point. You will upset her and not even realize it. You will feel uncomfortable. You will be proud and defensive. You will be wrong.

When you graduate, you will work at a nonprofit and then in classrooms with young men and women who fit the definition of the "urban Black youth" demographic you will read about in your college textbooks, but whose joy and pain and gentleness and brilliance will enter your heart more profoundly than you can imagine. They will teach you more than you will ever teach them, and that in and of itself is a rich privilege you will not deserve.

When you read a short story by Amy Tan and a Vietnamese student says, "Yes! A story about Asians!" and you overhear a Black student wondering when their story will be told, you will start to question what else is missing from your curriculum.

Then, a young man, who reminds you of some of the students you love, will be shot by a police officer, and it will gain national attention. This is far from the last time a traumatic event like this will shake your classroom. But it is the first time you paid attention because, as selfish as this is, it will matter to you in a new way. You will watch protests and outrage, both on the TV and on the faces of people you care about, and it will begin to put pieces together for you. You will witness the lament, anger, rage, and weariness Langston and Angelou capture in their poetry. You will recognize something internalized: a bias that shaped how that officer viewed that boy, how people you know react when they hear you work at *that* school, and how you will realize it is something you carry in yourself as well. And your blue eyes, like the ones Pecola prayed after in Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, will actually see for the first time. You will feel a lament at the unjust society. History, and I mean *actual* history, will show up in the books you choose and the learning you do, and it will transform your practice as a teacher. You will see all the ways your own educational experience was taught from one viewpoint, leading you to teach through inquiry processes so students take learning into their own hands, cultures, and experiences. You will fumble with responses to this and still not fully understand what it looks like to ask for something better for this world. This is the tip of your transformation.

Keep pressing in. I say that to you, younger me, as much as I say it to my current self. You will meet people who will continue to be gracious and kind to you and educate you. You will meet people who are bold and uncompromising and will not put up with your ignorance, and you will learn richly from them as well, even in moments of uncertainty and even when it hurts. Keep listening. In this, you will not only see the fullness of yourself—your own talents and beauty alongside your brokenness and privilege—but you will also come to see the fullness of those who had been categorized as "other" in your mind. You will need to understand your whiteness, and how it shapes the way you perceive the world. You will need to understand anti-Blackness, because it will show up in curriculum, attitudes, pedagogies, and systems. You will learn to decenter yourself and your preferences (yes, this is something you struggle with, young one).

As a teacher, this looks like co-creating curriculum and classroom spaces with your learners. This looks like seeing the ways they learn differently than you do as an asset, not a problem. It means opening the walls of your classroom to bring in experts and professionals that share backgrounds and cultures with your students to support their learning. It means leveraging their strengths—even the habits and preferences that might not look like strengths—to influence your pedagogy. It looks further than getting books by Black authors, but instead globalizing your curriculum to de-center white America (this is something you don't even realize is happening yet) and instead teach a fuller picture of history: the flaws and failures and facts that aren't always pretty, and the features and flourishing of marginalized voices that deserve a space in your instruction. Make space for it all.

But you will get there.

Yours from the middle of this lifelong journey,

Brianna

Chris Odam (he/him/his)

Chris Odam is the secondary ELA coordinator for Kansas City Public Schools. Chris focuses on helping teachers provide platforms and strategies for students to feel empowered and heard. Over his twenty years as an urban educator, he has vested in helping students hone their craft for writing and performing, both as a teacher and coach of spoken word poetry.

Dear Younger White Me,

MISAPPROPRIATE PASTS

It is ok to be interested in the clothes and culture of Black people; however, there are ways of dress that might be respected and not imitated in our youth, as this is called misappropriation.

Let's explore some of the ways you will likely behave and how to best steer your thinking now that you have my wisdom of having already lived this path and learned so much that you did not know back then.

Were you proud to have certain music in your Walkman? What was it about having Queen Latifah and *All Hail the Queen* in 8th Grade? Why did you turn it up louder when black folks were around? To that point, why do you listen to Hip Hop now? Do you still think to bump a song with pride when you pull up alongside a person of color? Do you expect props? What is that really about? How old were you when you learned what props were? Is it a Ghetto Boys song, no I think it is E-40 and The Click, "tryin' to get my proppers don't cha know."

This appreciation you have for a culture unlike your own is attractive to you because you also sense a void of culture in your own Whiteness. What does it mean to you to be a white man? Who will you look to in history for inspiration? This is one complex reason you sought the culture and identity of many people with whom you went to school with. Sagging your pants and keeping up on which streetwear was in style was actually one effort to rethink the identity of white men, or at least yourself.

Furthermore, your goal to be accepted by groups of people who are not your own racial background does not require a total shift in your own identity. You will even develop a certain walk for a while that showed you were trying to learn how to be in with the culture you had grown to appreciate. How come you do not walk that way now? What were you trying to accomplish in walking a way you had seen others do?

