

Creating a Culture of Repair

Taking Action on the Road to Reparations

Robert Turner

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“In *Creating a Culture of Repair: Taking Action on the Road to Reparations*, Rev. Dr. Robert Turner delivers a groundbreaking road map for transformative change. This powerful book offers a comprehensive guide to repairing the deep-seated wounds of systemic injustice, urging individuals, communities, organizations, and institutions to take meaningful action. Turner’s approach is both enlightening and actionable, as he explores the intricacies of reparations across individual, social, institutional, and spiritual dimensions. From acknowledging privilege to dismantling systemic racism, each chapter presents a compelling set of actions that can pave the way for genuine repair. This book is a call to action, urging us to confront our past, engage in transformative measures, and collectively pave the way for a more inclusive future. It is my sincere hope that readers, inspired by this work, will join the movement for reparations and contribute to the repair of our society.”

—Rev. Jesse L. Jackson Sr., civil rights activist
and founder, Rainbow PUSH Coalition

“Rev. Robert Turner is a person of profound faith who knows that ‘faith without works is dead.’ In *Creating a Culture of Repair*, Rev. Turner sets forth a thought-provoking road map for righting past wrongs and building a more just, equal, and strong America. The book is full of his wisdom and inspiration. It is an important read that not only elevates his big ideas but also fortifies the spirit in trying times.”

—Cory Booker, United States Senator of New Jersey

“*Creating a Culture of Repair* combines unflinching moral reckoning with an approachable and compassionate future-forward vision for social and spiritual transformation that could come only from a pastor’s heart. Turner’s unique and pragmatic work outlines a path forward for Christians and all people who are choosing to say ‘amen’ to the fact that reparations are right, necessary, and very possible.”

—Jermaine Ross-Allam, Director,
Center for the Repair of Historical Harms,
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

“Turner has given us a visionary road map that can lead us on the right road to repairing the breach caused by centuries of white supremacy in action. This is a vital book for those who want to learn more about the many harms inflicted on Black people in this country and for those of us who want to make reparations but are not sure how to begin.”

—Jocelyn Lieu, member, Middle Collegiate Church Reparations Task Force

“Turner invites readers to journey with him to both yesteryear and tomorrow as he presents one hundred definitive steps to move toward the goal of reparative justice. Turner contextualizes the necessity for reparations through his own lived experiences after moving from his native Alabama, where a member of his family was lynched, to serve as pastor of the historic Vernon AME Church in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and lead it through the one-hundred-year anniversary of the horrific Tulsa Race Massacre of 1921. Bearing witness to the effects of how government-sanctioned lynch mobs and cowardly killers took capital, cash, and profit-earning capacity from Black Americans, Turner invites all who are serious about reparative justice to walk with him on a journey toward reparations.”

—Jonathan C. Augustine, Senior Pastor, St. Joseph AME Church, and author of *When Prophets Preach: Leadership and the Politics of the Pulpit*

“Turner has created the most comprehensive contribution that demonstrates how reparations can be done in an impactful way throughout American society. His one hundred actions offer something for everyone in order to not only advance the conversation but also enhance the nation’s life and provide healing for its people. He offers practical and achievable solutions to address the various realms where harm has been done and concludes that the work of reparative justice will enhance the lives of all Americans and unify the nation under a common banner.”

—Jimmie R. Hawkins, Director of Advocacy, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), and author of *Unbroken and Unbowed: A History of Black Protest in America*

*To my maternal grandparents, Henry and Rosetta Birdsong,
and my paternal grandparents, Millage Jernigan and
Susie Turner Jones, none of whom finished high school
yet collectively raised thirty-seven children, two of whom are
my parents, Robert and Ruth Turner. I dedicate this book to
my ancestors, none of whom have ever received reparations,
and to my God, without whom I would not be here today.*

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Foreword

In 2023, the United States celebrated the sixtieth anniversary of the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom and the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King’s most famous speech. Although many remember only Dr. King’s “dream” from that speech, much of its content actually focused on the nightmare that was the reality of life for tens of millions of Black Americans (a nightmare that still continues today). On August 28, 1963, from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, the thirty-four-year-old prophetic leader reminded the nation,

We have come to our Nation’s Capital to cash a check . . . a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. . . . It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note insofar as her citizens of color are concerned. Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a bad check, a check . . . marked insufficient funds.¹

More than six decades later, this “bad check” has only gotten worse. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, voting rights were under attack, disproportionately disenfranchising Black people; “tough on crime” policies had led to criminalization and mass incarceration, particularly impacting Black Americans; 26 million (or 61 percent of all) Black people were poor or low-income, and 41 percent of all unhoused people in the “land of the free and home of the brave” were Black.

The pandemic further exacerbated systemic racism and economic inequality, deepening and spreading along the fissures of

racism and discrimination that have long been part of these yet-to-be-United States. The 2020 election and subsequent attempted coup by Donald Trump and his enablers led to the greatest attack on our democracy since the Civil War and Reconstruction gave rise to overt racism and violent acts motivated by white supremacy. The American nightmare experienced by Black people has become ever more excruciating.

However, at the same time that poverty and inequality have grown, affirmative action and equal protection under the law have been undermined, and anti-Black policing and policies have been enacted, it does not have to be this way. The promissory note of liberty, justice, and the pursuit of happiness is within reach if only the people, including our communities of faith, governmental authorities, and society at large, have the will to make good on its promises.

Indeed, we should hear the case for reparations in that same speech from the Rev. Dr. King. We must work to make it a reality today. Dr. King continued:

We refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt. We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation. And so we have come to cash this check, a check that will give us upon demand the riches of freedom and security of justice. . . . This is no time to engage in the luxury of cooling off or to take the tranquilizing drug of gradualism. . . . Now is the time to lift our nation from the quick sands of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood. Now is the time to make justice a reality to all of God's children.²

Yes. May we make it so. But how?

In the Gospel of Luke, John the Baptist begins a public ministry to prepare the way for Jesus, and crowds start coming to him in the wilderness to be baptized. “And the crowds asked him, ‘What, then, should we do?’ In reply he said to them, ‘Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none, and whoever has food must do likewise.’ Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, ‘Teacher, what should we do?’ He said to them, ‘Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you’” (Luke 3:10–13). After admonitions for tax collectors came admonitions for soldiers.

