RACIAL JUSTICE FOR THE LONG HAUL

HOW WHITE CHRISTIAN ADVOCATES PERSEVERE (& WHY)

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ONE

The Gaze

WHERE SHALL WE BEGIN?

Let's begin with a gaze.

A Black man faces a White woman across a dinner table. He breathes in. Breathes out. Searches for words. Considers how to respond to the story he has just heard. Let's call him Mark, her Hannah.[1] Let's listen to the story Hannah has just told Mark as a casual contribution to a dinner conversation among family and friends.[2]

Years earlier, Hannah decided to dress for a Halloween party as one of her heroes. This was in the early 1990s, and across America people were celebrating the world records and Olympic victories of runner Florence Griffith Joyner, known widely as Flo-Jo. As a track runner herself, Hannah decided to dress as that hero. She studied pictures of Griffith Joyner's Olympic races to copy her clothing, her pinny number, and her colorful nail polish. Then Hannah went to the store and bought makeup to match her light skin to Griffith Joyner's dark tone.

Hannah did not know the history of blackface—how in the nineteenth and early twentieth century White people coated their faces in dark pigment to ridicule Black people in minstrel shows, how imitating

[1]Unless otherwise noted, names of research participants are pseudonyms. Some identifying details have been omitted or changed to protect confidentiality.

[2]When stories in this book involve multiple people, whenever possible I have sought out the accounts of multiple people involved. I was unable to contact Mark, however, so this story is an account as told to me by Hannah according to her memory and interpretation of events.

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someone else's body in a Halloween costume can insult their dignity and history. She grew up attending a private school with only a few Black classmates, all of them upper and middle class. When she visited a Black schoolmate's home as a child, she saw the mom and thought, *Gorgeous model*, saw the dad and thought, *Impossibly cool*. She learned bits about American slavery but didn't know how racism continued after the Emancipation Proclamation, didn't know that the average White household during her lifetime held ten times the wealth of African American households.[3] Blackness, in her mind, was "dazzling." When she put on the Halloween costume for a college party, she did not know about the symbolic violence of wearing blackface, nor did she know anyone who could tell her. No one told her to stop. It was the 1990s at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, where 93 percent of students were White.[4]

"I remember as I was doing it," she reflected later, "there was something inside of me as I was making the choice, like, *I don't know, should I be doing this?* I thought about it for a while and I was slightly uncomfortable, but I'd never been taught about minstrel shows or any of that. I didn't know any of that. And so ultimately, I decided to do it because I thought, *I'll bet you if I go ahead and do it and it's not the right thing to do, I'm going to learn something from it*. And boy, did I ever."

So she went to a store and bought the cake of brown makeup. She stood before a mirror and wiped it on her face, her arms, her chest.

And then, years after that Halloween, she sat at this dinner table across from this Black man Mark, a professor and longtime family friend. And she casually told him about that Halloween costume.

Then silence. And this gaze.

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[3]Neil Bhutta et al., "Disparities in Wealth by Race and Ethnicity in the 2019 Survey of Consumer Finances," Federal Reserve, September 28, 2020, www.federalreserve.gov/econres/notes/feds-notes/disparities-in-wealth-by-race-and-ethnicity-in-the-2019-survey-of-consumer-finances-20200928.html.

[4]Devi Shastri, "UW–Madison's Black Student Enrollment Has Never Exceeded 3%," *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, February 6, 2022, www.jsonline.com/story/news/education/2022/06/02/university-wisconsin-madison-struggles-recruit-Black-students/7171091001/.

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"That moment is probably the most charged moment of my whole life," she said as she discussed it with me later. Her voice began to crack. When she regained her voice, she told me that then, too, in the eyes of Mark's gaze, she had begun to cry. "Oh, no, you don't," she would recall Mark saying when he saw her tears. "You don't get to do that." This was years before the phrase "White tears" would spread across social media to name the ways White people deflect confrontation about racism by focusing attention on their own emotions instead of the experiences of racial minorities. She didn't know the term, and perhaps Mark didn't either, but he was not about to let her drop out of the conversation to protect her emotional vulnerability. He held the gaze.

