

I believe racism is wrong. So what?

Being against something doesn't cost much—or accomplish much.

by [Teri McDowell Ott](#) in the [May 24, 2017](#) issue



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Last year Eddie Glaude Jr., who teaches religion and African-American studies at Princeton, gave a lecture at the college I serve as chaplain. Afterward I joined a group of students and faculty to discuss the issues he raised. Our conversation ranged about freely but mostly circled around mass incarceration, police violence against black males, and the housing crisis in African-American communities.

Sitting across from me was an African-American student with short dreadlocks and a red T-shirt. I knew this young man, Denton, only by my professor husband's admiration of his work as a philosophy major. After listening for quite a while, he finally spoke up. "Well," Denton said with a little shake of his head, "I pretty much think that white people created these problems, and so white people need to fix them. That burden should not be on us."

His words were understated yet damning, and they silenced the room. As the chaplain, I struggled to come up with an appropriate response. I wanted Denton to know that I was on his side. I also wondered if I really was. I didn't want to express my guilt over being a part of the problem, as such confessional statements seem to

be primarily about me and my need for redemption. And redemption requires an honest desire for change—change for which I was unprepared. I wanted to know what exactly needed to change, what I needed to give up.

I also didn't want to come across as a self-congratulating white antiracist—as the one who clearly understood Denton, unlike those ignorant white people who don't. So I just sat there, wondering what to do, what to say, and who to be.

This wasn't the first time I struggled to find an appropriate response to a person of color. My background left me woefully unprepared for such conversations. I grew up in predominantly white neighborhoods, schools, and churches. My family moved around Michigan every few years as my father was promoted to higher positions at his bank. As a teenager I moved to the affluent Detroit suburb Bloomfield Hills, which my parents chose for its high school. Our house, a two-story colonial in a cul-de-sac, was a relatively modest one for the neighborhood. One of the Detroit Pistons lived nearby, in a palatial estate protected by a brick wall and a black iron gate. I don't remember any other black neighbors.

Something happens to us when we grow up without people of color around. We are habituated to a white world in which people of color will always appear to be strange, different, and other. Stereotypes are fed because there is no one nearby to dispel them. Michael Jackson, Whitney Houston, and Jackie Joyner-Kersey were my models of black life and culture. So, I reasoned, all black people have rhythm, can dance, and are athletic. When my track team's bus transported us to a predominantly black school closer to the city, I instinctively assumed that I couldn't win against those athletes.

But as much as I admired and coveted these stereotypical black traits, I also knew that I did not want to be black. Being black, according to the news, also meant being poor and dangerous. When my family ventured into the city, I carefully guarded my purse. When black males went by I felt my body respond instinctively by going rigid and tense.

I know better now, but that does not always mean that I act better. Most times I don't act at all, impaired as I am by my ignorance, my uncertainty as to what would be helpful, and my deeply engrained habits. And the way society works—basically, in my favor—I don't have to do much. As philosopher Shannon Sullivan reveals in *Good White People: The Problem with Middle-Class White Anti-Racism*, in order to be

counted as a good white person today I simply need to be against racism. I do not have to do so at my own expense, and certainly not at the peril of my own white people. There's no need for me to work toward the goal of ending racial injustice; it's enough for me to be recognized as antiracist.

My first chance to act on these anti-racist principles arose when I was 16. My father needed to join a country club so he could entertain clients on the golf course. I remember the decision being difficult, because my parents were not country club types. They didn't believe in the extravagance and weren't going to build their social lives around their membership. They shopped around and were considering joining a club in nearby Birmingham, Michigan.

Then I learned that this club did not welcome African Americans as members, and I confronted my father about it. I don't remember the scene exactly, only the feeling that this was wrong. But he loves to tell the story, with a note of pride about how his daughter threw such a fit over this racial injustice that my parents decided to join a different, less exclusive club instead, one a little farther from home. I adored this recognition from my father. And from this experience I learned that acting as an antiracist didn't have to cost anything more than a slightly longer trip to the country club.

