Welcome to "Waking Up White: And Discovering Myself in the Story of Race" by Debby Irving

Discussion facilitated by Stephanie Estes & Pastor Dawn Haeger.

We hope this reading & reflecting opportunity will be edifying, eye-opening and, at times, challenging for each of us. The adage is true, we don't learn something new until we come to the edge of our comfort zone.

We acknowledge that discussions of race and our experiences of race can be emotionally charged. To that end, we invite you to consider the following and be prepared to discuss them so we can create a learning environment that is safe for all to participate.

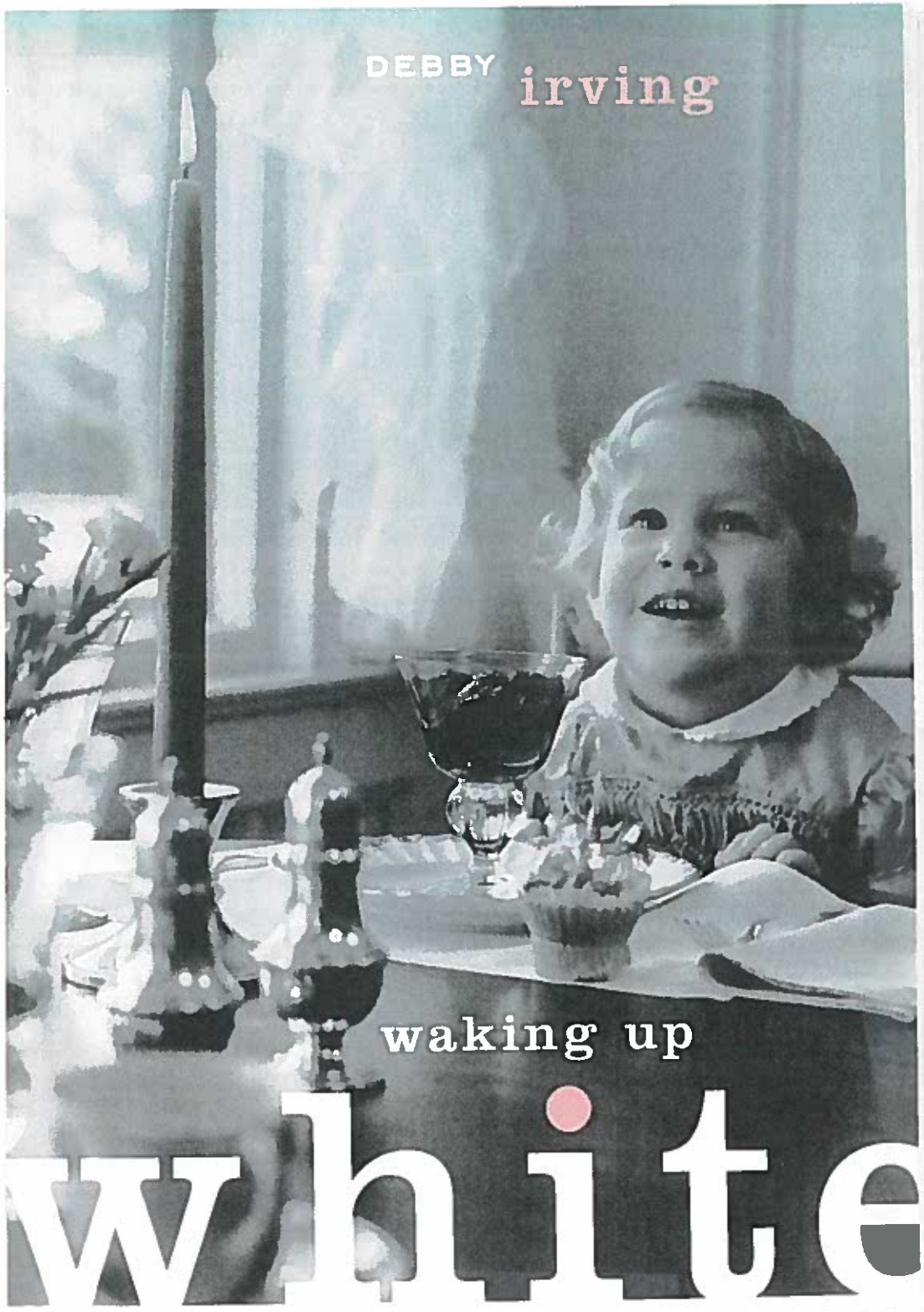
1. Why did you decide to join this group? What motivates you to be here?

2. What do you hope will happen in our month together?

3. What do you hope will not happen?

4. What is/are an expectation(s) you have for the group in order for you to feel safe to share your authentic feelings, ideas & experiences?

5. What are 2-4 words/phrases/images that come to mind with the following words:
    a. stereotype
    b. prejudice
    c. racism
    d. anti-racism



NOT SO LONG AGO, if someone had called me a racist, I would have kicked and screamed in protest. "But I'm a good person!" I would have insisted. "I don't see color! I don't have a racist bone in my body!" I would have felt insulted and misunderstood and stomped off to lick my wounds. That's because I thought being a racist meant not liking people of color or being a name-calling bigot.

For years I struggled silently to understand race and racism. I had no way to make sense of debates in the media about whether the white guy was "being a racist" or the black guy was "playing the race card." I wanted close friends of color but kept ending up with white people as my closest friends. When I was with a person of color, I felt an inexplicable tension and a fear that I might say or do something offensive or embarrassing. When white people made blatantly racist jokes or remarks, I felt upset but had no idea what to do or say. I didn't understand why, if laws supporting slavery, segregation, and discrimination had been abolished, lifestyles still looked so different across color lines. Most confusing were unwanted racist thoughts that made me feel like a jerk. I felt too embarrassed to admit any of this, which prevented me from going in search of answers.

It turns out, stumbling block number 1 was that I didn't think I had a race, so I never thought to look within myself for answers. The way I understood it, race was for other people, brown- and black-skinned people. Don't get me wrong—if you put a census form in my hand, I would know to check "white" or "Caucasian." It's more that I thought all those other categories, like Asian, African American, American Indian, and Latino, were the real races. I thought white was the raceless race—just plain, normal, the one against which all others were measured.

What I've learned is that thinking myself raceless allowed for a distorted frame of reference built on faulty beliefs. For instance, I used to believe:

- Race is all about biological differences.
- I can help people of color by teaching them to be more like me.
- Racism is about bigots who make snarky comments and commit intentionally cruel acts against people of color.
- Culture and ethnicity are only for people of other races and from other countries.
- If the cause of racial inequity were understood, it would be solved by now.

