

**WHITE AWAKE: AN HONEST LOOK
AT WHAT IT MEANS TO BE WHITE**

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The Day I Discovered My World Was White

It was a cold December weekend in Chicago, and I was excited. One of my best friends was getting married, and to top it off, he had asked me to officiate the wedding. I was honored by the invitation, though a bit intimidated. What if I botched it and ended up being the guy the editor tried to remove from all the film footage? I was a brand-new pastor and had been in vocational ministry for less than a year, and this was my first wedding.

My friend, the groom, was of South Asian/Indian descent, and he was very proud of his cultural heritage. He had promised that the reception in particular would take guests on a deep dive into Indian culture and that we should prepare ourselves for a culturally unique experience. The reception lived up to the hype, and I had a night to remember. My personal highlight was the *dandiya* dance, a group of people moving in two circles counterclockwise, holding two colorful sticks. I'm typically hesitant to get out on the dance floor, but the beauty of the dandiya was compelling.

When the dance ended, I was still feeling festive from the amazing experience. So I found my friend and shared with him how much I had enjoyed every bit of that wonderful night. Then I innocently added a comment: "I'm jealous of you. You have such an amazing

culture! It must be such a privilege to be able to reflect that beautiful culture during your wedding weekend. I wish I had a culture too."

I had no idea how much was packed into that little statement, but it sure wasn't lost on him. He suddenly got serious, placed his hand on my shoulder, and looked me straight in the eye. "Daniel, you may be white, but don't let that lull you into thinking you have no culture. White culture is very real. In fact, when white culture comes in contact with other cultures, it almost always wins. So it would be a really good idea for you to learn about your culture."

I found myself revisiting this conversation often. My friend was known for avoiding serious topics, so I had been surprised by the spontaneous intensity he had displayed. Most unsettling about it was his commentary on my "white" culture. First of all, I felt he was lumping me in with every other white person he'd ever known. I thought, *He can't seriously think there's just one white culture, can he?* In an attempt to piece together the confusing message he'd sent my way, I reflected on the Irish heritage on my father's side and the pride many of my relatives took in it. Then I thought about the German and French heritage on my mom's side. I knew less about those cultures, but still, they were three very different backgrounds. Was he suggesting that those three distinct cultures could be mashed into a single category: white? That seemed like a major stretch.

Then there was the even more unsettling suggestion that my culture wins whenever it comes in contact with another. Not only was he lumping all white cultures into a single group, he was also proposing that this single conglomeration consistently dominates other cultures. How would this not come off as insulting to a white person?

What seemed utterly obvious to him was utterly confusing to me. But I wanted to give him the benefit of the doubt, and I searched for where I could find agreement with him. I could readily acknowledge that some white individuals exhibit dominant or even racist behaviors. Certainly that was common ground:

But even then I found myself thinking, *Just because certain white individuals demonstrate prejudice or racism by their behaviors doesn't implicate an entire race.* I guessed that he would respond poorly to the suggestion that certain individuals of Indian heritage represent their entire race. Yet he seemed comfortable with the idea of poorly behaved white individuals representing all white people.

This monologue continued to live inside my head longer than expected, and I anxiously awaited its end. Instead it grew in intensity. I wasn't sure why, but it was becoming clear that God had provoked something in me through this brief encounter. My friend had opened a monumental door and had left me to decide whether or not to step through it. He had opened me up to a whole new world, but I was unable to navigate it on my own.

The Quest

Compelled by these unanswered questions, I began reading books and articles, listening to TED talks, and talking with anyone who appeared knowledgeable about this topic. While a number of interesting ideas were planted in the soil of my mind during that time, a conversation with an eventual mentor led to my initial epiphany. I'd had no previous relationship with this mentor, and after a steady series of my requests, he kindly agreed to meet with me. I wasted no time; I immediately peppered him with questions. I told him about the conversation with my friend at the wedding and shared my confusion about the claim that I was part of a larger white culture that dominates every other culture it comes in contact with.

He patiently sat there, listening as I verbally sorted out my thoughts and feelings. When I finally finished, I pulled out my notebook, eager for answers. I was curious to hear his insights into these dilemmas and was ready to engage with his ideas.

But he didn't respond to my questions at an abstract, intellectual level. Instead he issued a personal challenge in the form of a reflection

exercise. To help me begin my exploration, he invited me to catalog carefully the primary voices that informed me as a person and shaped my thoughts and values. To simplify, he organized the exercise around four groups of voices: my closest friends, the mentors I looked to for guidance, the preachers/teachers/theologians I relied on for spiritual guidance, and the authors of the books I was reading.

The instructions were simple:

- ◆ Comprehensively list them.
- ◆ Take note of the cultural backgrounds they represented.

Just How White My World Was

I started with my friendship circle, just as he'd asked. Though I had some acquaintances in my broader network from diverse cultural backgrounds, I couldn't include them as *close* friends. So I made my list, and everyone on it was white.

Next up were my mentors, those I looked up to for advice during challenging times. It didn't take long to develop this list, as I quickly surmised that I consistently went to six different people when I needed guidance. When I listed them and noted what culture they represented, I realized they too were all white.

