



**The Three “Guardians of the Threshold” that
Can Stop Us Right at the Beginning**

I. The "Guardians of the Threshold" That Turn Us Back

II. How to Get Past the "Guardians"

*“Courage is the commitment to begin without any
guarantee of success.”*

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

www.counteringRacism.org

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“The greatest danger for most of us is not that our aim is too high and we miss it, but that it is too low, and we reach it”

Michelangelo

Introduction

One of the Great Issues of the Age

As one of the great issues of the age, how we deal with our differences, from race, gender, religion, and ethnicity to differences in experience and style, will say a great deal about the kind of world we are able to create and pass on to our children.

This paper focuses on the racism suffered by black Americans, although most of it is applicable to other forms of racism as well as other differences. Black racism is the focus here because it has always been at the heart of the unfulfilled promise of the United States, and it is the toughest and most impactful challenge of diversity that we face.

Why a Heroic Journey?

The heroic journey is THE fundamental story of change – from individual to organizational to community change. The heroic journey provides a clear and honest model of the challenges before White people who genuinely step up to confront racism – whether as part of a collective effort to create systemic change or personally in daily life.

Confronting racism as any less of a challenge does not tell the truth, does not ask enough, and it almost certainly condemns the individuals and the initiative to failure or disappointment at best. Countering racism is that tough. The value of the heroic journey is that it provides a very clear picture of what to expect on the journey.

The Nature of the Heroic Journey

Almost every culture throughout time has used the heroic journey to teach its members how to create a life or establish, save, or renew a community. This is not about being grand larger than life heroes and having parades in our honor. It's about committing to a journey that will require extraordinary effort, the willingness to take risks, a great deal of consistent and sustained effort, and a foundation of courage, perseverance, and resilience.

As with any heroic journey, in confronting racism we will need to let go of old ways of thinking and acting – and probably self-image. We will naturally need to discover and master new ways. And we will have to deal with “inbetweenity” – the uncomfortable time in-between the old and the new. We will also need to find connections and support and recover from disappointments and setbacks. Heroic journeys are a test, but they call forth our best – often a best we didn’t know we had.



The Guardians of the Threshold – The First Tests on a Heroic Journey

That journey for white people starts at the threshold that marks the boundary between the known world and the unknown and that is a very big deal for White people countering racism. Thresholds define the edge of comfort zones and familiarity. Beyond them are the unknown and the other tests we will encounter. The guardians that are encountered at the threshold are the first tests or challenges to be passed and they have to be passed in order to continue on the journey.

In the classic heroic journey the guardians are designed to turn back people who are not ready or worthy of the journey. In the case of the journey to counter racism, the guardians take the form of (1) feeling an immediate sense of indictment; (2) confronting the unknown and potential losses; and (3) having to deal with the threat of incompetence.

Why Such a Big Section

This is one of the biggest sections on the site because these three guardians of the threshold are major challenges that must be effectively engaged in order to effectively counter racism. If they are not effectively engaged the journey will be superficial and disappointing because the guardians will continue to undermine what can be committed to the journey. They don't naturally go away.

The Four Keys to Success

There are sections here devoted to four basic keys to success in countering these natural and inevitable guardians:

I. Understanding the Three "Guardians of the Threshold" that Turn Us Back

We naturally and inescapably face an immediate indictment. We are confronted with the unknown and potential loss. And we face the specter of incompetence. Understanding these guardians brings them into the open and immediately decreases their power to turn us back.

II. How to Get Past the "Guardians"

There are key strategies for getting past each of the three guardians. They need to be adapted by each individual. They each increase the power for getting past the guardians – and they will support the whole journey.

III. Knowing Why it's Worth the Effort

There are surprising potential benefits for taking the risk and going forth on this journey. Some are personal, family or group benefits. Some are potential organizational benefits. And some are potential community benefits – from local to national. It's critical to be aware of what's worth the effort, risk, and potential sacrifice of going forth to counter racism.

IV. Begin

"So, how do I start dealing with these guardians because I'm committed to the journey to counter racism?" You can start small, or you can start big. The key is to start – to act – now. Acting is power

“You do not need to know precisely what is happening, or exactly where it is all going. What you need is to recognize the possibilities and challenges offered by the present moment, and to embrace them with courage, faith, and hope.”

