



Becoming an Anti-Racist

There is a lot of conversation about the difference between a White person “not being a racist” and “being an anti-racist.” It’s an important distinction because if we are not actively anti-racists, we are part of the problem.

We must always take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented.

Elie Wiesel

The Three Possible Identities

As White people there are three identities or postures that we can take. We can’t not choose. This may be an over-simplification, but not by much.

1. **“I am a racist.”** Believes in and actively supports, encourages, and fights to preserve racism. Racists are on the field of play working for racism to win.
2. **“I am not a racist.”** Believes that racism is wrong, does not actively support racism, but does not act significantly to counter racism. The result is that this group is on the sidelines passively supporting racism.
3. **“I am an anti-racist.”** Believes that racism is wrong and commits to act consistently to counter racism. This group is on the field of play working to defeat racism.

The Field of Play – Why the Identities Matter

The importance of choosing which group to be in is clear when we look at who is on the field of play making a difference. Two of the groups are on the field and in conflict. The third group (“I am not a racist”) is on the sidelines passively supporting racism.

- Two groups sustain racism – “I am a racist” and “I am not a racist.”
- Only one group counters racism – “I am an anti-racist.”
- There is no neutral ground – we either counter or support racism.

How the “I Am Not a Racist” Group Support Racism

Racism has been built into the fabric of America for 500 years and lives at every level - individual, family, group, organization, and community (from local to national). It is anchored in belief systems, cultural norms, laws, policies, processes, structures, literature, and the media. It is everywhere and it has momentum, so it runs unless it is actively and forcefully countered.

A critical mass of the “I’m not a racist” group will need to move from passively supporting that reality to actively fighting it to successfully counter that level of embedded racism. Racism is simply too deeply integrated in too many aspects of American life.

Being aware and educated about racism without intentional sustained action is useless. If we do not want to support racism we need to ensure that we get off the sidelines and put ourselves in the game – even if we are unsure of what to do or how to do it. We can start small, but we need to get in the game. If they are honest, everyone involved in effectively countering racism is “learning the way”, so not being expert is not a good excuse for staying on the sidelines.

*“Thou shalt not be a victim. Thou shalt not be a perpetrator.
Above all, thou shalt not be a bystander.”
Holocaust Museum, Washington, D.C.*

These Identities are Not “Fixed” – They Can Evolve

Because racism is such an embedded dynamic in American life, most of us have been born into a world that started us off in the “I am a racist” or “I am not a racist” groups. We didn’t choose our initial group and most of us weren’t even conscious of it for years.

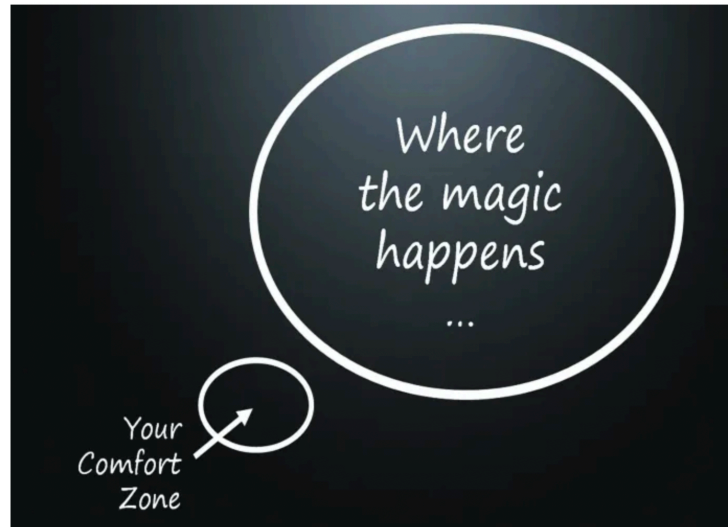
The challenge now is to take the responsibility to move into the “I am an anti-racist” posture. It is to commit to targeted sustained action to match the complexity and difficulty of countering racism. This is a matter of letting go of any denial, guilt or shame and taking on personal responsibility and power. That’s a deceptively tricky challenge.

Evolving from “I am a Racist” or “I am not a Racist”

There are a few steps that we can take to move rapidly to the desired group and identity.

#1 Become aware of and accept being caught in the grasp of your current group. This is the initial challenge to overcome denial and replace any guilt or shame with a sense of personal power and responsibility. The sense of personal power may start small, but it can grow surprisingly rapidly with experience.

#2 Act – Get outside our comfort zones. The combination of awareness and action is the key. Discomfort is part of the process, so accept it and keep it in its place. Not much will change if we are acting within our White comfort zones. It is almost inevitable that we will retreat into our comfort zones, but we need to keep pushing out. Starting small is OK. We can continue to stretch with experience.



#3 “Learn the way.” This is more “learning on the fly” than “learning as preparation for action.” The vast majority of White people bring plenty of characteristics and competencies to the challenge. We can certainly deepen many of our characteristics and develop new competencies, but that needs to happen mostly on the field – not on the sidelines. It is easy to get stuck on the sidelines preparing to enter the game.

Although some people are ahead of others, we are all learning the way in countering racism because it is new territory. The tough part is pushing through the uncertainty and fears of incompetence as well as dealing with the inevitable frustrations and setbacks. But that’s always the tough part of doing new things worth doing.

#4 Connect with Others. This is far more important than it might sound, for two reasons. First, most of the work in countering racism, particularly structural racism, must be done in groups (sometimes very large groups). Second, if we are taking risks and operating outside our comfort zones and committing time and energy, we will need support whether we are acting individually or collectively. **Countering racism is a team sport.**

“A lot of people are waiting for Martin Luther King or Mahatma Gandhi to come back – but they are gone. We are it. It is up to us. It is up to you.”

Marian Wright Edelman