"It wasn't like the revulsion look," she said, describing his expression, "but it was—his face looked different than I'd ever seen it. And I know he loves me deeply. Right? And he shifted into this other expression that I have seen on Black people since then, whenever they're talking about racism. It's fascinating. It's super focused and it's like they're trying to communicate something with you. And it's probably—you know what I think it is? I think there's a little part of them that has hope, you know? That this stupid White girl might learn something, like she might just learn something. But then—" Here she paused before speaking with emphasis. "I'm sure they've been disappointed so many times. Like, *do you dare even hope for that?*"

This gaze moment, which we'll return to in later chapters, portrays not just an interaction between two individuals but a freeze-frame of three deeper questions: Can people change for the better when so many forces keep us moving as we always have been? Can humans repair the seemingly irreparable harms between each other? And how should we dare hope for such things?

As a researcher, I heard many stories similar to that of Hannah and Mark, sometimes recounted by a White person in the story, sometimes

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by a person of color, and sometimes one after another. An Indigenous woman described a day when her White coworker used a clip from a war movie in an attempt to motivate their team to action. She would recall hearing a White commander in the video telling White soldiers: "This is your land. You can do whatever you want with it. Build your house and have your family here because this is your land." Until this moment in the meeting, she had been taking notes, listening intently and hopefully. Now she put down her pen and sat, her face a motionless gaze while her thoughts raced and emotions swirled through her body. "I was sitting there just trying to hold myself together," she said. "Historically that was not the truth of what happened. Indigenous people were there, and there was genocide. They were killed off, and they were displaced, and they were moved, and they were assimilated. They were terminated. All these things." She walked away, back to her hotel room, unable to stop shaking. She found a friend who listened as they unpeeled layers of pain. Later, with her friend's support, she wrote to the man about the video clip. He said he was sorry it caused pain, but he didn't understand why. She wrote again. He replied saying he was still confused. Eventually she gave up the conversation. "I don't want to be cast the burden of having to be responsible for his learning," she said. He was not ready to hear the explanation behind her gaze. "Multiply that story times at least once a week, something like that happens," she told me. "It gets really wearisome."

Something profound is contained in that gaze. It's a gaze that searches to see something in another person even more clearly than that person sees it in themselves. It sees both crime and context. It chooses to stay, at least for this moment. It exercises a powerful freedom, refusing to decide according to someone else's demands whether to berate, walk away, or hold steady. The Marks at the table know that the Hannahs might not learn something and might not change. They know that if they get this wrong, or even if they get it right, someone will probably get hurt again. Probably it will be someone on their side of the table. If Mark opens

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himself to hoping that Hannah will change, he carries that risk. Hope is costly and dangerous.

This is a book about what happens in the quivering possibilities of that gaze—whether people can love after irreversible harm, how people become agents of change toward racial justice, and how we even dare hope for that. I believe that the ways we answer these questions matter for all humanity.

These questions have haunted me since youth, and often I have felt alone in my search for answers.[5] Over the decades, I discovered many others who wrestled with the same questions, and eventually I spent several years carefully studying their journeys. Because I wanted to study a smaller group than the whole of America, I started by choosing a subgroup among White people—White Christians. One reason for this choice was that White Christians tend to think a lot about hope. For another reason, as we'll see in the coming chapters, they make for an important test case of how to hope for racial justice because they are especially disengaged from struggles against racism. In a recent survey asking how motivated people were to address racism, White Christians were half as likely as the wider White population to be highly motivated, and only one-fifth as likely as Black Christians.[6]

How does one go about studying the ways people hope and the myriad factors that cause people to orient their lives toward one value or another?

About fifteen years ago, after I had tried out more jobs, homes, and countries than could fit on a résumé, I happened to be in the right time and place for someone to ask me to teach a class called Anthropology and Intercultural Communication. I had taken a graduate-level class called Intercultural Communication, but I didn't quite know what anthropology was. They had a textbook, so I gave it a try.

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[5]To read how my own life story led me to write this book, see the afterword.