John’s message in Luke’s Gospel is squarely about justice and repair, echoing the Hebrew prophets and Mary’s Magnificat in a call for the just distribution of resources, equal protection under the law, and repair of the breaches in society.

Fast-forward to today. Individuals, congregations, and the systems and structures of society in the twenty-first century are in need of models answering that question, “What, then, should we do” to be engaged in effective anti-racist, pro-repair ministry and policy? Taken with Dr. King’s reminder of the urgency of the moment and the promise of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, Luke 3 provides guidance to all of us on the case for reparations.

These instructions from Luke 3—to share resources freely and abundantly; to act justly and equitably in economic and political matters; and to restore the people, soldiers, tax collectors, and faith leaders into right relationship with one another—echo the recommendations of *Creating a Culture of Repair: Taking Action on the Road to Reparations* by the Rev. Dr. Robert Turner. This insightful and instructive book provides important steps—in fact, one hundred of them—that individuals, communities, institutions, and spiritual authorities can take to atone for the sin of racism and repair the breach of white supremacy.

In the Hebrew Bible, the Lord laments to the prophet Ezekiel, “I sought for anyone among them who would repair the wall and stand in the breach before me on behalf of the land, so that I would not destroy it, but I found no one” (Ezek. 22:30). This book is an invitation to all—individuals, congregations, communities, governmental and other institutions—to be the *one* to stand in the gap.

Because if we ever are to repair the cruel injustice of systemic racism and white supremacy, we must engage in the work of restitution. Let us heed the words of the Rev. Dr. Robert Turner and walk the road to reparations and build a culture of repair.

Liz Theoharis
 Kairos Center for Religions, Rights, and Social Justice
 August 2023

Introduction

Remnants of Greenwood

A crowd descended on the county jail. Dick Rowland, a young Black man, had been taken into police custody after being accused of sexually assaulting Sarah Page, a young white woman. Hearing of the gathering crowd, armed Black men—many of them veterans of World War I—came with the intention of helping the sheriff to protect Dick Rowland from being lynched, but they were turned away by the sheriff and instructed to go home. Despite ordering away those who aimed to help him, the sheriff left the lynch mob intact. One of the members of the mob tried to take a gun from one of the Black men. A fight ensued. The gun went off, and when the white man who sought to take the gun was accidentally shot in the scuffle, violence erupted.

Over the course of the evening, a white mob moved into the neighborhood of Greenwood, home to Black Wall Street and some of the most successful Black Americans in the country. The mob torched businesses, looted houses, and shot Black citizens in the street. From the air, men in low-flying airplanes fired guns and dropped incendiaries onto buildings. Bodies were dragged through the streets, families executed at point-blank range, babies ripped out of pregnant mothers' stomachs.

The Tulsa Race Massacre of 1921 was the largest act of violence in America since the Civil War. According to the report of the Tulsa Race Riot Commission (not convened until 2001), it was the first time that airplanes were used to attack an American city. Not on September 11, 2001, at the Pentagon and World Trade Center,

nor on December 7, 1941, at Pearl Harbor, but on May 31 and June 1, 1921, in the Greenwood District of Tulsa, Oklahoma. During those eighteen hours of terror, ten thousand people were made homeless, six hundred businesses were destroyed, and more than three hundred people were brutally killed, their bodies discarded in mass graves.

I came to Vernon African Methodist Episcopal Church, in Greenwood, after one of the most direct encounters I have ever had with God.

Every so often in my Christian sojourn, God seems to call on me to do more. Such was the case one summer night in early August 2017. In the few months leading up to this call, I felt a spiritual pull from Almighty God to go in a certain direction, but which way I didn't know.

What I knew was that I was feeling a spiritual drying of my brook similar to the prophet Elijah when he was at the Wadi Cherith (1 Kgs. 17). Thus, one night, after going through months of spiritual aridity, I prayed to God, "Lord, I know that you want me to do something, and I want you to know this time I will not fight you. Whatever you want me to do, wherever you want me to go, I say yes to your will. In Jesus' name I pray, Amen!"

When I finished my prayer, I got off my knees and grabbed my phone from the bed to put it on the charger, looking at it to see the time. I noticed that I had a text message. It was from Bishop Michael L. Mitchell, who presides over Oklahoma and Arkansas, offering an opportunity in his district if I would take it. I was astonished that the direction I had just sought from God was delivered instantaneously. And so, as I had made the promise to God to say yes to whatever path he laid before me, I immediately replied to the bishop with one word: yes.

I didn't ask what he wanted me to do or where he wanted me to go. I was going. With that vow I made to God, I committed to Bishop Mitchell to move my family to a place I had never been before. I went forward, not knowing where I would pastor, how much I would make, nor where my family would live. In fact, I did not know any of this information until I arrived in Tulsa on August 26, just a few weeks after that first phone call.

The congregation of Vernon was founded in 1905, the same year many historians say Greenwood, and later Black Wall Street, was formed. From that founding moment, Vernon has been the staple of Greenwood. Our towering steeples have overlooked the parameters of Black Wall Street for nearly a century. Vernon's congregation held Tulsa's first Black principal, first Black attorney, first Black physician, and first Black peace officer. The first children's Head Start program in Tulsa was at Vernon.

As Greenwood prospered, Vernon did as well, and when Black Wall Street saw destruction during the Tulsa Race Massacre, so did Vernon. But as the district survived, so did the basement of our church, the only edifice on Greenwood Avenue that survived the Tulsa Race Massacre. That basement became a refuge to those fleeing violence on the night of the massacre. Leading pillars in the community saw Vernon as their place of spiritual renewal and believed that its revitalization was paramount to the prestige of the Greenwood District. Consequently, as people began to return and make Greenwood great again, so did the members of Vernon.

Following the destruction in 1921, the basement of Vernon was refortified by 1922. The sanctuary began to be rebuilt in 1925, finishing in 1928. The rebuilding of our historic church came with the help of those brave people who chose to stay. Vernon remains the oldest continuous Black landowner of the same parcel of land in the entire Greenwood/Black Wall Street District.

When we think of this massacre, we think about the economic hit for Black people. We think of the tremendous loss of life and of the exodus of those who refused to live among the racism in Tulsa any longer.

We often forget the stories of the people who stayed. The government didn't come to aid the rebuilding of that which they helped to destroy. White churches did not heed the call to rebuild the houses of God. It was none other than the people of the Greenwood community, whose families were murdered and livelihoods destroyed, who decided to stay amid the profound heartbreak and insecurity to rebuild the community in which they once prospered.

