



# MINDFUL OF RACE

Transforming  
Racism  
from the  
Inside  
Out



RUTH KING

**BOOK EXCERPT**

## INTRODUCTION

# Racism Is a Heart Disease, and It's Curable!

Something alarming happens when we think or hear the word *racism*. Something deep within us is awakened into fear. All of us, regardless of our race and our experience of race, get triggered, and more than the moment is at play. That word picks at an existential scab—some level of dis-ease at the mere insinuation of the word, some itch that we can't seem to scratch, or some fear we believe will harm us. This activation happens to all of us.

Regardless of how we look on the outside, we turn into frightened combatants and suit up for war. The heart quakes, and the mind narrows to its smallest, tightest place—survival. Whether or not we're conscious of it, we all tend to go to our weapons of choice—aggression, distraction, denial, doubt, worry, depression, or indifference. By virtue of a number of intersecting factors, including race, we carry with us varying levels of power to execute our desired outcome or to disguise our discomfort. Tension heightens, and the stress can feel intolerable—even life threatening. And for too many of us, such fear is not unfounded.

Some of us do not acknowledge that we are racial beings within the human race, nor do we recognize how or understand why our instinct as members of racial groups is to fear, hurt, or harm other races, including our own. And we don't know how to face into and own what we have co-created as humans. But each of us can and must ask ourselves two questions: Why are matters of race still of concern across the nation and throughout the world? And what does this have to do with me?

In the West, we live within a racial context of hatred and harm. Whether subtle or openly cruel, whether out of innocence or ignorance, the generational and often unconscious conditioning that has bred social and systemic norms of racial dominance, subordination, and separation, nuanced in every aspect of our day-to-day lives, is tightly sewn into the fabric of our society.

I'm writing this book in the year of the grand opening of the historic National Museum of African American History and Culture, part of the Smithsonian on the Washington Mall. Several months after it opened, a noose was found in front of a display titled, "Democracy Abroad. Injustice at Home." I'm writing on the fifteenth anniversary of the September 11 extremist attack on US soil. This same year, voters in Great Britain approved the Brexit referendum to exit the European Union, a decision driven not only by fear of being overrun by immigrants but also by a fear that globalization will undo long-established ways of life. The stunning Brexit vote was 52 percent to 48 percent.

I'm writing in the year Barack Obama, the first African American president of the United States, is ending his presidency, after enduring eight years of a horrific racist and obstructionist Republican Congress and Senate that, from the onset, proclaimed to ensure that Obama would fail and be a one-term president. Throughout his two-term presidency, blatant racism and relentless questioning and resistance to his leadership became the norm, all under the guise of governance.

I am writing in the heat of a human rights protest in the streets of Charlotte, North Carolina,

where I live, after a police officer killed Keith Lamont Scott, a forty-three-year-old African American father of seven, who was in his car waiting to pick up his daughter from school. According to the Huffington Post, police killed more than 250 black people in 2016. That's about twenty-one black bodies per month or five per week.

In 2016, Republican candidate Donald Trump—who ran a racially charged and divisive presidential campaign of hate, fear, and prideful disrespect of women and dark-skinned bodies and immigrants—won the electoral vote. Now, in this era of Donald Trump, overt racism has been made entirely okay again in the halls of power. In the month following Trump's election, the Southern Poverty Law Center, which monitors hate groups and other extremist activity throughout the United States, reported 1,094 bias-related incidents across the nation.

As I write, Charlottesville, Virginia, has become ground zero for the Loyal White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, who are protesting the city council's decision to remove a statue of Confederate General Robert E. Lee. This rally was considered the prerequisite of an alt-right march to be held a few weeks later. Alt-right marches are spreading across the nation and are not even denounced inside the Trump White House.

The long-standing demonization and criminalization of blacks and dark-skin bodies still occupy the psyches of the white people—mostly white men and the women who support them—who hold power in most US institutions.

On June 17, 2015, twenty-one-year-old Dylann Roof, a white male and Confederate loyalist, was welcomed into Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in downtown historic Charleston, South Carolina—one of the oldest black churches in the United States and a site for community and civil rights organizing. Within an hour of being welcomed, during prayer, Roof gunned down and killed

nine African Americans. The timing of these murders has significant historical relevance. In 1822, Denmark Vesey was suspected of planning a slave rebellion to take place in Charleston at midnight on June 16, 1822. When white citizens suspected this rebellion, thirty-five black people, including the church founder, were hanged, and the church was burned down. The Charleston church shooting on June 17, 2015, occurred on the 193rd anniversary of this uprising.

The morning Roof was arrested—sixteen hours after being on the run and after admitting that he had hoped to ignite a race war—Roof complained of being hungry. John Ledford, a white police officer in Shelby, North Carolina, brought Roof food from Burger King and reported, "He was very quiet, very calm. . . . He was not problematic." *Not problematic?! This is how racism works. A white man admits he wants to incite a race war, yet he is not problematic.* A bit crazy, don't you think?