If these beliefs sound familiar to you, you are not alone. I've met hundreds of white people across America who share not only these beliefs but the same feelings of race-related confusion and anxiety I experienced. This widespread phenomenon of white people wanting to guard themselves against appearing stupid, racist, or radical has resulted in an epidemic of silence from people who care deeply about justice and love for their fellow human beings. I believe most white people would take a stand against racism if only they knew how, or even imagined they had a role.

In the state that is somewhere between fear and indifference lies an opportunity to awaken to the intuitive voice that says, "Something's not right." "What is going on here?" "I wish I could make a difference." In my experience, learning to listen to that voice is slowly but surely rewiring my intuition, breaking down walls that kept me from parts of myself, and expanding my capacity to seek truths, no matter how painful they may be. Learning about racism has settled inner conflicts and is allowing me to step out of my comfort zone with both strength and vulnerability in all parts of my life. Racism holds all of us captive in ways white people rarely imagine.

As my white husband said to me recently, "It couldn't have happened to a whiter person." And if I, a middle-aged white woman raised in the suburbs, can wake up to my whiteness, any white person can. Waking up white has been an unexpected journey that's required me to dig back into childhood memories to recall when, how, and why I developed such distorted ideas about race, racism, and the dominant culture in which I soaked. Like the memoir by the guy who loses two hundred pounds or the woman who overcomes alcohol addiction, my story of transformation is an intimate one. In order to convey racism's ability to shape beliefs, values, behaviors, and ideas, I share personal and often humiliating stories, as well as thoughts I spent decades not admitting, not even to myself.

As I unpack my own white experience in the pages ahead, I have no pretense that I speak for all white Americans, not even my four white siblings. Never before have I been so keenly aware of how individual our cultural experiences and perspectives are. That said, all Americans live within the context of one dominant culture, the one brought to this country by white Anglo settlers. Exploring one's relationship to that culture is where the waking-up process begins.

For white readers I've included short prompts and exercises at the end of each chapter to help you explore the themes in depth and in relation to your own experience. To get the most out of them, I suggest using a journal and taking the time to write out your thoughts. I've found the act of writing to be a great excavator of buried thoughts and feelings.

My waking-up process has been built largely on the collective wisdom from people of color throughout the centuries who've risked lives, jobs, and reputations in an effort to convey the experience of racism. It can be infuriating, therefore, to have the voice of a white person suddenly get through to another white person. For this reason, throughout the book I've included the voices and perspectives of people of color to highlight the many ways they have tried to motivate white people to consider the effects of racism.

I can think of no bigger misstep in American history than the invention and perpetuation of the idea of white superiority. It allows white children to believe they are exceptional and entitled while allowing children of color to believe they are inferior and less deserving. Neither is true; both distort and stunt development. Racism crushes spirits, incites divisiveness, and justifies the estrangement of entire groups of individuals who, like all humans, come into the world full of goodness, with a desire to connect, and with boundless capacity to learn and grow. Unless adults understand racism, they will, as I did, unknowingly teach it to their children.

No one alive today created this mess, but everyone alive today has the power to work on undoing it. Four hundred years since its inception, American racism is all twisted up in our cultural fabric. But there's a loophole: people are not born racist. Racism is taught, and racism is learned. Understanding how and why our beliefs developed along racial lines holds the promise of healing, liberation, and the unleashing of America's vast human potential.

Racism is not the unsolvable, mysterious tug-of-war I once thought. There is an explanation for how America got so tangled up with racism. Ironically racism, the great divider, is also one of the most vital links we

share, a massive social dysfunction in which we all play a role. Perhaps the greatest irony for me has been the discovery that after all these years of trying to connect with people I was taught to see as different and less-than, I've learned that the way to start is to connect with parts of myself lost in the process of learning to be white. I invite you to use my story to uncover your own, so that you too can discover your power to make the world a more humane place to live, work, and thrive.

Thank you for reading.

CHILDHOOD IN WHITE

A man's character always takes its hue, more or less,
from the form and color of things about him.

—Frederick Douglass

1 WHAT WASN'T SAID

Lessons my mother couldn't teach me.

"WHATEVER HAPPENED TO ALL THE INDIANS?" I asked my mother on a Friday morning ride home from the library. I was five years old.

The library's main draw for me had always been a large, colorful mural located high on the lobby wall. It featured three feathered and fringed Indians standing with four colonial men on a lush, green lakeshore. The colonists didn't hold much interest, perhaps because these were images familiar to me, a white New England girl with colonial ancestors. The dark-skinned Indians and their "exotic" dress, on the other hand, took my breath away. The highlight of my library excursions was sitting in a chair and gazing up at the Indians on the wall as my mother chatted with the librarian checking out our family's weekly reading supply.

About a year earlier, my mother, amused by my interest, had suggested I check out some books about Indian life. Lying on my bedroom floor back at home, I had pored over the images. Colorful illustrations of teepees clustered close together, horses being ridden bareback, and food being cooked over the campfire added to my romanticized imaginings of the Indian life. Children and grown-ups appeared to live in an intergenerational world in which boundaries between work and play blurred. Whittling, gardening, cooking over the fire, canoeing, and fishing—these were enough for me. I wanted to be an Indian. I collected little plastic Indian figures, teepees, and horses. For Halloween my mother made me an outfit as close to the one in the mural as she could.

Eventually, my infatuation led to curiosity. If I had descended from colonists, there must be kids who'd descended from Indians, right? I wondered if there was a place I could go meet them, which is what led me that Friday morning to ask the simple question, "Whatever happened to all the Indians?"

"Oh, those poor Indians," my mother said, sagging a little as she shook her head with something that looked like sadness.

"Why? What happened?" I turned in my seat, alarmed.

"They drank too much," she answered. My heart sank. "They were lovely people," she said, "who became dangerous when they drank liquor."

I could not believe what I was hearing. *Dangerous?* This would have been the last word I would have applied to my horseback-riding, nature-loving friends. "Dangerous from drinking?" I asked.

"Yes, it's so sad. They just couldn't handle it, and it ruined them really."

This made no sense to me. My parents drank liquor. Some friends and family drank quite a bit actually. How could something like liquor bring down an entire people? People who loved grass and trees and lakes and horses, the stuff I loved?

