



*“Do not expect to be taught or shown.
Take it upon yourself to use the tools around
you to learn and answer your questions.”*
[Guide to Allyship](#)

The Basics

A Brief Introduction to the History and Legacy of Chattel Slavery

Fall 2024

All sessions are from 4:00-5:30¹ on Sunday afternoons via ZOOM. The “Calendar and Book Lists” section (p. 7) provides the specific dates.

Introduction

Few Americans, especially white ones, fully understand either the history of chattel slavery or the legacy that the history has created – one that has embedded our culture not only with significant contributions from African-Americans, but also with notions of the superiority of whiteness.

African- American contributions are either erased from our textbooks and education and thus not part of our memory or they are considered the work of singular and exceptional persons rather than work that is representative of the capacity of any and all Black people.

White contributions, on the other hand, are literally “white-washed,” elevated, and mythologized, becoming fixed in our consciousness as proof of superiority. The fact that many of our revered “Founding Fathers” held human beings in chattel slavery is also glossed over in our textbooks, education and memory.

In “The Basics” we dig into the history and legacy of slavery and the impact that history has on both Black and White individuals through the molding of all our institutions to uphold the superiority of whiteness. Primarily, we use the written and spoken works of Black people so we might see the world we live in through their eyes. We also learn how our culture is white-dominant and about the impact that dominance has on each of us.

Fear is often an ever present emotion for many of us when we engage in explorations of race. When we come to understand the history of race and racism, we become more comfortable and less fearful about having conversations about race and reaching across racial divides.

¹ Except Dec. 8th when we will continue to 6 PM to allow time for conversation with our Black Mentor.

Aspirational Outcomes for Each of Us

- We increase our understanding about how race and racism are built into our culture, our institutions and ourselves;
- We each have become more effective at recognizing and resisting white-centeredness in ourselves;
- We each continue our commitment to on-going learning about race and to becoming more anti-racist in our daily lives by working for change especially in our white spaces;
- We each feel supported and energized by belonging to a group of learners committed to fostering racial justice.

Self-Reflection – the framework for approaching our learning

The heart of the work we do together is about self-reflection. The work of Circle members is about:

- **acquiring new information** to expand perspectives on race and racism; *followed by*
- **self-reflection** through which to examine past experiences, assumptions, and behaviors; *and then*
- **practicing change** by trying on new thinking, new ways of speaking, and new ways of behaving in daily life.

The Circle is neither a book group, nor an academic course. The Circle is about building our individual capacity to make change – in ourselves and in our communities. The content that is the source of our learning and unlearning is essential, but not sufficient. The focus of the Circle is on personal growth in becoming an anti-racist through self-reflection. A useful metaphor for self-reflection is looking into a mirror (inward) rather than through a lens (outward). Self-reflection is how we turn content into our personal growth - our capacity for making change and letting go of the fear that holds us back.

For each of us the journey is unique; just as the path we have taken to this point is unique. Our growth comes by engaging with the content through the feelings and memories the content evokes; through being willing to ask ourselves why those particular feelings and memories have surfaced; and willing to think about what that may mean about our own history with race and racism as a white person. There are no easy right and wrong answers.

There are so many resources to choose from to do this learning – and new ones being published/released constantly. Those included in the Circle learning plan may look daunting. But quality, not quantity, is the point.

Read/listen with care and attention:

- note what you are feeling; e.g. shame, anger, confusion, resistance, validation etc.
- note what is physically happening in your body; altered breathing, muscle tension, edginess, etc.
- note what you skipped over because you thought you knew it already or had nothing more to learn;
- ask yourself what may have triggered the responses you are having.

Engage with the amount of content you need to start exploring your own experiences, ideas, and behaviors around race and racism through self-reflection. Sometimes just a small section or paragraph may provoke an “aha” moment. Other times you may have to go deeper into the content.

This is not easy work; it may take practice to notice the feelings because we have learned from an early age to push them away, to be “colorblind” and to see race as not a problem for whites. Once we start noticing, the feelings likely will be painful ones, not pleasant ones. Truth hurts.

Circle sessions are intended to encourage, stimulate and support us in our individual learning. It is the work we do individually that is most important to our own growth.

Vulnerability

In our culture, vulnerability is often seen as weakness. To be vulnerable, however, is to cut away something and open a space. That is what happens when we toss out old habits and beliefs to make way for new learning and changed behavior.

In doing this work you will likely learn much that you did not previously understand about our history and its impact on the present. As a white person, we each need to reckon with our own legacy from the past. This requires that we ask ourselves difficult questions and be willing to face uncomfortable answers – in other words make ourselves vulnerable.