[6]Christina Barland Edmondson and Chad Brennan, *Faithful Anti-Racism: Moving Past Talk to Systemic Change* (InterVarsity Press, 2022), 17.

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That class changed my life. I was teaching at a seminary in South Africa where students came from across the continent. We had conversations comparing how Malawians and Zambians hug, why missionaries translated "God" as "Big-big" in isiZulu, and how Chinese companies build roads across Burundi. I learned that anthropology doesn't just teach people *about* each other; it teaches people *how* to learn *from* each other and *with* each other. I discovered that anthropologists had explored questions my previous degrees hadn't answered, such as how humans decide what makes a good life, how people imagine reality, how much control individuals have over their own lives, and how our answers to these questions contribute to suffering and flourishing. Anthropology aims to study not just what people do in a controlled experiment in a lab, but in everyday life. It's like very slow journalism, with lots of interviews and lots of time spent in the middle of everyday life happenings. Anthropologists observe, not just to catch the latest big event but to analyze ordinary humanity. Eventually I went on to get a PhD at the University of Wisconsin–Madison in this thing called anthropology. Then I found a job teaching it so I could keep exploring questions like these.

So when I tackle questions such as what leads White people to care about racism, I start by listening to people and hanging out with people. But which people?

As I was beginning to consider this research, I mentioned my plans during a podcast interview. A few weeks later, I received an email from a White man in my city. He said my plan to study White people pursuing racial justice caught his attention, and he thought, "That sounds like me." So he offered, "I know it's a bit bold to offer myself for this, but if it's helpful, know that I'd be a willing participant."

I had met this man before, but I didn't know him well. His email brought into focus a concern I'd had from the start of the research: What criteria should I use to choose participants? People who volunteered for the study? People who met certain characteristics signaling their commitment to racial justice? If so, what characteristics? Should they check

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boxes on a list of belief statements, or pass a test of their knowledge? Or would they best be selected not for what they knew and believed but for what they did? Should they work in certain jobs, live in certain neighborhoods, or volunteer in certain ways?[7] Does a White person committed to racial justice contact their legislators, volunteer in a school, attend talks by leaders of color, or regularly find themselves the only White person in the room? What counts as a White person committed to racial justice?

Clearly any of these criteria might exclude and include different sets of people. But was I even the one to decide? I was not. That much I knew. The criteria for choosing White people who demonstrated a commitment to racial justice had to come not from me or any other White person but as directly as possible from people of color. They are the most affected, and over their lifetimes they weigh the consequences of the complex overlapping patterns of White people's choices. In this study, I wanted to center their perspectives.[8]

People of color are not monolithic. Scholars of color hold differing positions in ongoing conversations about what racial justice means and

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[7]The methodologies of two of the most similar books to this one selected organizations working to address racism and then chose participants from among the White volunteers and staff of those organizations. See Eileen O'Brien, *Whites Confront Racism: Antiracists and Their Paths to Action* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2001); Mark R. Warren, *Fire in the Heart: How White Activists Embrace Racial Justice* (Oxford University Press, 2010). Others have drawn largely on renowned historical figures or on the author's own personal experiences and acquaintances. See Drick Boyd, *Disrupting Whiteness: Talking with White People About Racism* (Arch Street, 2021); Karen Johnson, *Ordinary Heroes: How Studying the Past Can Help Us Move Past Racial Divides* (InterVarsity Press, 2025); Clifford Williams, *The Uneasy Conscience of a White Christian: Making Racial Equity a Priority* (Wipf & Stock, 2021). Others focus on narrowly controlled parameters such as the extent of individuals' social ties. See Mary R. Jackman and Marie Crane, "'Some of My Best Friends Are Black . . .': Interracial Friendship and Whites' Racial Attitudes," *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 50, no. 4 (1986): 459-86; Doug McAdam and Ronnelle Paulsen, "Specifying the Relationship Between Social Ties and Activism," *American Journal of Sociology* 99, no. 3 (1993): 640-67. In one study, researchers interviewed people of color about White allies, but the study did not extend to those White people described. Cassandra L. Hinger et al., "Defining Racial Allies: A Qualitative Investigation of White Allyship from the Perspective of People of Color," *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 70, no. 6 (2023): 631-44.