I must have pressed her for more because my mother, who along with my father sought to protect my siblings and me from anything upsetting, went on to tell a tale in vivid detail about children hiding under a staircase, in pitch blackness, trying to escape the ravages of their local friendly Indian now on a drunken rampage, ax in hand. They were all murdered.

"Well, what happened to the Indian?" I asked, my heart beating in my chest.

She paused, thinking. "You know, I don't know," my mother answered sincerely. We both went silent.

I never questioned this narrative's truth or fullness despite its dissonance with the peaceful images in my books. My mother, full of kindness and empathy, told it to me. I don't question that she believed it. She told me a version of a story as she had heard it from someone else, who also likely believed it. I had no other, more complete historical context in which to place this story about a nearly extinguished culture now neatly tucked away on isolated reservations I didn't know existed. I had minimal knowledge of how Native peoples had long flourished in their own cultures before white Europeans decimated them with theirs. It makes me wonder how many lies and half-truths I've swallowed and in turn inadvertently passed along in my lifetime.

Stereotypes, I've learned, are not so much incorrect as incomplete. It's true that alcohol was a factor in the waning of indigenous people. But there's infinitely more to the story. What my mother didn't tell me was that the white colonists had purposefully introduced alcohol to Native Americans, using it to weaken, subdue, and coerce them into signing over land and rights. She didn't explain how disease brought by our ancestors had infected and killed Indian men, women, and children, in some cases killing 90 percent of a Native nation's population. Nor did she tell me that those who survived disease found themselves in dehumanizing federal programs designed by white men to "civilize" Indians, separating them from one another and stripping them of the languages, customs, beliefs, and human bonds that had held them together for centuries.

She didn't help me understand what it might have felt like, for people as attached to their families and homes as I was to mine, to be torn from theirs. She didn't turn and gently ask me to imagine what it might be like to lose nine out of ten of my closest friends and family. She didn't tell me that today indigenous people use words like "invaders" and "terrorists" and "genocide" to describe the Pilgrims and their actions. She didn't explain that the English coming to America was part of a larger historical pattern of white Europeans invading countries, exploiting resources, and "civilizing" people they considered to be savages, all in an entangled quest to dominate through Christianity and capitalism. She couldn't tell me any of these things because she herself had never learned them.

The question I asked that Friday morning was typical of a young child trying to make meaning of the world around her. Unfortunately, my mother's own upbringing had left her lacking the necessary knowledge and life skills to connect me to my world through historical truths and critical analysis. Instead I got hand-me-down snippets that never added up and left me feeling confused and upset. Neither my mother nor I understood that moment as one of many in which she was racializing me. Without ever once mentioning the words "race" or "skin color," my mother passed along to me the belief that the two were connected to inherent human difference.

Without meaning to, on that day or any other, my mother gravely misled me. She didn't do it because she was evil or stupid or had upholding racism on her mind. My mother was warm, compassionate, and bright. She told me the versions of events as she knew them, errors and omissions included. Just as she had once done, I used my scant information to construct a story about humanity. Over the course of my childhood the media confirmed my idea of Indians as "savage" and "dangerous." I came to see them as drunks who grunted, whooped, yelled, and painted their faces to scare and scalp white people. What a tragedy that over time my natural curiosity, open mind, and loving heart dulled, keeping me from confronting wrongs I never knew existed.

That Friday morning was the first and last time my mother and I spoke of the Indians' fate. Shock gave way to disappointment. My little collection

of plastic Indians lost its luster and ultimately got boxed up and put in a dark corner of the attic. Out of sight meant out of mind. First, though, I separated out the horses and built a barn of cardboard for them, using oatmeal for shavings and packing straw for hay. As I deconstructed the Indian world according to my wants and needs, and parceled out its parts to new roles and hidden spaces, I had no idea of the parallel playing out between my actions and those of white people over the centuries.

As stunning as my mother's version of events is for its incomplete portrayal of indigenous people, equally powerful to me is the subtle and indirect way it contributed to the ongoing portrayal of white people as the superior race. The story whispered to me the idea that Indians were somehow "other," like a whole separate and inferior species. Indians were drunks, so white folks must not be. Indians were dangerous, so white people must be safe. Indians lacked self-control, so white people must really have their act together. Indians weren't good enough or tough enough to survive, but white people sure were, even when they drank liquor. Like drops of water into a sponge, moments like these saturated me with the belief that I was of a superior race and wholly disconnected from other races—except as a potential victim.

On top of all of this is another critical point. Embedded in her incomplete story was a message that just one piece of information, drawn from a single perspective, was good enough to form a conclusion. Neither my mother, nor the media, nor my schooling encouraged me to dig deeper, to find indigenous people and ask how they told their own history. My mother passed along to me not only incomplete information but also an intellectual habit of not questioning authority, not pursuing other dimensions of a story, and not having the interest or stamina to grapple with complex issues. As a result, I came to view history as something set in stone, printed in books, painted in pictures, and taught by teachers who delivered facts. I took it all at face value, constructing for myself a one-dimensional world in which people were right or wrong, good or bad, like me or not.

Q **What stereotypes about people of another race do you remember hearing and believing as a child? Were you ever encouraged to question stereotypes?**

2 FAMILY VALUES

The making of a belief system.

THE PHOTO ALBUMS OF MY CHILDHOOD read like a stroll through the Norman Rockwell Museum. Skating and skiing on the ponds and hills of New England. Holiday gatherings with food-laden tables and exuberant faces. Men on the golf course. Women knitting in rocking chairs next to children playing games by the fire. The vacation-bound family station wagon crammed with children, dogs, and sporting equipment. And everyone, everywhere, white. These iconic visions of a life of comfort and frolic, however, are but the tip of the iceberg. The real story begins beneath the waterline, where the beliefs I adopted over the course of my childhood informed my choices and behaviors.

When I arrived in March 1960, my white parents, Bob Kittredge and Jane Pierce Kittredge, had been married fifteen years and produced my four older siblings, ages six to fourteen. My parents made their home in Winchester, an almost exclusively white Boston suburb set in a leafy green, pond- and lake-filled area north of the city. With excellent public schools and plenty of green space to play in, it provided a clean and safe world in which my mother could take care of the five of us while my father enjoyed an easy commute to his job as an investment lawyer in Boston.