White supremacy has operated through the white washing of truth, the promotion of “colorblindness” as equity, the claim of a post-racial society, and the denial of complicity or responsibility. To call this out – to declare “the emperor has no clothes” – especially, when one may be the emperor, takes courage and feels very risky. We need to recognize the protective layer we each have that ensures our own comfort and open ourselves so we can be touched by the experiences of those whom our culture has marginalized.

The Circle is intended to provide a level of support and an empathetic² space with others going through the same process. Some of us also may find that having a trusted family member, friend, or colleague to talk with may help in exercising our vulnerability muscle.

As the Circle progresses, and members become comfortable with each other, each of you may find reaching out to another Circle member for sharing outside the Circle is also a helpful way to practice your vulnerability.

Member-led Discussion

In order to deepen our individual experience, for each session two members will co-lead our discussion by providing a framework for sharing our individual self-reflections about what we each learned from the resources we chose for the topic at hand.

² See Brené Brown [on empathy](#)

Co-leaders will:

- communicate with each other at 2-3 weeks ahead of their session to make sure each select a **different** resource for that session – preferably one of the books, to ensure a deeper exposure to the topic;
- meet (in person, by phone, on Zoom) with each other 3-5 days before the session to share with each other your own self-reflections about your learning and agree on a framework for the Circle discussion;
- if the Chosen framework requires preparatory work by members, send information to Circle members no later than Friday before the Sunday session;
- provide time management for the session;
- keep the discussion focused on self-reflection;
- ensure that all members have the opportunity to speak.

Assignments of co-leaders for each session will be confirmed at the organizational session.

Strategies for framing a session

The following are suggestions only; co-leaders may frame the discussion in any way you choose to elicit the sharing of self-reflection.

- Each co-leader shares a personal reflection on some aspect of what they learned and asks for members to respond to what was shared;
- Co-leaders agree on one event, issue, piece of information ... and then each share their own reflection on that item, followed by members reflections on the same item;
- Ask each member to come prepared to share one quote from what they read that touched them in a meaningful way.

Topics

In “The Basics” we cover the introductory topics that are essential to understanding how and why our country’s racial divide began and how it currently manifests itself in the lives of both Blacks and Whites.

- Slavery
- The Legacy of Slavery
- Being Black
- Being White

“The Basics” does not cover the racializing of our societal institutions (e.g. education, criminal justice, housing etc.), the growing calls for reparations or the ongoing efforts to promote or resist White Nationalism – all of which are covered in the full Circle.

We conclude with a choice of books that provide ideas for ways forward.

Content

For each topic there is a choice of several books. Offering this limited option affords everyone the opportunity to read something not previously read. It both frames our discussion around a topic and enriches the conversation with the sharing of multiple approaches. It also helps us

to resist the temptation to talk about a specific book, instead of about ourselves and our learning. With some exceptions, these books are all works of Black authors.

In “The Basics” we focus on learning through books in order to maximize the learning opportunity in the short time period. Books also offer the most substantive and in depth coverage of the material. Since our goal is self-reflection, the process of reading also offers the additional benefit of being able to pause and self-reflect in ways that other media do not as easily do.

Ultimately, we each choose how much content we can manage as well as how much content we need to stimulate deep self-reflection – to have “aha” moments. The more content we each engage with, the more meaningful the experience will be.

Consider keeping a journal for each of the blocks of time you work. Jot down the ideas/quotes that really caught your attention, brief notes about why they were meaningful to you and questions they raise for more exploration.

Being in Community in the Circle

Though we are learning as individuals, we also are learning in a community when we meet as a Circle. Within our circle we:

- **maintain confidentiality** to create a brave space for courageous sharing;
- **share our learning** and respond to each other with openness, compassion and curiosity;
- **ask questions of each other** to assist each other in “seeing” the way we each have internalized white supremacy;
- **encourage each other in taking risks** to disrupt racist ways of thinking, speaking, and behaving;
- **speak honestly**, even when it makes you feel vulnerable;
- **help each other to identify blind spots**, in order to make space to choose change;
- **look for the learning opportunity** in whatever situation you find yourself;
- **approach this work and each other with humility and gratitude**; we each have our own experiences and insights to share and this learning is never done.

