

# From White Racist to White Anti-Racist the life-long journey

by Tema Okun, **dRWORKS**  
2006

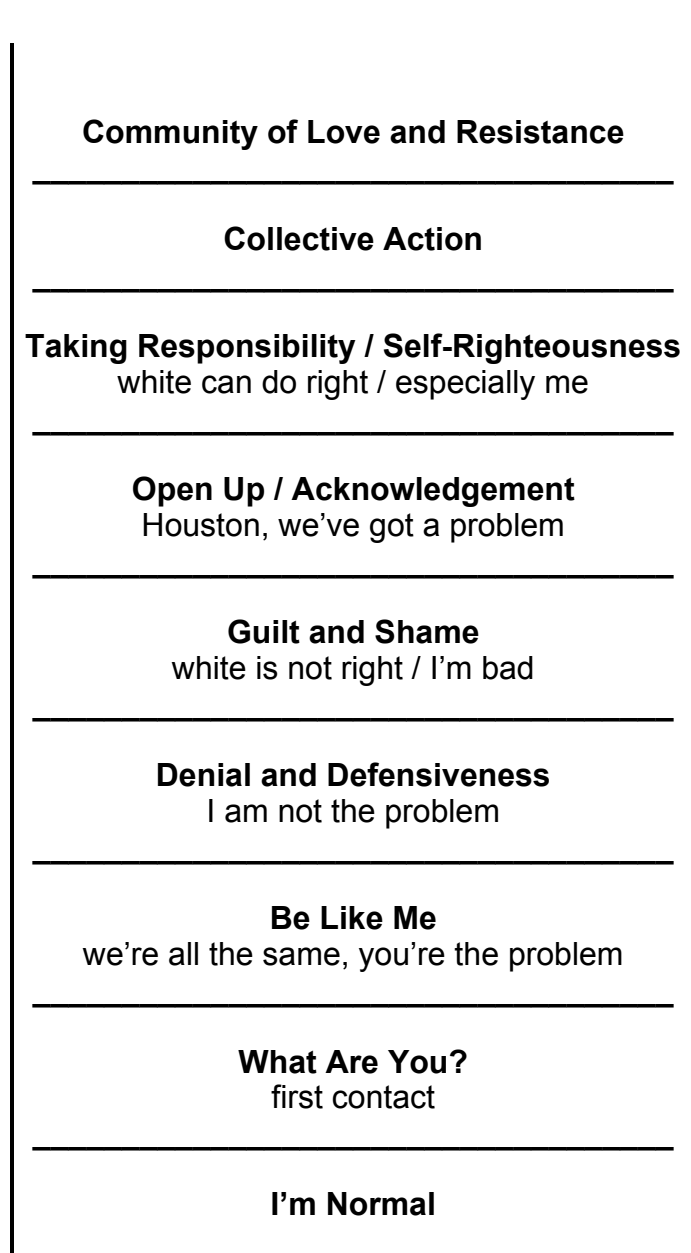
*Note 1: This article is written by a white person about white people. Therefore, I have written using personal pronouns (I, we, ours, us). I did this because I find it difficult to write in the 'third person' as if I am not somehow attached to this material or part of the group to which this material applies.*

*Note 2: I dedicate this article to my long-time colleague Kenneth Jones, who is responsible for much of what I understand about life and kept me laughing about all that I don't. I love you and miss you beyond words.*

This article is meant to accompany the ladder of empowerment for white people, which is our attempt (referring to **dRworks**, an organization described below) to distinguish the different stages that white people go through as we develop awareness of our relationship to racism. This work draws on the thinking and experience of many people; those who have been directly quoted are listed at the end. The rest is the result of my exposure to the thinking and experience of many trainers and participants in the Dismantling Racism process, including **dRworks** colleagues, as well as friends and colleagues doing anti-racism work. Any usefulness found here should be credited to the larger community of anti-racism activists; any errors or flawed thinking is mine alone.