Today, my father would probably be called a workaholic. Long days at the office were often topped off with volunteer board or committee work for the bank, hospital, and country club. I hovered around him when he was at home, playing blocks nearby while he worked. Saturday mornings he worked from his favorite easy chair, his briefcase open in his lap, a pencil between his teeth. The sound of the briefcase snapping shut usually indicated the start of a family project: household jobs that gave me not only a number of skills but also an unshakable work ethic. Under the direction of both parents, the whole family raked, shoveled, mowed, weeded, pruned,

and fertilized. We built a backyard patio ourselves, following a guide from the hardware store about how to lay bricks with the help of a level. I did most of this willingly, just to be a part of the group and spend time with the father I adored.

My father's family was only minimally present in our lives. My dad's mother came from a big Boston Irish Catholic family who owned Doyle's, a bar where word had it Boston's Irish Catholic body politic made backroom deals. The family had also, according to lore, made sure no cronies went thirsty during Prohibition. Unfortunately, relations were fraught on my father's side, in no small part because of my grandmother's choice of a husband in the 1920s. My grandfather, a Protestant farm boy from northern Vermont, never measured up in the eyes of my grandmother's family. For one, he was on the wrong side of the Protestant-Catholic divide at a time when that particular culture clash raged in Boston. For the last fifty years of her life, my grandmother burned with anger at her family for the rejection she felt, even contending that she'd been shortchanged in a cleverly manipulated family will.

In her anger, my grandmother put the kibosh on the Catholic Church and raised her two sons Protestant. She also worked overtime to make sure her children proved her family wrong by becoming the superstars she needed them to be. It worked. My father, through a series of scholarships, excelled his way through prep school, Williams College, and Harvard Law School, making him a worthy match for my mother, a Smith College graduate from an esteemed New England family.

The heart and soul of the family culture in which I was raised came from my mother's family, a large, close-knit clan of interwoven clans of old, white, Massachusetts and Maine families with whom we spent holidays and summer vacations. By the time I came along, my father's Irish Catholic and poor-farmer roots had been so thoroughly extinguished I knew little of them until I was in my twenties. I identified 100 percent as a New England WASP, with parents and an extended family who bore all the trappings of the social elite and an extensive network of like-looking and like-minded family and friends with whom to preserve our Anglicized, Yankee culture.

Like many New England Yankee families, our roots went back to the Mayflower and other early boatloads of English settlers. (If you're related to one settler, you're related to a dozen or so: after all, they were each other's only mates for the first hundred years.) Families like mine had had ample opportunity to accumulate and merge land and wealth, creating a sense of perpetual abundance and stability.

It has perplexed more than a few friends of mine who are not of Yankee descent why on earth people with so much wealth also embody that famous Yankee frugality. Despite mortgage-free houses, private educations, and ever-growing financial investments, families like mine drove cars until the engine's last breath, patched up the elbows of old sweaters to extend their wear, and reused their morning teabags throughout the day. To me it made perfect sense. These visible expressions of my culture aligned seamlessly with family teachings that money was mostly for accumulating, waste showed carelessness, and flashiness—well, there was almost nothing more evident of poor breeding than flashiness.

Frugality must have been a carryover from the Puritan days, as were restrained emotions and extreme modesty about the body. These three values weighed heavily in my understanding of the world. I wonder, though, at which point exuberance, joy, and humor worked their way into my family's culture, for these were highly prized traits that put the party in the Puritans, at least in my family's case.

Like many old New England families, we had a shared vacation home at which we all soaked up and reinforced these values for one another. Ours was, and still is, in northern Maine, where in 1807 a land grant led a branch of my family to help settle a border town. Well over a century later, a log cabin set on a crystal clear, mountain-ringed lake occupied by my family for generations provided the ideal setting in which to unleash the rowdy (but still frugal) family spirit in all its glory.

Full of successful lawyers, bankers, and businessmen who married spirited women, the extended family lived by the motto "Work Hard; Play Hard." Even on vacation we rarely sat still. We spent a month of each summer at the lake, where early-morning flotillas of small boats ferried children, adults, and dogs to the lake's tiny island for campfire breakfasts. Boating, swimming, horseback riding, and tennis competitions filled the days, and raucous multigenerational card games on the screen porch echoed over the lake late into the night. At evening's end, boats and cars would rumble away from the dock and driveway, signaling the children to scamper to their sleeping porch cots to rest up for the next day. People in northern

Maine still joke: "It's black flies in June, mosquitoes in July, and Pierces in August." I am a Pierce. These are my roots. This is the group whose heritage and cultural traditions I made my own, from whom I took my identity.

From a young age I internalized the idea that accomplishment for anyone was simply a matter of intention and hard work. Family gatherings inevitably included stories about our New England ancestors overcoming challenges. Only recently have I come to understand the impact these stories had on me. Tales of *Mayflower* settlers and other early American ancestors suggested to me that America provided a kind of neutral template on which anyone could design the life they chose. Not only did these stories affirm my place in American history; they translated into a sense of confidence and ability that took hold from an early age. Like my siblings and cousins, I could hold my own by age ten at most any family sport or game, organize an overnight camping expedition, or sew and bake all my Christmas gifts for friends and family. Little did I know how each skill was developing in me the kind of strategy, efficiency, productivity, and confidence so valued in American classrooms and corporate offices.

Being accomplished and staying busy were signs of good character, I believed, in part because they offered ways to show my forebears my gratitude. I would rather have been labeled homely than lazy. Somehow, without anyone ever saying it directly, I felt immeasurably beholden to my long-lost ancestors, pioneers who impressed me with their drive, high morals, and hard work. Because they endured great sacrifice in reaching their goal to establish a new nation, I felt it my duty to carry the torch they lit on New England's shores.

Our good fortune and long line of self-sacrificing forebears led me to another belief: complaining about anything was out of the question. Physical and emotional hardiness were parts of the same whole. Unrestrained emotion was seen as a weakness, unless of course it came in the form of a happy yelp at a notable golf shot or tennis slam. Displays of anger showed poor rearing; pride was gauche; sadness, anger, jealousy, and fear were just plain pitiful—all worthy of being shunned with silver-clinking-on-china silence or a swift change of subject. A "good attitude" was highly valued and rewarded. I learned to stuff down my negative feelings and to buck up with expected chipperness. Each cultural norm motivated me to fit in while judging others who didn't. I learned to become deeply uncomfortable around people who exhibited any of the disapproved emotions, especially anger.