[8]In considering how to accomplish this, I was inspired in part by the ways in which W. E. B. Du Bois centered the activism and perspectives of Black people even within his biography of White abolitionist John Brown. W. E. B. Du Bois, *John Brown* (Oxford University Press, 2007).

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how to accomplish it. I wanted to allow space for participants in the research to define that nebulous concept. People's own understandings of the term *racial justice* would change across their journeys, and the study was meant to uncover those changes. I also wanted to hear not only from academics but from people across a range of class and educational backgrounds. I planned to pay particular attention to perspectives of Christians of color, given the focus on Christians in this study, but even that subset would include a wide range of experiences and views.

And so this study had three phases. In 2022, I began phase one by meeting with thirty people of color who led churches or organizations focused on addressing racism.[9] I chose them by beginning with leaders I was familiar with and then following their recommendations to meet others. I listened as they described what racial justice meant to them—what happens when it goes well and when it goes poorly. I asked them to describe what they hoped for and also the ways they hoped. They told stories of interactions with White people and what people of all races can do to pursue justice together.

At the end of each interview with a person of color, I asked for their recommendations of White people to interview. I asked, "If you knew a White Christian who was new to this journey and who was looking for a White Christian mentor, who would you recommend? Or who do you know who has been at this for something like a decade or more, who's still committed and seems like they will be long term?" I wrote down names they listed and asked them to explain why they chose these individuals. Sometimes they paused, thought for a bit, and admitted they could not think of anyone to recommend. These moments of hesitation led to insightful conversations as well. Some people gave names but emphasized that no one had this process down to perfection. The White people I interviewed often stressed the same thing: They were not experts, exemplars, or heroes. They were just the best option somebody in

[9]I also conducted a few interviews between 2019 and 2022 to refine my research questions and methods.

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their life could think of. They'd done something well, but never everything. Often, when describing why they chose these individuals, people of color would name the mistakes they had made as well as their successes—it wasn't just getting things right that qualified them; it was how they responded when they got things wrong.[10]

In phase two, I interviewed forty of the White Christians who'd been recommended by those faith leaders of color. Interviews usually lasted at least two hours, much of which was spent describing their life histories. Other questions explored their definitions of racial justice, practices and challenges they experienced in pursuit of racial justice, and their hopes.

This methodology had the benefit of allowing me to hear some of the same stories recounted from multiple perspectives. When possible, I asked White individuals about details mentioned by their acquaintances of color, and vice versa. I knew of no other studies that had taken this approach of studying White transformative journeys through the lenses of their own perspectives and of people of color around them, and I read accounts by at least two authors wishing they had.[11] No individual goes through life making changes by their own efforts alone—transformation always happens in a social context—and I wanted a methodology that would uncover at least some of those interactions from multiple perspectives.

To catch those interactions across a social network, I also committed to conducting most of the research within one geographic and social space—the city of Madison, Wisconsin. Madison is my home and has been for nearly twenty years. My longtime familiarity with the city allowed me to catch references and ask questions an outsider might not consider. When I asked people in the study to describe Madison, I commonly heard a sentiment expressed in this quote by a Black Christian leader: "I think people *think* it's progressive. It's a very educated, tolerant area that hasn't done really well of including people of color into the

[10]For more details about the research sites and methodology, see appendix A.
[11]O'Brien, *Whites Confront Racism*; Warren, *Fire in the Heart*.

