

*White Awake: An Honest Look at What It Means to Be White*  
**Available September 19, 2017**  
 \$16, 208 pages, paperback  
 978-0-8308-4393-0

## Pastor and Reconciliation Leader Examines Cultural Identity Amid Broader Injustice Conversation

Daniel Hill, the author of *White Awake*, has spent decades working and investing in the city of Chicago. As a part of his work as the founding pastor of River City Community Church, Hill has been engaging in reconciliation efforts in the city as well as contributing to the broader conversation concerning race and injustice.

In the last two years, Hill has emerged as a national thought leader in the arena of racial reconciliation, with interviews on CNN, Fox News, and *Jet Magazine* as the most recent examples. *White Awake* chronicles the stages of his own journey into understanding and embracing his white cultural identity.

“In the late 90s while working at Willow Creek, I had a major epiphany about God’s heart for reconciliation and justice,” Hill said. “This reshaped not only my theological understanding of God, but also my sense of call. I have been actively pursuing church-based, racial reconciliation ministry ever since. I avoided writing on this topic as I was of the strong persuasion that white Christians looking to educate themselves should center historically marginalized voices of color as their primary guides instead of relying on traditional methods of white people talking to white people about race.”

Hill still feels strongly about this conviction to lifting up marginalized voices. But over the years he’s received a stream of those voices telling him that if a white person is going to speak to the topic of reconciliation and awareness of white identity, it should be one with the credibility of working with marginalized groups and with credibility in the eyes of Christians of color.

“Daniel Hill sought me out as a mentor over two decades ago, and it has been a joy to watch the progress of him and his church,” said John Perkins, cofounder of the Christian Community Development Association. “Now, in *White Awake*, he shares lessons learned on his journey of following Jesus into the ministry of reconciliation. As Christians in this day and age, we need to all think critically and closely examine the teachings of Scripture. In this book, you will find fresh thinking around the critical topic of race, and I would encourage every Christian to read it.”

Throughout *White Awake*, Hill reveals how systems of oppression and marginalization have contributed to the place we find ourselves in today. He unpacks the broader concept of

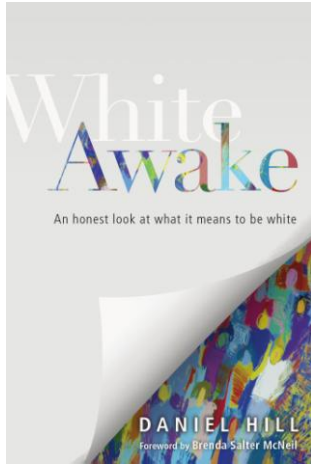


# BOOK DETAILS

cultural identity, exploring its intersection with the concept of Christian identity by digging into the following seven stages:

- Encounter
- Denial
- Disorientation
- Shame
- Self-righteousness
- Awakening
- Active participation

*"White Awake is a profoundly pastoral book with serious implications for the ecclesial, social, and political life of our nation,"* said Michael Wear, author of *Reclaiming Hope*. *"At a time when conversations about race seem increasingly cross-pressured by various interests and motivations, readers can trust Daniel Hill to tell them the truth about racism and white supremacy. Hill does not use these fraught issues to manipulate, but rather to help his readers see more clearly. If Christians read and consider this book carefully, it will help them. It helped me. I'm grateful to Daniel for writing White Awake."*



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*“Daniel Hill has been my friend for almost two decades, and with each passing year, I learn more from him and admire him more. His passion, intelligence, and depth are gifts to the community he pastors and to the city of Chicago, and this book is a wise and helpful guide for all of us who want to learn more about both the theology and practice of reconciliation in America today.”*

— **Shauna Niequist**, *New York Times*-bestselling author of *Present Over Perfect*

## Waking Up to the Whiteness of My World

It was a cold December weekend in Chicago, and I was excited. One of my best friends was getting married, and to top it off, he had asked me to officiate the wedding. I was honored by the invitation, though a bit intimidated. What if I botched it and ended up being the guy the editor tried to remove from all the film footage? I was a brand-new pastor and had been in vocational ministry for less than a year, and this was my first wedding.

My friend, the groom, was of South Asian/Indian descent, and he was very proud of his cultural heritage. He had promised that the reception in particular would take guests on a deep dive into Indian culture and that we should prepare ourselves for a culturally unique experience. The reception lived up to the hype, and I had a night to remember. My personal highlight was the *dandiya* dance, a group of people moving in two circles counterclockwise, holding two colorful sticks. I’m typically hesitant to get out on the dance floor, but the beauty of the *dandiya* was compelling.

When the dance ended, I was still feeling festive from the amazing experience. So I found my friend and shared with him how much I had enjoyed every bit of that wonderful night. Then I innocently added a comment: “I’m jealous of you. You have such an amazing culture! It must be such a privilege to be able to reflect that beautiful culture during your wedding weekend. I wish I had a culture too.”

I had no idea how much was packed into that little statement, but it sure wasn’t lost on him. He suddenly got serious, placed his hand on my shoulder, and looked me straight in the eye. “Daniel, you may be white, but don’t let that lull you into thinking you have no culture. White culture is very real. In fact, when white culture comes in contact with other cultures, it almost always wins. So it would be a really good idea for you to learn about your culture.”

I found myself revisiting this conversation often. My friend was known for avoiding serious topics, so I had been surprised by the spontaneous intensity he had displayed. Most unsettling about it was his commentary on my “white” culture. First of all, I felt he was lumping me in with every other white person he’d ever known. I thought, *He can’t seriously think there’s just one white culture, can he?* In an attempt to piece together the confusing message he’d sent my way, I reflected on the Irish heritage on my father’s side and the pride many of my relatives took in it.

