

Word and Life: Confronting Racism Series

Healing the White Body in the AntiRacism Movement

By **Maura Conlon-McIvor** / Special to VOICE

RACISM CARRIES BOTH A DEEP HISTORICAL AND BIOLOGICAL THUMBPRINT, different today in the United States than its original form centuries ago. Matt Lowe, an educator, Restorative Practitioner, and a recent speaker in Word & Life’s Confronting Racism series, asserted that racism has evolved “like a virus,” mutating through history.

Seeing racism’s historic roots is key to understanding its evolution today, for Lowe. He called “our original trauma” The Doctrine of Discovery in 1452, where Christians asserted domination over non-Christian, indigenous peoples. The bifurcation deepened as Euro-centric colonization expanded. He noted the Bacon’s Rebellion, taking place in



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Virginia in 1675, where indentured servants – poor whites and poor Blacks – together rose to challenge “the elite.” This marked the beginning of separating out the races according to color, the elite class situating poor whites above Blacks, wherein “enslavement became hereditary.” Our Constitution, he added, upholds “property rights” more so than human rights, adding that owning property became the cultural norm for maintaining power.

He described the Marshall Trilogy of the 1820s, three racially motivated judicial actions that further excluded oppressed people from the sovereignty of owning property. Such policy reinforced the “belief system” of white people “to own and possess – that’s our way up.” He cited California’s 1978 law, Proposition 13 – which came “out of legalized segregation” and rolled back real estate assessments – as another example of exacerbating racial inequality.

History informs us of racism’s origins and our body’s biological reactions reflect it. Indeed, Lowe asserted that the root of racism “is tied to the body” and how prejudice, within this framework, arises from our “fight/flight/freeze” responses.

“We are made of neurons...these chemical triggers...create our experiences of everything...Triggers create habits, and habits create a posture. This posture is what upholds the position of superiority in the body,” he explained.

Drawing from the field of Integrative Biology Systems, Lowe pointed to the visceral origins of racist beliefs as a dialectic between our sympathetic system (fight/flight/freeze) and the parasympathetic system which, he described, as akin to that state of ‘rest and digest.’ Viewing racism through this neuronal lens differs from a solely external analysis of the issue. We go into the body to see the recurring, biological link between our felt, racist perspectives and the concomitant cultural habits of privilege guiding our behaviors and policy.

Lowe echoes Beverly Daniel Tatum’s definition of racism as “a system of disadvantage based on prejudice and power,” indicating that the word “policy” also embodies a sense of physicality, its root from the Greek “politicos” which pertains to “the freedom to move around a common space.” Thus, he underscored the connection between our neuronal perspectives and white people’s power to arrange cultural space, that is, to protect themselves – say in the workplace or in the community – from having to confront a sense of otherness, upholding norms of safety.

“How we move throughout the world reflects our racism...reflects our whiteness,” Lowe suggested. He asserted that it’s challenging for white people to admit they are racists as “we get caught in that same sympathetic fight/flight/freeze response.” To heal, we must address both “what we’ve done and also what has been done to us” with an attitude of humility. Lowe, who is blind and who holds a BA in Black Studies and History and an MA in Urban Studies, asserts that the white body, preconditioned by history and biology, continues to hold “the posture of the oppressor,” one that is shaped by “fear, anger, trauma.” To correct this, we must face the shame of “protecting our own fight/flight/freeze responses,” considered synonymous with what is called ‘white fragility.’

Lowe believes that Christianity, with its historic culpability using the Bible to justify enslavement, plays a leading role in cultural repair and reconciliation. He founded the faith-based community organization, CUREJ (Christians United for Racial and Economic Justice) with the vision of creating healing around antiracism. His advocacy work focuses on five steps, including: reckoning, re-education, de-monumentalization, undoing policy, and public accountability in the spirit of truth telling.

He also underscored the importance of white people undergoing lineage work, addressing family histories of struggle which—although allowing for assimilation into white culture—nonetheless still carry stories of intergenerational trauma. He recommended two books germane to these efforts: *A People’s History of the United States* by Howard Zinn and *Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America* by Ronald Takaki.

“It’s not just about looking at yourself, or your racist tendencies, but how you are going out and shaping the world and addressing systems of power,” he said. “Your antiracism work is only as good as the history and context which you are drawing from. That is why white folk need to know their Black history, Latinx history, indigenous history, Asian American history. We need a peoples’ history to shape our antiracism’s efforts, not just a naming of white fragility.”