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I Shudder. Do You?

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Sometimes it feels as if this virus came to teach us a thing or two about the problems we've allowed to emerge and let fester in our country.

Poor kids can't get a decent education while sheltering in place because they don't have internet access in their homes. Women are bearing more of the responsibility for homeschooling, child care, elder care, and housekeeping while working full-time. Latinx people are twice as likely as whites to lose their jobs as a result of the pandemic. People of color and immigrants are more likely to hold front-line service jobs, which puts them at greater risk of getting the virus. Black people are dying from the virus at far greater rates than others, due to underlying conditions like diabetes, hypertension, and heart disease which themselves are brought on in part by the stress of being Black in America. And, maddeningly, just as the data on the demographics of who was dying from this thing came to light, many red states began opening up again.

I shudder. Do you?

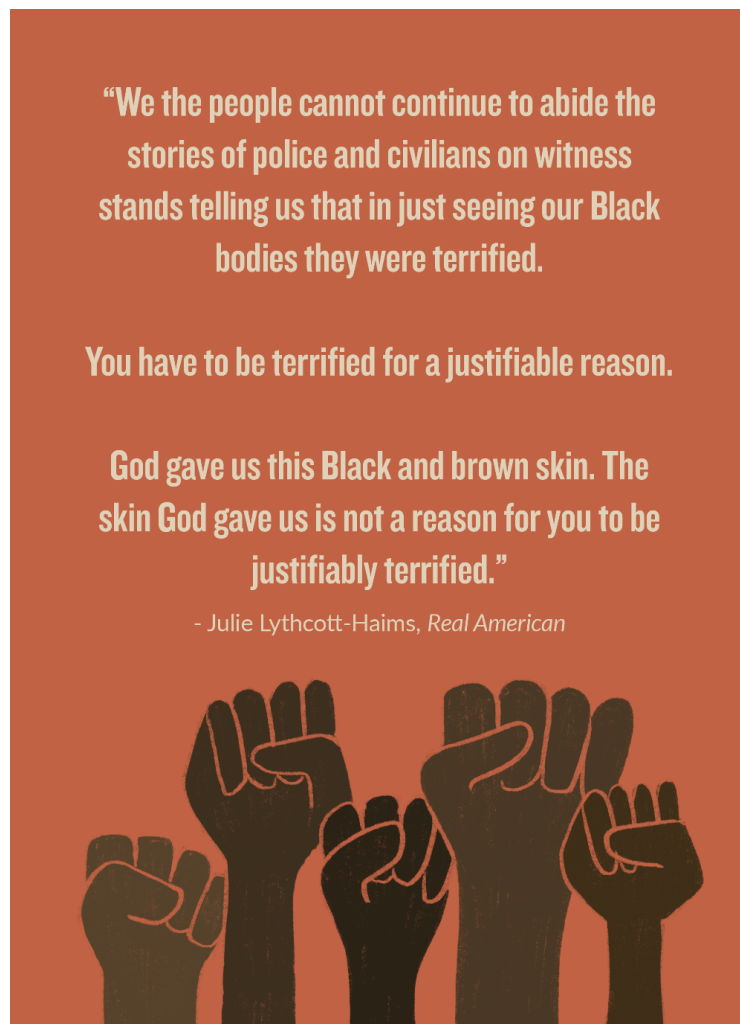
I presume you're adhering to the regulations set by your local and state public health leaders. Yet as you do so, there are those in your community who believe that the virus is a "hoax" or "plandemic" and feel that governmental attempts to prevent its transmission are an intolerable encroachment into their liberty. Some have taken the Pro-Choice mantra *my body my choice* as their own. Some are waging protests at their state capitols bearing signs that equate public health requirements to slavery and the Holocaust. Some of those protestors are armed. Can you imagine what would happen if a group of armed people of color swarmed a state capitol building in America? If you're trying to teach someone what white privilege is, this is a great example...

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I'm fifty-two. In my lifetime, our nation has never been more polarized. In 2008, I served as an elected Obama delegate at the Democratic Convention representing my portion of Silicon Valley. Nothing in my fifty-two years has matched the exhilaration I felt while standing in a throng of proud Californians as we participated in a somewhat peculiar yet

hallowed procedural process through which we were going to make history. I couldn't know what would soon be unleashed. That gun sales would soar. That an elected member of Congress would yell "liar" as President Obama delivered his first State of the Union speech, and that another would refuse to hold a hearing on Obama's Supreme Court Justice nominee. That white nationalists would see the election of Obama as their clarion call.