Those who stayed created an ecosystem where Black excellence saw a renaissance and more Blacks continued to come to Tulsa in

search of their slice of the American pie. The growing Black population attracted more doctors, peace officers, and teachers who knew nothing of the massacre. Consider the economic genius of those individuals who—two generations out of slavery—created the most prosperous town for Blacks in the country in a place that had just become a state in 1907. With no aid or entrepreneurial training, they became first-generation business community and church leaders. The new arrivals ate well from their slice for several decades, yet those who stayed and rebuilt were somehow forgotten in the very community they helped to restore. In a conservative state that prides itself on having little to no government interference, the story of Greenwood should have been highlighted as an example of what a determined people did with no welfare, affirmative action, Pell grants, small business loans, nor philanthropic grants. Instead, the names of those determined people have faded as though they were a victim of their own success, and this important remnant has been forgotten for nearly a century.

Not forgotten at Vernon are the individuals who stayed and rebuilt our church. The stained-glass windows of Vernon display craftsmanship and artistry unlike anything else seen in Black Wall Street. While their physical brilliance is unique, it is the names in each piece of glass that are inspiring. These names reflect those who financially helped rebuild the sanctuary. Individuals such as S. E. Berry, who was one of a half dozen Blacks in Greenwood who owned an airplane; R. T. Bridgewater, the first Black physician in Tulsa; Barney Cleaver, the first Black sheriff's deputy; schoolteachers J. T. A. West and J. I. Wallace; S. M. Jackson, the owner of the most prosperous Black funeral home, which embalmed and buried the only two people who received proper burial after the Tulsa massacre: Rueben Everett and Vernon church member Eddie Lockard.

Dr. R. T. Bridgewater's thriving medical practice was burned down during the massacre; his office safe was pulled out and left in the street. Bridgewater never received anything for his loss, yet he remained, started his practice again, and stayed at Vernon. S. M. "Sam" and Eunice Jackson rebuilt their mortuary business, and today their relatives still run the renamed Jack's Funeral Home. The Jacksons had a child shortly after the massacre who tragically died very young.

The Rev. Alfred Barnett Sr. survived the massacre and later became an ordained clergyperson in the African Methodist Episcopal Church. Lucille Figures survived the massacre and later moved to Texas; her son continues to support the church in her honor. Lucille's granddaughter Patricia Barnett is still a member of Vernon, where she sings in the choir, a stewardess who serves with a glad heart and a loving spirit.

Robert Fairchild knew Dick Rowland personally. He was in high school at the time of the massacre and stayed at Vernon virtually his entire life. He taught Sunday school and opened a dance hall where his love of dance was displayed for all to see. He and a few other businessmen started the Greenwood Chamber of Commerce, which is still in existence today.

Ernestine Gibbs was a survivor who owned several businesses and was a part of the missionary society. Her descendants still reside in the area and are business owners as well. At the time of the massacre, Vernice Sims was on her way to the prom, which, sadly, never happened. Vernice became a prominent spokesman and witness of the massacre who gave her testimony to the Tulsa Race Riot Commission and was included in the lawsuit led by Johnnie Cochran advocating for reparations.

James Wesley Williams and his wife were co-owners of Dreamland theater and Williams Mechanic shop, which was featured in the opening scene of the HBO series *Watchmen*. They also owned several rental properties and a confectionary—all of which were destroyed during the massacre. They never received an insurance claim or reparations. Williams's descendants are still in the area and one is a popular news anchor, Danya Bacchus.

John R. Emerson Sr. owned a cab transportation company, hotel, and other businesses that were decimated during the massacre. He rebuilt it all, but during the midcentury "urban renewal" of the Greenwood area, the hotel was demolished. Today none of his businesses still exist. His granddaughter Harriet Emerson is a member of the church and its board of trustees.

Olivia Hooker survived with her parents, who owned Hooker Clothing. Her family moved away after the massacre, but Olivia never forgot what she saw and endured as a child. She joined the armed forces after obtaining several degrees. It was my great honor

in ministry to do her homegoing memorial eulogy celebration at Vernon AME Church. She was the last known survivor from the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre.

Each one of these families lost the ability to inherit capital, cash, and well-known businesses offering quality products: three elements necessary for building wealth regardless of ethnicity. The loss of capital and cash did not result from poor financial management nor cyclical market conditions. Neither was their misfortune due to one of Tulsa's notorious tornadoes. No, these families lost the right to inherit this capital, cash, and business as a result of it being taken in an act of state-sanctioned terrorism in which vigilantes deputized by the sheriff descended on Greenwood and in less than eighteen hours burned more than thirty-six city blocks to the ground. Wealth gained by those who believed in the American dream went up in flames by those who gave them a nightmare.

Doubly devastating is that while the victims' descendants are doing well and the Greenwood community still exists, it is a shell of its former self and the families for the most part have been unable to recreate the same level of prosperity as when Black Wall Street was in its prime. Those survivors who dared venture back into the water of American capitalism as business owners found more obstacles than did their parents, who had begun their enterprise on land recently seized from indigenous Americans and sold cheap to settlers. The theft of the so-called Oklahoma Territory from the indigenous tribes (who had already been pushed to the area from southeastern states in earlier "Indian removals") was the first of three major incidents of land theft in Oklahoma in less than one hundred years. The second was the Tulsa Massacre of 1921, and then midcentury, through urban renewal coupled with interstate highway construction, the land was stolen again, moving Blacks out to make room for white-owned development. Now the entrepreneurial spirit, though not dead, is not shining as brightly as it once did. Most have chosen to work for someone else. It seems as though, subconsciously, they have collectively decided to shield their genetic entrepreneurial brilliance from those who systematically seek to destroy any development of an autonomous Black economy.

Watching the insurrection at our nation's capital on January 6, 2021, reminded me of what happened here in Tulsa one hundred years before: an angry white mob was causing mayhem with the support of elected officials. The destruction of Greenwood was far worse, of course, but the basic premise holds that white racist mobs in every generation know their privilege and seem hell-bent to use it to the detriment of justice, peace, nobility, and civility. America has yet to show that it is willing, let alone able, to rein in its white racist mobs. Sadly, America's citizens, democracy, and justice will continue to suffer because of it until the country finds the strength to abolish its idol of white supremacy.