Many say imitation is the sincerest form of flattery; however, in seeing other people experiment and portray themselves in ways that might make other cultural groups question such with deserved concern, I want you to be respectful and realize that many forms of cultural garb are to be revered and respected. Wearing your overalls backwards or with one strap down may not speak the compliment you wish to impart to others. It is also important to respect others as we experiment with what we decide to portray about ourselves.

GROWING COMFORTABLE BEING UNCOMFORTABLE

There is a definite reason you did not enjoy History or Political Science while you were in school. No doubt you grew tired of hearing the versions of American History that were so limited in their voices and portrayal of people that were kept quiet at all costs. It pained you to self compare to Nazis . . . or slave owners. . . .

What you deemed as hating history or resenting teachers for their perspective or even patriotism, is actually a healthy skepticism and critique of a powerfully construed and concocted problem dealing with representation and the mis telling of so many narratives, as truths were only viewed and told from the lens of the oppressors.

This letter is to help you recognize that the emotion you feel as a critical thinker is not only warranted but perhaps unpopular with many scholars or professors, as this will require their own revisiting of history and a more open approach to admitting this perpetuation of falsehoods and stereotype are not at all accident or just part of the educational system we should accept.

Please know that these moments of frustration, especially in a college setting, are not to be hidden or stomached, but will take the development of great listening and speaking skills, so as to be able to question and thwart the ongoing system of racism and oppression some fail to continue to process and even take steps to disrupt.

Your job is not to find a more comfortable place in which to learn but instead to grow comfortable challenging institutions which continue to fail to expand and improve their own lens. Your place at the table in doing so is not only warranted as a white man, but long overdue to be more involved and challenge what roles white men take in this process.

There will be one moment in 11th grade that I want you to be prepared for so you might take action. Your History teacher will ask you to stand up and represent what a Nazi might look like. He will say, "Stand up, Chris. You look like a Nazi." This same teacher will also sign your yearbook, "To my favorite Hitler Youth Scholar, Sieg Hiel." Instead of being mystified and mind blown, I want you to be ready to challenge this statement publicly before the class, explaining why it is inappropriate for my own identity development to be compared to a Nazi soldier, right there before my peers. Also, others, including school leadership, should see and question the signature he was brave enough to plant in my cherished yearbook.

These moments and many others will present themselves as you get older. Do not shy away from the potential conflicts that might arise when these moments are taken head on. Instead, grow the confidence and the warranted voice you possess to work tirelessly in addressing the challenges to others rights when they are perceived in our day to day life.

Also, do not expect anyone to throw you a parade for your efforts, as this is the normal everyday behavior we should hope to see in white educators across the country. Rather than hope for the praise of people of color, find a group of like minded individuals to surround yourself with, as this network will help you remain confident about the path of growth you have chosen.

HIP HOP IS FOR YOU—AND EVERYONE ELSE TOO

So here is the final revelation—the reason you are so into Hip Hop is the manner in which it seeks to promote authenticity and inclusion. This means that this everlasting genre of music has plenty of room to explore and find yourself. It also means that you should pursue this artform as a way to interact, grow and pursue the power of your own voice in this complicated world. Many of your students will go on to become known Hip Hop artists in the community. Rather than watch them admiringly for so many years, instead ask to collaborate more and find your own voice as a performer. You are also a voice that many need to hear. Hip Hop will provide a challenging and inspiring domain for you to work within, and being authentic will be the only way others might appreciate your craft and artistry—even your thinking will come to light, and in this form will you be able to communicate and critique the world we live in each day.

Sincerely,

Chris Odam

(he, him, his)

Debby Irving (she/her)

Debby Irving is the author of *Waking Up White* and *Finding Myself in the Story of Race*.

Dear 1965 Debby,

I know how excited you are about starting first grade, to move from "too much drawing and not enough school stuff" as you've been saying throughout your kindergarten year. What I have to say won't feel good, and yet it will be crucial to your future sense of self and continued enthusiasm for learning.

From the very first day you step into Mrs. Greeno's classroom, you will find your natural curiosity punished. Your questions will result in hours in "the quiet chair" over the course of the first grade. The questions that fill you with energy and zeal will not be appreciated by Mrs. Greeno or most of the teachers you will have until high school. You will have a brief reprieve from being punished for question asking in the second grade. This will be the one and only year you will be able to bring your full self to school. A teacher named Mrs. Bennett will notice your curiosity, wonder with you, and give you extra projects to feed your thirst to know more.

I'm guessing it's hard to imagine why so many teachers, people who've chosen careers in knowing more would punish anyone for asking questions. What's important to understand is that most teachers will either not be able to admit when they don't have answers to your questions and/or have agendas that create little time for wondering. Please know, regardless of their frustration with you, that your questions are excellent. Why *is* the same word (can, pen, bark—so many!) used for different meanings? Why *is* there sometimes an "ie" and sometimes a "y" to create the sound "ē?"