After Glaude's lecture at our college, he paused to take a question from a white professor. The question soon turned into a speech, the point of which seemed to be to inform everyone what a good enlightened liberal she was. The speech was couched in a message for our students of color: they should share their experiences so others could learn from them. "I tell my students to teach me, to help me learn," she concluded passionately, as if expecting a round of applause.

Glaude paused for a moment. Then, slowly and more graciously than was warranted, he said, "You know, it's *tiring* trying to teach people all the time. There are books you can read." And the black and Latino students in the room exploded in spontaneous, raucous applause.

I didn't want the rage and resentment to include me. But of course it did.

Glaude's comment led me to read James Baldwin's *Notes of a Native Son*. I was immediately pulled in to the craft of Baldwin's prose—his detailed scenes, his layered structure, his profound honesty and self-awareness. I was thoroughly enjoying getting to know Baldwin's work—until I came to a scene that brought me to

an abrupt stop.

In the title essay, Baldwin describes the rage, the blind fever that finally overcame him after he was repeatedly turned away from restaurants and diners because of the color of his skin. In one restaurant, a young white waitress with “great, astounded, frightened eyes” was sent to tell the hungry Baldwin that he would not be fed. Baldwin writes:

She did not ask me what I wanted, but repeated, as though she had learned it somewhere, “We don’t serve Negroes here.” She did not say it with the blunt, derisive hostility to which I had grown so accustomed, but, rather, with a note of apology in her voice, and fear. This made me colder and more murderous than ever. . . . Somehow, with the repetition of that phrase, which was already ringing in my head like a thousand bells of a nightmare, I realized that she would never come any closer and that I would have to strike from a distance. There was nothing on the table but an ordinary water-mug half full of water, and I picked this up and hurled it with all my strength at her.

Baldwin’s raw, violent anger upended me. At first I did not want to understand, because to understand the rage would make it acceptable—and it was too frightening for me to accept it. I fought with myself, tempted to close the book on Baldwin. How easy it would be to dismiss him as just another dangerous black man.

I couldn’t close the book, though, because I found myself in Baldwin’s story. The white waitress could have been me. She followed the norms and rules set by white society; she did as her employers told her to do. She was sorry for what she knew was wrong, but not sorry enough to change or rebel. The dark stranger at her table may have frightened her, but she was more afraid of what she risked losing as a good white woman—her job, her reputation, her position of privilege.

She felt powerless, even though she wasn’t. She had a voice, but she used it only to perpetuate her own domination. She had a body, but no muscle of hers moved to cross the line of segregation. She didn’t act, she didn’t speak up or out, because she knew that this angry black man had more to fear from the restaurant full of white people and its white owners and the white police officers who would come when *she* called. It was safe for her to do nothing. So though she empathized with Baldwin’s plight, she offered him nothing more than a tone of apology as she rejected him like

everyone else.

Sitting at the desk in my home office, holding Baldwin's book open to this page, I stared blankly out the window overlooking the green of our neighbor's yard and felt the full effect of this confrontation. I felt unbalanced, uprooted from my position of safety and privilege. I didn't want Baldwin's rage and resentment to include me. But of course it did. And this, I believe, is when the first flicker of understanding lit within my mind. I had to feel the heat of this rage before I could even begin to appreciate the nightmare of the African-American experience.

Baldwin later came to terms with his anger, noting the destructive nature of hatred, which "never fails to destroy the man who hate[s]." But he also wrote that "there is not a Negro alive who does not have [this rage] in his blood." And I recalled hearing it, though in more restrained form, simmering in the voices of students like Denton who are frustrated and tired, angry and resentful that here, in 2016, white people still fail to understand.

Rage can consume and destroy, but it can also serve as a pure, refining fire, burning away all that blinds us to the reality of human suffering. I think of the story where Jesus enters the temple and, in a fit of rage, overturns the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sell doves. I wonder if those confronted by Jesus' rage listened. I wonder if we good white people will, too.

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