Thomas Merton

PART I

Understanding the Three “Guardians of the Threshold”

There are three natural “Guardians of the Threshold” that confront us whenever we attempt to take the first steps to confront racism in a committed way. They are capable of intimidating us and stealing our power. They are intimidating by their very nature, but they do not need to steal our power.

Guardian #1 Feeling indicted as a white person personally and/or as a group

Guardian #2 Confronting potential losses and the unknown

Guardian #3 The specter of incompetence

They gang up on us. These guardians come as a trio, and it is often difficult to tell which one is causing the most trouble. Each is difficult enough. Taken together, they are a daunting challenge and all too frequently one that stops White people right at the threshold of the journey. Unfortunately, the usual scenario is some initial activity around the threshold, but not much progress beyond it.



Guardian #1

Feeling Indicted

Feelings of indictment for White people are unavoidable and immediate when issues of racism arise. They appear unsummoned and they hang around tenaciously. Not only do they not feel good, but they also tend to become the focus of attention, obscuring possibility, a phenomenon that is neither healthy nor helpful.

Feeling indicted, whether as an individual or as a group, naturally stimulates other feelings that undermine and diminish. They include, but are not limited to feeling:

- Defensive
- Diminished
- Confused
- Angry
- Resentful
- Blamed
- Guilty (having done something wrong)
- Shamed (not being good enough)

This guardian can also frame the challenge in unhelpful ways, particularly:

- Us-Them

- Right-Wrong
- Win-Lose

Unmanaged, these feelings lead naturally to refusal to engage, withdrawal from the journey, attempts to diminish the issues, or attempts to diminish those who represent them.

Blame vs Responsibility

A classic trap is that blame and responsibility often get confused. For instance, on a personal note, blaming myself for what happened prior to my life or when I was a child is not appropriate. Taking responsibility for my past actions as an adult and my future actions, however, is appropriate. And it is required if I am to truly be the author of my life, have personal integrity, and have the impact I want to have.

But if I do accept my responsibility in order to move ahead, I'm faced with some things that are very difficult to accept:

- ▶ It's difficult to accept that human beings are capable of enslaving others or of tormenting and even exterminating those who are different. Yet all of these characteristics are part of our heritage as Americans.

That awareness can keep us alert to the fact that the best of the American way doesn't hold sway just because we're Americans. We have to "be Americans" in our actions if we are to create the America we want and respect.

- ▶ It's difficult to accept that some of my behaviors have been racist and have caused pain in others. That doesn't fit the self-image I value. That realization can, however, be turned into resolve.
- ▶ It's difficult to accept that I have often not acted to confront the racism of others or attempt to change the racism that has been institutionalized in organizations and communities of which I am a part. I'm either an active part of the solution or I'm a passive part of the problem.

- ▶ It's difficult to accept that I am, to a certain degree, a "recovering racist." I grew up in a society that was overwhelmingly racist and socialized me as a child. I was a racist by the time I was 3-4-years old. I didn't decide or choose to be a racist – I just was. I'm not to blame for my socialization as a child, but I am responsible for how I respond as an adult and whether I choose to be a leader or an apologist.

Leader or Apologist? These things may be difficult to accept, but the price of denial and avoidance is even greater. I not only have to become partially blind or numb and diminish or cut off part of my life, but I also severely restrict the possibilities in life. These realizations may be painful and confusing, but that's very different from being damaging.

We can accept some painful truths, let go of the blame and take on responsibility. In doing so we become larger, stronger, more complete, and more capable of leading and making truly significant contributions to our families, our organizations, and our communities. Refusing to do so only leads to trying to deny, diminish, or justify the clear realities of racism and leaves us as apologists; smaller and less significant. And that's only one of the guardians.



Guardian #2:

Confronting Potential Losses and the Unknown

Change, in any form, involves confronting endings, losses, and the unknown. These dynamics can be particularly confusing in confronting racism because of the lack of clarity of what

might be lost. It feels like it might be significant, but the specifics are murky. And the degree of unknown – what might be encountered - is even more daunting.