The basic purpose of this article is to help white people understand our identity as white people within a racist system which assumes our superiority while at the same time challenging that assumption and replacing it with a positive, anti-racist identity. While many white people seem to think that the solution is to claim 'colorblindness,' both with regards to ourselves and to people of color, we believe that it is absolutely critical to accept our identity as white people within a white group, understanding that this association profoundly affects the quality of our lives politically, economically, socially. We must then work, in the words of Beverly Daniel Tatum in her excellent book on racial identity development **Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting in the Cafeteria Together** (p. 94), "to feel good about it in the context of a commitment to a just society. This requires two tasks: the abandonment of individual racism and the recognition of and opposition to institutional and cultural racism."

## THE LADDER



It is important to note that although the ladder of empowerment appears linear, it is only linear in that a person cannot move from a lower stage to a higher stage without going through each intermediary stage. For example, I cannot go from the

perception and experience that “I’m normal” to the perception and experience that “I’m opening up” without first going through the stages of ‘what are you?’, ‘be like me,’ ‘denial and defensiveness,’ and ‘guilt and shame.’

It is not linear in that we can move through to ‘higher’ stages and then five minutes later drop back to a ‘lower’ stage as a result of a challenging interaction. Unlike moving up, it is possible to skip stages moving down. For example, I can feel like I am ‘taking responsibility’ as a white person for my racism and then, when challenged by a colleague on something I have done that is assumptive and/or patronizing, quickly slide back into ‘denial and defensiveness.’ We move up and down this ladder in a lifetime, in a year, in a week, in a day, in an hour. The lower we are on the ladder, the more we collude, or cooperate, with racism. In fact, one of the ways that institutional and cultural racism works is to keep pushing us down the ladder. Our goal, as we develop our practice as anti-racist white activists, is that we stay for shorter periods at the lower stages and for longer periods at the higher stages.

This is also not a linear ladder in that the stages don’t begin and end distinctly. They overlap and elements of one stage will show up in another. You will notice seemingly contradictory elements in the same stage and similar elements showing up in different stages. This is the nature of identity development. The ladder is a generalized attempt to describe the different steps that we go through as white people in developing our awareness and abilities as anti-racist activists. Where we are on the ladder depends at any given moment on our history, our experience, our relationships, our experience with other oppressions, and our exposure to information.

Movement up the ladder tends to happen as a result of both relationships and information. We have found that relationships with people of color and other white people struggling to deal with racism have been very important in helping us to move up the ladder. Actually knowing someone who can help us, through their life stories and experience, see the world in a new way and understand the different realities of being white and a person of color in the U.S., has proven to be extremely critical to our development as white anti-racists. These relationships teach us that racism is not a thing of the past and that it has to do with institutional and cultural legacies, not just mean-spirited personal intentions. Sometimes exposure to overt (meaning hard to dismiss) incidents of racism, either in our personal lives or through media, books, magazine articles, TV, movies, are catalysts to moving us from one stage to another. One of the reasons that we promote the development of white caucuses at **dRworks** is because caucuses can be a place where we can get the support and help we need to broaden our awareness and move up the ladder.

There are many ways to use the ladder. When we work with white caucuses, we often draw the ladder on newsprint without any words inside and ask people to talk about the different stages they have gone through as they develop in their awareness of

white privilege and racism. As people name these stages, sometimes they hit on the stages we have listed here, sometimes they name emotions and thoughts that fit within the stages. We begin to sketch in each of the stages and talk about them in some depth.

Once people have an understanding of the stages and the ways in which these stages are and are not linear, we ask people to think about where they are now, where they were 10 years ago, where they were 5 years ago, and where they would like to be. We talk about what made it possible for people to move both up and down the ladder and what we can do to support each other in moving up and how we can challenge each other, with care and attention, when we move down.