What I most want you to understand, is that your wondering, your not taking anything as a never-to-be-questioned given, *is your superpower*. What will frustrate you, bore you, confuse you, and in the end deaden your curiosity for learning, is that schools were never designed to foster curiosity or personal growth. They were designed to create compliant grown ups, people conditioned to enter the work force, even if that's as an unpaid housewife and mother, prepared to stick to the rules unquestioningly. Your K-8 days will be full of tasks that ask you to memorize, recite, work quickly and efficiently, and strive to be "the best" among your peers. The combination of boredom and competition will create a toxic culture among classmates. Playground bullying will be the outlet for the most frustrated students. You will both bully and be bullied.

I want you to know that the more you can hold on to your curiosity, the happier and kinder you will be. When questions arise, remember them, write them down, honor them. Look at them and say, "This is my superpower!" Take those questions to your father, or Mrs. Adams at the library. Both of them cherish your spirited energy and thirst for knowledge. They will say,

"What a great question!" Anytime an adult says this to you, you can be sure you have met a fellow traveler, someone who, like you, is eager to question the ways we understand our world.

The burden of compliance and boredom will take a terrible toll on your wellbeing. By the end of middle school, your parents will see that the problem is not you, never was you, and will help you find a high school that will change your life. You will come more alive every day as you learn to trust that this new school not only values your questions, it encourages them. Between now and then, remember, the problem is not you. The good news is that that superpower of yours? That ceaseless urge to question? That will be the very strength that allows you to recover and heal the parts of yourself trampled by the school system. Even better, it will lead you to publicly interrogate education's capacity to diminish or grow our humanity. Stay curious about the world. And stay curious about how you feel about it.

Love forever and ever,

2021 Debby

Jen Cort (she/her/hers)

Jen Cort (she/her/her) is the founder of Jen Cort Consulting and podcast host of *Third Space,* which leads experts focusing on equity, inclusion, diversity, and justice.

Dear Jen,

What I most want you to know about race is to trust your instincts and know that you do not know. Listen to that small part of you that asked "Is this because he is Black?" because the answer was always "yes." You are growing up in a commune where you have and will continue to be taught to stand for and with others. You will learn history from women and from a first nation teacher both will focus on the plights of the communities from which they originate, please listen and take in the weight of their stories but also know that this is not a complete history. You will celebrate the faith traditions of all of the people in your home, learn songs in every language spoken on the Farm, and you will protest tribal lands being taken. Please continue to protest but also know it is not enough.

There will be a time when a package is stolen from our little post office, and the package will include food and snacks at a time when all of you go to bed hungry. And the elders will question one of the boys you live with. You will wonder if it is because he is one of the only Black boys but you won't ask because the ethos around you is love and acceptance and it seems like it can't be possible that he is questioned because he is Black. But that voice inside of you is trying to tell you that words professing acceptance are not the same as actions ensuring belonging. Listen to it.

Listen when you hear the words out of your mouth saying you aren't biased that the way you were raised inoculated you from bias. Those words protect you from the weight of impact your biases have on you. And those same words harm others flooding them with messages that you are among the most dangerous, cloaking yourself in the thought that you are immune from racism, bias, and the benefits of privilege.

Ask more questions. Ask of the elders "Why do we say we have a mission of acceptance but we are mostly white?" Ask of yourself "Whose voice is not heard because you are busy filling space with your words?"

Keep a vigilant eye out for the seduction of saviorism. It is imbued into your every experience as Farm folks go around the world setting up midwifery programs, education systems, irrigation, and more. To be sure these are meaningful actions, however, the language around them will drip with the language of saviorism "we fixed," "we created," "we educated" rather than "we asked," "we listened," and "we co-created."

Know that you will grow up and your work will center on belonging, but it will happen only after you recognize that you are biased, racism has been present in all facets of your life, and listening is far more important than speaking. You will do so only by asking yourself every day how your privilege is benefiting you, and by continually working the muscle of saviorism

resistance. Being a hippy kid, a Quaker, an equity practitioner do not come with capes with magic powers inoculating you from bias. They come with the expectation that you will recognize in yourself and invite others to point out to you when you acting as part of the system keeping racism in place.

Finally, remember the truth of who we are changes all of the time. You will have moments when you look back and realize that not knowing caused pain. Remember shamed brains can't learn and you need to learn every day. So be kind to yourself when you mess up. Through this kindness, you will have space to grow and to do better.

Leigh Ann Erickson (she/her/her)

Leigh Ann Erickson, author of the young adult book *What Is White Privilege?*, is the proud sister, daughter, and granddaughter of teachers. She has taught in rural, suburban, and urban schools, witnessing the disparities that exist in US education and working to dismantle those disparities. She is the founder and principal of Undone Education Consulting and the Undone Movement, which works with teachers across the nation to end educational inequity. That work includes teaching predominantly White student populations to recognize historical truth and privilege and be part of the work to dismantle systemic racism. To do this, Leigh Ann developed an extensive curriculum and created the Connect, Absorb, Respond, and Empower (CARE) conference, which brings authentic and relationship building conversations about race and bias into high schools. She speaks about this work across the country and supports school districts and business with equity training. Leigh Ann earned a bachelor's in English and Spanish from the University of Delaware and master's in teaching from Pace University. She was a 2019 finalist for Iowa Teacher of the Year and received the Iowa HER Women of Achievement Award in 2018. Erickson is grateful to play a small part in a conversation about race and equity that has been happening in this country for centuries.