I'm writing this book at an intense time of global and civil wars: Wars against other nations and within nations. Wars against races, religions, and cultures. Greed wars on the youth, the elders, and the mentally and physically ill. Wars against the poor, against immigrants, against gays and transgendered people, and against women and girls. I'm writing at a time when the need for reform of criminal justice, economic justice, immigrant justice, LGBTQIA rights, and children's rights—to name a few—is clear. Race and racism are roots to these concerns. I am writing at a time of global fear—people fearing each other and the systems within which we exist. A time when greed is altering the planet that once sustained us, and the planet is revolting, as are its people, against exploitation and corruption.

The world's heart is on fire, and race is at its core. What's happening in the world today is the result of past actions. The bitter racial seeds from past beliefs and actions are blooming all around us, reflecting not only a division of the races that

is rooted in ignorance and hate but also, and more sorely, a division of heart.

Racism is a heart disease. How we think and respond is at the core of racial suffering and racial healing. If we cannot think clearly and respond wisely, we will continue to damage the world's heart.

For well over twenty years, I've coached leaders and teams in cultivating cultures that are inclusive, creative, productive, and respectful. I was trained professionally in clinical psychology, organizational development, and diversity consulting, and this background supports me in seeing patterns of racial ignorance and distress that get in the way of us coexisting as humans. This background alone, however, while it brought awareness and understanding, did not transform my relationship to racial distress. The best tool I know of to transform our relationship to racial suffering is mindfulness meditation. For more than twenty years, that practice has supported me in experiencing racial distress without warring against it.

Mindfulness-based meditation has become vastly popular in modern-day secular life, being practiced in schools, prisons, hospitals, therapeutic programs, veteran centers, movement and other healing modalities, and corporations. It is also being studied scientifically. Mindfulness-based meditation is not a religious code as much as it is a social psychology that supports experiences of well-being. Research has shown it to have a positive impact on neurobiological functioning, stress reduction, and overall physical and mental well-being.

I was attracted to this practice because my habitual ways of relating to racial distress were not working. I was a righteous rager—I even wrote a book about rage—and I had many reasons to rage about race. But then, at the age of twenty-seven, I had open-heart surgery for a mitral valve prolapse, a surgical procedure that began a spiritual inquiry into my habits of harm. When introduced to mindfulness meditation years later, I learned

how to interrupt the mental war I was inflicting on others and myself. I learned how to relate to distress with more compassion, and I opened to a deeper understanding of my racial conditioning. I discovered that how I thought was core not only to my level of distress but also to my ability to break habits of harm.

I have not reached nirvana, no. But I do know the freedom that comes from being able to look at what is happening—not what my mind is programmed to believe is happening, but what is really happening—without raging inside. Over time, this practice has profoundly impacted how I relate to both racial distress and racism in my relationships and communities. Through mindfulness meditation practice, I discovered the meaning of a quote often attributed to South African president Nelson Mandela: “When we can sit in the face of insanity or dislike and be free from the need to make it different, then we are free.” That’s what mindfulness meditation does. It helps us put a crucial pause between our instinctive and often overwhelming feelings of being wronged or harmed or in danger and our responses to those feelings. In that pause, we gain perspective—we find our breath, our heartbeat, and the ground beneath our feet. This, in time, supports us in seeing our choices more clearly and responding more wisely.

My journey of racial healing has been long, and it continues. A number of experiences converged to give birth to this book. My own mindfulness practice was revealing a deeper understanding of racial distress and increasing experiences of inner freedom. I was learning to sit with difficult feelings without coming apart, all the while growing in my capacity to look at what was happening within me as it was happening.

In 2008, the year President Obama was elected, I moved from a racially engaged and diverse community in Berkeley, California, to a racially segregated and cautious community in Charlotte,

North Carolina. In Charlotte, I could feel, at my feet, the discontent of the ancestors and, at my face, a polite distance tinged with hostility.

Racial tension was at an all-time high following the killing of unarmed black men, women, and children by police, and there was civilian retaliation toward police officers. On one of my morning walks in Charlotte, I noticed that many of my neighbors, most of whom are white, had small US flags lining their yards in honor of the recently killed police officers. For years, I've walked this same path and never have I seen symbols of care for the masses of black lives who so viciously lost their lives at the hasty hands of police. I don't condone the killing of anyone, and I mean no disrespect to the vast territory of grief that engulfs us. Pain does not discriminate when it comes to senseless loss; it just hurts—it crushes our hearts. Yet, on this walk in my friendly neighborhood, I felt oddly diminished and felt compelled to make what is often invisible and glossed over more visible and pronounced.