Our capitalist free-market system cannot reach its fullest potential so long as it allows white racial terror attacks to go unpunished. The destruction of Black homes and businesses by racial terror in places like Greenwood in Tulsa; Rosewood, Florida, in 1923; and Wilmington, North Carolina, in 1898, meant America lost fortunes overnight. Tragically, there is virtually a Tulsa in every state of the union.

In the summer of 1919 alone, African Americans endured more than twenty race massacres. Black soldiers were just coming back from fighting fascism in Europe and were terrorized at home in a season so bloody it became known as Red Summer. These Black men left their hometowns as sharecroppers and "boys" and returned as privates, sergeants, and captains. Their self-esteem was greater, their knowledge wider, their sense of self deeper—and their tolerance for economic exploitation eliminated. They had looked totalitarianism in the face and defeated it. They returned to never be defeated again. The newfound swagger of these Black men became an affront to those who held to white supremacist ideals.

Those ideals had been promoted during the war years by the movie *Birth of a Nation*. Released in 1915, this silent film depicted Black people as slothful and violent. The chief antagonist was a Black man who was attempting to rape a white woman. Instead of being deflowered by a man who was, in her mind, a "brute beast," the woman jumped off a cliff. Upon hearing about it, white men, depicted as great and honorable gentlemen, banded together to form the Ku Klux Klan to avenge the suicide of the young white woman and crush the supposedly lazy, ignorant Blacks who wanted more

rights so that (in the minds of the Klansmen) they could have more access to white women. The Klansmen were applauded for their efforts and presented as the heroes of the film.

Membership in the Klan, which before the film had been dwindling, began to skyrocket. The movie was a major blockbuster, and President Woodrow Wilson had a private screening of it in the White House. After seeing the movie, he reportedly said, “It’s like writing history with lightning. My only regret is that it is all so terribly true.”

When the highest-ranking authority in the land, the commander in chief, has declared that a movie depicting Black people as lazy and ignorant and Black men as desiring to assault white women is true and accurate, he promotes false propaganda, which grows unchecked. As we saw on January 6, 2021, after Trump and his media buddies had been carrying on about how the election was stolen, lies of this magnitude often lead to violence.

So after President Wilson’s comments and the resurgence of the Klan, when these Black patriots returned from the Great War in Europe, the local whites whose identity rested on the pillars of white supremacy, which gave them permission to think that they were better than everybody else, were perplexed. *These “boys” now think they’re men? Soldiers? Heroes?* White men were bewildered when they started to see Blacks doing better financially than them. It troubled their mind. Racist whites could not stand to see the truth that Blacks were just as smart, talented, and ambitious as they were. Their fragile minds and poisoned hearts could not handle that, so they had to destroy the evidence of that truth—and that included homes, churches, and libraries. During the massacre of Greenwood, the Blacks who were fleeing overheard whites saying to themselves, “How did we ever let them get this land in the first place?” The problem is they didn’t “let them” get anything—Black residents purchased the land with their own money.

Only two things happen when you encounter the truth after being raised in a lie: you either accept the truth and expose the lie, or you eliminate the truth and hold fast to the lie. The people in Greenwood and other predominantly Black communities across the country where there was even a modicum of success were victims of the latter. And to justify their mayhem, racist whites in a majority of

the communities that saw a massacre told themselves another lie, an unproven allegation that a Black man had said or done something to a white woman, the principal complaint and concern of the Klan in *Birth of a Nation*, the movie that was praised by President Wilson.

Wilson's belief that *Birth of a Nation* was a realistic representation of Black Americans is appalling. Even worse is that this inaccurate, callous, and racist line of thinking is still common in our public discourse more than a century later. We can see this same resistance to the truth in the present pushback against critical race theory, an academic framework for looking critically at race and the significant role it has played in the United States of America and the world. Individuals expressing their disdain for public education by passing laws and starting petitions against the teaching of critical race theory in K-12 schools are offering pointless solutions looking for a problem. Even advocates of critical race theory will tell you that it is a principle taught at institutions of higher education, not K-12—a fact that shows how detached from reality the opposition really is. However, this fact does not stop them from attacking it, because the core of their objection is that the true history of Black America might be taught and the great white lies of American history might be exposed. These are lies that have been promulgated for centuries, claiming “slavery was not all that bad” and “it was a benefit for Blacks to get them out of Africa,” two lies we will explore and expose later in this book.

Modern defenders of these lies think that teaching how this country has harshly treated Black people—while giving advantages to white people that Blacks did not and do not enjoy—is unpatriotic and harmful to children. What these adults mean is that *they* find it uncomfortable and perhaps even threatening. They insist that racism is an aberration in American history, not the consistent theme. They are ignorant to the fact that while the racist laws may be changed or no longer enforced, the racist culture that they created and sustained still remains.

The area of Alabama where my extended family resides is one of the poorest areas in the country. A region known as the Black Belt, it was once one of the most prosperous places in the country, due to its fertile soil on which my ancestors grew and picked cotton.

My family chose to stay in Alabama after slavery even after my great-grandfather's first cousin was one of the last people lynched in Bullock County, Alabama. One way of defeating your enemy is to outlast them, but while we won the land, those who upheld Jim Crow took the wealth.

The case of Greenwood is similar; the Blacks there have outlasted their oppressors, but unfortunately the land now belongs to the city and the wealth has been transferred to seemingly everyone but the descendants. Similar to economics, justice does not trickle down. It must be corrected in order for justice to be done.

Those warriors who braved the aftermath of the worst race massacre in American history—the largest civil disturbance since the Civil War—recreated their community without any help from the government, insurance companies, or nonprofits. They turned their hell into a haven and found a way to make “bricks without straw,” as the Israelites did in Egypt (Exod. 5). The people who stayed rebuilt the city of ruins just as Nehemiah rebuilt the wall of Jerusalem. They held their position as Moses held his arms up (Exod. 17), but these brave Black Tulsans did not have anyone to assist them as Moses did. This is why reparations matter.

Reparations are not just about reimbursing victims of assaults like that on Greenwood for the property, income, or even lives lost “back then.” Reparations are about the impact that four hundred years of “back then” still have on Black Americans today.

What Are Reparations?

When people think about reparations, they might assume that they personally will have to write a check because of something that happened long ago—something for which they personally bear no responsibility. They might see it as a handout to people who were not directly impacted by the harm done long ago—slavery, Jim Crow, housing discrimination, and so on. However, making reparations is actually repair or redress of an offense. It is society's way of atoning for things it has done and correcting the damage that is still present, even if the damaging acts may have ceased.