Obama's election seemed to be the crowning achievement of the Civil Rights Movement. And perhaps it was. Yet, also, it was a catalyst for the election of Trump. (Another example of white privilege: Can you imagine a Black candidate with five children by three wives having a shot at, let alone winning, the presidency?) It was a catalyst for the resurgence of an ever-strengthening element of armed folks who regard America as a white country and see the rest of us as interlopers, perhaps even intruders. And it was a catalyst for the killing of Black adults and children, often caught on video, routinely said to be "justified." Stuningly, as I sit at my desk and write this to you, an unarmed Black man named George Floyd was just choked to death by a Minnesota police officer who pressed his knee into George's neck for 7 minutes as horrified bystanders asked the police to stop. To me, these incidents are a new form of lynching. This is why we say "Black Lives Matter." We're not Black supremacists. We're asking *Can't Black life matter, too?*



Do you believe Black folk are human beings deserving of the same dignity and respect that ought to be afforded all human beings? Of course you do, right? Yet I encourage you to ask yourself this question anyway, because we have to see someone as fully human in order to

care about their struggle and their pain. The murder of 25-year-old Ahmaud Abery while jogging on a sunlit residential street in Georgia, and the refusal of the local DA to prosecute his killers, is one of the latest examples of the cruel refusal to see Blacks as human. If your social media feed did not resound with shock over what happened to Ahmaud Abery, I invite you to be curious about whose narratives you *are* consuming, and whose you are not, and why.

Viewing Blacks as less-than-human of course goes back centuries. They were able to chain us up because they saw us as animals. They were able to snatch us from the arms of our mothers, fathers, and children on the auction block and ignore our wailing cries for mercy because they felt our family bonds were not like their own. They released us from bondage without even the promised “forty acres and a mule” because they had no interest in trying to undo some of the wrong they had done to us. They tolerated only about twelve years of Reconstruction before implementing Jim Crow because they did not want us to participate in society. We were, as Ibram X. Kendi writes, [Stamped From the Beginning](#), and we wear this sign of lesser-ness every day of our lives.

Why do they always talk about slavery goes the retort. Why? Because its manifestations are with us to the present day. Fast forward from the start of Jim Crow to 1921 when white supremacists razed the prosperous Tulsa Oklahoma community known as the “Black Wall Street” to the ground. Zoom ahead 25 years to the end of World War II when Black veterans were denied the benefits of the GI bill because of racism embedded in the Veterans Administration itself, as well as in the minds and hearts of realtors and mortgage lenders who sought not to provide opportunity to Black GIs and their families but to hold them back. This meant most Blacks were unable to participate in the great prosperity of the 1950s, and with home ownership being the greatest way to transfer wealth from generation to generation, this is what led to the enormous financial disparities we see today such that the average net worth of white families is roughly \$171,000 versus \$17,000 for Black families. Home value isn’t just about what we can pass on to our descendants. It plays a central role in the quality of the public schools our children can attend. All parents want better opportunities for their children. A Black Ohio woman was jailed in 2011 for sending her children to a public school that was not in her district, while in 2019 two dozen rich white people who had cheated and lied to procure an offer of admission to an elite college for their child did not see jail time.

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The economic and legal injustices are just the half of it. If you don’t see us as human, you don’t care about, or even see, our pain. A 2017 study in *Psychology of Women Quarterly* shows that white female college students are less likely to help Black victims of assault because they “felt less personally responsible for them.” A 2017 study from Georgetown Law Center shows that to adults “Black girls seemed older than white girls of the same age,” and “needed less nurturing, protection, support, and comfort than white girls.” Pop culture provides regular examples. The reaction to the beloved character Rue in the “The Hunger Games” movie is one. Though Rue was described as “dark skinned” in the book, some people balked when the Black actress Amandla Stenberg was chosen to play her. When Rue

died on screen, many white viewers took to social media to report that while they had felt deep grief while reading the book, seeing Rue on-screen as a visibly Black girl led them to feel nothing. Even [the disparate treatment of Kate Middleton and Meghan Markle by British tabloids](#) has a racialized undertone to it. We know this is not a uniquely American phenomenon.