How could I live a life of stifled emotions? Simple: it was all I knew. Later in life I would pay a steep price for my emotional numbness, but at the time the focus on the positive served as my North Star. I'll get into this conditioning more later, as it has huge implications for racism. For now, just know that it is no coincidence that one of the things my white mother could not teach me was to honor feelings of outrage. "The point of life is to enjoy it!" she used to say, in a declarative kind of way, raising her fist in the air. When she said it like that, I liked it. So I went with the program.

A reluctant homemaker, my mother thrived instead on athletics, creative projects, and the general chaos of neighborhood kids running in and out of her house and yard. Our house in Winchester was a six-bedroom, Tudor-style home with big first-floor rooms perfect for spreading out our blocks, train tracks, coloring books, and board games. We were allowed to tear around on tricycles, rolling over the worn rugs and by the antiques handed down through generations of New England ancestors. My mother set up the house to run more like a summer camp or after-school program than a typical suburban home. Even if it were just a closet, my mother named various parts of the house for the activity they were meant to inspire—the sewing room, the sports room, the costume room. She taught us to sew, bake, and create plays, backyard fairs, and around-the-block parades. She encouraged us to build elaborate forts of tables and sheets. This household atmosphere of endless possibility surely engrained in me the belief that if I could envision it, it could be done.

On most days we were expected to spend at least some of the time outdoors being active and getting fresh air and sunshine. In addition to having a big yard to play in and a summer home to retreat to, we belonged to the Winchester Country Club and the Winchester Boat Club, where we could swim, play tennis, golf, and sail. Both were just a bike ride away. In the colder months my mother bundled us up in hand-me-down jackets and hand-knit hats, mittens, and scarves to share with us her love of sledding, skiing, and skating. Each November, my father built a backyard skating rink on which the figure-skating girls timed their twirls between the puck slaps of the hockey-playing boys. I had more activities to choose from than I had time to do them.

Being the youngest of five, I spent my entire childhood trying to catch up, figure things out, and not get left behind. "Last but not least," my father used to smile in recognition of my efforts. This status as youngest created

in me a lifelong sensitivity to people—especially children—who feel "less-than" in any way, shape, or form. Despite all the riches, all the fun, and all the internal confidence I developed, I also struggled with feeling left out and left behind. My older siblings always seemed to have more important people to be with and more important things to do. My entire family went to the 1964 World's Fair in New York City and left me, age four, behind with a babysitter to watch it on TV. I've never forgotten my sense of being a second-class citizen as a result of their choice. It was a silent and stuffed-down suffering, for I had learned young that complaining was for losers.

Q What values and admonitions did you learn in your family? Think about education, work, lifestyle, money, expression of emotions, and so forth. Try making a list of ten principles, values, and unspoken beliefs. Siblings and cousins can be good resources for thinking about this. Now consider what conclusions you drew about people who did not appear to follow your family's belief system.

3 RACE VERSUS CLASS

Everyone wants to know:
Which one is the real issue?

BEFORE I CONTINUE, I have to call out what could potentially become a distraction. By now you've noticed that I am not only white but a white Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP), from a family with plenty of socio-economic advantage. I worry that some white readers will quickly conclude: *This story has nothing to do with me. My family wasn't wealthy or WASPy. We immigrated here and made it from nothing.*

Let me first acknowledge that your relationship to American culture may well be different from mine. With the exception of indigenous people, who have been on this continent for thousands of years, every American has a unique coming-to-America story and a unique location in our social landscape. Yet not to be overlooked is the fact that the vast range of white-skinned ethnicities have one critical factor in common: namely, that ever-visible white skin and the perks (whether acknowledged or not) that come with it. Also crucial is the fact that just as white people tend to look at other racial groups as a group, loading them up with stereotypes and judgments, the same thing happens with the white race. Understanding whiteness, regardless of class, is key to understanding racism.

Likewise, you might find yourself thinking, *Wait a minute—this is about class, not race.* I've often heard people debate the entangled relationship between race and class. "Which one is the real issue?" people ask. "Is it race or class?" I've wondered myself how much my socioeconomic advantage versus my skin color advantage shaped my life and skewed my worldview. I've come to believe it's not an either/or issue. Both are real, and both matter. Trying to determine which one is the "real" issue does a disservice to both. Concluding class is the real issue would give me permission to avoid thinking about race. Similarly, assuming race is the more significant issue overlooks the complications faced by white people caught in a vicious cycle of poverty. Both can trap people in a kind of second-class citizenship. If you can't get

the education you need to get a job to pay for healthy food, medical care, transportation, and a home in a neighborhood with good schools, then you can't educate your children in a school that will prepare them for a job that will . . . and so on. Any cycle that traps someone in a state of perpetual disadvantage is the real issue for the person experiencing it.

And yet race and class are inextricably linked. Because class has long been easier for me to understand than race, this book focuses on the more elusive role skin color has had in my life. In grappling with whiteness, I've tried as much as possible to tease out and examine the race factor. Two stories stand out as ones that helped me understand skin color's potential to carry advantage or disadvantage across the socioeconomic spectrum.

A white man I met at a conference shared a story about his 1970s adolescence in poverty. His father had lost everything as a result of a double addiction to alcohol and gambling. Desperate to get a college education, the son shoplifted to pay his way. In all his years of sneaking electronic equipment out of stores, he got nabbed only once. For that, he was told to hand over what he'd stolen and not come back to the store. A young black man trying the same tuition-funding strategy very likely would have been followed around the store by a suspicious employee and arrested if caught.

On the other side of the equation is a story told by John Hope Franklin, an African American man revered for his contributions as a US historian, educator, and author. In 1995 President Clinton awarded Dr. Franklin the Presidential Medal of Freedom. In celebration of the honor, Dr. Franklin hosted a small dinner at Washington, DC's, exclusive Cosmos Club. That evening, a white club member handed Dr. Franklin—who was dressed in a tuxedo—a coat check tag and asked him to fetch her coat. Nothing like this has ever happened to me or any white people I know.

Unlike poverty, skin color is visible and fixed, forever and always. In both stories I see skin color translating to an expectation on the part of onlookers. White skin can erroneously bring high expectations and the message "You belong"; dark skin can erroneously bring low expectations and the message "You don't belong."