Dear Leigh Ann (circa 2009–2010 school year)

You are a teacher. You have 5 years under your belt teaching in New York City—in one of the most diverse high schools in the nation, and it has been life changing. You've met and married your love, found amazing friends, developed lasting relationships with students and colleagues, and now you are halfway across the country in Chicago—a city known for its nefarious segregation practices. In this school, there is no diversity. All of your students are Black, and you think you might know what that means, coming from one city to another, but you do not.

Context is critical here, and though I know you know where you are in this moment in time, allow me, for the sake of hindsight, to illuminate how some of your experiences have brought you to this space and made you the way that you are. Growing up in a virtually all White neighborhood was not something that entered your consciousness in childhood. It was a lovely childhood filled with bike rides and friends and exploration, but it was incomplete. Though I am not, in any way, assigning blame to those who loved you, your community was part of the age old suburban segregation, and you missed out on knowing and loving people of color—a reality that impacts you right now as you stand before your students in Chicago.

And even though you think you know what life is like for these students, and, worse yet, what is best for these students, after spending many years in NYC, you do not. *This, Leigh Ann, is a letter that I wish you had in this moment you stand in*. It is one that comes from an older version of yourself who has experienced deep personal and professional failure, and one who realizes

the way in which she did not hold and protect the dignity of her students in Chicago as she should have. Here's what I wish you knew so that your experience, and the experiences of your students, would be richer, more joy filled, and more honoring to the people and place in which you work.

Your understanding of history is impacting you right now in your classroom. After analyzing your own secondary education at a predominantly White school in Pennsylvania, here's what I've come up with: we learned about slavery but not the remarkable history of African people or the scope of the violence they endured because of the slave trade. We learned about emancipation but not the triumph and tragedy of reconstruction. We learned about Jim Crow but not lynching; the Civil Rights movement but not Amzie Moore, Fred Shuttlesworth, or the amazing Fannie Lou Hamer; the war on drugs but not mass incarceration. And while there will always be gaps in our learning, these gaps are particularly problematic because they led us to one dangerous conclusion: we're good. The bad stuff is in the past and, really, it wasn't that bad or that difficult to overcome. So what happens when we think this? We explain away the negative experiences of people of color, of our students in Chicago, through personal rather than collective responsibility. If someone isn't making it, it must simply be their fault. They just didn't "fill in the blank." The experiences of Black people are judged against our personal White experience, and if racism doesn't add up to us, it must not be happening because we're all good. The reality is that we are far from good. If humanity shares one thing, it is, as author and founder of the Equal Justice Initiative, Bryan Stevenson states, a common brokenness. Recognizing this is freedom, Leigh Ann. It is a freedom to have compassion, and that is what I wish you shared with your students.

Forget everything you learned about holding power in the classroom. **Release power and come alongside for the joy of everyone in the space.** As you began the NYC Teaching Fellows, there was a clear memory of being told "Never show the students that you are weak." In fact, you were even told to lie about it being your first year in the classroom! The focus of much of the training was how to maintain power over the young souls in your classroom. This was bad advice for you, Leigh Ann, because when a student challenged your personal preferred behavior, you fought for power instead of working to understand what that child was experiencing. You carried that need for power into Chicago, and when you quickly saw that it would be harder to maintain here, you grew harder. Here's what I wish you knew—it is a joy to relinquish power, and to admit to yourself and those you learn with that you still have much to learn, that teaching is hard, that life can be hard. In your desire to maintain power, while you still worked to build relationships, you also missed out on relationships and an opportunity to earn the trust of your students, and really listen to their stories, and come alongside them in those stories. Remember your homeroom class? This was one space where you didn't feel pressure to hold power, and though you only spent 15 minutes a day with those students, you spent those 15 minutes well- talking about who students were, building connections, being silly, apologizing for being wrong. You were likely a more effective teacher in those 15 minutes than you were for the remainder of the day. I know it can seem "easier" to hold power and keep students in line with your idea of how they should be, but it is not easier, and it hurts those you are there to care for. Remove the burden of power. Share in the learning, and get to know the wonderful young people you are sharing space with.

White culture is not synonymous with Right culture. When the way we grow up is synonymous with mainstream culture, it is easy to come to believe that this is the only way to be. Growing up in White culture impressed that idea upon you as you stand before the Black students in your classroom. You want them to be the way you are, likely for two reasons: you have come to believe that's the right way to be, and it's much easier for you to understand them if they act like you do. This is how we force our students to code switch. This is how we miss out on the gifts a variety of cultures brings to the table. You created a culture war in your classroom—shutting down that which did not feel right (ahem—White). Don't do this. There are so many ways to be. Recognize that your way is not the only way, and allow your students to be who **they** are in your classroom without the pressure of asking them to be who **you** are.