Ending and Loss

There are a surprising number of endings or loss that are possible. To intimidate, these do not need to be obvious or even highly likely. They just need to be possible. In the case of racism challenges, they are both numerous and natural. Losses may include the loss of something already gained or the loss of possibility, which can be even more threatening.

The possible endings or losses, whether real and immediate or potential or feared, are many. For instance, I could lose:

Personal

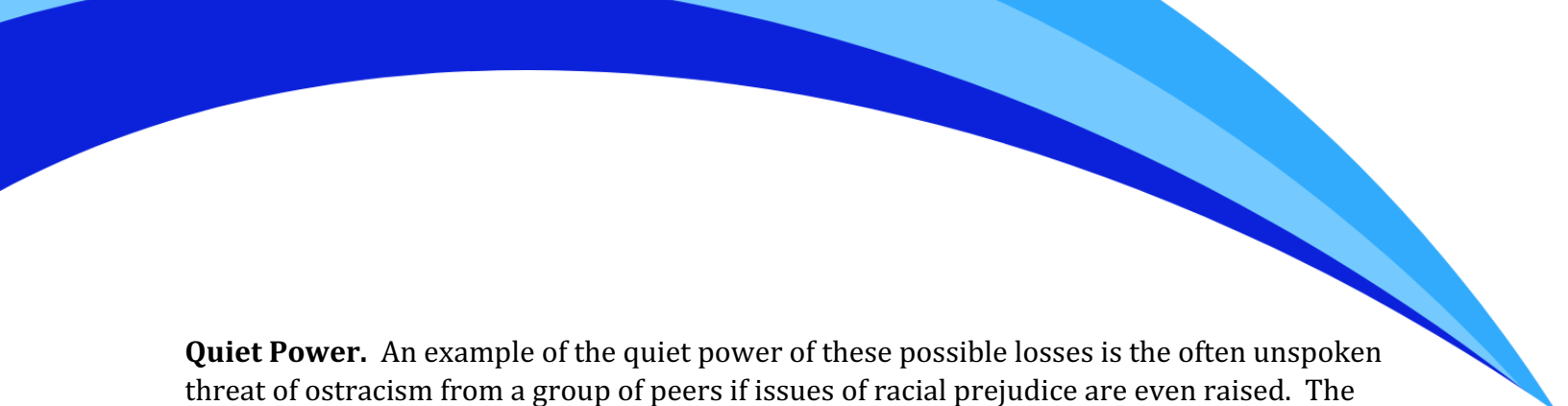
- ▶ Beliefs or a sense of order - how things work
- ▶ Image - of myself or others
- ▶ My sense of well-being or comfort
- ▶ My ability to hide from or deny uncomfortable truths - and the actions they require
- ▶ My understanding of the known world - losing old models of how it works or how to make my way
- ▶ Meaning - what matters in my life

Interpersonal

- ▶ Relationships - as they currently are or perhaps completely lost
- ▶ My sense of place or acceptance - particularly by White people and particularly peers or authority figures
- ▶ Faith in my style of relating to others
- ▶ Relationships within my immediate or extended family

Systemic

- ▶ My “fit” with others - groups, organizations, or communities
- ▶ My position and career possibilities - increased competition or disadvantage
- ▶ My influence
- ▶ Privilege or advantage in general



Quiet Power. An example of the quiet power of these possible losses is the often unspoken threat of ostracism from a group of peers if issues of racial prejudice are even raised. The ostracism or shunning may be relatively passive and even denied, but most of us, when we are honest, are well aware of how fragile and how important acceptance by a group can be.

A second example is that we might also find that we are not as evolved as we thought we were, thus suffering some significant loss of self-image. Coming to understand just how damaging racism has been can very well cause a loss of innocence and comfort - and bring us to the need to take difficult or risky action.

The Unknown

Although the known world never completely disappears, it doesn't take much unknown to cause a significant amount of anxiety, fear, uncertainty, doubt, questioning, hesitancy, or fatigue. With racism, most of us "don't even know what we don't know."

In any significant change we are challenged to value and pursue the questions; to tolerate and even value the uncertainty and confusion that are inevitable; to let go of what we know and to search for what's possible, making mistakes and missteps along the way. This will certainly be the case in engaging in any significant anti-racism initiative.