This is just one way that this ladder might prove useful. Please feel free to expand its uses and to add to it, as it is an ongoing teaching and learning for us all. If you have ideas or feedback, please send it to us at the website (see last page).

The ladder begins where we all begin, which is with the belief that, in relationship to race, we're normal.

## **I'M NORMAL**

also known as the innocence/ignorance stage

In this stage, we

- do not see ourselves as white
- assume racial differences are unimportant
- are naive about the connection of power to race and racism or oppression (we do not have a power analysis)
- do not have much experience with people of color
- believe people of color want to assimilate
- see all issues of race as individual

In this stage, we think of ourselves as the racial norm. In fact, we don't really see ourselves as white because we are the norm and therefore don't need to be racially described. We have little or no consciousness about our white privilege or other advantages we receive as a result of simply being white. We passively absorb subtle messages -- from the media, from books, from movies, from political and religious leaders, from many adults -- that "white people are generally good and they're like us, and we're like them." Beverly Daniel Tatum notes that, because white people "represent the societal norm, they can easily reach adulthood without thinking much about their racial group" (1997, p. 93). She also notes that white people and communities don't talk about race (we remain silent) and "as a consequence, whites

tend to think of racial identity as something that other people have, not something that is salient for them” (p. 94).

As a result, we assume or internalize the notion that we are normal and it is people of other races who are ‘the other.’ This leads to a sometimes subtle (not always) internalized belief that we are better (superior) and they are inferior. These assumptions and internalized messages begin to shape our perceptions and define our reality without us even realizing it.

We tend to move out of this stage when we are exposed to information or experiences which lead us to see that difference and unfairness exists.

## **WHAT ARE YOU?**

also known as first contact

In this stage, we:

- have our first contacts with people of color
- notice they are not like us (happens as early as the age of 3)
- work to make sense of the difference, particularly if we associate the difference with additional information about unfairness or discrimination
- begin to notice our own prejudices, or those of our family
- continue to see issues of race as individual and still have not developed a power analysis

Beverly Daniel Tatum calls this stage ‘disintegration,’ describing it as the point at which we have our first meaningful contact with a person of color and where we may be forced to notice firsthand that racism, or unfairness is at work. She writes “this new awareness is characterized by discomfort. The uncomfortable emotions of guilt, shame, and anger are often related to a new awareness of one’s personal prejudices or the prejudices within one’s family” (p. 97).

Discomfort and guilt can be particularly strong for those of us whose family members are visibly bigoted or racist and may be less for those of us whose family members are more open or anti-racist. We still tend to assume that racial and cultural differences are unimportant. We have not developed an understanding of the ways in which racial differences are tied to power differences. We do not find or put ourselves in many situations with people of color, and when we are or do, our interactions are often characterized by naiveté, innocence, ignorance, or timidity.

We tend to move out of this stage when we take in information about racism and discrimination experienced by people of color, either through relationships with people

of color, with anti-racist white people, or through exposure to new information (books, movies, news). In our attempts to understand (and sometimes control) the dissonance we feel when we notice racism and discrimination, we tend to move to the next stage, adopting either the position that *we're all the same* (so we can feel ok about the difference and unfairness) or the position that *you're the problem* (so we can blame someone for it). Our own sense or experience of difference (because of gender, sexuality, class, disability, etc.) can either help us move into a new stage or work to keep us in this one, depending on how we relate to our own difference.

## **BE LIKE ME**

also known as we're all the same, you're the problem

In this stage, we

- want to be seen as an individual
- begin to sense white privilege with little or no awareness yet of power
- believe we can 'flatten out' differences
- believe in importance of 'fairness'
- feel apologetic, guilty, or fearful towards people of color
- see racism as a problem between individuals
- either over-identify with people of color or think people of color should 'just get over it'
- can see the differences as 'exotic' or 'erotic'
- don't see ourselves as part of the problem

One of our reactions to noticing racial difference is to believe the difference is OK as long as we assume that 'you,' 'the other,' are essentially like me or want to be like me. Racial differences at this point feel threatening (I need you to be like me and to the extent you aren't, there is something wrong with you), invisible (I don't see any difference, we're the same), or exotic (your difference is fascinating to me as it would be to a 'tourist;' there is nothing significant about it other than as a source of fascination). In this stage, we sometimes assume the role of 'tour guide' to the dominant culture, trying to help people better assimilate because we assume this is what they want. We are not aware of this assumption (or others like it) because we also assume that our world view is the universal world view (everyone thinks like we do).