And then there's the perennial evidence that white folk use their power with impunity. Emmett Till was brutally murdered and left to rot in a swamp because a white woman alleged he had winked at her. The novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*, fictionalizes this horror and its consequences on the page. Two days ago, a Black man named Christian Cooper was bird watching in New York's Central Park. He came upon a white woman named Amy Cooper (no relation), whose dog was not leashed (which is required 24/7 in that section of the park, because of the birds). He asked her to leash her dog. She refused. She then called the police while taunting him, "I'm going to tell them there's an African American man threatening my life." She knew precisely what she was doing. She was attempting to join a centuries-long slew of white women whose fragility results in the loss of Black life. The viral outrage contained assumptions that she was a MAGA hat wearing Trumpster. Nope. From public records of her financial contributions to campaigns we can infer she supports liberals.

I wrote my memoir, *Real American*, partly to warn us about the growing number of Americans who want to take "their" country "back" from people like me and other people of color. That's the political point of the book. But I also wrote this deeply personal account in order to ask readers to ask themselves *do I see Black people as human beings at all?* Of course you do, right? But, what are you doing to put that belief into action?

There's a [beautiful graphic going around on Instagram](#) that describes white privilege and what a person can do if they have it. One suggestion is that such folks "promise to listen to and amplify the voices of people of color." Regardless of your background, this week I'm offering the opportunity to learn more about racial disparities, some of which are on prominent display in this confusing COVID-19 moment, and others of which exist in the general state of affairs in America. I hope you'll check out any/all of the below that may interest you.

- If you want to understand what racism can do to self-esteem, [check out my podcast conversation with Christina Blacken, host of "Sway Them in Color."](#) where we talk about developing self-love while growing up Black in white spaces, and how creative expression can help us heal from difficult experiences.
- If the racial wealth gap concerns you, [check out this highly-detailed analysis from The Brookings Institution.](#)
- To learn how "the unfolding public-health and possible economic disaster of the pandemic will disproportionately affect black Americans" [check out this investigative report from McKinsey.](#)
- Asian American health care providers are battling two foes: the virus and racism. [Read about it in this Washington Post piece.](#)
- The comparison between Felicity Huffman and a poor Black mom trying to get her kids to better public schools [is outlined in this piece in The Atlantic.](#)
- The effort to "close the homework gap" (i.e. provide internet access to *all* children) is in the hands of Congress as we speak. [Learn about it in this piece from the National Education Association, at the end of which is a simple form enabling you to lobby your Congressman and Senators on this subject.](#)

- COVID-19 is illuminating the racism already embedded in our society. [A law professor was interviewed by the Washington Post for his thoughts on it here.](#)
- We're all supposed to wear masks right now, yet that's a challenge for Black men if people perceive them to be thugs. [If you'd like to know more about that, read this New York Times piece.](#)
- Some New York law enforcement officers are enforcing social-distancing requirements differently based on the color of the offender's skin. [If that feels wrong to you, check out this "tale of two cities" in The Guardian.](#)
- If your social media feed wasn't telling you about the failure of local authorities to arrest Ahmaud Abernathy's killers, [here's a great piece from CNN to help you get up to speed on what the outrage was \(and is\) about.](#)
- To see what all the fuss is about with Amy Cooper [here's a good summary.](#)
- If you want to immerse yourself in learning how racism was created and maintained over the centuries, look no farther than the award-winning book [Stamped From the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America, by Ibram X. Kendi.](#)
- If you want to read a book on how implicit bias gets baked into our brains, [Jennifer Eberhardt's book Biased: Uncovering the Hidden Prejudice That Shapes What We See, Think, and Do is the gold standard.](#)
- And of course if you want to get to know me and my journey with race and racism better, [check out my memoir, Real American.](#)

Look, I believe in humans. And I believe that if we can put machines on Mars and decode the human genome then we can rid ourselves of the insidious biases inside of us that make us refuse to treat others with the same dignity and respect we want for ourselves. We fail to be the democracy we have always purported to be—*of liberty and justice for all*—until we get this right. Call me naïve but I believe we can. I believe we have to.

Our elected leaders matter more than ever. If, like me, you want to get involved at the national level, [I'm co-hosting a June 3 video call](#) with four Democratic Senate candidates who are trying to turn the Senate blue again. It requires a minimum donation of \$100, which is a lot, I know. But I've decided it's worth it because I want to be inspired about what I can do to elect leaders who believe that all of us are worthy of dignity and respect in America.

I want to stop shuddering and start smiling again. I want to believe in America again. The thing is, *we are America*. It's on us. And it's well past time.

xo,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "JULIE". The letters are stylized and connected, with a long horizontal stroke underlining the "J" and "L".