Then I thought about the German and French heritage on my mom’s side. I knew less about those cultures, but still, they were three very different backgrounds. Was he suggesting that those three distinct cultures could be mashed into a single category: white? That seemed like a major stretch.

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# BOOK EXCERPT



**Daniel Hill** is the founding and senior pastor of River City Community Church, a vibrant, multiethnic church in the Humboldt Park neighborhood of Chicago. He is the author of *10:10: Life to the Fullest*. Prior to starting River City, Hill worked in the business world before serving five years on the staff of Willow Creek Community Church in the Chicago suburbs. He has a business degree from Purdue University, an MA in theology from Moody Bible Institute, a certificate in church-based community and economic development from Harvard Divinity School, and a DMin from Northern Baptist Theological Seminary. He is married to Elizabeth, who is a professor of psychology, and they are the proud parents of two children.

Then there was the even more unsettling suggestion that my culture wins whenever it comes in contact with another. Not only was he lumping all white cultures into a single group, he was also proposing that this single conglomeration consistently dominates other cultures. How would this not come off as insulting to a white person?

So, what seemed utterly obvious to him was utterly confusing to me. But I wanted to give him the benefit of the doubt, and I searched for where I could find agreement with him. I could readily acknowledge that some white individuals exhibit dominant or even racist behaviors. Certainly that was common ground.

But even then I found myself thinking, *Just because certain white individuals demonstrate prejudice or racism by their behaviors doesn't implicate an entire race.* I guessed that he would respond poorly to the suggestion that certain individuals of Indian heritage represent their entire race. Yet he seemed comfortable with the idea of poorly behaved white individuals representing all white people.

This monologue continued to live inside my head longer than expected, and I anxiously awaited its end. Instead it grew in intensity. I wasn't sure why, but it was becoming clear that God had provoked something in me through this brief encounter. My friend had opened a monumental door and had left me to decide whether or not to step through it. He had opened me up to a whole new world, but I was unable to navigate it on my own.

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I was working at Willow Creek Community Church, a megachurch in the Chicago area, when I experienced my first racial awakening, described here. At the time, Willow Creek's seeker-sensitive approach was redefining the ministry philosophy of numerous congregations. So there was a tremendous demand for training, equipping, and practical resources. This led to the founding of a companion organization called the Willow Creek Association, and these two entities partnered to run a steady stream of conferences all year long.

These conferences' impact wasn't limited to church leaders who traveled thousands of miles to attend. Willow Creek was also a major source of inspiration and equipping for me, and I credit it with being the place where most of my leadership skills were honed and developed. A huge job perk of working at Willow Creek was being able to attend these conferences, and I rarely missed one.

But as much as the environment of Willow Creek had shaped me and as much as these conferences had built my leadership skills, I was feeling lost. I had experienced the beginnings of a racial awakening, but I was in need of someone to guide me into the next step of the journey. The question "what am I supposed to do?" burned within me, and I was desperate to find answers.

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At the time, I was working on the staff of Axis, a young-adult ministry that was dedicated to reaching twenty-somethings. Other members of the staff were wrestling with issues of race and cultural identity as well, so we committed to reading some books and discussing them together. One of the authors who challenged our thinking was Dr. Michael Emerson, at the time a professor at Rice University as well as a leading scholar on race and religion. His book *Divided by Faith* played a significant role in the racial awakening of Pastor Bill Hybels, who encouraged the entire congregation to read the book.

*“Daniel Hill’s personal and deep dive into whiteness, reconciliation, and the dividing lines in our social matrix of race is needed like never before. At a time of ongoing racial weariness and colorblind responses, I’m so grateful for this resource. Allow the transparency and courage of this book to lead you into the needed work of unity, liberation, and justice.”*

— **Efrem Smith**, author of *Killing Us Softly* and *The Post-Black and Post-White Church*

One of the themes that jumped out at me was the *hypersegregation* of the white American church, a term Emerson and his colleagues coined when researching racial segregation in cities. They measured each city based on a range from zero (complete racial *integration*) to one (complete racial *segregation*). If a city measured .90 or higher, 90 percent of one group would have to switch neighborhoods to achieve integration; in that case, the city was hypersegregated. A score that high indicated a city’s racial makeup. As Emerson said, “Values this high could usually only be achieved through laws, discriminatory lending and real estate procedures, threats, and other racially unequal practices.” It was sad but not surprising to see that a number of cities in America approached the value of .90.

I was vaguely familiar with the racial history of our country, so it seemed plausible that certain cities still reflected the effects of unjust laws, procedures, and practices. What I didn’t expect, though, was that this level of racial segregation reached beyond just cities; it was present in the American church as well. Emerson and team applied the same research criteria when studying congregations and discovered that conservative Protestantism *exceeded* these values of .90. This seemed statistically impossible, which led Emerson to suggest, “Even if someone were in control of all conservative Protestantism and had the power and will to consciously assign whites and nonwhites to separate congregations across the nation, obtaining a value of over .90 would be a difficult feat . . . such segregation values are astonishing.”

Revelations like this fueled my desire to find a way to break out of the white-centric world I had been in my whole life and to pursue a more multicultural reality. I began to evangelize enthusiastically about this vision within Willow Creek, though many had been passionate about it long before. In the naiveté of youth, I quickly became the annoying, self-righteous white guy. I felt I had finally seen the light, and I was determined to make everyone around me see it.

The tension I felt due to my growing racial awareness continued to intensify, and it was clear to me that something was going to have to change.

— Adapted from chapters one and two,  
*“The Day I Discovered My World Was White”* and *“Flying Blind”*