

***WAKING UP WHITE* by Debby Irving**

Facilitation and Discussion Guide*

Introduction:

In *Waking Up White*, Irving offers a personal exploration of how Americans are socialized to hold racial biases and stereotypes, as well as a manual to begin to deconstruct those false beliefs and reach a deeper understanding of modern-day racism.

Facilitation Tips:

Conversations about race, racism, whiteness and privilege can often be uncomfortable. It is important to create a discussion space in which participants are made to feel safe and their perspectives respected. Below are some tips for facilitating conversations about difficult topics.

1. **Set group goals** for the conversation before it begins. Discuss why participants are in the room, what they hope to learn and what they believe constitutes a productive and successful discussion.
2. **Establish community guidelines** prior to the start of the conversation. These communally-created rules ensure that everyone has an equal opportunity to participate.
 - Listen to Understand, not respond: Encourage participants to actively listen to understand what others are saying and learn about their values & experiences.
 - Share Space and Time: If you are someone who talks easily, we encourage you to listen more. If you are someone who tends to keep your thoughts to yourself, we encourage you to speak up.
 - Learn from situations where impact was different from intent: Remember it's not our intentions that matter, it's the impact our actions had that need to be addressed.
 - Choose Growth over Comfort: We encourage people to recognize when they are uncomfortable, sit with it and know that is a sign of growth.
 - Confidentiality: "What is said here, stays here. What is learned can leave."
3. Actively facilitate. Don't be afraid to reroute the conversation if it strays too far off track, or to solicit answers from those who have not spoken often.
4. At the same time, encourage participants to explore difficult subjects and to push personal boundaries, even if it means making mistakes.
5. Debrief after the discussion is finished. Ask participants what went well and what did not.

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*This discussion guide is an edited version from [ARAC Reads Facilitation and Discussion Guide](#) Compiled by the Religious Action Center and Rabbi Andrea Goldstein

Discussion Questions:

The following questions are divided according to the sections of *Waking Up White*.

I. Childhood in White (p.1-26)

In this section of the book, Ms. Irving thinks back to the assumptions, both spoken and unspoken, that her family transmitted about race and class, self and others.

- Thinking back, did your family ever talk about issues of race and class? If so, what was the content of those discussions?
- As a child, what was your understanding of why some people were wealthy and some people were not?
- What was your family's attitude about people in power?

For Discussion Leaders: Allow people to discuss what unspoken (or spoken) messages they may have absorbed about race and class from their childhoods. If people share that they were only taught to see people as people – and to not see race or class – ask them if they think this was a good thing, or if it may have been harmful in any way.

II. Midlife Wake--Up Calls (p. 27-60)

In this section, Ms. Irving shares some of the sobering history she learned in her “Racial and Cultural Identity” class. On p. 30 she writes, “Not thinking I had a race, the idea of asking me to study my ‘racial identity’ felt ludicrous.”

- What are the ways in which you describe yourself to others? By gender? Religion? Sexual identity? Marital status? Familial status (parent, sibling, grandparent, etc.)? Is race ever a part of that description?
- Is it important for white people to perceive and understand whiteness?
- What “aha” or “waking up” moments did you have while reading this section of the book? If you did not have a moment like this while reading the book, do you remember having a “waking up” moment about race previously? What was it? How did it occur?

For Discussion Leaders: Be sure to remain aware of and sensitive to the racial and ethnic diversity of the participants. Individuals may provide very different answers about whiteness and “waking up” based on their own experiences and identities, but all responses are valid.

III. Why Didn't I Wake Up Sooner? (61-92)

Here Ms. Irving delves more deeply into white privilege and starts to discuss the discomfort we can feel in speaking to one another across racial lines. On p. 71 she writes: "Privilege is a strange thing in that you notice it least when you have it most." She also shares part of a piece called "Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack."

- What privileges are granted simply for being white?
- What complications arise in facilitating conversations across race? What role does white privilege have in shaping these complications?
- Have you ever had anyone doubt or minimized an experience of racism, sexism, homophobia or anti-Semitism? How did that make you feel?
- Have you ever second-guessed another person's experience when it comes to racism or some other form of discrimination?

IV. Rethinking Key Concepts (p. 93-112)

In these chapters Ms. Irving debunks a number of stories that white people tell themselves about their relationship with race in America.

- How do good people help to perpetuate systemic racism?
- How does "colorblindness" help to perpetuate systemic racism?
- What is the Robin Hood syndrome and how does it affect white and black people?
- Have the social justice programs in our organizations and in our community played into any of these stories? If so, how?

V. Twenty--Five Years of Tossing and Turning (p. 113-156)

Ms. Irving speaks about instances in her life of trying to work with people of color, of mistakes she made and lessons she learned.

- Have you tried to form relationships across racial lines? If so, were you successful? If not, what has held you back?
- When do you feel inside or outside of social circles?
- What do these chapters suggest, if anything, about the generational effects of racism?
- On p. 128, Ms. Irving writes: "White people becoming racially aware and coaching other white people to do the same is so important." Why is it important for white people to take this on?

For Discussion Leaders: On p. 145, in discussing the aftermath of Jane Elliott's controversial experiment, Ms. Irving writes: "I wonder why that same outrage against her experiment, which ostracized white children for one day, doesn't carry over to how white people respond to the way people of color, especially black men, women and children, have been treated for years." Point this out and discuss.

VI. Leaving My Comfort Zone (p157-184)

In this section, Ms. Irving details her work in becoming a diversity and antiracism teacher. She shares guidelines regarding conversational ground rules on p. 172.

- Do you agree with the guidelines Ms. Irving describes? In your opinion, are any guidelines missing?
- How can white people prepare to listen, without judgment, to the experiences of people with color? Why is it important for them to do so?

For Discussion Leaders: On p. 183, focus on the concept of the “Beloved Community.” Ask how people feel about this concept and try to articulate realistic avenues and obstacles in making this idea a reality.

VII. Inner Work (p.185-216)

These chapters detail the continuing work that white people need to do in order to be partners in the work of dismantling racism.

- Discuss the following topics:
 - A multicultural approach vs. a “melting pot” approach when thinking about communities
 - Becoming culturally competent
 - The often-hidden dominant white culture
 - Interdependence vs. individualism
 - The difference between equality and equity

VIII. Outer Work and Reclaiming My Humanity (p. 217-249)

These chapters begin to help us think about where we might want to go from here.

- On p. 219 Ms. Irving writes: “Either I’m intentionally and strategically working against [racism] or I’m aiding and abetting the system.” Do you agree with this statement?
Why or why not?
- How can you move from being a bystander to an ally? Be specific.
- What qualities make a good ally? What behaviors or attitudes can compromise allyship?
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- What can we gain – as individuals and as a community – by working together with individuals and communities of color to end racism? What have we lost if we miss out on these opportunities?
- Where should we go from here?

Additional Resources

Suggested Websites

- www.rac.org/civil--rights
- www.debbyirving.com
- <https://www.laxwakingupwhite.com/>

Suggested Books

- *Just Mercy* by Bryan Stevenson
- *The New Jim Crow* by Michelle Alexander
- *Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates
- *So You Want to Talk About Race* by Ijeoma Oluo
- *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration* by Isabel Wilkerson
- *The Sum of Us: What Racism Cost Everyone* by Heather McGhee