It won't be clear, it won't be certain, it won't be without mistakes and failures, and it certainly won't be comfortable. It is, however, the only way to new understanding, confidence, and capability.

As with the potential losses, there are a lot of potential sources of unknown. It can be a general sense of entering an unknown world or it can focus on more specific concerns. Those can range from wondering what will be asked of us, what's appropriate and inappropriate, what works, who will be encountered, where support can be found, etc.

Probably the most troublesome part of the unknown when countering racism as White people is not knowing what we don't know.



Guardian #3

The Specter of Incompetence

This is the one that is deceptively powerful. To be competent means to meet all requirements, to be suitable, to be duly qualified, to be acceptable. The fear of feeling or appearing incompetent is one of the most powerful deterrents to leaving a known world and going forth. And one of the most powerful barriers to growth and mastery. It's not that it's more powerful than the other guardians. It's just that it's deceptively powerful.

The Questions Naturally Confronted

When confronted with countering racism almost everyone (who is honest and aware) feels incompetent to a significant degree. A whole set of questions immediately arise for us, such as:

- ? "So, what am I supposed to do (or not do)?"
- ? "How will I know what's right?"
- ? "How am I to think about and understand these issues?"

- ? "How do I deal with all of these reactions?"
- ? "Will I cause damage or hurt people by being inappropriate or clumsy?"
- ? "What skills, capabilities, or styles of mine are still valid?"

- ? "What skills or competencies do I need?" "How do I develop them?"

- ? "Who is around to help, teach, model, or support me?"
- ? "How will others react to my initial lack of competence?"

Often, the answers to these questions are not readily available, which means an extended experience of lacking competence must be accepted and managed. Trying new ways, experimenting, taking risks, dealing with awkwardness, maintaining an increased effort, and overcoming initial ineffectiveness are all required, all have a cost, and are all tough to voluntarily take on.

The nobility of the effort comes in recognizing that it takes courage and commitment and is in service of one of the great issues of the age.

The Learning/Competence Ladder

There are very few settings where a lack of competence is tolerated. This reality is a major barrier to learning in any form, particularly rapid learning, or the learning of complex difficult subjects. The intolerance of any lack of competence sabotages the four essential steps of significant learning, which are abbreviated below. It is the willingness to commit to these four steps that is of value. Competence results. Unfortunately, there are rarely shortcuts in this process where significant learning and mastery must take place.

- ▶ **Unconscious incompetence.** We don't know what we don't know. A comfortable place to be, but dysfunctional when growth and mastery are necessary.
- ▶ **Conscious incompetence.** This is the tough one. We become aware of what we don't know. The gap is uncomfortable, but we're in the game if we manage our discomfort. Engaging in countering racism guarantees this experience. This is a very tough place to be, and the temptation to avoid it or try to escape from it is strong and consistent.
- ▶ **Conscious competence.** We develop new competencies through conscious effort and consistent effort, dealing with our awkwardness and mistakes. We've achieved a new level of competence, but it requires a lot of conscious attention and energy to maintain it.

- ▶ **Unconscious competence.** The new competencies no longer require the conscious effort and practice they required in their development. They now seem to be a natural part of us.

Confronting a challenge that is the size and complexity of countering racism usually comes with some additional mix of feelings that are diminishing - feelings that can send us running from the mastery process, forsaking mastery for temporary comfort. For instance, feelings of:

- ▶ Inadequacy
- ▶ Impotence (lack of power, influence, ability to be effective)
- ▶ Feeling “less than”

- ▶ Uncertainty
- ▶ Confusion
- ▶ Hesitancy
- ▶ Discouragement

- ▶ Awkwardness or clumsiness
- ▶ Lack of confidence
- ▶ Anger
- ▶ Frustration

Part II

Getting Past the Guardians

Some guardians in the myths are only encountered at the threshold they guard. Unfortunately, the guardians we encounter in countering racism have a tendency to follow us on the journey if we don't deal with them effectively. They are so much a part of us that they can be companions for quite some time. It's not really that we get past them, but rather that we don't let them stop us from going forth and accept that they will travel with us – usually to a lesser and lesser degree as we deal with them.