Simply put, reparations are not merely given; they are a matter

of justice. They are demanded by moral systems as old as Judeo-Christian, Islamic, and Buddhist traditions. For both the religious and nonaffiliated, if you adhere to the Magna Carta or the Declaration of Independence, uphold the Golden Rule or any philosophy of fairness, or believe in the intrinsic value of all people, then your own conscience will recognize that reparations are not merely due, they are past due! Reparations are not charity; they are justice. Reparations are not complementary but crucial to repairing the fabric of our democracy and making the Constitution real for all Americans.

America prides itself in being “one nation, under God, with liberty and justice for all,” but as long as we deny justice to African Americans for the atrocities they have faced in this country solely because they are Black, we are not living up to the pledge that each one of us has recited since childhood. That pledge does not say justice for all except enslaved people or sharecroppers or Black people. It does not say justice for all except those who are no longer alive or their descendants. It simply says, “justice for all.” Such an august statement is not a whisper but a shout, not a whimper but a flame, not a weak wind but a tornado with the intention to sweep up all impediments to justice and jettison them from our midst.

We as a nation have managed to “strain out a gnat but swallow a camel,” as Jesus says in Matthew 23:24. And now we have become sick. We have fussed and fought ad nauseam concerning lighter issues like filibustering, debt ceilings, and mask mandates but have swallowed or ignored the monumental issues such as America’s ongoing systemic racism, current-day manifestations of white supremacy, objectification of Black lives, and centuries of compacted harms and neglected redress. America is deliriously ill because it has denied justice and reparations to an immense number of its citizens.

Healing can come only when you first acknowledge you are sick and then take your medicine. Reparations are a vital part of the medicine America needs to take in order to have true racial healing. Considering the immense negative energy America expended to secure, sanction, and uphold slavery, white supremacy, and the dominance of whiteness, the same energy should be exerted positively in repenting, reversing, and repairing those most abominable actions.

The United Nations' general description of reparations says:

Adequate, effective, and prompt reparation is intended to promote justice by redressing gross violations of international human rights law or serious violations of international humanitarian law. Reparation should be proportional to the gravity of the violations and the harm suffered. In accordance with its domestic laws and international legal obligations, a State shall provide reparation to victims for acts or omissions which can be attributed to the State and constitute gross violations of international human rights law or serious violations of international humanitarian law.¹

The National Coalition of Blacks for Reparations in America (N'COBRA) specifies that the intended recipients of reparations are “people injured *because of their group identity* and in violation of their fundamental human rights by governments, corporations, institutions and families” (italics mine). They are entitled to what “they need to repair and heal themselves.”²

The Movement for Black Lives makes clear that reparations “cannot be achieved simply through ‘acknowledgment or an apology’ or ‘investment in underprivileged communities.’”³ True reparations, according to the United Nations, must include (1) cessation of the harm being done and assurance that it will not be repeated, (2) restoring those harmed to their situation prior to the harm being done, (3) compensating financially those harmed for anything that cannot be fully restored, (4) satisfaction of moral injury through apology and acknowledgement, and (5) providing rehabilitation through medical, psychological, or any other care that is needed.

Achieving the goal of reparations for Black Americans will take unprecedented social pressure and government action. It will take people all over the country waking up to the reality of our nation's history and present, joining together to create a culture of repair. This book offers one hundred steps that will move us forward toward the goal.

These steps are divided into four categories, with varying levels of investment and consequence:

Individual reparations are things that individuals seeking to remove the stain of racism can do to mitigate harm done to African

Americans. These actions begin with simply acknowledging one's privilege as it relates to white supremacy and the harm done by white supremacy, educating oneself and others to resist and oppose that ideology, and providing what aid one can to those who have been adversely affected by it. The individual level is a place to start but is not enough, on its own, to repair the damage that has been done. While these actions do not remove the need for action by the government and other institutions that enacted policies which subjugated and oppressed African Americans, they do provide a course of action for individuals who are tired of waiting for their government to do what is morally right and desire to use their own initiative and resources to make this country more just for African Americans.

Societal reparations are the efforts of people in groups—connected by proximity or affiliation—to amend for past and present actions that have had a debilitating effect on African Americans. Under this approach you will see overlapping categories for more pluralistic solutions coordinated by businesses, nonprofits, community improvement groups, and more. While churches are specifically addressed in chapter 4, church groups working to improve their communities will want to consider the action steps listed in chapter 2. Under this approach, Black and non-Black communities can work together to implement community-based reparations that focus on research, redress, and restitution.

Institutional reparations are the truest and most comprehensive form of justice and accountability. This approach requires the participation of the public, governmental entities that permitted, legalized, or even mandated heinous acts for which no repair has ever been given. For justice to be done, citizens must advocate for a national movement of reparations and vote for leaders who will advance these policy initiatives. Institutional reparations would signal the beginning of a new era when healing and harmony are truly possible in this country.

Spiritual reparations include ways in which houses of faith participate in repairing the spiritual harm done to African Americans. Throughout American history, white Christians have used their faith and Scripture to justify the enslavement and abuse of African Americans—promulgating false ideas such as the claim that Black people had no souls and that our skin color was a curse from God.

From bombings of Black churches to the whitewashing of church history and Jesus himself, spiritual harm has been done and must be repaired by white Christians today.

Black Americans must be the strongest people on earth, for all we have endured; and still, we persevere. The greatest strength we can manifest is not showing how much we can push or pull. On the contrary, the hardest exhibition of strength is shown by what we can hold. An eight-ounce glass of water is easy to lift while you sip it, but how long can you hold it with arms outstretched? I often think of those strong saints who, after the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre, did not pull out and leave, nor did they push themselves to do something different. No, they held their tenuous position, a revolutionary act of immense strength.

Rosa Parks staying in her seat on a Montgomery bus, knowing she was going against Jim Crow laws, was indeed a revolutionary act. Winston County staying in the Union when every other county in Alabama chose to secede was a revolutionary act. Blacks staying in the South after emancipation, fighting for true participation in a democracy—while local white residents tried with every tool in their arsenal, from the grandfather clause and literacy tests to poll taxes and lynchings, to keep them from voting—was a revolutionary act.