Be humble, dear girl, and remember the image in which these young people are made. One day, in the not too distant future, you will be a mother. It will change everything. You will look at the students in your class as someone's child, and that will remind you that they were created in the image of a higher power and that they hold innate dignity. Leigh Ann, can you look at them through that truth right now? So much of society aims to destroy the dignity of people. This is especially true for people of color, but what if your time with these students reinforced and uplifted the dignity they held as human beings? What if, in your time, you heard their grievances, shared in their joy, and walked alongside instead of in front of them? Oh, the richness that could have been.

This will not be your only chance, Leigh Ann. While your time will pass with the particular students you stand before, you will come to partner with this same school in a way that applies the lessons you've learned since this fateful school year. There is joy and reconciliation ahead. My wish is that you held this letter, and could begin that time of mutual joy and reconciliation when you first walked into that Chicago classroom.

In humility, disappointment, and gratitude,

Leigh Ann (circa 2021)

Lindsay Lyons (she/her)

Lindsay Lyons is an educational justice coach who works with teachers and school leaders to inspire educational innovation for racial and gender justice, design curricula grounded in student voice, and build capacity for shared leadership. Lindsay taught in NYC public schools, holds a PhD in leadership and change, and is the founder of the educational blog and podcast, *Time for Teachership*.

Hey, Lindsay @ 17!

Your sense of wanting to escape your hometown will still be there years later. You are right to believe there is more to the world, and you should get out there and see it all. But there is also so much happening right now, where you are.

The flags hanging in the back of pickup trucks in the student parking lot are Confederate flags. I'm still not sure how you haven't realized this after passing your AP US History exam. I'm not sure if it was learning all of the course material from independently reading a textbook, your reluctance to see that your peers were promoting white supremacy or the fact that none of the adults who see these flags—not your teachers, not your principal—talked to you about it.

When a person's Blackness is a whispered detail and people celebrate color blindness, this is not kind. These actions perpetuate the idea that any skin tones darker than pink are a problem. While people may not realize that's what they're doing, they will understand this someday. Because you will tell them. That nauseous feeling in your stomach is your body telling you that this is racism—more specifically, white body supremacy—in action.

By now you are familiar with that ever-present nausea and the accompanying urge to do something, to say something. That discomfort you feel when you don't? Adults with decades more life experience than you struggle with that. But you *can* and *must* say something. *You* are not wrong for pointing out dehumanization. These practices will only continue until interrupted and although you may not learn the language and strategies to interrupt white supremacy effectively until years later (and even then, you will continue to make mistakes, learn, and grow), you have the power and the agency—as a person, a student, a white girl—to change things.

What I have learned in the last 15 years (thanks to many amazing mentors) is that you will do more harm if you don't do something. The harm certainly affects people without white-skin advantage. But thanks to a brilliant woman that you will do a ton of incredible, creative, racial justice work with, you will learn that silence and inaction also wounds *you;* it wounds your soul. Being anti-racist is a selfish act. Sometimes being selfish is exactly what is needed. Life is complicated.

You control what you do and say. How other white folx respond is up to them. (Side note: "Folx" is a gender inclusive term for people you will use all the time once you learn it. You'll

learn a lot about gender in undergrad, including the concept of intersectional justice. As Fannie Lou Hamer said, "Nobody's free until we're all free.") You don't have all the tools yet, but you will dedicate your life to advancing racial, gender, and intersectional justice. For now, start by calling it out. Just name what's going on. Rock the boat. It's the best thing you could do for the small town you live in, the high school you will soon graduate from, and the people in these communities, whose souls need healing. That includes you.

Love,

lindsay @ 32

P.S. In a few years, you will be inspired by a Black feminist scholar named bell hooks to stop capitalizing your name in your signature. This is one of many things you will learn. Get excited, and enjoy all the learning to come!

Matt Scialdone (he/him)

Matt Scialdone has been teaching ninth-grade English, African American literature, and civic engagement for the past two decades at Middle Creek High School in Wake County, North Carolina.

Dear Matt, in your first year of teaching,

It's 2002, your first year teaching 9th-grade English after teaching a few sections of Freshman Composition as you completed your master's, and you don't even know what you don't know.

Like most first year teachers, you are teaching mostly what you were taught, how you were taught it. This will serve you well to "get the boat in the water" when it comes to your teaching career. But it won't necessarily serve your students well.

Oh, they'll learn—you'll teach them to parse Shakespearean sonnets, to identify sentence fragments, and to craft a transition statement. But they won't connect deeply with their learning, not yet. You'll have written that master's thesis on Freireian critical pedagogy, but you won't actually manifest any of those ideas in your classroom for a few years. You'll be in survival mode for a few years.