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fabric." He said a typical attitude he encounters from White people is, "We'll tolerate you as long as you assimilate or play the game." As one White man put it, Madison has "lots of liberals with conviction but lacking experience." Compared to many cities of its size, Madison's 280,000 people are quite White: 73 percent White, 7 percent Black, 8 percent Asian, 9 percent Hispanic or Latino, 9 percent two or more races, and less than 1 percent Indigenous.[12]

Focusing most of the research in one city allowed me to analyze interlocking networks, events, and institutions that shaped this social space. But because Madison, like any place, has its own idiosyncrasies, I also selected three other locations with contrasting characteristics. I spent several days in each, conducting interviews and observations with people of color and White people. I leave out information identifying the locations of most events in this book as a way to protect the confidentiality of those involved, but you'll read examples from each research site. One location was a predominantly Black urban neighborhood on the East Coast. Another site was a rural town in a formerly Confederate Southern state. Additionally, in order to compare a very different historical and cultural setting with a predominantly Black population, I returned to an area where I had lived for five years in South Africa. By comparing accounts across four regions and subcultures, I was able to confirm consistencies across all locations and also observe how these trends play out differently across different kinds of communities. To read more about these research settings, see appendix A.

As an anthropologist, I also value another important element of research in addition to interviews: participant observation. What people say about their lives is always shaped by their own self-awareness and choices about how they present themselves to others. One way to supplement what they say is to watch what they do. Anthropologists

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[12]These percentages do not total 100 percent because Hispanic overlaps with other categories. "Quick Facts: Madison City, Wisconsin," US Census Bureau, 2024, www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/madisoncitywisconsin/PST045224#PST045224.

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attentively spend time alongside people, joining meetings, workplaces, and online communication networks to watch and even share experiences. To this end, I joined spaces where White people learn about racial justice—conferences, events, and community-based trainings. I visited eleven churches with a wide range of demographics and denominations. In between visiting other churches, I spent time with the predominantly White church of which I am a member and with a predominantly Black church that I have attended monthly for several years. I had begun attending both of these churches before beginning this study, and my involvement there was a personal choice rather than a research choice, but I was inevitably attuned to research questions even on ordinary Sunday mornings. In the same way, I inevitably also drew on my ten years of experience teaching about racism at Wheaton College, a predominantly White Christian liberal arts college.

As I conducted the research, I worked alongside a research assistant, Princess Vaulx, a Black Christian woman who had recently graduated from the University of Wisconsin–Madison. I recorded each interview, and Princess and I read transcriptions and relistened to every interview while we coded—a process of listing and sorting every answer to every question asked. We met weekly to talk through what we noticed, and she contributed valuable insights that shaped this book.

All that interviewing and observing produces a mountain of data—thousands of words based on hundreds of hours of note taking. For a while, managing all those notes feels like wandering through a forest in an unfamiliar ecosystem. It's hard to imagine you will make sense of all the organic textures and seeming randomness that surrounds you, much less ever find your way out. But eventually, you start to notice repetitions and find pathways. This practice is similar to the ways mathematicians solve complex problems. You gather as much data as you can, sort it into an organized system, and then look for ways to describe it elegantly enough to communicate something. For me it involved a lot of lying face-down on my bed and walking up and down my road, shifting ideas

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around like Sherlock Holmes in his mind palace. Qualitative data usually can be sorted into not one but many patterns. There are probably as many books that could be written from this data as there are humans willing to pay attention and set their fingers to a keyboard. A writer must choose one pattern and begin. This one is mine.

But it also isn't just mine. There was one more important phase to this research. Once I had begun sketching a draft outline of this book, I revisited many people in the study, especially people of color, and asked whether my analysis seemed to be on the right track. I gave talks and invited everyone involved in the research to listen and give feedback. I shared drafts with other scholars and trusted experts, many of whose names appear in the acknowledgments of this book. All of this is a way of testing for internal validity—that results make sense not just to outsiders but to those who experienced the phenomenon firsthand. It's also a way to test for this elusive thing that qualitative researchers call saturation—a point when new data mostly just reveal a repetition of what's already been learned. In reality there is no such thing as perfect saturation—the joy and curse of interviewing is that every conversation always, always offers something new to learn. I do not claim to have found everything, nor could I fit it all in one book. Another test of validity will come from you—how does this challenge, overturn, or make sense of your own ways of being in the world? I hope it will do all of those and more.