In this stage, we want to be seen as an individual and often become angry when we are 'lumped in' with the white group. As Beverly Daniel Tatum notes, "when white men and women begin to understand that they are viewed as members of a dominant racial group not only by other whites but also by people of color, they are sometimes troubled, even angered, to learn that simply because of their group status they are viewed with suspicion by many people of color. 'I'm an individual, view me as an individual!'" (p. 104) We carry a certain blindness, wanting to be seen as separate from

our group while failing to acknowledge that people of color learn very early that they are seen by others as members of a group, and often only as members of that group.

Our strong feelings about this are supported by the dominant culture, which teaches us to value rugged individuality and to believe in meritocracy (the idea that our hard work is why we succeed and our success has nothing to do with membership in the white group). When we begin to hear about systemic racist barriers to achievement and success, we hear that as meaning we don't deserve and didn't earn what we have, making it even more difficult for us to identify as part of the white group, since doing so erases our precious individuality (Tatum, p. 103).

At the same, we begin to have an understanding that racism exists and so may feel apologetic towards people of color. We may see ourselves as less prejudiced than most other white people, which presents an interesting contradiction. We want to be seen as different from (and better than) the very white group which we don't acknowledge. We tend to take accusations of racism very personally because we believe that racist thoughts or behaviors require intent.

Paul Kivel, in his excellent book **Uprooting Racism: How White People Can Work for Social Justice**, notes (p. 61) talks about how another racist response to difference is the eroticization of people of color. "White people's images of people of color . . . make them seem not only dangerous, but also exotic and erotic. Men of color . . . have been portrayed as wild, bestial, aggressive sexual beings with little or no restraint . . . . Women of color are portrayed as more passionate and sensual than white women." This eroticization of difference produces naïve and devastating responses. For some, it appears as inappropriate curiosity about hair and skin color; for others it shows up as extreme fear and anger which in turn leads to the use of force, which has historically included and continues to include lynching, rape, mutilation, and killing.

One of our most common responses when first noticing race is fear. We are taught at an early age to fear difference, and because we are the norm, white, we are systematically taught to fear people of color, who are different. The irony is that this occurs where the psychological and physical harm done to people of color by white people is historically overwhelming, while the fear that white people feel toward people of color, who have been and continue to be portrayed as dangerous and untrustworthy, is largely "manufactured and used to justify repression and exploitation of communities of color" (Kivel, p. 53).

This manufactured fear plays an important role in keeping us in this stage. Fear supports our ability to dehumanize people of color, the 'other.' In this way, fear prevents us from forming the relationships that break through this dehumanization and encourages us to remain stuck in our stereotypes.

This is probably one of the most challenging stages from which to move, because the next stage is denial and defensiveness, which is a direct result of beginning to understand the pervasiveness of racism. Our first reaction to this understanding is to resist or deny it, staying in 'be like me' because of the psychic safety it provides.

One of the ways that we stay in the 'be like me' stage is to blame people of color for racism. We wonder why they 'have to make such a big deal about it' and become upset when racism is named (as opposed to becoming upset about the racism).

We would suggest that U.S. dominant culture is stuck in this stage precisely because our institutions and organizations want to avoid responsibility, guilt, and shame about the past. As a result, the dominant culture suggests that racism is a thing of the past, that any remaining racism is the result of the personal racism of a few ignorant people, and that the playing field is now level.