The following suggestions for dealing with these three guardians are just that - suggestions. They are not a formula or recipe that will work for everyone in every situation. They will, in fact, look different for everyone at least to some degree. They can be thought of as guidelines or as discussion points.

The key is to face the guardians directly and draw on our values, will, and courage. And act. It is in the acting that we magnify our values, will and courage, and diminish the power of the guardians.

"I am not a courageous person by nature. I have simply discovered that, at certain key moments in this life, you must find courage in yourself, in order to move forward and live. It is like a muscle, and it must be exercised, first a little, and then more and more. All the really exciting things possible during the course of a lifetime require a little more courage than we currently have. A deep breath and a leap."

John Patrick Shanley

Guardian #1 - Getting Past the Indictment ***Let Go of Guilt & Focus on Responsibility & Action***

Taking responsibility often comes with some regret or guilt about previous actions taken or not taken, but it is primarily freeing and a source of power. It calls on our "larger self" and supports being present and engaged. Feeling indicted, on the other hand, calls on our "smaller self" and can be diminishing or reinforce defensiveness and aggressiveness or withdrawal.

To make a difference, "taking responsibility" includes committed action. Awareness is "essential, but not sufficient." Committed action is a powerful and rapid antidote to the natural indictment.

Strategy #1

Take the approach of being a "recovering racist." This can add a sense of positive urgency and a heightened sense of responsibility vs. blame. Most of us grew up in a racist and sexist society.

This is particularly true if we were born in the 30s, 40s and 50's when there was almost nothing to counter the culture of racism. We were socialized as racists before we were 3-4 years old.

We aren't responsible for becoming racists, but we are responsible for how we act now.

Strategy #2

Accept responsibility for actions taken or not taken. We also need to accept personal responsibility for actions taken or not taken in our past. We might have been socialized as racists before we were 5, but as young adults or adults we have had plenty of experience to call us to confront racism. And almost all of us can look back and see where we failed to act to counter racism or took actions that reinforced racism – on a personal or systemic level.

We also need to forgive ourselves and turn that energy from regret or guilt into focused action. And we need to ask for forgiveness where appropriate. A sense of indictment strips power or misdirects it. We need to reclaim that power and direct it.

Strategy #3

Follow the warrior tradition. This might seem like a stretch, but it's a perfect fit. The guardians of the threshold – like indictment - are designed to turn us back before we even go forth. Taking on a warrior posture makes it pretty tough for the natural indictment to turn us back as it supports the first two strategies as well as bringing our courage, perseverance, and resilience to the fore.

This requires the courage to see and hear the truth as well as to speak the truth. Many warrior traditions believe that a warrior must be able to hold the pain of the world without being overwhelmed, consumed, or paralyzed by it. Being overwhelmed is a major danger with becoming aware of racism and its scope and scale.

Many traditions believe that what is required of a warrior is to “engage fully and with excitement.” Partial commitments and engaging tentatively are simply paths to frustration and failure in the face of a major challenge like countering racism. The guardian of indictment is very likely to wither in the face of us engaging fully and with excitement.

"Life shrinks or expands in proportion to one's courage."

Anais Nin

Guardian #2 - Getting Past Potential Losses & the Unknown

Keep Losses in Perspective & Diminish the Unknown

Getting past this guardian is mostly a matter of perspective. It's partly a matter of not letting the potential for loss and the unknown be bigger than they really are in the context of our lives. And it's partly a matter of identifying what we might bring into being as a result of the journey.

Strategy #1

Create your personal vision. Create and affirm a vision of how you might counter racism and what you would look like doing that. This takes significant thought and commitment. It can be anywhere from 1 month to 3 years in the future. It can include everything from what you have done/become, what you are doing (and with whom), what the experience is like, results you have achieved, what you hope or expect to achieve, etc.

When clear and specific enough, such a vision balances endings and losses as well as decreasing the sense of the unknown.

"A vision is not just a picture of what could be; it is an appeal to our better selves, a call to become something more."