Advocacy and agitation, willingly putting the needs of a broader goal before your own personal wants, is revolutionary, and fighting for reparations is the most significant political, cultural, and spiritual revolutionary cause of our generation. Joining this most noble cause unites us with the revolutionary fighters of yesteryear. As emancipation was for Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman, as Black spiritual upliftment and liberation were for Bishop Henry McNeal Turner, as self-love and self-determination were for Marcus Garvey, Malcolm X, Fred Hampton, and Stokely Carmichael, as civil rights was for the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, John Lewis, Rosa Parks, and Fannie Lou Hamer, so should reparations be for us today.

This is their revolution. And now it's ours.

Chapter 1

Individual Reparations

One common objection to the concept of reparations is that individuals alive today did not enslave anyone nor personally implement the black codes and other racist policies. True enough; the very definition of systemic racism conveys that it is not purely the malice of individuals that prevents equality but the laws, structures, and norms of a society. Individuals acting alone cannot make or unmake unjust systems. Systemic problems require systemic solutions. So why start with individual reparations?

My faith teaches me that small acts by individuals can have a major impact on the lives of others, and even on my own soul. The same can be said for individual acts of reparation. If individuals do something, no matter how small, it can have a major impact on others, and a cumulative effect as we seek to make this world more just.

Imagine the disciples hearing Jesus speaking the words in Matthew 25:35–40:

“‘For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you or naked and gave you clothing?’

And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me.’”

Notice that the righteous did not say, “Well, I am not the reason you are hungry and thirsty,” or “You got yourself incarcerated.” No! As individuals, they worked together to find and meet those in need. Jesus is seen here identifying with the oppressed and those who are in need. Jesus also commends the righteous individuals for doing something for a particular vulnerable population, whether or not they personally participated in their oppression.

Similarly, the hero of the Good Samaritan parable sees a man lying beaten on the side of the road—a man he had not personally harmed and to whom he had no official obligation—and uses his own resources to restore the stranger to health.

“He went to him and bandaged his wounds, treating them with oil and wine. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, ‘Take care of him, and when I come back I will repay you whatever more you spend.’” (Luke 10:34–35)

When Jesus tells us to “go and do likewise” (v. 37), he compels us to follow the example of one who valued the well-being of his neighbor without assessment of guilt or innocence. The same compassion is needed today.

There are many Americans who, when confronted with a major social problem like poverty, homelessness, or underperforming schools, believe that government solutions are an overreach that unfairly burdens taxpayers. They prefer individual solutions like donating to shelters and food pantries or volunteering to help in classrooms. These are good starting points and offer a way to personally invest in one’s community. Individual reparations are also excellent starting points for people who want to address the inequities that have resulted from our country’s centuries-long oppression of African Americans.

Liberty and Justice for All

Individualism is at the heart of the American dream. Part of what makes the United States of America great is the belief that individuals can rise from rags to riches. With all of its problems, America is still a land of opportunity where people can rise out of their original socioeconomic class. While certain factors like race and the educational background of one's parents indicate the likelihood of such movement, the possibility of individual upward mobility is a hallmark of American capitalism. Both for our freedoms and opportunities, the United States stands as a beacon of light in a world filled with despotic regimes, economic limitations, and corruption run amok. For these reasons and more, America remains one of the most highly sought-after places to live. In large part, those who come to this great expanse in the Western Hemisphere do so because of the infinite opportunities that exist here. Fueled by popular culture, what is seen on television and heard in music, America is thought to provide each person access to the American dream. It has given much to those who immigrated here with extraordinarily little.

Sadly, Blacks in large part have not had the privilege of such upward mobility. In 1860, Blacks owned one-half of 1 percent of the nation's wealth, and in 1990 Blacks owned only 1.5 percent of the nation's wealth.¹ In a little over one hundred years of "freedom," Black Americans had an accretion of just 1 percentage point. Such astonishing figures should serve to admonish anyone thinking that opportunities in America are equally available to all citizens. Moreover, this sad fact helps disprove the notion that the end of slavery meant instant equality and opportunity, or even unfettered access to the liberties that make economic advancement possible.

Individual liberty, epitomized in the Bill of Rights, is the backbone of our democracy. Since its inception, however, these rights have not been accessed equally. Women and people of color have had to fight for equal rights every step of the way, and even when incorporated in the letter of the law, inclusion in practice is often challenged. Part of individual reparations involves people with unfettered access to freedom using their freedom to help make those whose rights have been limited more free.

Consider the ways certain rights have been denied to Black Americans. The First Amendment states, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.” The rights named in this amendment outline a rudimentary belief of what it means to be free: to worship in accordance with one’s conscience, to say and write what one pleases, to gather together, and to use these freedoms to critique even the very government granting these rights. However, African Americans have not always had these rights protected.

The Black-owned *Tulsa Star* newspaper printed articles critical of racism and the white power structure and encouraged Blacks to be more politically and socially active; during the 1921 massacre, the owner of the paper was run out of town and the warehouse the newspaper was in was bombed. Football player Colin Kaepernick has not been signed by any NFL team since taking a knee during the National Anthem in 2016 to protest police brutality. In the summer of 2020, when Black Lives Matter protesters marched in Washington, DC, they were met with fierce force from police and the government. When Blacks protest, no matter how mild their expression or assembly, from taking a knee to encouraging political activism, there are often severe ramifications. Meanwhile, the predominantly white crowd that descended on the nation’s capital on January 6, 2021, had the endorsement of the president and other elected officials. Many in the Republican Party continue to defend those who stormed the halls of Congress in an act of insurrection, calling it “legitimate political discourse.”²

The action items following this chapter will explain ways to use your freedoms of speech, press, and assembly to advocate for those whose freedoms have been limited.

Consider also the Second Amendment: “A well-regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed.”

I fully support the right of Americans to bear arms, but I cannot help but notice the discrepancy in the amount of debate and funds used to defend this right as compared to defending those outlined

in the First Amendment. In too many urban communities in America it is far easier to get a gun than it is to purchase a book. No wonder deaths due to homicide continue to rise in communities of color. Meanwhile, “stand your ground” laws protect individuals who shoot and kill unarmed Blacks like Trayvon Martin, killed in 2012 by self-appointed neighborhood watchman George Zimmerman, who was acquitted.

So, in urban communities this great freedom is unfortunately used as a sword giving access to guns to people who need more books, and in suburban communities it is used a shield in defense when unarmed innocent Blacks are killed.