Until I understood the impact skin color can have on one's life, I wasn't able to consider racism in combination with other factors that influence one's culture. The cultures that shape people are breathtakingly complex when you consider all that goes into them. Era, geographic location, language, level of education, ethnic heritage, race, gender, sexual orientation, income, wealth, religion, health, family personalities and professions, birth order, hobbies, and sports provide multiple variables that mix and match to create a unique culture in each and every family and each and every person. To further complicate matters, each element is a cultural carryover from prior generations. When it comes to culture, the only thing we all have in common is that we have one, and it shapes us.

Each of the above variables creates elements of shared experience that spawn shared beliefs and values. People in certain parts of the country, for instance, develop strong identities as Southerners, Californians, or in my case New Englanders. The same can be said of every variable, including race and class. Yet race stands apart from the variables listed above. Not only is race visible and permanent; it's come to act as a social proxy for one's value in American society. White has long stood for normal and better, while black and brown have been considered different and inferior. Social value isn't just a matter of feeling as if one belongs or doesn't; it affects one's access to housing, education, and jobs, the building blocks necessary to access the great American promise—class mobility.

So there we are, full circle, back to racism and classism and how they interact with each other. A discipline within the study of race, intersectionality, examines the myriad ways cultural differences intersect with one another to create unique life experiences and perspectives. That's another book. For now, consider this one story. An acquaintance of mine is a middle-aged white woman from the Midwest. Comparing notes one day, she talked about how her parents were working-class folks struggling financially. They were overtly racist as they spoke and acted from a deep fear that black people were going to move in and take their jobs or buy a house in their neighborhood and lower the value of their home. In contrast, my parents' upper-middle-class world insulated them to a point where they felt little threat. Their lack of fear allowed them to pass along to me a sense of responsibility to help the poor. An element of class you'll notice in my story is the persistent sense of needing to "help" and "fix." These characteristics are considered by many to be trademarks of the dominant class.

You may also notice that I often conflate racism and classism. Though at times it may sound as if I think all white people are loaded and all black people are downtrodden, I know it's not that cut-and-dried. But I need to start somewhere, and this book is the story of the *beginning* of my racial learning journey. As much as I tried to untangle and hold separate the racial thread,

at certain points I couldn't. I'm getting better at it as I go, but it's a long, slow process of distancing myself from the embedded beliefs I internalized throughout my young life.

I hope that the fact my story is loaded with socioeconomic privilege doesn't prevent white readers from finding their own connection to race and racism. Every white person can awaken to the impact the ideology and practice of whiteness has on our brothers and sisters of color. Despite our cultural differences, what's crucial to grasp are the ways in which our shared social system ultimately connects all our stories into a single collective narrative. My story is just one point of entry into our shared history.

Q Class is determined by income, wealth (assets), education, and profession. Betsy Leondar-Wright, program director at Class Action, suggests these categories as a way of thinking about class:

Poverty
Working Class
Lower-Middle Class
Professional Middle Class
Upper-Middle Class
Owning Class

How would you characterize your parents' class? Your grandparents' class? Your class as a child? Your class now? What messages did you get about race in each?

4 OPTIMISM

The downside of perpetually looking on the bright side.

IN CONSIDERING THE CULTURAL INFLUENCES that shaped me, I've thought a lot about how optimism infused itself into my very being. I used to think it was something I inherited, a kind of hardwired chipper trait. Recently, however, I came across a description of Baby Boomers as a "postwar generation of opportunity and optimism." *Ha!* I thought. *There it is again, me attributing something to myself when it actually is as much about my culture as my character.* It was yet another moment in this unending journey of coming to see the ways in which I soaked up and enacted larger social forces.

The year I was born, 1960, marked the fourteenth year of the postwar baby boom—generally defined as 1946–1964. With their oldest child born in 1946 and their last in 1960, my family embodied the national fertility phenomenon resulting from the sudden influx of men in their early to mid-twenties returning from World War II. My father and uncles were just a handful of the millions of GIs who returned home to women awaiting marriage. Making things even rosier, the US government stood poised to inject cash into the GIs' dreams to settle down, pursue careers, and start families. Known as the GI Bill, this federal program allowed men, like those in my family, to pursue higher education on the government's nickel and buy homes with low-rate, government-backed mortgages.

The bill funded an economic and housing boom that created a vibrant suburban sprawl and a culture to go with it. New suburbs popped up around the country, while established suburbs burgeoned. Free from burdensome loan payments, suburbanites consumed and accumulated in grand proportions. Across America, families like mine purchased once-rare commodities at exponential rates. The sale of televisions, cars, and single-family homes exploded. Ads and television shows promoted goods while projecting images of the suburban ideal onto the popular psyche, promising a world of happy nuclear families, clear gender roles, manicured lawns, throngs of

children on shiny new bikes, and neat driveways harboring stylish new cars. Suburban life and all it entailed became a norm for millions of American families. By the time I was born, the newly defined American dream had become an attainable reality for millions of white families. It turns out that the culture of achievement, security, and optimism I so thoroughly internalized was part of a larger pattern.

Being born and raised in the post–World War II baby boom era exposed me to a particularly potent brand of optimism that mixed like a gin punch cocktail with the New England Yankee can-do spirit that had been defining my family for generations. Not having experienced the Great Depression or World Wars I and II, I believed optimism was a given and achievement and security were available to all who bucked up and kept their nose to the grindstone. Optimism seemed not only a realistic mindset, but necessary for achievement. After all, people who complained or moped were unlikely to get far in life. Upbeat was the attitude of the successful.

The 1960s media-delivered world of white people confirmed my understanding of life as pretty comfortable. Ozzie and Harriet could have been my parents. Beaver Cleaver could have been my neighbor. The world was jovial, problems were surmountable, and people got along. Life was comfortable. Normal was a house or two, a car or two, a pet or two, a TV or two. The social issues of my TV world were limited to squabbles and misunderstandings between family and friends and could be solved in thirty minutes or less. And everybody was white.

History lessons further reinforced the world as I knew it. At home and in school I learned about my country's history exclusively through the lens of white European Americans, the kind of people I'd heard about in my own family history. The guys in the history books looked a lot like the guys in the portraits at the Winchester Savings Bank. I used to squint and imagine them without their wigs and goofy old-fashioned clothes, turning them into people I might bump into on the street. The black-and-white photos of former and current hospital presidents hanging in the Winchester Hospital lobby looked a lot like the men I knew. My father was even one of them. Everywhere I looked I saw a world I wouldn't have described as white. I would have told you it was just the world. These were the guys who ran things. I knew and liked them. They felt familiar. Life was friendly, and I belonged. Of course I was optimistic.

