

Why being anti-racist is not enough

By Richard Zitrin

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To my white progressive friends: To say that last spring’s killings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor shook me would be an understatement. I also was shaken by the depth of my multiracial daughter’s anger—including at her entire white family—and I found myself thinking long and hard about my own racial culpability.

Eva Paterson, an old friend and a civil rights activist, suggested I write something from my perspective: a white guy who has considered himself an anti-racist for nearly all his 73 years. When I asked whether I should be speaking, she said, “Yes, because our white ‘liberal’ and ‘progressive’ supporters don’t get this. Speak to them.”

A week after arriving in California at age 26, I started working as a law student in a case involving four Black and two Latino prisoners accused of five murders and other crimes stemming from an August 1971 conflagration at San Quentin State Prison. I worked primarily for Johnny Spain, the only Black Panther among the “San Quentin Six” and a close friend of George Jackson, who was killed that day.

Spending hours in both prison and courtroom, I saw how “The Six” were literally enslaved: moved while chained around their legs and waists with iron braces encircling their necks. They looked as if they were headed to the auction block. They were locked down 23 hours a day and were never allowed outside exercise. I was grateful to be assigned to draft the lawsuit against the prison that eventually ended many of its most horrific practices.

Johnny and I met and talked often. I realized that not only was his prison experience beyond my emotional comprehension, so too was his life story. I could understand his words but knew I could never feel what it was like to walk in his shoes.

But I'm not writing this to explain who I was, what I did or what I understood. I'm writing to tell you about all the things that for decades I didn't understand—some that I completely missed until last spring's resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement. BLM leaders have told us white folks to dig deep and look within ourselves to better understand our own complicity in society's systemic racism.

I got the same message from my daughter Maya, who's grappling with her previously suppressed feelings about being the only person of color (she'd say "biologically multiracial but socially identified as Black") in a privileged white family.

Until last spring, I thought I had a good understanding of white privilege. I knew that despite my sweaty T-shirt and shorts, I could still duck into a fancy hotel, nod to the doorman, and head to the men's room, while my friend "Cedrick," the accomplished high school teacher who favors hoodies off-duty, would never get in the door.

A much steeper path

Black folks walk a much more challenging path than whites, whether they're poor laborers or lawyers schooled at Stanford. I didn't fully appreciate the pervasive nature of systemic racism. I walk around the streets of San Francisco without fear. My Black friends do not. Ever. Some—my Black lawyer friends and the law students I mentor—"overcome." But they each still face the challenges of being Black every day.

A few years ago, I had a client, a 64-year-old disabled Black man, who found himself in the middle of the street, face down on the pavement with his hands behind his back, surrounded by police with guns drawn. In good old "enlightened" San Francisco. For the "crime" of driving his own car. True, the cops thought it was stolen, but face down on the ground? This remains a Black person's reality.

On Jan. 6, our Capitol was invaded. As I saw rioters storm the building with little police resistance, I remembered last June 1, one week after Floyd died, when a group of peaceful protesters was forced out of Lafayette Park by police in riot gear using tear gas and other aggressive means, all so that President Donald Trump could have a Bible-holding photo-op. Had January's crowd of law-breaking rioters instead been a peaceful march of largely Black protesters, there likely would have been far more police aggression and violence. That's the truth in Black and white.

'Savior?'

I've spent much of my life working on issues facing the Black community, but after last spring, I stepped back to look seriously at my own motives. I had to consider the extent to which I'd been a "white savior," insufficiently sensitive to how my efforts might affect those I was trying to

help. I knew I was far from the misguided savior tropes in *The Help* and *Green Book*. I tried to avoid “teaching” Black people a “white” way to do things. And I’ve tried—not always successfully—to help only when asked.

And yet, there were occasions when I became a “voice for the voiceless” without being invited. Even if unintentional, an uninvited voice can show a lack of respect or awareness that white people won’t “save” Black people. There were times when I should have just “passed the mic.” Eva reassured me that there is still a role for white folks to speak out and help carry the message that, spoken only by Black people, may appear self-serving. But there’s a fine line between that and Savior City.

I have a Black scholarship student—I’ll call him Joseph—with whom I’m very close. He took the California bar exam twice and just missed passing. California’s Supreme Court recently lowered the “cut score” to a level that would have twice given him a passing grade, I felt it was unfair not to apply the lower score to last February’s exam, especially during COVID.

I wanted to do something to help, but when I asked Joseph, here’s what he wrote to me:

“Honestly, I want to take the bar in October and pass it fair and square. It would mean a lot to me. I don’t want you to feel like I don’t appreciate what you’re doing, but I personally want to take the exam and pass on my own. I know I can do it no matter how hard.”

I was again guilty of “saviorism.” I replied that I loved and respected his response. I learned another lesson, and this week he was sworn in as a member of the bar.

‘Bona fides’ and my daughter

Perhaps my most embarrassing recent realization is that there have been times in my interaction with Black friends, colleagues and even strangers when I have unnecessarily referenced my anti-racist “bona fides.” Was I looking for validation, instead of just being myself and letting that be enough? Everyone is familiar with the “nonracist” who says, “Some of my best friends are Black.” My version, upon occasion, was to mention that I’d been given this or that diversity award or—most tellingly and perhaps most unfortunately—that my daughter is Black.

To be sure, these bona fides cut both ways. Sometimes this information is relevant to a speech, or when answering questions about myself. But while my daughter is a source of great love and pride, trucking her out as a “bona fide” when it’s not relevant is wrong. At its worst, it’s not much better than when I wheeled her in a stroller and (white) people would say to me, “Oh, what a great thing you’ve done” by adopting her, a statement that disgusted me.

My daughter’s emotional responses to the Taylor/Floyd tragedies have taught me a lot. I’ve probably examined my parenting more closely than anything. I thought that I was doing such a great job of raising her: researching the pros and cons of white families adopting Black children; teaching her that she was “African American” from the cradle, too young to appreciate how “Black” applied to her brown skin; introducing her to Black female role models; even seeing Jesse Jackson take her in his arms when she was 6.

I sent her to a diverse school, discussed repeatedly the racial issues she'd face, and most importantly, showed her unconditional love and affection.

But there was more I could have done: hung out more with Black friends and community organizations; fostered Maya's development of her independent relationships with Black adults; found Black hairstylists and perhaps a Black pediatrician; and appreciated better her own sense of multiracial identity. And I could have taught my two older white sons more—especially the difference between how they and their sister are seen out in the real world.

Most significantly, I failed to fully appreciate how isolated Maya could feel—a Black island in a white world. I now realize that this was more about emotional sustenance than intellectual understanding. We've long discussed "important" social, political and artistic issues—the 1921 Tulsa massacre; Frederick Douglass' speech about July Fourth; the takeaways from the movie *Blindspotting* or Colson Whitehead's novels.

But these are intellectual ideas, no substitute for emotional sustenance. Without this sustenance, no matter how much she is loved, our daughter could still feel like an outsider in her own family. And here, I dropped the ball.

So just being an anti-racist is simply not enough. In many ways, I've fallen short. I won't say "failed" because I learn from those shortcomings. For us white progressives, deep self-examination is also not enough unless it's abiding. There's always more to understand. An old musician friend used to tell me, "Practice makes better." So does honest reflection.

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