

Preface

. . . I believe deeply that we cannot solve the challenges of our time unless we solve them together—unless we perfect our union by understanding that we may have different stories, but we hold common hopes; that we may not look the same and may not come from the same place, but we all want to move in the same direction: toward a better future for our children and our grandchildren.

—Senator Barack Obama,
(*Los Angeles Times*, 2008)

The epigraph above, in combination with the epigraph to Chapter 5 referencing President Bush’s acknowledgment of historical discrimination in our country, provides the rationale for this book. We excerpted passages from our autobiographies that illustrate some of our earliest recollections of our own racial identity as well as those who are different from us. Please read the passage below as an introduction to us via excerpts from our “stories.”

Excerpts From Ray and Randy’s Autobiographies

Ray’s Excerpt



My mother worked as a domestic for one of the community’s leading white families and my father was a laborer at a steel mill in a neighboring community. My parents’ relationship was stable. Because both parents worked, it was my perception that we were fairly well off, a black family not experiencing any of the usual indicators of poverty. . . . disconnected utilities, a lack of food, and we had one of the first televisions in our neighborhood. My mom had a fifth grade education and I discovered that she had difficulty reading when I brought her a note from high school and she had me read it to her. My dad had a sixth grade education but he was an avid reader and followed current events in the newspaper and by listening to daily newscasts.

The fact that they worked two very different jobs afforded them very different social perspectives and worldviews, and both of them freely shared their perspectives with me. As a domestic for a powerful family in the community, my mom viewed the world as a very dangerous place for African American males. She constantly admonished me to be sure to be polite and show deference to white people in order to avoid confrontations that could ultimately prove to be deadly. There was no one at my father's workplace that had any community connections. He felt that he had a social responsibility to challenge the status quo around issues of social justice and constantly challenged the segregated school setting and other forms of local discrimination. It was confusing, to say the least, to constantly get input from such divergent points of view, while at the same time experience exclusion from local eateries, athletic facilities, and other public venues.

My father taught me how to identify and question level one issues. He was considered to be a radical for those times around local issues. I failed to grasp the breadth or depth of the scope of racism. Living in a very narrowly defined space and place and being internally focused, masked how racism negatively impacted the lives of everybody. I clearly had no notion that whites, though impacted differently, were also negatively affected by acquiring an inflated sense of privilege and entitlement.



Randy's Excerpt



My first recollection of race was as a small child. I lived with my parents in a shotgun-style house that was located on the "other side" of the railroad tracks, behind a factory, in a neighborhood that was racially mixed. We were white, and there were three groups we now call demographic groups—our labels were "colored people," the Irish, and we who were from "mid-southern" states. The period was the late 1940s and early 1950s. The black men and the southern white men worked in one of the three factories in town . . .

We all lived in this largely unimproved neighborhood . . . I never regarded it as a hard life because it wasn't. That was our life. Our house was clean and neat and I assumed that was the case for all the other families in our neighborhood.

The odd thing was that we did very little visiting with those who were not like us. My father was always clear at the mistreatment of Negroes in the larger society. Neither of my parents went beyond eighth grade in their formal education. When he retired, my father had worked forty years in a foundry. My mom worked primarily in the home, except for a few years that she worked in a department store when my sister and I were in high school . . . My thinking about matters of race developed when I was quite young.



Our complete cultural autobiographies are in the Appendices. You may be tempted to read them before reading the body of this book. Please read this book in the manner and sequence that works best for you. We wish for you to use this book as your guide to viewing leadership as a continuous growth process.