## **DENIAL and DEFENSIVENESS**

also known as 'I am not the problem'

In this stage, we:

- are forced to see ourselves as part of the dominant group
- blame people of color for creating their problems
- deny any privilege or power we have as members of the white group
- believe people of color aren't trying hard enough
- look for evidence of reverse discrimination
- insist the playing field is level
- believe in the power of individual above all

At some point, we are forced to acknowledge the significance of racial difference, usually through the depth of an emerging relationship or by witnessing undeniable racism. At this point, Beverly Daniel Tatum notes that we either "deny the validity of the information being presented or psychologically or physically withdraw from it" (p. 98). The logic is that if I don't talk about it or spend time with people who make me think about it, I won't have to be uncomfortable. This is when we say (or think) things like "why do you have to make such a big deal about race all the time?" We may believe that too much attention is placed on cultural differences or that people of color are 'overly sensitive.' We deny that racism is the problem and believe that talking about racism is the problem.

When we do admit that racism is happening, we see it as isolated incidents rather than a daily, constant grind.



Interestingly, denial and defensiveness are often connected to fear of loss. Those of us who have developed friendships with people of color may fear losing them in the (sometimes mistaken) assumption that acknowledging our difference or our own racism will end the relationship. This is particularly acute when the person of color with whom we are friends is in a stage of denial also. We fear the loss of our ability to define (or control) our own reality (and everybody else's; this is where we begin to sense that the way we view the world is narrow and limited and may not apply to everyone).

Some of us stay in this stage because of our fear of losing family and friends, who threaten to 'leave us' if we insist on acknowledging and taking responsibility for racism, or who characterize our behavior as a 'phase' that we're going through and one we'll get over once we come to our senses.

One potent form of denial and defensiveness is intellectualizing, where we say all the right things and use our intellectual understanding of racism to distance ourselves from taking a look at how we benefit from and perpetuate racism. We may believe that any advantages we have as white people are because people of color aren't trying hard enough. It is in this stage that we experience white people as victims of reverse discrimination, insisting the playing field is level or that people of color get unfair advantages because of affirmative action and 'quotas.' We experience the taking away of an unfair privilege (historic admission to school where admission was denied to African-American and Native students) as though we are being treated unfairly, no matter how clear it is that we have been given unfair advantages (a history of admissions because of race, family ties, ability to pay based on historical legacy of wealth, etc.). [Thanks to columnist Molly Ivins for making this point.]

A specific form of denial is the "I marched with Dr. King" defense, where we bring up past participation in civil rights marches or all that we've done to help the cause to make the point that we are not racist, do not participate in racism, and are 'good.' Joan Olsson in her extremely useful **Detour Spotting for White Anti-Racists**, notes that "this denial of contemporary racism, based on inaccurate assessment of both history and current society, romanticizes the past and diminishes today's reality" (p. 11). One of the reasons we use this form of denial is because it allows us to separate ourselves from other white people and because we assume that admitting our own continued racism means admitting that we are essentially 'bad.'

We may get angry when people of color meet together to address their problems because we feel excluded (why can't I be there with them?). We are generally unwilling to look at what it means to be white without being in a mixed group where people of color can 'help' us understand (what we are often looking for is reassurance that we are 'ok'). We may feel threatened because people of color are making decisions which we can't see (or control).

We return to this stage again and again whenever anything happens to make us feel vulnerable and/or attacked for being white. This happens, for example when we meet a person of color in a stage of rage or exclusion/immersion who doesn't want to deal with us simply because we are white.

This is another hard stage to leave because we fear admitting what we might have to do if we acknowledge the reality of difference and racism. We also fear the feelings of guilt and shame that automatically come with acknowledging racism, privilege, and internalized white supremacy.