The third category took the longest. I had become a serious student of the Bible by this point, so I listened to many preachers, teachers, and theologians. I wanted to ensure that my accounting was comprehensive, so I meticulously filed my way through the full archive of cassette tapes and CDs I'd accumulated. I had been encouraged to explore a diverse range of theological perspectives, so I had been influenced by everything from Pentecostals to Presbyterians. But I was stunned to discover that, with the exception of two preachers, the entire roster was white.

The last category I had been instructed to assess was authors, and by that point I was sure of the conclusion. I followed through on the

exercise just to be sure, but the results in all four categories were the same: the voices shaping me were overwhelmingly white.

There's no crisp way to summarize all I learned during that self-assessment. I was awakening to a reality that had always been there, hidden in plain sight, but I finally had the eyes to see it:

- ◆ My closest friends were white.
- ◆ My most trusted mentors were white.
- ◆ The teachers and theologians shaping me were white.
- ◆ The authors planting new ideas in my mind were white.
- ◆ The church I worked at was white.

Just like all moments of genuine awakening, the discovery was both liberating and terrifying: liberating in the way truth always is, lifting you out of the fog and into the light, and terrifying because this revelation of truth demanded changes.

I no longer had the luxury of living in ignorance, feeling good about myself while being blissfully unaware of the cultural influences in my life. I had naively thought that my personal transformation had happened the moment I chose to follow Christ. But I saw clearly in that shifting season of my life that the work was just beginning.

Discussion Questions

Chapter 1: The Day I Discovered My World Was White

1. Daniel told his friend at the wedding that as a white person, he wished he had a culture too. His friend responded by saying, "White culture is very real. In fact, when white culture comes in contact with other cultures, it almost always wins." How do you feel when you hear that response? What do you suppose this friend was trying to suggest when he said this?
2. Do you agree with the idea that white culture tends to "win" when it comes into contact with other cultures? How do you see this playing out in your own experience?
3. In the chapter, Daniel expresses resistance to the idea that his culture is "white." If you are white, in what ways are you influenced by your specific cultural background (e.g., Irish, Italian, etc.) and in what ways are you influenced by being white in America?
4. Do you have any resistance to the idea that "white" is a primary cultural identity in the United States? Why or why not?
5. Have you ever experienced a moment where you realized how much white culture influences American culture? What was this experience like?
6. What elements do you associate with white culture in America? What elements of white culture are obvious to most people? What elements are not?

7. Daniel's friend said, "Just because certain white individuals demonstrate prejudice or racism by their behaviors doesn't implicate an entire race." What do you think his friend meant?
8. In the aftermath of his wedding experience, Daniel describes the internal conflict between his individual responsibility and his responsibility as a white person in America. Have you ever experienced this conflict? What are your initial ideas about the interplay between individual and corporate responsibility?
9. Daniel's mentor asked him to catalog the voices that had shaped him as a person. Try this activity for yourself. First, list the individuals who have significantly influenced you. Then take note of their cultural backgrounds. Do you notice any patterns? What conclusions might you draw from this exercise?

Chapter 2: *Flying Blind*

1. In this chapter, Daniel cites statistics on the hypersegregation of the American church from the book *Divided by Faith*. Does this level of segregation surprise you? Why do you think churches tend to be so segregated?
2. Despite his intentions, Daniel's Metro 212 ministry was culturally homogenous. Why do you think his group ended up being all white? Why do you think his initial attempts to increase diversity failed?
3. Have you ever tried to increase the diversity of a group (ethnically or otherwise)? What was the outcome? How did it make you feel? What lessons did you learn?
4. Daniel describes his meeting with a diverse group of Chicago pastors and the hard, but important, words that each shared with him. Do you think these criticisms were fair? How do you think you would have responded?

5. In the story of Nicodemus and Jesus, Nicodemus seems to want a concrete answer from Jesus about what he should do next. Have you ever experienced a situation where you wanted a clear, concrete answer from God but God did not comply? How did it make you feel? How did you react?
6. Do you think white Christians tend to prioritize action over inner transformation? Try to think of a time when you initiated action before contemplation. What did you learn? How might we grow in our ability to see before we act?
7. What might Daniel have needed to see before attempting to lead a multicultural ministry?
8. In what ways might white Americans be blind to racial dynamics? What connections are there between the blindness described in this chapter and the failure to *see* white as a culture (think back to Daniel's conversation at the wedding)?
9. Daniel highlights three terms from the Nicodemus story: *see*, *transform*, and *born again*. Reflecting on your own spiritual journey, think of a time when you struggled with failure or loss. What did God help you *see*? What did God *transform*? In what way(s) were you *born again*?
10. Now think about your own journey with issues of race and culture. What is God helping you to *see*? What is God *transforming*? How might you be *born again*?

Chapter 3: *What is Cultural Identity?*

1. How would you have defined cultural identity before reading this chapter? Compared with your individual identity, how much have you thought about your cultural identity?
2. Take a few minutes to reflect on Daniel's questions: "Who am I?" and "Where do I fit in the world?" How would you answer those