The Third and Fourth Amendments are intended to protect people from unwarranted invasion of their private space. The Third Amendment protects citizens from being required to house soldiers, which felt very pertinent to a country still reeling from the American Revolution, when soldiers would just take quarters in or possession of people’s homes. The right to feel safe and protected in one’s own space remains central to our feelings of freedom.

Aggressive and disproportionate policing in Black communities is similarly invasive, even when the letter of the law is not violated. Since the time of slave patrols, African Americans have been under surveillance and threat. Law enforcement today is not like Andy Griffith, with his innocuous badge and gun, but more like a paramilitary group, made up of many former soldiers and equipped with military-grade equipment. Overpolicing predominantly Black areas is both a cause and an effect of inaccurate perceptions of Black men, who are in many cases no more criminal than their white counterparts. For example, a disproportionate number of drug-related arrests are of Black men (more than 25 percent, when only around 14 percent of Americans are Black), even though “drug use rates do not differ substantially by race and ethnicity and drug users generally purchase drugs from people of the same race or ethnicity.” Similarly, “the ACLU found that blacks were 3.7 times more likely to be arrested for marijuana possession than whites in 2010, even though their rate of marijuana usage was comparable.”³

Today another Third Amendment is needed for Black, brown, and other groups as it relates to technology. Edward Snowden showed

the world just how much the American government observed the everyday life of Americans, and we know that even as far back as the 1960s, technology has been used strategically in Black communities to monitor and stifle organizing.⁴ Virtually, the government has taken quarters in our homes, cars, and offices without us ever asking them to come in. Through personal items such as cell phones, televisions, computers, and smart refrigerators, the government, not to even mention the technology companies that we utilize, has the ability to take quarters in our space.

The Fourth Amendment prohibits “unreasonable searches and seizures” and warrants issued without probable cause. While this freedom works very well for most Americans, it is too often violated when policing Black communities. Cities across America have implemented “no-knock warrants,” virtually nullifying the protection of the Fourth Amendment. This is how police entered the home of Breonna Taylor, the young African American woman who was fatally shot by police in Louisville, Kentucky, in 2020. The same shameful abuse of power was used in the killing of Amir Locke in Minneapolis in 2022.

The Fifth through Eighth Amendments provide guidelines for our legal system. Most people identify the Fifth Amendment with the phrase “I plead the Fifth,” referring to its prohibition against compelling anyone to “be a witness against himself.” This amendment also protects citizens from being charged twice for the same crime (“double jeopardy”). Most significantly, however, the Fifth Amendment states that Americans cannot be “deprived of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor shall private property be taken for public use, without just compensation.” Closely related, the Sixth Amendment guarantees the right to a “speedy and public trial, by an impartial jury,” with the aid of witnesses and counsel.

There is not enough paper in the world to write detailing the gross ambivalence to and outright rejection of these rights for African Americans. Whether it be in Elaine, Arkansas; Tulsa, Oklahoma; East St. Louis; Rosewood, Florida; Wilmington, North Carolina; or any other city in which terror was inflicted on citizens in response to an alleged infraction by a Black person, no due process was considered. In the case of the Tulsa Race Massacre,

for instance, the white mob went to the county jail to abduct Dick Rowland and hang him because during a large part of American history, the sentiment was that the court system was too good for Blacks to go through. They thought, why waste taxpayer dollars on a trial, jury, judge, and prison, when we all know he or she is guilty, so let's just hang them. And hang them they did. According to the Equal Justice Initiative, between 1877 (the end of Reconstruction) and 1950, there were more than 4,400 racial terror lynchings in America.⁵ This does not include the thousands of people who suffered when Black neighborhoods and businesses were burned to the ground, people were killed, and survivors were placed in concentration camps.⁶

Furthermore, accused Blacks who did receive a trial hardly ever saw an impartial jury, as in the case of the "Scottsboro Boys," convicted of raping two white women despite the lack of evidence. Even when Blacks were killed by whites, the partial juries were almost always sympathetic to the white defendants, as in the case of Emmett Till's killers in 1955.

These horrid occurrences of racial violence make mockery of the Fifth and Sixth Amendments. In fact, but for a few exceptions such as Rosewood, Florida, where in 1994, the nine survivors of a 1923 massacre were awarded cash payments and their descendants received cash and college scholarships, virtually none of these injustices have been repaired nor even investigated, much less was any white perpetrator brought to justice.⁷ If we believe that "all men are created equal," how can one group (Blacks) suffer loss of life, property, and liberty without ever having the opportunity to seek redress in the courts? America owes them because America failed them. These Black individuals suffered violent racial attack at the hands of white individuals under the protection of law, and now it is time for both individuals and government to help repair the devastating harm that was caused.

The Seventh Amendment offers the same rights for a civil trial that the Sixth provides in criminal cases. Many situations in which Black Americans might seek reparations would be through the civil court system, and yet the most common reason civil cases are thrown out is the statute of limitations. When you consider the harm done to Black people, and the agency they held at the

time of the wrongdoing, it is easy to see why those immediately impacted did not see the courts as a realistic option for their redress, in large part because racism was central to mainstream American society and white racial terror was America's favorite pastime long before baseball was invented. Furthermore, there are some things so gross, so abominable and unconscionable, like what has happened to Black people in America, that recompense should not be barred by statutes of limitations. There is no expiration date on morality. If something was terribly wrong in 1864, it is still wrong today. The passage of time does not make something less wrong, it only compounds the damage and multiplies the suffering.

The Eighth Amendment states, "Excessive bail shall not be required, nor excessive fines imposed, nor cruel and unusual punishments inflicted." The torture inflicted on lynching victims certainly qualifies as "cruel and unusual," not to mention the horrors of slavery before that, and our entire legal and penal system continues to unfairly burden Black families through excessive bail and mass incarceration.

Because of the prohibitive cost of bail and the pressure to make a plea deal to avoid the terrible experiences in American jails, 74 percent of those locked up in local jails in America have not been convicted of a crime, according to a 2020 report by the Prison Policy Initiative.⁸ Doubly vexing is that bail, an instrument created to provide freedom to those charged with a crime, is now being implemented as a tool for keeping people in bondage.