Rosabeth Moss Kanter

Strategy #2

Get potential endings and losses in context. There are a lot of potential losses and endings, ranging from comfort and self-image to role and job opportunities. For example, two of the biggest are the potential loss of our image of ourselves or America and the fear of being excluded or shunned by other White people if we are out-front about countering racism. These potential losses are usually more powerful when shadowy and undefined. Bringing them into the light diminishes their power, particularly over time.

Getting clear on the difference between loss and sacrifice can also be freeing. Sacrifice is giving up something for something of greater value. Having a vision of what is of value can give meaning to endings and losses.

And - balance potential losses against the cost of not going forth. Having gotten the potential losses in context, get clear on what might be lost by not going forth. That can be a surprising motivator.

Strategy #3

Decrease the unknown. It's hard to decrease the unknown in the future – although having a clear vision helps a lot. It's easier to decrease the unknown of the current reality and history regarding racism – and what we might do about it. This is an area where there are lots of specific actions that can be taken and a rapidly increasing number of resources.

For example, we can read fiction and non-fiction books and articles online, watch videos online, watch movies about the black experience or listen to music, take courses online, etc. We can focus on everything from black personal experience and history, to closing the wealth and health gaps or citizenship and political action.

We can connect with others, including white groups dedicated to fighting racism. We can find companions that can explore this with us. We can find people that can educate us or raise our awareness, although we have to be careful to not exploit them. Getting past this guardian is much easier when connected with others.

"We gain strength, and courage, and confidence by each experience in which we really stop to look fear in the face ... we must do that which we think we cannot."

Eleanor Roosevelt

Guardian #3 - Getting Past the Specter of Incompetence

Keep Incompetence in Context & Act

If we accept the challenge to counter racism and get past the guardians of the threshold, we will certainly encounter areas where we lack competence. That's unavoidable as it's new territory – and extraordinarily complex and difficult.

However, we will also be bringing a great deal of competence with us that is applicable. We need to remember that and consciously bring our competence to bear while developing the new competencies required.

Strategy #1

Keep "incompetence" in context. Don't let an initial sense of incompetence in countering racism equal incompetence as a person. Reflect on areas of competence and strengths that can be brought to bear on this new challenge. These competencies have been developed over a lifetime and most will be relevant. Some new competencies will be needed, but they can be developed.

Countering racism will require an extraordinary range of competencies, and no one will possess them all. Everyone brings competencies to the challenge, but no one brings all the competencies required. Countering racism definitely requires individual capabilities and performance, but it is ultimately a team game.

The problem is less a matter of personal incompetence than it is the scope and scale of competence that is demanded. Everyone struggles with this – even people that have been confronting the challenge for a long time.

“Too many people undervalue what they are and overvalue what they are not”

Unknown

Strategy #2

Go forth short on new competence. “Learn on the way.” Act. Make mistakes. Be awkward or clumsy at times. Discover new understanding and build skills. Stumble and recover. Waiting for complete competence before acting usually means very little action and probably not much in the way of new competence.

The fear of failure or doing harm is almost always present, but rapidly gets smaller once action begins. “Learning the way” is always required in journeys of major change and this is no different. And everyone, even the experts, will be learning the way.

Strategy #3

Start small and rapidly expand. If you’re ready, you can start with a major effort, but the key is to act – and the small actions matter. That doesn’t mean to stay small, but starting small is fine – as long as it’s in service of expanding actions and challenging the competency boundaries. Remember – we’re trying to ensure that the guardian of the threshold doesn’t stop us from going forth on the journey. Sometimes it’s important to “go slow to go fast.”

*“I am only one, but I am one. I cannot do everything, but I can do something.
And I will not let what I cannot do interfere with what I can do.”*

Edward Everett Hale

Remember

- √ The guardians are the first tests facing us in countering racism.
- √ They are surprisingly powerful, but their power shrinks dramatically when we confront them directly.
- √ There are effective strategies for dealing with each guardian.
- √ We get stronger as we take them on – strength that we can deploy on the journey and strength that will stay with us in the rest of our lives.

“Don't wait until everything is just right. It will never be perfect. There will always be challenges, obstacles and less than perfect conditions. So what? Get started now. With each step you take, you will grow stronger and stronger, more and more skilled, more and more self-confident, and more and more successful.”

Mark Victor Hansen