

Open Letter to White Family and Friends

Christiana Laine

August 24, 2020

A few weeks ago, I sat outside the 3rd Precinct of the Detroit Police Department on a blazing hot cement barrier, distantly surrounded by roughly 200 individuals in medical masks, diverse in age, race, and religion. We were gearing up for maybe our third week of marching in support of Black Lives Matter and the defunding of the police. For an hour or so each day, before we march, there's an open mic. Anyone is welcome to step up to the platform and offer words of encouragement, philosophy, hype, education, or personal message. On this day, a charismatic Black man with long dreads and a contagious smile named Leon King stepped up like he had most days, and spoke about his lifelong westside neighborhood; often repeating, "I'm a Joy Road Cat!". He had stumbled upon the marches by chance and described his initial mistrust of the movements' motives and intentions, in large part because a whole lot of white folks - like me - were attending en masse and being very loud and proud. Upon joining the daily marches for a few weeks, this day he wanted to say thank you, because we kept coming, and he felt he had found another family on the streets. "I have no idea why you white folks are out here doing this for me," he said, "but thank you for being here."

This last sentiment of Leon's gave me pause. It's true that nothing felt more like the "right thing" to me than to be there, using my voice and my body to help break the silence and apathy around systemic racism and police violence, but it had been quite a while since I had asked myself *why*. It led me to think about many of my own white family members and friends who - judging by their Facebook posts - are likely also wondering why I am doing this, and what Black Lives Matter has to do with them.

I wrote this open letter in response, to address the construct of whiteness as I've begun to understand it and speak about the subtler incarnations of white privilege, the kind I was born and raised in.

I grew up in a very small Midwestern town. The type of quaint and sleepy place where every neighbor waved to one-another and knew your brother, your cousin and your great grandmother. The private Christian elementary and middle schools I attended had a 100% white staff and student population. My public high school in the same town maintained roughly 98%. I believe the homogeneity of my surroundings and complete lack of representation or education about any other races, creeds, or colors, wove an intentional fabric of "blissful" ignorance which has taken me half my life to begin to unravel and reconstruct.

I was not raised to hate or discriminate. I was raised to believe that everything was fine.

For example, when I was quite young, I loved to watch TV Land. One of my favorite old shows was "The Jeffersons". I loved that theme song "Movin' on up!". At age 6, this show was likely my only glimpse into the life of a Black family, which makes a lot of sense considering that at the time, "The Jeffersons" was the longest running American sit-com with a primarily Black cast.¹ Though the show did touch on themes of racism and discrimination, I don't doubt it was largely popular due to its saccharin representation of an affluent Black family living in a high-rise apartment building, dealing with the familiar and funny minor inconveniences of any other American family. In Tai-Nehisi Coates' reflective and heart-wrenching book *Between the World and Me*,² he describes the television shows of his own youth, as a portal to an "other world", one that was "suburban and endless, organized around pot roasts, blueberry pies, fireworks, ice cream sundaes, immaculate bathrooms, and small toy trucks that were loosed in wooded backyards with streams and glens" while he resided in the real world that was West Baltimore. He goes on to say, "I obsessed over the distance between that sector of space and my own. I knew that my portion of the American galaxy, where bodies were enslaved by a tenacious gravity, was Black and that the other, liberated portion was

not.” In a sense, “The Jeffersons” made sure the world of Coates’ upbringing remained invisible to white America.

Perhaps the oddest effect “The Jeffersons” had on me, however, was to instill the assumption that individuals with the last name “Jefferson” must be related, and therefore African American. In my 6-year-old mind and beyond, when learning about the founding fathers, I internalized the image of a Black Thomas Jefferson.

As I understood until I was 11 or 12, the fourth president of the United States was a Black man, and Black and brown people had shared in equal success and suffering with white people throughout American History. I had similar misconceptions about Martin Luther King Jr., believing him to be the direct descendant of Martin Luther the Catholic monk. Was this a flaw in my learning ability, or a failure of my education that sought to shelter us from the evils of our past and lump the “good guys” into one category and the “bad guys” another? I don’t remember learning of a single other “good” Black man at that time. We learned the footnotes of slavery during Black History Month, but it read like the terror of a thousand years ago. Abraham Lincoln was the best guy ever, he took care of a few bad slave-owners, and *everything was fine*.

What did resonate about MLK was that he was shot, but I never truly understood why, just like JFK and Bobby Kennedy. It was always the tragedy of the deaths of “great men” and never the very grim circumstances surrounding them. My reality throughout adolescence was racial ignorance by design. Because all the white people surrounding me claimed and touted “colorblindness”. They were nice Midwestern folks “not looking for trouble”.

Cut to Barack Obama’s election in 2008. I was 16 and he was of course the first Black president – the significance was no longer lost on me. My town, my family, and my school were suddenly and clearly divided. Not by his merit, his actions, his words or his demeanor, but merely by the color of his skin, was he judged, ridiculed, hated, and accused of birth certificate forgery. The ruse was over. The nice Midwestern folks I’d grown up around preaching “love thy neighbor” were making one thing very clear. It seems what they meant

was, “love thy white neighbor and don’t let the Black folks in because they’ll take over and make us pay for 400 years of their oppression by our hands, and we will rewrite history before we let that happen.” The ugliness of their hypocrisy was something I could never unsee. *Everything was not fine*.