The bail system has been largely taken over by for-profit insurance companies to keep people in financial hardship and at risk of being reincarcerated long after their sentence is done. According to an American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) report, "The for-profit bail industry is responsible for \$14 billion in bonds each year, collecting around \$2 billion a year in profits."⁹ Those profiteering off of the prison system are exploiting the poor. Due to these practices, people who have not been proven guilty of a crime are detained in jail and their families are saddled with debt even if the person was later found innocent.

America's prison-industrial complex harms people of all races, but African Americans suffer disproportionately, as researchers David Arnold, Will Dobbie, and Crystal S. Yang reported in 2018:

Racial disparities exist at every stage of the U.S. criminal justice system. Compared to observably similar whites, blacks are more likely to be searched for contraband, more likely to experience police force, more likely to be charged with a serious offense, more likely to be convicted, and more likely to be incarcerated. Racial disparities are particularly prominent in the setting of bail: in our data, black defendants are 3.6 percentage points more likely to be assigned monetary bail than white defendants and, conditional on being assigned monetary bail, receive bail amounts that are \$9,923 greater.¹⁰

Although Blacks make up 12 percent of the US population, we make up 38 percent of the jail population in America. That is triple our number in the general population. Does that mean that Blacks are three times more criminal than other American citizens? Of course not. No, we need to critically examine policing in majority Black communities (relevant to the discussion of societal and institutional reparations later in this book), and individually we need to explore why people feel the need to call the police on Blacks for doing innocuous acts like going to work, barbecuing, and so many other mundane activities.

What those endeavoring to assist in providing individual reparations need to understand is that after emancipation from chattel slavery, the institution did not go away, it simply evolved, and this evolution was empowered by the US Constitution, in the same amendment that supposedly liberated enslaved people. The Thirteenth Amendment, passed in 1865, says, “Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction.”

Did you catch that? In liberating enslaved people from involuntary servitude, the Thirteenth Amendment legalized slavery as punishment for a crime. Therefore, immediately after enslaved people were freed, states and communities began to pass laws circumscribing Black life, through vagrancy laws, making it illegal to be unemployed, and through loopholes in contracts for the only jobs available for Blacks during this time in the South—sharecropping and menial labor. Convict leasing, also known as chain gangs, dominated the southern workforce in the aftermath of slavery, hired out

to businesses or the state to dig ditches, work on roads, construct buildings, and fulfill other public utility functions. This is but one way that the United States has kept African Americans under the thumb of oppression for more than a century and a half beyond emancipation.

Free to Advance the Cause of Freedom

Clearly, America's moral and political transgressions have transformed its own Bill of Rights into a bill of what ought to be made right for African Americans. Hence this author calls on individuals to take action toward righting these wrongs. The individual action steps laid out in the pages that follow are a starting point. Using your own time, energy, and resources will make a difference on a small scale, empowering you to join together with others in your community to make bigger changes, and ultimately to influence government institutions to make reparations on a national level.

Those who initiate individual reparations are like those abolitionists who individually found ways to liberate enslaved people from bondage. They did not own enslaved people themselves nor did they support the idea, but they still went a step further and sought ways as individuals to dismantle the wicked institution. Author Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote antislavery novels and journalist William Lloyd Garrison chronicled the terrible deeds and abuses of slave owners. While Harriet Tubman personally led at least seventy people to freedom on the Underground Railroad, other individuals provided their homes, churches, and barns as stops to conceal weary passengers. Frederick Douglass spoke vehemently against slavery from his own experience as a former enslaved person. These individuals were all seen as radicals but acted for others because of their faith. Their individual bravery should be an inspiration to those of us who believe in true justice to do the same. You do not have to be personally participating in or directly suffering from oppression as terrible as slavery to want to eradicate and bring others relief from racial injustice.

Action 1

Acknowledge Your Privilege

The term *white privilege* entered our contemporary lexicon when women's studies professor Peggy McIntosh published a paper in 1988 called "White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences through Work in Women's Studies." Her paper included forty-six examples of this privilege, holding up a mirror to white Americans' experience and opening a window into how their experiences are not normative for nonwhites, especially Black Americans. These examples include seeing people of your own race commonly represented in media, having "flesh"-colored bandages be similar in color to your own flesh, and facing a person of your own race when you see "the person in charge."¹¹

The first thing an individual can do to begin repairing the injustice to Black Americans is to personally accept the truth that there exists a privilege in this country for those who have white skin. Acknowledging this privilege does not diminish any accomplishment of the acknowledger or the difficulty in overcoming challenges. It is simply a humble statement of awareness that life is easier (not easy) because of the white skin that one has.

Consider an analogy: you can walk a mile barefoot on a rocky road, but it's a lot easier to walk that same mile with socks on and a whole lot easier to walk that mile with walking shoes on. Neither article of clothing takes away the truth that you walked the mile, but it is honest and fair to acknowledge that you walked in socks or shoes and that those who walked in bare feet may need more attention paid to their bruised feet after their walk.

Another way of recognizing that privilege exists is asking yourself this question: Would I want to trade places with the person who had to walk the mile on a rocky road with no shoes or socks? Would any white person want to trade places with a Black person in light of racial profiling by police and store clerks; having a lower life expectancy and net worth; or facing discrimination in applying for a home loan, country club membership, or job?

The American colonies were founded by European immigrants

for other European immigrants. This land was never meant to be a place where anyone besides white settlers could prosper. The egalitarian populism that swept through America from the American Revolution, the land rush of the westward expansion, the establishment of public education, the New Deal, and the GI Bill were all meant to improve the lives of white Americans. That is privilege: to have a nation, from its inception, create laws, social norms, and customs to solely benefit people like you.

One way to subvert white privilege is by raising awareness of it. Hence, writing an opinion column acknowledging how you've benefited from white privilege and participation in white supremacy, or privately sharing this information with an organization that is seeking reparations and needs such anecdotal information, is a great first step that white individuals can take. The voices of white allies for reparations are invaluable in this fight to change the hearts and minds of Americans. Additionally, if you are being interviewed on a podcast or for a magazine, or if you receive an award, be up front and acknowledge your privilege. You could say something like, "I first and foremost want to acknowledge the ways my white privilege has helped get me here."

Using your voice to share that idea helps more people understand the systemic levels of white supremacy. Acknowledging one's privilege is akin to golf players acknowledging their handicap so that the game can be fairer for everyone. Privilege does not disappear when it is acknowledged, but doing so provides context for recognizing how systemically America has catered to people with white or fairer skin.

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