Every interview and interaction for the purpose of research is a gift. No one was paid for their time in this study except my research assistant through the generosity of a research grant.[13] Everyone invited to participate had the freedom to say no, and in the few cases when people did, I am grateful that they prioritized the many other important ways they make a difference in their community. I don't take lightly the extraordinary generosity of every person and group that contributed to this

[13]I am grateful for two John Stott Faculty Grants in Human Needs and Global Resources that supported this research.

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book. They gave gifts of grace to me and to you. There's joy in receiving such gifts, and also responsibility. I hope that this book joins you and me together with one long string of gifts received and passed along, forward and forward.

Here's what I do not have for you in this book. I do not have another how-to manual of ten neat steps to make yourself and your organization into a bastion of antiracism. I don't have a case for how Christian theology does or doesn't line up with antiracism, or how to preach that to a congregation.

I also don't have an analysis of how White Christians became entangled with racism, both blatantly and in subtle forms such as colorblindness. I am able to write this book because many others have written those books already.[14] I'm not here to invite the White Christians who are not in this book to defend themselves, nor to raise anybody's hackles about them. Let them be for a minute—let's turn our attention elsewhere.

Neither am I offering my own personal story of discovering some beautiful path you can follow straight to success. I cannot promise political victories, church transformation, or structural change. I know that's not great news, but I think you don't expect great news anymore, and you can handle it.

Here's what I do have for you: evidence that, if you care even just a little bit about both of these crazy bedfellows of Christianity and racial justice, you are not alone. Your people are out there. They have been for a very long time, and from what I can tell, they are not going away.[15]

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[14] One of the most recent and direct examples of such research is Anthea Butler's *White Evangelical Racism: The Politics of Morality in America* (University of North Carolina Press, 2021).

[15] Historians who have documented their existence include Drick Boyd, who offers a similar reason for his work: "I hope that Whites and People of Color reading this book can see that, despite the horrific history of White racism over the past five hundred years, there is also a legacy of opposition by White antiracist allies from whom we can learn and in whose steps we can follow." Boyd, *Disrupting Whiteness*, 10; see also Johnson, *Ordinary Heroes*.

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You exist, and others like you exist, and the questions and experiences you have cradled matter.

And when I say "they exist," I mean not just people who signed up for a book club last fall because they saw something in the news that made them feel sad or guilty, or people who watched one YouTube video after another until they could feel emotionally alive again, or people who jumped on a bus to go to a protest last summer because their friends were going and it was all very fun. I'm talking about people who weave racial justice into the very fabric of their communities, their work, their families. It's the normal of their lives. They're the ones who know how to get stuff done. You probably know many people who have tried out fair-weather fandom of racial justice. I want to make sure you know folks who are lifers.

Most of all, I'm excited to tell you about a pattern that showed up across all seventy interviews and thousands of pages of notes and observations that went into this research. That pattern tells us something about how people come to pursue racial justice in the long term and how they hope. I'll walk you through each piece of that pattern in the coming chapters, but here's the short version.

Among those White Christians invited in this study, I found three interlocking elements in common across nearly every journey. These elements didn't always happen in the same order, and they often repeated in deepening cycles, but they were nearly always all present. If one piece was missing, people of color around them often noticed the gap.

Efforts aimed at training White people to address racial injustice often focus on just one aspect of the person or problem. Those who see racism as a shortage of good intentions focus on what we might refer to as the *heart*—emotions and passions. Others focus on racism as a shortage of information—a fix for what we might call the *mind*. Another approach concentrates on spiritual issues such as sin, forgiveness, and vindication—concerns of the *soul*. Still others want to move directly into

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action, addressing the material and economic effects of racism—concerns of *strength*.

But humans cannot be neatly divided into segments like that.[16] These categories blend and intertwine, and each is necessary. The primary call given to Christians—the commandment that Jesus himself referred to as most important—is to love God with one's entire heart, soul, mind, and strength (Mark 12:30; Deuteronomy 6:5). Likewise racism cannot be undone through a discrete package of actions that address one portion of human life or another. The three elements I found across people's life stories offer a holistic picture of racial justice that engages heart, mind, soul, and strength.