To this day, my own father calls the type of greed and division pervasive in American patriotism “human nature”. And to this day I wonder, why must we as humans be measured against the most selfish among us? I do not fear the stripping of my individual “power” for the lifting up of others. I understand that some fight through their own struggle and traumas by arming themselves with defensiveness and wish to stomp upon others who struggle in an attempt to lift themselves up. But those who are tender can truly rise, for those who are tender are not just sympathetic to pain, they are in pain themselves. Tenderness infers that a wound has been inflicted, and a slow healing is happening and through that healing may we hope to heal others. It was my tender humanity and my nature that told me run from the toxic indoctrination of my youth.

As soon as I could, I moved to San Francisco. After being deprived, I was drawn to diversity, found it beautiful and important. There I made my first good Black friend. It breaks my heart and makes me cringe to remember that I told him once he couldn’t *really* be Black because he was the “whitest acting” Black person I knew, as if it were some sort of compliment. I didn’t know any others well; I’d just heard that type of thing on TV. How kind and patient he must have been to tell me simply it hurt his feelings. He tried to explain but I didn’t absorb it then.

I kept moving to more cities and traveling, always learning, always being humbled. Finally, I moved to Detroit six years ago. And it was here that I finally faced my lifelong ignorance head on - and it hurt. It was here that very patient people looked me in the eye and told me I needed to shut up and listen, read, reflect, and read some more. So I did.

I relearned. Starting with basic history. Thomas Jefferson wasn’t Black of course. In fact he owned around 600 slaves in his lifetime. He did, ironically, write the *Declaration of Independence*. Perhaps the boldest and most famous of

its statements being “that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

I hope anyone reading this is aware that this document did not include the rights of women, Black, brown, or indigenous folks at the time of its writing. But a further bit of research reveals that this final text went through multiple rewrites. Jefferson was influenced by the writings of English philosopher John Locke, who penned a similar phrase in his argument for the separation of religious law and governmental law, *A Letter Concerning Toleration*. He writes,

“Civil interests I call life, liberty, health, and indolency [sic] of body; and the possession of outward things, such as money, lands, houses, furniture, and the like. It is the duty of the civil magistrate, by the impartial execution of equal laws, to secure unto all the people in general and to every one of his subjects in particular the just possession of these things belonging to this life.”³

Can you imagine if the established rights of citizens included tangible things like health, rest, and the ownership over one’s own self? None of us are afforded such “luxuries,” but the system, the police, and white people living comfortably and blindly in the falsehoods of white supremacy have denied Black and brown people all three of these included rights since the onset of this nation. And each day, with every police shooting, church burning, and arrest of Black bodies to oil the gears of for-profit prisons, it becomes more clear that as an institution, America does not bat an eye at denying Black folks the right to life; let alone health, rest, property, and bodily autonomy.

Before, during, and after the writing of the *Declaration of Independence*, there was a lot of debate going on regarding what *God* might have Christians do in the time of slavery. Contrary to what I and many of my peers were taught, people back then were not just born believing that the color of one’s skin deemed them “subhuman” to be justifiably stolen, beaten, and worked until death. Ibram X. Kendi goes into painful and harrowing detail on this subject in his masterpiece, *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive Histo-*

ry of Racist Ideas in America. In fact, if this paper inspires nothing else within you, I implore you to begin your own re-learning by reading this book. On constructs such as the idea of a “pure”, white heart, and Christ’s blood washing Christians “white as snow”, Kendi writes, “I was taught the popular folktale of racism: that ignorant and hateful people had produced racist ideas, and that these racist people had instituted racist policies. But when I learned the motives behind the production of many of America’s most influentially racist ideas, it became quite obvious that this folktale, though sensible, was not based on a firm footing of historical evidence [...] It has actually been the inverse relationship—racial discrimination led to racist ideas which led to ignorance and hate. Racial discrimination - racist ideas - ignorance/hate: this is the causal relationship driving America’s history of race relations.”⁴

All of this rhetoric was designed and widely circulated to perpetuate the belief that to be white, was to be right in God’s eyes. White Christians were placated by this idea. They could preach the gospel to their Black slaves, but the slaves could never be redeemed and free like them; they could never be “pure” through and through. I notice today that white folks who “want no trouble” would be very glad to stop having their “whiteness” mentioned altogether, citing reverse-racism any time their skin color is associated with their inherent bias and ignorance.

These truths are painful and uncomfortable. I understand a predilection to avoid and separate oneself from them, but without a universal effort on the part of those with the privilege of 400 years to learn and take responsibility, the cycles of oppression will continue as they were designed and intended. I think many do not understand that it was we who invented the very idea of race, to perpetuate our wealth, power, the American Dream, and it is we who must first work to dismantle the oppressive institutions which still operate today on those racist founding principles. If we want to be unified, we must unify in upholding uncomfortable truths, and tearing those systems down.

To answer Leon King, and anyone else who may be wondering, I think we're here because we opened our eyes somehow, and once the veil has been lifted, you cannot pull it back down. Malcolm X. said it best, "I'm for truth, no matter who tells it. I'm for justice, no matter who it is for or against. I'm a human being first and foremost, and as such I'm for whoever and whatever benefits humanity as a whole."⁵

1. Kathleen Fearn-Banks, *Historical Dictionary of African American Television* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowan & Littlefield, 2014)
2. Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (New York, New York: Spiegel and Grau, 2015)
3. John Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, (London, England, 1689)
4. Ibram X Kendi, *Stamped from the Beginning: the Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America* (New York, New York: Bold Type Books, 2017)
5. Malcolm X & Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X.*, (New York, New York: Ballantine Books, 1999)

runner