My parents spoke often of their commitment to making our childhoods worry-free. They never argued, at least not in front of us. They never spoke ill of anyone else. They didn't let us watch the news. They didn't speak about world events unless they were cheerful events, like Neil Armstrong landing on the moon or Mark Spitz winning seven gold medals. I wish they were still alive so I could ask them what their thinking was. How much was their impulse to protect us in reaction to the hardship they'd experienced in their own young lives? I imagine that fifteen years of economic depression and family and friends fighting in world wars must have made for tense households. I can't know their intentions, but I can say that the impact was to leave me both programmed to look for hope in dire circumstances and ill prepared for a world far more complex and multidimensional than the one I knew. (It's not lost on me that this tension led me to this book.)

As I've swapped childhood stories with people of color, I've learned the ways in which many parents of color prepare their children for a hostile world. Trying to protect children by providing a worry-free childhood is a privilege of the dominant class—a white privilege. Many parents of color teach their children to keep their hands in plain sight if a police officer is near and to avoid white neighborhoods in order to avoid being questioned simply for being there. In the same way I was trained to make myself visible and seek opportunity, many children of color are trained to stay under the radar and avoid suspicion.

Another thing that kept family conversations light in my house was the ability to avoid sharing disturbing history and current events. Watching the documentary *Cracking the Codes: The System of Racial Inequality* gave me a glimpse into how much more difficult such avoidance must be for families of color. Just trying to pass down family history would inevitably lead to upsetting truths. In the film, a black woman describes a childhood conversation she had with her mother. It begins when the young girl asks her mother why neighborhoods in her hometown, Washington, DC, look so different. Question by question and answer by answer, the mother and daughter ease the conversation all the way back to slavery. The daughter, struggling to understand the concept, presses her mother, just as I had pressed mine about the Indians. "What do you mean? They had them doing a lot of chores?" the girl asks. Her mother tries to explain slavery. "Oh no sugar, uh-uh, they couldn't be married, they couldn't keep their children, they didn't have their own souls, everything was taken from them, and you know your grandfather? His father was a slave. That's why he has that African name, Osi." The girl is stunned. "Well, why did the people let themselves be slaves?" she asks.

Her mother answers, "Oh Ericka, it wasn't like that. The whole government supported it."

I had no awareness of girls like Ericka or mother–daughter conversations about history not told in textbooks. The image of young Ericka trying to take all that in shook me. I imagined having a conversation about a topic so tragic with my own children. It felt unbearable to me to have to taint a young heart and mind with such injustice. Yet I don't believe that avoiding all potentially upsetting conversations serves anyone. There is no painless or easy way to convey truth to our children.

I remember the day Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated. I was sliding down the banister when I heard our sitter, an older white woman with blue-collar roots, scream in the TV room. I ran in to see why she was making such a fuss. Her hand was over her mouth, her eyes were glued to the TV, and tears flowed down her cheeks. "King's been shot," she said in monotone, more to the TV than to me. I had just turned eight.

"What king?" I asked.

"Dr. King. Dr. Martin Luther King," she answered without looking at me. "What will become of America?" she asked no one in particular.

I still remember climbing those stairs for another ride down the banister, surprised that no one had ever told me America had a king, let alone one who was also a doctor.

Toward the end of his life, my father, out of the blue, said to me, "I think maybe your mother and I made a mistake by trying to protect you kids so much." The more we talked, the more I understood that as he watched the marriages of three of his five children fall apart, and his four daughters' struggles to balance work and family, he questioned how the sheltered life of comfort, innocence, and ease he'd conspired to create may have played a role. "I don't think we did our job in preparing you for the real world," he said. He wasn't in a contemplative mood; he was deeply distraught.

Invoking the optimism so prevalent in our family, I think I said something with a lighthearted laugh to comfort him. "We could have turned out a lot worse, Dad." Though that is what I felt at the time, the more I understand the world, the more I think he was right. By pretending the world was virtually problem-free, my family culture left me grossly underprepared to solve problems. Oh, I could fix a flat tire or jury-rig a spent boat rope, but messes created by difference of opinion or lifestyle? Those left me high and dry, as I looked on with no tools to understand the situation, de-escalate tension, or navigate toward a solution. In my case, my protected childhood only made for years of stress and confusion about real-world issues. If I had been introduced to some holes in the illusion of perfection, I might have been able to peek through and see the many sufferings and contradictions in the world around me. I might also have understood earlier in life how to connect to the world beyond mine.

Q What were some of the major economic, political, demographic, and pop culture trends from ten years before your birth until age twenty? How did they show up in your life? How do you think they influenced your beliefs?

WITHIN THE WALLS 5

The exclusive world of thriving people raising thriving children.

FOR MUCH OF MY LIFE, the word "exclusive" brought warm, fuzzy feelings. An exclusive resort, exclusive club, or exclusive school meant top-notch quality. It felt good to know I was a part of an exclusive place or group of people because it made me feel that I too was exclusive, meaning of top-notch quality. But doesn't "exclusive" actually mean people are being excluded? How did it ever become okay with me to exclude someone? In the same way I hadn't given much thought to the implications of "race," I hadn't given much thought to the concept of "exclusivity." I took on the word, and I took on the lifestyle, without thinking through the implications.

For me, part of the waking-up-white process is acknowledging that I'm a recovering lemming. Of course I did things like live in Winchester, play at the Winchester Country Club, and ski at the "exclusive" ski club to which we belonged, because that was the life into which I was delivered. I simply went along to get along. I never considered that the space I was taking, or the resources I was using, might be being withheld from another to make it all possible.

I also had no idea of the valuable and coveted social network I was forming. I never imagined that the life that felt so regular to me could perpetuate my good fortune and ensure my corner of the market. As I moved about in a world where CEOs were just dads and board chairs just friends and family, I developed a wealth of social capital, a network of people and a cultural affinity with them, that would later add to my own success by employing me or supporting my fundraising efforts. It's impossible to fully quantify the accumulated and compounded advantages that came simply from living day in and day out with a small group of people connected to each other and to untold resources.

Beyond Winchester my parents' well-established New England network of white friends and family immersed me in a monocultural world. If we traveled, we stayed with people who lived in homes a lot like ours, belonged to country clubs a lot like ours, attended schools like ours, and had similar cars, TV sets, artwork, and antiques. My exceptionally sheltered world felt familiar and easy to navigate everywhere I went.

