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GUEST ESSAY

What I Want My Kids to Learn About American Racism

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I first heard the phrase “white supremacy” in my introductory sociology course at the University of Illinois in 1993. The image of men wearing white sheets and burning crosses came to mind, and I figured my professor was referring to ancient history. But I remember her continuing: “White supremacy is the assumption that the cultural patterns associated with white people — from clothes to language to aesthetic preferences to family structure — are normal, and the patterns associated with people of color are inferior.”

Wait, didn’t that basically describe *my entire life*? Feeling strange about my Indian grandmother’s clothes, about my grandmother’s cooking, about the fact that my grandmother even lived with us.

I learned that there was a whole language for this, with concepts like “institutionalized racism” and “structures of oppression.” There were influential theories, indeed entire academic fields, built on those ideas. And however bad it was for South Asian immigrants like me, white supremacy and institutionalized racism operated in the lives of other groups, including Black people, Native Americans and Latinos, in specific and often more challenging ways.

I could not get enough. I read bell hooks, Audre Lorde, Paulo Freire. Understanding white supremacy helped me see my life in a different light.

I remembered the presentation my dad had given at a conference of South Asian businesspeople in Chicago. Someone asked him why he had decided to buy a Subway sandwich store instead of starting an independent shop. “Which white people do you know are going to buy sandwiches from a brown guy born in India named Sadruddin?” I recall him responding. “A recognizable franchise covers your dark skin and ethnic name. It helps you hide.”

At the time the comment had struck me as perfectly logical and entirely unremarkable. My dad had simply spoken a basic truth of life as a brown-skinned immigrant in the United States, the equivalent of noting that gravity pulls you down. I remember most of the audience nodding along. But later, based on what I learned in my classes, I interpreted the moment differently: It was a wound from a bullet fired from the gun of American racism.

The deeper I read, the more I saw the entire world through that lens. I soon couldn’t see much else. Racism permeated everything. My principal identity was as a victim of racism. My singular purpose was to call racism out, beat it down and give it a violent death in front of a crowd.

I lost sight of many things, like how fortunate I was to be a middle-class college student spending my days reading and the role I had in building something better. I was in a conspiracy against my own agency. I sense a similar tendency in the way [race and racism](#) are taught in some schools today. Calling out racism is part of the work, not all of it. After you get rid of the things you don't like, you need to build the things you do.

My kids have learned about “privilege” and “oppression” much earlier than I did — they were using these words in everyday conversations by the time they were 10 years old.

They didn't learn this from me or their teachers at school. In fact, I find myself bemused by all the controversy over learning about race in elementary schools — as if the classroom is where most kids are first hearing about race.

The ways racism plays a role in American life are obvious to kids from a very young age. Before some kids can ride a bike, they are watching videos of police officers killing Black men. They see Colin Kaepernick kneel during the national anthem, hear the political statements of LeBron James and Naomi Osaka, listen to songs like “This Is America” by Childish Gambino, read books like “The Hate U Give,” watch television shows like “All American” and, above all, experience racism themselves.

It would be a tragedy if teachers pretended none of this was happening and left kids to their own devices to figure it out. The job of the school is to provide broader context for the facts of the world and to pass along the knowledge and skills so that students can navigate it. That means that a full history of America's past and present, our ugliness and our beauty, needs to be taught.

And I would be remiss in my duties if I allowed my kids to fall into the same victim mind-set that I succumbed to as a college student. We are South Asian American Muslims, and my kids have experienced their fair share of anti-Muslim taunts, which, these days, are just as much about racial bigotry as religious bias. We work with the school so that it is better equipped to deal with the problem of prejudice, and then I remind my kids what a privilege it is to be Muslim. I want them to derive their identity from loving Islam, not hating Islamophobia.

My kids are now 12 and 15. As they progress through adolescence and become even more attuned to the politics and culture of their nation, I want their schools to play the appropriate role in shaping them to be participating citizens of a diverse democracy. That means teaching an expansive version of American history and instilling in them a sense of responsibility to help make the next chapter more just and inclusive. Citizenship is not a spectator sport.

That was a lesson it took me until the end of college to learn.

In my final semester at the University of Illinois, I did an independent study with an African American female professor of theater and education. Toward the end of the semester she invited me to attend a dress rehearsal of a play she had written with her graduate students. “Children are one of the most oppressed groups in our society,” she told me. The play was an experiment at a type of theater that put kids at the center.

I was eager to demonstrate how much I had learned in our independent study and was the first person to stand during the talk-back session after the performance. My professor smiled broadly when she saw me. I used a tone dripping with scorn. I targeted a scene in the play where a child retreats to his own

room after a fight with a parent. In front of the entire audience, I declared my professor and her graduate students guilty of racism and classism for writing a character who had his own room. "What about all the families where kids don't have their own rooms? Or the Black and brown families that don't have houses? Don't you realize that your play is only further oppressing them?"

The cast stared at me in disbelief. There were no more questions or comments from the audience. My critique effectively shut everything else down.

I had hoped my professor would be proud of me. So the email she sent came as a total surprise. I remember the contents as if I read them yesterday.

Her students, she wrote, had worked so hard on the play and were deeply hurt by my comments. She was hurt, too. Why hadn't I offered constructive suggestions, she wondered.

She closed with this: Since you were disappointed with the play that these students wrote, you should try your hand at creating something better. It is always harder to create than it is to criticize.

I sat with that email for a long time. My professor was teaching me that devoting yourself to seeing the bad in everything means that you ignore the good and you absolve yourself of responsibility for building things that are better.

I know that there is a role for people who sit in the audience and criticize the show, but it was starting to dawn on me that that's not who I wanted to be. I wanted to be the person putting something on the stage.

Parenting is in no small part the process of praying your kids get right the things that you got wrong. I hope my kids' schools teach them that considering the role of race is a question that should frequently be asked, not a conclusion that is already reached.

Because of the way I interpreted the ideas of white supremacy and structural racism in college, the only comment I remembered of my father's during that conference of South Asian businesspeople was the one he made about race. But my father said many other things too. He pointed out that the Subway sandwich stores we owned had given us a comfortable life, including filling the savings accounts that put my brother and me through college. Several of his managers, recent immigrants from South Asia, went on to have their own Subway sandwich stores and earned enough to put their kids through college too. My dad was proud of what he built, and the difference it had made for his family and broader community.

I don't want my kids to shy away from confronting racism, but I don't want whatever racism they might experience to make them lose sight of all of their other identities and privileges. Above all, I want my two sons to understand that responsible citizenship in a diverse democracy is not principally about noticing what's bad; it's about constructing what's good. You need to defeat the things you do not love by building the things you do.