The first element we'll look at is what I call a *collision*—an encounter in which the reality of racial justice hits home in a conscious and often emotionally salient way. Collisions contribute toward engaging the *heart*. People look back at collision moments to remember why they care.

The second element is that they had spent extended time engaged in what I call *asking a lot of why*. They had learned from people from a wide variety of walks of life how the idea of race came to be, how racism shaped their nation and local setting, and how racism persists through the centuries. They could name ways that institutions and systems such as education, incarceration, housing, hiring, and law create and perpetuate inequalities across racial groups. Asking why engages the *mind*. This kind of learning gives people a deep understanding of the scope of the problem and what solutions might work.

These two elements are where a lot of training about racism focuses, and many other researchers have corroborated that these steps matter both for individual and societal change, whether people are Christians

[16] I noticed the parallel to *heart*, *mind*, *soul*, and *strength* after I had already written most of the book, so they did not shape my analytical decisions. I offer these only as what could be a useful mnemonic, not as discrete categories. Psychological research has shown, for example, that even decisions that we perceive to be most rationally driven by the "mind" are shaped by the sorts of emotions, biases, and reactionary responses that we associate with "heart." Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (Pantheon Books, 2012); Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2011).

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or not. But here's the problem I discovered—when White people have only these two elements, they often crash into brick walls of hopelessness. These two elements are very good at stripping away naive hopes. In that hopelessness, White people can too easily walk away. Unlike people of color, White people in the United States usually have the option of not thinking about racism, and when all they can see of racism is that it's big, nasty, and persistent, it's just so much easier to look elsewhere.

But there's a third element in these journeys that took me by surprise, and I think it might surprise you too. It's something Hannah mentioned when she told the story about Mark, and often it happened at the point in people's life stories where their voices choked up or tears began. This element engages the *soul.* It's a shift in how a person spiritually and physically interacts with the world that I call *responding to grace*.

Whereas the first two elements tend to strip away delusional hopes and expose people to despair, this third element, responding to grace, plays a crucial role in converting despair into hope. It's a kind of linchpin that brings together these two questions—how White Christians become advocates for racial justice and how tough hope is forged. Once we've seen how people combine these three elements, we'll turn our attention to the ways they engaged their *strength*—the postures and practices that characterize an abiding and active kind of hope.

As we take a close look at that persevering way of hoping, you'll see the postures and active practices that characterize people who pursue racial justice long term. We'll examine the bedrock foundation for this hope, the feeling of walking in it, and the goals toward which it aims. We'll see how advocates for the long haul engage their *whole selves*.

This is no one-size-fits-all action plan. As one Asian American man told me, "Solving racism can't be reduced to another checklist item." But with some creativity, you'll find practices described here that you can adapt to the shape of your own life and the asymmetrical relationships you find yourself in. At the end of this book you'll find questions for

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reflection and discussion, and I hope you'll take the time to chew on these on your own and with a community. We'll be focusing on the question of how to address racial injustice, but much of what you'll read here can also inform struggles against other social injustices such as sexism, ableism, and poverty. My intention is that you too will find a hope that is weathered and wild. A hope that grows in the composted remains of suffering and produces the nourishing fruit of love.

I know that for a lot of us, hope itself is hard to even hope for. If you feel yourself hanging on by only a thread of hope—hope either for racial justice, or for the church, or for this thin sliver of overlap between the two—I wrote this book with you in mind.

Maybe this is the very first book you've read with *race* in the title, or with *Christians* in the title, and you've got a lot of questions. Maybe you're a person who can't say the word *antiracism* without rolling your eyes a little, or maybe instead you're a person who rolls your eyes at *those* people. Maybe just holding this book feels like a risk. I'm glad you're here. Welcome.

Maybe you're a person of color, and despite having to go through every day figuring out White people's ways, you're still curious or fed up enough to read some more research on White people. Maybe you've tried to "be a bridge" in diverse spaces, a bridge that stretches so wide it creaks and groans. You've seen White people come like tourists into your spaces, wafting the stench of colonialism, and you've done your own work to figure out how White people think, and you want to know why White people can't get on with it and do the same.