You'll first get a sense that something needs to change when you recognize that your students are consistently more interested in the historical context you provide for texts than the texts themselves. When you teach the story of the Scottsboro Boys and Emmett Till as your classes begin *To Kill a Mockingbird*, you see *the spark*. You watch it travel around the room, spines straighten, heads align, eyes widen.

"So wait, those girls on the train lied?" they'll ask.

"His momma kept the casket open, for real?" they'll ask.

"Yes," you'll say. "Now, let's start with chapter 1." They'll follow you to the fictional Maycomb, but you can sense they want to return to the very real Scottsboro, Alabama, and Money, Mississippi.

You'll see *the spark* as you begin to diversify the texts in your class.

The poetry of Clint Smith; spines straighten.

The fiction of Sandra Cisneros; heads align.

The speeches of Red Cloud; eyes widen.

There will be a shift in your classroom. Students will still gain the "nuts & bolts" of English Language Arts, but they will also begin engaging with their learning in a new way. They'll start teaching themselves, tracking down informational websites and videos about topics from class. They'll start teaching each other. You'll start to see Rudine Sims Bishop's concept of

"windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors" come to life. *The spark* will find its tinder; fire will follow.

You'll begin to know what you didn't know. When you relied on teaching what you were taught, how you were taught it, you were leaving questions unasked and unanswered. To effectively teach, you'll need to become a student again.

No one taught you about the Red Summer of 1919.

Or the Chinese Exclusion Act.

Or Wilmington 1898.

Or Wounded Knee.

Or Stonewall.

But this is exactly the *context* that will drive your students' engagement with all the other *content* of your class. This is exactly the *content* that will help your students *contextualize* their own lived experiences.

You'll begin to know what you don't know, so you'll need to get to work.

Literally Yours Truly,

Matt, from 2022

Michael J. Dunlea, M.Ed., NBCT (he/him/his)

Michael J. Dunlea is a National Board Certified elementary teacher at the Tabernacle Elementary School in the Tabernacle Township School District, which is a rural preK–8 public school district in Tabernacle, New Jersey. Michael has taught preK, first, and second grades, and he has been teaching third grade for the past four years. Michael is the 2020 Burlington County Teacher of the Year, 2020 and 2012 New Jersey State Teacher of the Year Finalist, 2020 Global Teacher Prize Top 50, and 2019 NEA Global Teacher Fellow. In addition, he received the 2018 Presidential Award of Excellence in Mathematics & Science Teaching.

Dear Michael,

Happy 18th birthday! You are now considered an adult. Take a look around, and what do you see? Do you notice that everyone looks like you? Don't wait to begin asking important questions. You are currently asleep, and it is in your best interest to awaken to the realities around you. When you post pictures and your friend Crissa asks "Where are all the people of color?" don't assume they all chose not to live in your area. Something is missing, and you don't even see it. How is it possible that mostly white people live in your town and area? You are too inquisitive not to be asking critical questions that lead to the truth and honest history of the United States.

You can be a powerful person of positive change in this world. You have the opportunity to understand the privileges you currently have and the obligation they bring to work towards making them available for all people no matter their skin color, religion they belong to, or any other factor that defines us as human beings.

You will feel deep remorse if you wait until you are middle-aged to discover what is staring you right in the face. What an incredible chance you have to avoid a future regret.

Please don't wait until you are 40 years old to become friends with people who are different from you. You are robbing yourself of so many relationships that will enrich your life. The removal of ignorance brings light where there is darkness. It eliminates the fear of what is unknown. It empowers even greater learning and inner peace. You need to wake up my little friend. As a future educator, you can not help others learn what you have not yet learned yourself.

In addition to this you should also know that on February 21, 1985, the NJ Pick 6 Lottery numbers are 10, 20, 23, 25, 29, 30. And one other thing, enjoy your hair, really take time to just seriously enjoy it.

Michael J. Dunlea , M.Ed., NBCT

Michelle Cottrell-Williams (she/her)

Michelle Cottrell-Williams is an educational specialist, Equity and Cultural Responsiveness in Fairfax County Public Schools who has taught for thirteen years—high school social studies and emerging multilingual students (ESOL)—modern world history, AP European history, sociology, psychology, economics & personal finance, and US government and two years middle school—resource teacher for the gifted, social studies lead, and instructional coach. Michelle was a teacher in Arlington Public Schools for fifteen years, and she's new to the Fairfax County educational specialist position as of May 2021. Arlington is a large (~29,000 students), semi-urban district, and Fairfax is a very large (~188,000 students), suburban district; both are in Northern Virginia. Michelle is the 2018 Virginia Teacher of the Year and lives by the following: "As I know better, I do better; I am both a masterpiece and work in progress." She is a co-conspirator with Undone Consulting and is about to start a new podcast called *Disruptive Behavior*.