Perhaps it's because my twenty-three-year-old grandson called me—distracted, in disbelief, and afraid—right after Alton Sterling's murder by police and just before Philando Castile's. Perhaps it's because my partner and I had been falling asleep crying in each other's arms, empty of words. Perhaps it's because the stories of our pain as a collective get broad brushed, easily forgotten, and buried in the criminality of our bodies. Perhaps it's because as a great-grandmother and elder, I can feel how endangered my children are as black bodies, and I can't guarantee them protection from harm.

My resettlement in the South has offered me innumerable opportunities for mindfulness practice, especially as I repeatedly replaced the missing Obama/Biden signs in my front yard. When I would get triggered by a remark, a conversation, a racist incident, or a terrible piece of racially charged news, I could take it to my

meditation cushion and work through the feelings so that I could then think clearly enough to decide how I wanted to respond. What freedom that was—not to be held in the tight grip of anger, defensiveness, and fear; to be released from the bondage of being on red alert, always ready to have my rage engaged.

My other outlet was to sit and talk to my life partner, Dr. Barbara Riley, who has spent the bulk of her career working for racial justice. She and her colleagues have designed and developed an array of concepts, tools, and frameworks for transforming oppression, most notably Integral Matters™: Thriving on Difference. In our talks and walks, she shared her framework of understanding and working with racial issues as individuals, as members of identity groups, and within the institutions in which we work. It was through these talks that I realized the subtle depth of racial *group* identity and its contribution to structural racism. I have worked with this framework for several years integrating it with mindfulness principles, which is reflected in part 1 of this book.

Using my professional background in designing diversity leadership programs, along with my experience as a mindfulness practitioner and teacher, in 2010, I designed and began teaching the Mindful of Race program. This training brings a mindful inquiry to an examination of racial conditioning and social distress.

I was able to incorporate this training into multiyear programs in the Dedicated Practitioners Program and Community Dharma Leaders Program at Spirit Rock Meditation Center and in the Teacher Training Program at Insight Meditation Society, as well as the Meditation Teacher Training Institute of Washington, DC. In these programs, I was able to encourage an investigation of racial ignorance and social distress, which allowed me to witness the positive impact that examining race through the lens of mindfulness had on others over time. For the past several years, the Mindful of



Race training has supported individuals and groups across the nation in understanding and transforming racial habits of harm. This book, to a large extent, grew from the soil of this program.

What you will find in this book comes not only out of my work as a meditation teacher, life coach, and diversity consultant but also from my personal experiences as an African American, married lesbian, and great-grandmother, raised with working-class values in South Central Los Angeles, in the heat of the civil rights and Black Power movements. I am not an expert at any of these identities, yet I speak through all of them. This book is also inspired by the countless people I have worked with over the years who are asking:

- How do I work with my thoughts, fears, and beliefs in ways that nurture the dignity of all races?
- How do I comfort my own raging heart in a sea of racial ignorance and violence?
- How can my actions reflect the world I want to live in and leave to future generations?
- How do I advocate for racial justice without causing harm and hate, internally and externally?

Racism is a heart disease. Many of us can live for a while with a heart disease without knowing it, and others of us know we have a heart disease but are afraid or even in denial about it. But racism is a heart disease, and it's curable! This book points us toward racial harmony and healing.

In part 1, *Understanding Habits of Harm—Diagnosis*, we discover the narrative we hold along racial lines—both conscious and unconscious. We examine our racial inheritance

and habits and look at how social, historical, and cultural conditioning influences our perceptions and actions. We examine race through our individual and group identities and look at how dominant and subordinated group identities maintain racial ignorance, injustice, and the institutional proliferation of racism. This information supports us in clearly seeing our interdependence and the impact of our individual agency on collective and social well-being.

In part 2, *Mindfulness—Heart Surgery*, we explore how to stay present to racial distress through mindfulness meditation. We develop a mindfulness practice that can support us in investigating racial disease, while softening the grip of anger, guilt, and fear that arises when we do this work. This practice helps us experience the kinship, care, and relief that come from releasing racial distress. Through regular mindfulness practice, we begin to make peace with our own heart and mind and discover that, despite what is happening around us, we can recognize and discharge racial tension and distress within our body and mind and experience increasing moments of inner freedom.

A purely self-centered spiritual practice limits racial healing. Therefore, in part 3, *Cultivating a Culture of Care—Recovery*, we shift our focus outward. Using spiritual archetypes, we discover what it means to contribute to a culture of care with integrity, talk to our children about race, nurture racial literacy through racial affinity groups, talk about what disturbs us, develop the healing power of our creative expression, and discover the role of equanimity in social transformation.

Each of us has a racial story. While I can't know of your unique experiences as a racial being or of what you have experienced or escaped, what I do know is that if you are willing to take this journey with me, you will be able to recognize the shape of racial ignorance and suffering, find your part in it, and respond more wisely to change it.