Maybe you've spent time around Christians and thought that responding to racial injustice should be a pretty low bar to ask of Christians, who are supposed to be all about love and reconciliation and faith against the odds and tapping into the power of the Creator of the universe. You ask yourself, *If the church can't get this right, is it time to admit that this is not just accidental, but some intrinsic flaw in the very fiber and structure of the religion itself?*

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To all readers, I hope that when you encounter something unsettling or troubling, you will listen a little longer, hold your judgments a little looser, stretch a little further, breathe a little deeper. Whoever you are, this book is for you if you share just one thing: Deep down you feel a kind of vibrating uncertainty about what can be done about injustice and the future of this country and this world. You just don't know anymore. There may have been a time when you could believe things would get better. Some days you still can. But there's a darkness you have faced, and when you look into that darkness, it's hard to be so sure. There's a weariness in your body and your soul that comes over you so heavily sometimes that you cannot shake it off. Permeating through whatever shields of sarcasm or bitterness or hardheaded perseverance you use, there comes a scarier emotion—a sadness, and a fear, and a fear of more sadness.

In this book, you and I and all the people you'll meet here come together, seeing each other with something like the gaze between Hannah and Mark. I ask you to pause in the discomfort of that gaze. Let your body be still. Linger longer than is polite. Ignore the awkwardness of not knowing what another human thinks or what you should do next. Tune out all the distractions tugging you to look away. Quiet the voices guessing what you'll find on the next page, predetermining whether you'll like it. You might find yourself hoping that Mark will say, "Heck no, I'm done with trying to explain my life and pain to another White person." Or you might be hoping they'll find a way to make it right somehow. You might imagine that it shouldn't be so hard. Or you might think that it most certainly will be hard. Maybe you find yourself hoping for nothing at all, sitting exhausted beside an empty well of hope, unable to muster the energy to care anymore. Whether you feel yourself on Hannah's side of the table, or Mark's, or in a complicated mixed experience of both, there's something for you here. In that gaze we waver in the precarious liminality between love and hate, hope and despair.

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I wouldn't ask this of you lightly. If you are anything like me, this journey comes with a lot of tears, some cursing, and throwing a book or two across the room. It can be lonely and tedious. It very well may break your heart. But let me say again what I want you to know: You are not alone. You are going to meet a certain kind of unusual people in this book. Together we're going to scoop out the litter that has clogged up our wellspring of hope, scrub it out, and see whether we find something shimmering.

I wrote this book to contribute to what we collectively know about how to repair racism, but I also wrote it for another reason: It's personal. I too am a White person on a journey of learning to pursue racial justice. I too identify as Christian. Whether you prefer to read it now or later, in the afterword to this book you'll find my own story of coming to take racism seriously. I've experienced both healing and hurt in the church. Like many people interviewed in this research, I resonate with Tony Campolo's paraphrase of Augustine of Hippo's words from the fifth century: "The church is a whore, but she's my mother."[17]

And I've seen my own ways of hoping splinter and crack. This book took me decades to be ready to write. Researching has opened windows into memories of my own encounters with desperation, my own collisions and learning and years spent wanting someone to please just tell me how to hope. I have felt in the very writing of this book that my own hopes were being tested. Writing is an act of mind—learning and clarifying and organizing—but also of heart and strength. Sometimes when I'm writing I feel the need to walk into the sunlight and stretch my arms as wide as they will reach. Other times writing makes me want to curl up in a ball and make myself small. I think something in me knows that if anything will break through the cracks of darkness with a shard of light, it will be both strong and small. It will also require me to hold a pen, curve fingers over a keyboard, lengthen my spine—the body must

[17]Anthony Campolo, *Letters to a Young Evangelical* (Basic Books, 2006), 68.

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commit as well as the mind. But most of all writing is an act of soul. Soul is all that can carry the other two onward long enough. Writing this book, I often felt like a midwife holding out my hands asking for some incarnation of some kind of God to be born into these up-turned palms. It is absurd. But it is what I have—to keep outstretching arms, waiting, hoping for something undeserved and raucous.

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