## **GUILT, SHAME, and BLAME**

also known as: white is not right, I'm bad

In this stage, we:

- really feel and think that racism is a very big problem and that we are part of that problem
- understand at some level that we are racist
- feel guilt and shame, often deeply
- blame people of color for racism as a way of avoiding our guilt and shame
- either feel extremely responsible for racism (sometimes taking it on as our primary issue) or deny any responsibility at all for racism (I am not racist)

In this stage, we begin to understand the pervasiveness of racism and that we have a part in it; guilt and shame are an inevitable result of this realization. As our understanding grows and we begin to 'see' white privilege and the ways in which we internalize white privilege, the feelings of guilt and shame become stronger.

Most of the time we don't notice or question our whiteness. However, when the subject is racism many of us don't want to be white, because it opens us to charges of being racist and brings up feelings of guilt, shame, embarrassment. and hopelessness.

Paul Kivel

One of the main reasons we stay in 'be like me' and/or 'denial and defensiveness' is to avoid coming to this stage and having these feelings.

Actually, this is not a stage where we want to stay very long. Guilt and shame eventually turn to resentment against the very things that are causing these feelings ("I don't want

to feel guilty and ashamed any more, so I won't"). This resentment often leads us back into denial, defensiveness, and an inability to be open to what is really happening. [Thanks to Leonard Pitts, a columnist for the Miami Herald, for making this connection.] We suggest that most of white America responds with resentment when

we are asked to take responsibility for our role in racism; the reason for this is because we have no models for how to handle the feelings of guilt and shame which we know are inevitably attached to taking responsibility for racism.

It is also possible for feelings of guilt and shame to turn into fear and anger directed toward people of color. Beverly Daniel Tatum explains the logic this way: “if there is a problem with racism, then you people of color must have done something to cause it. And if you would just change your behavior, the problem would go away” (p. 101). We turn to this argument because it relieves us of all responsibility for individual or social change. This is also the stage where we say things like “don’t blame me” because “I never owned slaves,” “I didn’t vote for David Duke,” or “my family didn’t join the Klan.” Joan Olsson explains that we respond this way because we tend to hear blame “whenever the issue of racism is brought up, whether or not blame has been placed on us. As beneficiaries of racism and white privilege, we sometimes strike a defensive posture even when we are not being individually blamed. We may personalize the remarks, put ourselves in the center, [not realizing that] most references to racism are not directed personally at us. It is the arrogance of [our] privilege that drags the focus back to us” (p. 10).

This can also be a stage of profound personal transformation. This is the point at which many white people begin to understand that we must take responsibility for racism, even if we weren’t personally involved in its historical foundations. We begin to understand that we are participants in racist institutions and a racist culture, that we do benefit from racism, and that we participate in perpetuating racism, even when that is not our intention.

This can be an opportune time for white caucuses and support from other white people, because these provide “space to speak with honesty and candor rarely possible in mixed-race groups” (Tatum, 1997, p. 111). It is at this stage, if we are to move through it, that we learn to sit with our discomfort and our feelings (without immediately taking action and/or denying them), with the understanding that the ability to sit with ourselves, with a sense of both mercy and love, is key to our development as an anti-racist.

## **OPENING UP/ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

also known as “Houston, we’ve got a problem”

In this stage, we:

- see racism as illogical
- relate to people of color who are like us
- are often frustrated by separation (by caucusing, for example)

- feel apologetic for our privileges
- have a general understanding that racism is a problem without a strong analysis of the ways in which it is personal, institutional, and cultural
- see racism as a result of flaws in the system (as opposed to understanding that the system is founded on racism)
- can over-identify with people of color
- are enthusiastic about 'celebrating' diversity, without understanding the power dynamics of racism

In this stage, those of us who believe in the power of logic see racism as illogical. We also talk about it in terms of lack of fairness. We begin to admit that racism and white privilege are serious problems. We begin to see ourselves as members of the dominant group and to understand that there are political and social benefits attached to this group. We tend to see power differences as personal (the result of personal circumstances) and we believe in the importance of reducing all kinds of prejudice.

