So You Think You're an Anti-Racist?

6 Critical Paradigm Shifts for Well-Intentioned White Folks

The Base Shift: Human relations programming --> Social justice activism
Food fairs, multicultural nights, and diversity festivals are fun events that may bring people together temporarily. But do they contribute to eliminating racism? The most anti-racist shift for white people is to understand that confronting racism is going to be uncomfortable, difficult, emotional, and painful. So why do we put so many resources into human relations programming? Who might we be trying to protect?

Racism as a people of color problem --> Racism as a white people problem
Racism is my pathology, not that of people of color. Of course, it's much more comfortable for me, as a white person, to portray it is a people of color problem so that I can sit back and wait for people of color to solve it. How convenient, right? White people are privileged by racism, even if we aren't consciously contributing to it. Since we reap the benefits, we also hold the responsibility to challenge the system that benefits us.

Color-blindness --> Self-examination
I don't believe color-blindness is possible. I see difference. If I can't be honest about that, I don't have much potential to be an effective anti-racist, do I? And if color-blindness is possible, I don't believe it is desirable. Why would I want to deny what may be a powerful, impactful part of somebody's identity? Instead of working on my color-blindness, I might decide to direct that energy toward self-examination so that I can be honest about my prejudices and how they impact the people around me and the work I'm trying to do.

Racism as individual acts --> Racism as an institutional oppression
I'm not burning any crosses. I don't own slaves. (And neither did my great-grandparents!) So this racism thing isn't my issue, right? Well, not exactly. As long as I can understand racism as individual acts of white people, I can pretend that I have no part in it. But wait. I benefit from racism. It gives me access to certain opportunities denied other people on the basis of race. If I understand racism in that way -- as an institutional structure that provides access and opportunity to some at the expense of others -- then I do have some responsibility to end it.

Racial harmony --> Racial equity
Why can't we all just get along? Why can't we just have peace on earth? Why are those people so angry? Here's what I've come up with: There can be no peace without justice. (Consider it: If you were discriminated against every day of your life based on something over which you had no control, would you be feeling harmonious with your oppressor?) There can be no justice without equity. So if we want peace and harmony, all we have to do is provide equity. Who's ready?

Focus on intent --> Focus on impact
Of course you don't mean to be racist. Neither do I. But as a white person, I'm still working on understanding racism and my own whiteness. I, too, am a product of racism. I must take responsibility for the impact I have, regardless of my intentions. Racism hurts, whether I mean it or not.