Dear Little Michelle,

You are now still quite young. You are kind, and people are drawn to your gentle warmth and inviting smile. Most of your friends are different from you—different religions, different races, different languages—but you don't seem to notice. At least not now. You just know you feel loved in their homes.

When you are 12, though, you are going to ask Daddy what he'd think if you married someone who is Black. You won't be certain what prompts the question, but perhaps you've started noticing things. He's going to respond by telling you that he wouldn't mind exactly, but it would probably be a bad idea since it would make it really hard for your kids. You're not really sure what he means, but you don't know how to ask for more. Perhaps this moment will become a touchpoint for you.

As you get older and go to high school, your circle of friends will change, eventually becoming almost entirely White. You can't really say why. In fact, you won't even really notice.

It will still be quite some time before you start to understand that people don't all walk through the world like you do. You will grow up surrounded by reflections of yourself, showing you where you fit in the world and what you might make of your life. Emily Style and Rudine Sims Bishop both call this a mirror. Whether you are watching TV, reading a book, learning history, coloring, or looking through catalogs and magazines, you will see people who look like you. And so, you will internalize the idea that your experience is universal. That you belong in every room you enter. That you have value. And you can't imagine that anyone else isn't growing up believing the same about themselves.

When you grow up, you're going to become a teacher. It will be one of the best decisions you ever make. You are going to feel unimaginable love for the thousands of students whose lives intertwine with yours. You will make a lot of mistakes, though, especially in the beginning. You will struggle most to understand the Black and Brown boys who seem so different from you. But as you learn to recognize the humanity in each of them, you will begin to understand just how much we all need to be seen, and just how little our world tries to see.

Do what you can now to see others and recognize the beauty they add to your life. Believe that every person deserves to feel that same sense of belonging you get to experience. Pay attention to how adults look at and talk to the people of color around you. Are they acting towards them like they act toward you? If not, say something. Ask questions. Wonder aloud about why you are treated better. Notice.

Know that you are seen, you matter, and you are enough. Then, share it with others. Because everyone deserves to be seen, to know that they matter, and to believe that they are enough. Sometimes it will feel scary or awkward or uncomfortable to stand up for this truth, but trust me, it's worth it. It's always worth it.

Love,

Michelle from 2021

Nicole Greene (she/her/hers)

Nicole Greene, NBCT, is a special education teacher at Winston Preparatory School. She's been a SPED teacher in New York City and California for eight years and spent two years as an upper elementary school head. She has taught students in Grades 4–12.

Dear Young Colie,

Here I am . . . you, but from the future. I don't know what age you are as you read this, but I know that no matter what age it is, you'll already want to be a teacher, and if you're already in second grade, your dream is to be a special education teacher. You'll have big plans to change the world. The good news? You'll arrive at your career goals just a few months after graduating college. But, it won't be like anything you imagined. The world will change you. The better news? You don't know this now but you need it. The world needs it.

Know that I know you—your heart, your intentions—and everything I say comes from a place of love and encouragement. You are growing up in a strange home in a very sheltered place. There are things you currently hear and experience that you will not internalize, that you know in your heart are wrong (like the frequent use of the N-word that makes your stomach scrunch into knots and your eyes well with tears), but there is so much more to racism that you have not yet learned . . . things that you will internalize. These, my sweet self, are the things you will spend your life studying and analyzing, unlearning and fixing. You pride yourself in dating Black boys, having a large group of Black friends, and you don't yet know the damage and pain you will inflict on them—without intent and without knowledge. You'll pride yourself in paving a different path for yourself than your upbringing, without any awareness of the facets you did take with you. These are the things that will eat you up later in life, as you wonder about the damage you've done. You'll think about if you should find your middle school boyfriend, David, and apologize for telling him "my parents would kill me for dating a Black guy." You don't yet know how awful that is, but I promise you'll learn. You will wake up in the middle of the night with immense guilt over the time you said to Maya "my best friend is Black" and wonder if you should call her and apologize . . . even 15 years later. To these I say, forgive yourself but don't forget. This hyper-awareness of these mistakes, of the hurt you may have caused . . . they'll propel you forward. They'll fuel the question "what else don't I yet know and what can I do to learn?" that will change your teaching, your relationships, and your impact on others in the world.

You're probably wanting me to tell you all the mistakes you'll make so you can avoid them—but even if I could, I wouldn't. You don't yet know how sheltered your world is. You don't yet know so much, and you wouldn't believe me if I told you half of it. While I wish I could change the hurt you most definitely will have caused, each of these mistakes are crucial for

you. They'll dismantle the world you existed in for the first 18 years of your life for the good of everyone else you meet.

I know this all sounds overwhelming and scary. The truth is, the overwhelm and fear will never truly dissipate. Sometimes you'll feel strong and excited and empowered, and many other times you'll feel drained and lonely. You're going to lose friends along the way, your familial relationships will change along the way. That said, keep pushing. Go forward even when you're feeling alone (you aren't), even when it puts your job on the line (it will), even when it makes for awkward holidays.