## A Few Biases and Caveats

To give this book the focus and shape it needs, I have had to isolate race, carving it out from the gestalt of social oppressions, all of which are worthy of attention and care. Racism, however, is the ism that I feel is the most insidious and the most enmeshed with our sense of social normalcy—and insanity. It's been discussed the longest, yet has not penetrated the global heart in ways that uproot its poisons. My wholehearted hope is that this book supports that uprooting.

In writing about racial conditioning and suffering, I am, of course, limited by my own experience, my language, and the problems inherent in categorizing complex experiences into small boxes. For example, I use many personal experiences, and I use the terms *blacks* and *African American* interchangeably. I have also lumped all people of color (POC) and all whites into equally small boxes, though I am well aware of the vast diversity that exists within each of these simplistic categories. I realize that by doing so, some people will feel that their experiences are not directly reflected here. However, speaking with such categorization affords me the opportunity to show racial habits of harm more pointedly.

I also recognize that the younger generations may have different experiences from those expressed here; they, therefore, may feel that this book does not speak to them. I understand that some biracial and multiracial people may struggle with picking sides and that some POC—Hispanics, Asians, dark-skinned immigrants, and many others—have experiences so painful that they too may feel underrepresented here. I acknowledge these differences and invite you to make connections to your specific experience by noticing the skeletal shape of oppression portrayed in this book.

I do not speak for all whites or all POC. And as just one African American woman, I don't represent the experiences of all African

Americans. I still have much to learn about the complexity of racial group identities, which I feel is a gateway to understanding racial oppression. I want to further acknowledge that although I have traveled to many parts of the world, this book mostly speaks of race culture and slave mentality in the United States; thus, it may, at times, illustrate more black and white racial concerns that are foundational and unfinished within the United States. This book is in no way meant to shadow the sharp edge of racial oppression experienced by other races within the United States and throughout the world—including the indigenous peoples of the Americas and Africa, the aboriginal peoples of Australia and New Zealand, the Syrian and Palestinian people, and other people of dark skin, including Asian people who for generations have freely given Westerners like me the gift of the Buddha's teachings.

My fear of excluding any of us from this important and complex exploration or of simplifying any person's experience is one reason it has taken years to write this book. I have questioned myself, *Do I understand enough or know enough?* At some point, I realized that the answer was no—I didn't understand enough or know enough, but I would have to go ahead and write the book anyway. None of us knows enough, but we can't let that stop us. Despite the diversity of our experiences, what you will recognize on the following pages are the dynamics common among most oppressed groups and what sustains this dynamic.

And so, in this book, we will employ racial diversity and these gross categories of white and POC as a starting place, a point of entry. We will use them as a way to look closer, to look behind, beneath, and beyond the category to recognize how we relate to each other. And we will not stop there; we will open our eyes and hearts wider to see our humanity and to devote ourselves to ensuring social dignity and freedom for all.

My hope is to ignite your imagination and help you discover your voice in the song of racial healing. Together, we'll imagine the possibilities of who we could be and how we could live in this world if every one of us aimed our energy toward awakening, nonharming, generosity, and kinship—a world with race but without racism. It all begins with an examination of our habits of harm.

One last request: bring an ancestor with you. In the work of racial healing, we soon discover that we have inherited what's unfinished from our parents and ancestors. The meaning of our practice is deepened when we remember that we are not just doing this inquiry for ourselves. Bringing an ancestor with us can support our mindfulness of racial inquiry and healing.

Reflect for a moment: Is there someone in your bloodline whose relationship to race affected your life? Perhaps a keeper of the family history? Or someone who hated another race without apology? Or maybe there was a racial secret that was kept that everyone knew about but couldn't talk about. Maybe someone in your life left a mark on your heart and changed how you saw life—maybe a mind-set or view that you

knew was wrong that you could not interrupt, or a view or belief that you knew was right but your efforts to nurture it were overpowered. Bring the threads of this racial legacy to mind so it can be seen clearly and be honored and transmuted through your awareness. Think about which ancestor you might want to bring along to transform the lineage business.

This book is a call to those who care deeply about racial harmony, people who want to go the distance by making a difference from the inside out. To begin, we must first take a deep breath and consent to this journey. We must be willing to be diligent in service to our belonging and to this planet that nurtures us. We must be willing to exchange comfort for racial consciousness and to be more curious than critical or dispirited.

If I didn't belong to you, I wouldn't have written this book. If you didn't belong to me, you wouldn't be reading it. I'm you, and you are me—you just don't know that yet. We are here, sharing these pages, to embrace our membership in each other's lives, to discover our wholeness, and to remember that we belong. Be willing to be a light and to let your heart lead the way.

Let's get on with it, shall we?

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**RUTH KING** is an international teacher in the Insight Meditation tradition, a recognized diversity consultant to leaders and organizations, a life coach, and the

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