The social rules remained constant. I remember being shocked when my mother asked me to change up my language and say "Yes, ma'am," to my Southern aunt. I looked at my mother as if she had two heads. *I don't say "ma'am,"* I thought. *That's not the right way—that's just weird.* She gave me the hairy eyeball enough times that, for the course of the trip, I conformed to this Southern convention. That's about as multicultural as I got. Right through my senior year of college, life exposed me mostly to other versions of myself and the customs and traditions I considered normal.

My friends and I took our socializing seriously, often acting like miniature versions of our parents, reinforcing for one another the expected responsibilities and rewards as descendants of people we believed to be New England's "first people" (overlooking the fact that indigenous people were actually the real "first people"). Catchy little phrases such as "Blood is thicker than water" and "Don't air your dirty laundry" reminded us to stick together, show our excellent breeding and rearing, and set an example for others. I tried to buck the system here and there (which you'll read about later) but eventually conformed to the demands of the strict social code of upper-middle-class life. At country clubs and other likely gathering places where intersecting clans of WASP families met and mingled with the assurance of practiced square dancers, I mastered every step.

Being with people a lot like me allowed me to avoid any serious cultural clashes. Not only were family and friends similarly raised; a key social code included avoiding conflict by keeping social interactions light and cheerful. "Never discuss politics or religion" served as an explicit conversation guideline. The rest were implicit—learned by feedback. If I stuck to conversation within my culture's conversational norms, I'd get a laugh or a follow-up question. If I said something outside the norms, the tension, silence, or swift change of topic would tell me I'd made a misstep. If there'd been a handout on conversation principles, it might have said: *Don't discuss* religion, politics, money, negative emotions, fears, resentments, vulnerabilities, or bodily functions. *Do discuss* weather, hopes and dreams (as long as they're none of the above), travels, who you know, who's doing what where, commuting routes and times, consumer products you've tried and do or do not

like, where you go/went to school, sports, and music. *Remember*, it might have said: *problems are private.*

Perhaps this is why the civil rights movement seemed so removed from my life until two decades after landmark protests and policy changes shook the country. Only recently, in a family conversation about my awakening, did my two oldest sisters tell me of their involvement in the movement. As Smith College students, both had traveled to the South. One sister spent a week at the predominantly black Benedict College in South Carolina and followed up by arranging to have a renowned Benedict professor speak at Smith. The other sister traveled to North Carolina to register voters, staying with a black host family. Why did I never hear of their efforts? Perhaps the answer lay in the fact that my parents had asked at least one sister not to mention anything to our aunt and uncle living in South Carolina, who they presumed would not approve. Did they intentionally not say anything to me in an effort to prevent a chatty four-year-old from spilling the beans? Or was it a way to avoid the risk of bringing a potentially contentious conversational topic to the dinner table? In either case, the omission contributed to the ignorance that now makes me burn with regret.

People of all colors have been incredulous about just how sheltered my childhood was. "Didn't you see pictures of the civil rights movement in the paper?" they ask, trying to imagine how the images and stories of the era could have escaped me entirely. Here's the embarrassing truth: until I was a teenager, the only parts of the paper I ever saw were the sports and comic sections. The paper landed on our front porch every morning but was gone before I could sit down for breakfast. Each day, when my father left at exactly 7:03 to catch the 7:18 train to Boston, he folded the paper and snapped it into his briefcase, along with his peanut butter and jelly sandwich and train fare, which my mother placed on the kitchen table. The paper left with my father, who joined all the other commuting men striding down the street in their gray suits and fedoras, each carrying a briefcase as they headed to buildings in Boston's financial district, where they would meet and mingle with friends and colleagues from other exclusive, walled-off towns and neighborhoods.

In the absence of larger social concerns, my childhood was filled with the excitement of days ahead, of a time when I would step into the roles I watched the adults in my life play. I studied them deeply out of both affection and a desire to emulate them. Saturday night dinner parties at our house, when I'd weave through the crowd handing out appetizers, gave me the ideal opportunity to examine my parents' friends. Standing around the room in a smoke-swirled haze in their V-neck sweaters and pearls, swishing ice in their cocktail glasses, and throwing their heads back with laughter, they made being a grown-up look wonderful to me.

Until the age of twenty-two, when I graduated from college, this was my world. I was surrounded by similar houses with similar families of children with homemaker mothers and commuting suit-and-tie fathers. Now I can see they were white children with white homemaker mothers and white commuting fathers. That white-skinned people were the only ones I knew never struck me as anything other than perfectly normal. They weren't white people to me—just people. And this, I assumed, was the American experience.

If I could turn back time and rewrite the script for those years, my parents would be deft at sharing with me the realties of American history and current events, especially the civil rights movement. They would explain to me the movement's ideals and the strength and courage of the resistors. Instead of protecting me from what they may have perceived as frightful events fit only for adults, they would point out the courage of people on different sides of the racial divide coming together to encourage America to live up to its ideals. They would help me imagine what it must feel like to hold your ground at a lunch counter or in your town's first integrated high school. They would explore with me the similarities and differences between the way my ancestors risked their lives to free themselves from English rule and the way black Americans and their white allies were now risking their lives to free themselves from segregation. My heart aches to think of the lessons I lost in being "protected" from this powerful and poignant chapter in American history.

As it was, I was left to imagine myself imitating the only world I knew. My parents trained me well to succeed in a world I would ultimately find too constrained. Did I sense on some level that injustice was in play? Or was it the sick, sad feeling that came over me when I was asked to tamp down feelings and steer conversations away from authenticity and toward a narrow definition of politeness? Whatever it was that drove me to pursue the life I did, in the mix was a need to find out what existed beyond the walls so I could make sense of what was happening within them. I never anticipated having to challenge my belief that everything I had was earned or inherited

from people who'd earned it. The big houses, the private educations, the clubs, the optimism—all of these I believed were earned through nothing other than hard work and high ethics. For most of my life the idea of unearned privileges remained unheard of, an unfamiliar concept from an unknown American reality.

Q How connected to or disconnected from the larger world was your family, your school, your town? How much did you understand about conflict and struggle in your world or beyond? How did you make sense of people who had material wealth and people who didn't? What was your family's attitude about the people in power?

MIDLIFE WAKE-UP CALLS

Education is learning what you didn't
even know you didn't know.

—Daniel J. Boorstin