I can't give you all the answers, but I can give you some advice. You're going to make mistakes—don't hide from them, own them with a humble and apologetic heart . . . then vow to never make that mistake again. Decenter yourself—at first you'll think you're a hero, but that's still your privilege talking. The sooner you take yourself out of the equation, the fewer mistakes you make, the more genuine you will be. Remember impact matters more than intent, so don't take it personally when you do mess up. Your intent doesn't change the hurt you cause; let that reality guide your choices and your words. Most of all, don't give up. Don't let the fear of making a mistake stop you from trying. The worst thing you can do is sit in comfort and safety on the backs of others.

Sounds like a lot, huh? It is. But it'll be worth it.

Love,

2021 Colie

Sarah Halter Hahesy (she/her/hers)

Sarah Halter Hahesy (she/her/hers) is a third-grade teacher with Brookline Public Schools. She has been a paraprofessional, a fourth-grade teacher as well as a third-grade teacher for the past thirteen years, and it is her favorite grade to teach. Sarah's school is a mix of urban and suburban, and she has created a small group of peers at her school that meet monthly to discuss our antiracist teaching.

Dear Younger Sarah,

As a white person, you will want to see immediate results for all the actions that you are doing to end racism. This work is a marathon, not a sprint. You might not ever see the end result, but do NOT stop. People will put up obstacles to stop your work or question your commitment to this fight. Don't forget that this is the most important work you will ever do. It will benefit all to end this hateful system of oppression. Find your people. Keep being open to learning. Don't let set-backs make you feel like a failure. Your students and children need this to help them make the world a more equal and just place.

You've got this!

Love,

Older Sarah

Shawna Coppola (she/her)

Shawna Coppola (she/her), is the author of *Renew: Become a Better and More Authentic Writing Teacher* and *Writing Redefined: Broadening Our Ideas of What it Means to Compose* as well as a literacy specialist and consultant. She has been in education for over twenty years and has been a literacy specialist for over ten years. Shawna is also a member of The Educator Collaborative, a K–12 literacy think tank.

Dear Younger Shawna,

So you've read *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* by Alex Haley and Malcolm X! I can see it in you—in the way your fists clench, in the way eyes flash angrily now that you've somehow "awoken" to the injustice that you can no longer unsee. Of course you learned about slavery—and what was it? The Trail of Tears?—long before this, but it *just didn't register* the way it should have. Your white adolescent brain is still developing, after all, and the way these atrocities were presented to you in school was through a decidedly post-racial lens: "But that was in the past, kids! Things are better now." But Malcolm X . . . Malcolm X hits differently.

This, sweet girl, is the beginning of a long journey that will take decades upon decades to navigate. In fact, your work to disrupt and dismantle whiteness in your own life, in the tiny, most microscopic recesses of your own brain, will never end. Some of your classmates—the ultra privileged cishet white boys, mostly—will mock you for your outrage. (A too-large number of these *cishet-white-boys-who-mock* will develop into *cishet-white-men-who-mock*, so enter your DMs cautiously. You'll understand this in about twenty-five years.) Your parents will wonder why you are so angry "all of a sudden." You'll fall off the wagon, so to speak, for at least a decade, when in your twenties you'll "forget" how important it is to fight against racial injustice—because your whiteness includes the privilege of being able to "forget."

Try not to let that happen. While you, as one person, cannot "fix" what is so broken in this world—or dismantle that which is designed to work *exactly as planned*—you *can* make a small difference through both your burgeoning activism as well as through the internal work in which you so desperately need to engage. You can work hard, for instance, to *unlearn* so much of what you were socialized to believe since birth—about whiteness, about Blackness, about Indigeneity, about everything having to do with race and racialized identities. As an 80s child who was glued to the television for much of your childhood, you've absorbed a lot of harmful images and misinformation. You've also been led to believe that white folks' experiences, needs, and desires are the "norm," and that anyone who doesn't fit into the category of whiteness is "other." UNLEARN THIS. Seek out media that refuses to conform to this nonsense. Question why it's so difficult to do so as a young, white teenager living in New England. Ask your teachers why, for example, one of your high school electives is called "Minority Literature" when your core classes are simply called "English" or "Social Studies." *Say something*—please!—when one of the handful of students of color at your school, who you've known since kindergarten, is teased for her beautiful Korean-ness.

Don't simply look away.

And also: understand that while all of *this* is not your fault, it *is* your responsibility to fight it, daily, with every ounce of energy you have. It will feel at times exhausting, and at other times exhilarating, to use your (unearned) social capital for this purpose. Some days, when the latest news cycle rears its ugly head, you will feel as though it is all for naught. You will lose friends; your family relationships will suffer. But you, Shawna…you will come out of this a better, more knowledgeable, more compassionate human. Even more importantly, you'll have at least a fighting chance at breaking the chains of white supremacy within your own tiny sphere of influence. And that, at least, is something.

Love,

Shawna (4/12/21)