At this stage, we may begin to feel productive anger, or anger at the reality of racism and what it has done to us as white people in terms of separating us from people of color and deeply damaging our world view.

One of the ways in which we move from guilt and shame to this stage is to distance ourselves from white people and over-identify with people of color. Beverly Daniel Tatum quotes one of the white students from her class: "I wanted to pretend I was Black, live with them, celebrate their culture, deny my whiteness completely. Basically I wanted to escape the responsibility that came with identifying myself as white" (p. 106). This is the stage where cultural appropriation takes place, where we take pieces of the cultures of people of color (their hair styles, their dress, their religious or spiritual rituals) without having relationships with communities of color or an understanding of the history or meaning of the relationship of these pieces to the larger culture.

We have a deeper awareness of other races as significantly different, but we may not yet have the information or awareness to understand the ways in which power differences play a role. We may be unsettled by separatism and feel we cannot learn and grow when people are separated.

Although at this stage we have come to "understand the everyday reality of racism, whiteness is still experienced as a source of shame rather than as a source of pride" (Tatum, p. 107). It's at this stage that we also tend to seek a "certificate of innocence" (Olsson, p. 18) where "we seek or expect from people of color some public or private recognition and appreciation for our anti-racism. Other times we are looking for a 'certificate of innocence' telling us we are one of the good white people." This can take us back to denial and defensiveness when a person of color is displeased with us

and we take the attitude “well, if the very people I’m doing all this for don’t want my help, why bother?” (Olsson, p. 18).

This is a delicate stage because we have yet to identify our own self-interest in doing anti-racism work and can easily be derailed.

We can move to the next stage through pro-active efforts to build relationships with anti-racist whites and people of color, through study and analysis of racism and its relationship to cultural and institutional power, a growing willingness to be uncomfortable so that we put ourselves in places (emotional, intellectual, and physical) we have not been before, and through continued work on issues of racism in our lives.

## **TAKING RESPONSIBILITY/SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS**

also known as white can do right, especially me

At this stage, we:

- see ourselves as part of the white group
- understand and begin to take responsibility for our power and privilege as part of the white group
- are comfortable with separation
- continue to have feelings of guilt, anger, frustration, but also of joy because of deepening relationships and increased multicultural experience
- distinguish between commitment and perfection
- see challenges as teachers
- participate in individual and collective action
- value self-reflection
- use our racist thoughts and behaviors to deepen understanding and change thoughts and behaviors
- think of ourselves as separate from and ‘better’ than most other white people
- feel our commitment to anti-racist work very deeply, leading to self-righteousness

In this stage, we begin to think about what we are going to do about racism and white privilege. We engage in the six ‘Rs’: reading, reflection, remembering (our own involvement in racist thoughts, beliefs, actions), risk-taking, rejection (a willingness to take risks and be rejected without turning away from a commitment to fight racism), and relationship-building. As a result, we begin to develop a power analysis, to see racism as not just individual, but as cultural and institutional.

Even though our analysis of racism is expanding, much of the work at this stage is happening on a personal level. We are deepening our understanding of our own world view and how it does not represent a universal experience. We begin to accept, respect, and appreciate white people (particularly those who are anti-racist activists) and people of color. We begin to take responsibility for our privilege and power and recognize our self-interest in dismantling racism.

At this stage, we are comfortable with the need for separation and begin to look for support from other white people. Feelings of guilt, anger, frustration, and anxiety (fear of unknown) continue to appear but can be liberating as well as painful. We begin to understand that there is no way to do anti-racist work without making mistakes, although this understanding is still 'young' and our self-judgment and judgment of others is still very high.

We are more open to seeing challenges by people of color and other white people as 'teaching moments' and opportunities instead of simply threatening. We are more able to accept the rage expressed by people of color (or white people) without taking it personally, understanding that rage is often an appropriate response to racist oppression. We seek opportunities to be involved in cross-cultural interactions. We begin to be knowledgeable about cultural differences and to understand the limits of our knowledge.

