

Me, a White Supremacist?

A journal reflection

BY WENDY CICHANSKI CADUFF

I CHOSE a purple journal. Purple for the color of repentance. As it turned out, the daily journaling was the hardest part of this endeavor that a good number of Basilica staff had voluntarily undertaken together.

Through the work of The Basilica's EDI (Equity, Diversity, and Inclusivity) initiative, the staff has been challenged to commit time to EDI work. About a dozen staff members chose to read and discuss *Me and White Supremacy: Combat Racism, Change the World, and Become a Good Ancestor* by Layla F. Saad this past spring. We met four times, since the book was organized into four weeks of daily readings, and shared our thoughts, learnings, doubts, and past experiences with the utmost trust in each other.

If I only had to read the assigned section each week, it would have been difficult enough. Not the volume of pages, rather what was being presented was emotionally challenging. Honestly, it was a firehose of truth to grapple with.

But each daily reading within each week's chapter also presented two to six journal

questions for the reader to reflect on. Early on, in the first week, Saad challenged me in my "white exceptionalism" (meaning, "I'm not a racist, I'm one of the good ones") to not skip the journaling work. She knew many readers would be tempted to just think about the questions, but not write out responses. And that's where the rubber meets the road, as the saying goes.

When it's just me, my pen, and my purple journal, I must dig deep and be honest. Be honest about my white privilege. Be honest about my white fragility. Be honest about my anti-Blackness. Be honest about my tone policing. Be honest about my white saviorism. Be honest about my racist stereotypes.

For me, the police murder of George Floyd was a shatter moment. To see George Floyd's death captured on cell phone video and play out repeatedly for 9 minutes and 29 seconds was too much to bear. I couldn't watch it all. I was shaken out of my white slumber and wide awake, electrified, along with so many in our city and cities around our world.



Honestly, I've never been taught how to even have a conversation about race. I wasn't educated about racism in our nation. I don't have conversations about racism with anyone—with other white people, nor with People of Color—and certainly none that implicate my part in perpetuating it. I have very few People of Color in my life. Up to this point, I haven't taken the time to find out about white supremacy—I had that term relegated off and reserved for extremist groups. No more. Now I realize it means me too.

As I look back at my childhood and teen years, Saad helped me realize I was never told the color of my skin would

limit me in any way. Or that I would have to work doubly hard to prove myself because of it. Or that people would fear me before ever knowing me. In fact, the color of my skin was never once even discussed growing up because it was seen as the norm. It was the safe way to be born. That is the truth of my white upbringing. I think most BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) would not tell a story like that—but rather have very different stories of how color was addressed in their family of origin.

In this world we move around in, I've realized how much whiteness is centered as the norm. When I think about who I mix with, the stores I go to, the main characters in the movies, books, and podcasts I encounter, who I worship with, and the sheer number of people with white privilege holding leadership positions, I know it's true. As I consider each of these areas, Saad challenged me to think about who is seen as the norm and who is seen as "other."

And what would I do now in response to this shatter moment? Some whites took to the streets in protest with leadership from groups like Black Lives Matter. Others were determined to become better allies—learning to yield to the experience of the Black community, to talk less and listen more in this time of racial reckoning. Some denied the crucial moment we were faced with and became defensive, retorting with All Lives Matter, or Blue Lives Matter. Some retreated into white apathy or white silence and did nothing. I looked for books and joined Facebook groups to learn as much as I could. I have a young Black son at home. His life matters.

This is personal work, this deep dive into antiracism. This is work for the white community to do. Each of us. As I seek to understand my own complicity in white supremacy, it is incredibly uncomfortable.

White centering is so normal to me I haven't even been aware of it. My challenge now is to stop upholding whiteness as the norm.

Saad asserts, "None of us are born fully conscious of systems of oppression or our own privileges and unconscious biases. We are also not born aware of the historical contexts within which we hold identities of privilege or marginalization." (p.164) She likens it to a fish not being aware of the water it swims in, or us not being aware of the air we breathe. But it is our job now to become fully conscious, to educate ourselves, and to become aware. And, she promises, once we become aware, once we begin to see something, we cannot unsee it.

This book is an important teacher for anyone wishing to understand the complex system of white supremacy, and our individual role in it, and for anyone who dreams of a more equitable world. It is written clearly and user-friendly. When taken seriously, it is life changing. I know that sounds dramatic, but I firmly believe it's true. As Saad wisely puts it, "You cannot dismantle what you cannot see. You cannot challenge what you do not understand." (p.38) This book helps the reader to both understand and begin to dismantle white supremacy. As you come to it, come with courage and with an open heart, and don't forget your purple journal. ✝

Wendy Cichanski Caduff joined The Basilica staff in 2018 as the Coordinator of Caring Ministries.