Thanks to the Circle, I am working on my own humility when talking about race with other white people. It's still uncomfortable to admit that I started the Circle believing I was "more advanced" in my anti-racism journey. I now understand that that perspective serves no one, least of all me. Former Circle member

Black mentors

The circle is composed of white members only:

- so members do not refrain from honest speaking for fear of “exposing themselves”;
- so white members do not look to a Black person to raise the difficult issues and to make white members feel good;
- because white people need to respect the degree to which Black people are exhausted by having to explain racism to white people and refrain from seeking out Black people for that purpose; white people need to do their own research before seeking out Black people for information.

- because white people must equip themselves with the knowledge and skills to take leadership in disrupting the systems that for centuries have privileged them and kept Black and other marginalized people from thriving.

In order to keep the Black experience framed in our discussion, a Black mentor will be present in conversation with us at our last session.

Guidelines for Conversations with Our Black Mentors

1. First and foremost, be in the space with our Black Mentor as a **learner**; engage in active and open **listening** so we create an environment in which our Black Mentor truly feels heard and that their thoughts/ideas are respected and meaningful.
2. Keep in mind that many Black and other POC feel vulnerable in white spaces because of past experience with microaggressions and outright intentional racism;
3. Frame questions to our Black Mentor around issues that are not personal;
4. Be thoughtful and considerate of our Black Mentor's privacy; let them decide the degree to which they want to share any personal experiences. We are not here to ask them to share potentially traumatic experiences, and additionally we cannot know beforehand what experience is traumatic for a particular individual.
5. Remember that Black and other POC experience life in quite different ways than do white people. Do not challenge or question their experience or ask them to justify their ideas, thoughts, and opinions.

Acquiring the Books

Most of the books are available through the CWMars system used by public libraries in Berkshire County. You may need to plan in advance to have the book you want in a timely manner. If your local library does not have them, request a hold and they will be sent to your local library for you.

If you wish to purchase new books, consider shopping at a local bookstore or at Bookshop.org (a consortium of local book shops that returns funds to those shops when you buy online) instead of using Amazon.

It is also possible to get copies in good condition for much less money at online used book dealers. Try [Better World Books](http://BetterWorldBooks.com), [Thrift Books](http://ThriftBooks.com), or [Powell's Books](http://PowellBooks.com) (located in Portland, OR, so a bit larger carbon footprint)

Preparation prior to our first meeting

1. Consider subscribing to and regularly reading both the [Anti-Racism Daily](http://Anti-RacismDaily.com) and [The 19th News](http://The19thNews.com) to see current events from different perspectives than mainstream sources.
2. Begin reading the books for the first discussion session on **Slavery**.

After “The Basics”

We hope that you will be eager to continue learning about race and racism.

- Read the books you did not choose as you went through “The Basics.

- Go to the [NAACP Berkshire Branch White Learning](#) and download the material for the full White Learning Circle which will provide a good list of resources for learning about the racialized systems that keep us back;
- Use the same link to view and download “Resources for White Learning” – an extensive, curated bibliography that is updated several times a year.

Calendar & Book Lists

Sept. 29 - Getting started

October 13 – Slavery and Racist Ideas

Co-leaders:

Books (read all – these are intentionally children’s books)

American Story by Kwame Alexander

Born on the Water by Nikole Hannah-Jones and Renée Watson

Stamped (For Kids): Racism, Antiracism and You adapted by Sonja Cherry-Paul

October 27 – The Legacy of Slavery

Co-leaders:

Books (read the 1st on the list you have not read previously)

The Warmth of Other Suns by Isabel Wilkerson

How the Word is Passed by Clint Smith

All that She Carried: The Journey of Ashley’s Sack, a Black Family Keepsake by Tiya Miles

November 10 – Being Black

Co-leaders:

Books (read the 1st on the list you have not read previously)

Eloquent Rage by Britney Cooper

Between the World and Me by Ta-Nehisi Coates

I’m Still Here: Black Dignity in a World Made for Whiteness by Austin Channing Brown

When they Call You a Terrorist by Asha Bandele & Patrisse Khan-Cullors

November 24 – Being White

Co-leaders

Books (read the 1st on the list you have not read previously)

Waking Up White: and Finding Myself in the Story of Race by Debbie Irving

So You Want to Talk About Race by Ijeoma Oluo

Tears We Cannot Stop: A Sermon for White America by Michael Eric Dyson

The White Bonus: Five Families and the Cash Value of Racism in America by Tracie McMillan

Note: we will meet from 4:00-6:00 PM on Dec. 8th to provide time for conversation with our Black Mentor.

December 8 - Ways Forward

Co-leaders:

Books (read either)

The Sum of Us by Heather McGhee

Anti-racism as Daily Practice: Refuse Shame, Change White Communities, and Help Create a Just World by Jennifer Harvey