At this stage, we are also in great danger of falling victim to false pride and self-righteousness. We find ourselves talking about white people as 'they' (because we are so judgmental of the white group and most people in it and see ourselves as separate from and 'better' than the group). We say things like "what is wrong with those white people?" or "they just don't get it," or "you're wasting time with us, we're not the people who need this training." This is another form of denial called distancing, where "we put other white people down . . . and righteously consider ourselves white people who have evolved beyond our racist conditioning" (Olsson, p. 16).

We begin to move out of this stage when we become interested in working with other white people and people of color on issues of racism. We begin to take leadership and risks as we work with others to achieve a collectively defined vision of an anti-racist organization/community.

## **COLLECTIVE ACTION**

In this stage, we

- participate in individual and collective action to address racism on the personal, institutional, and cultural levels

- work to make strategic changes in organizations/communities consistent with anti-racist analysis and vision
- are thoughtful about building alliances with people of color and white anti-racist activists
- seek structural change to address institutional racism
- work collectively with other white anti-racist allies and people of color
- claim our identity as a white person in a racist society
- admit that this work requires learning from mistakes and are more forgiving of our mistakes and those of others

In this stage, we begin to understand, as Beverly Daniel Tatum says, that “there is a history of white protest against racism, a history of whites who have resisted the role of oppressor and who have been allies to people of color” (p. 108). Tatum also quotes Clayton Alderfer, who says that at this stage “we have a more complete awareness of ourselves and of others to the degree that we neither negate the uniqueness of each person, regardless of that person’s group memberships, nor deny the ever-present effects of group memberships for each individual” (p. 112).

It’s at this stage that we also begin to realize that we can’t understand what is really happening on our own. This is not necessarily an easy transition and requires a lot of deconditioning of the ways U.S. culture has taught us that our strength is in our individuality and ability to ‘do it ourselves.’ We reach out to be in relationships with other white anti-racist allies and people of color in order to develop a solid analysis of what is happening that includes the voices and experiences of a broader range of people.

We work to make strategic changes in our organizations/communities consistent with an anti-racist vision and analysis that is collectively built. We are thoughtful about building meaningful alliances with other white anti-racist allies and people of color. We tend to avoid working out of a sense of urgency in those situations where urgency reinforces our white privilege and power. We work with our allies to seek structural changes which address institutional racism. We work with our allies to define and live values which address cultural racism.

We understand the belief that all white people are racist does not mean that we have an obligation to walk up to all white people and share this insight with them; we try to be strategic about working to build white anti-racist allies. We no longer work to separate ourselves from other white people; instead we tend to understand that we are simply extensions of each other and see the beliefs, fears, and racism of other white people as reflections of our own. We claim our identity as a white person in a racist society and understand the importance of seeing ourselves as part of the white group, both in terms of the power and benefits we receive and in terms of the potential power to organize other white people to address racism. We begin to feel and see the

importance of taking responsibility for working with other white people on racism and internalized white supremacy.

We're also more aware than ever of the complexities of doing anti-racist work. We understand that there is not 'one right way' to do this work. As a result, we are less judgmental and more forgiving of mistakes, our own and those of others. We continue to hold ourselves and others accountable, yet we are able to do so with less self-righteousness and more compassion.

We don't expect perfection of others, or demand it. It's in our imperfections that we bear our common humanity.

Leonard Peltier

## **COMMUNITY OF LOVE and RESISTANCE**

Beverly Daniel Tatum notes that "those who persist in the struggle are awarded with an increasingly multiracial and multicultural existence" (p. 109). In this stage, which we are all still seeking to achieve, we are living and working in strong anti-racist organizations and communities, with all the complexities and challenges such a vision brings.

In this stage, we are consistently organizing and building a community that has the power to heal the remnants of racism, internalized racist oppression, and internalized white supremacy. We are constructing organizations and communities that can help us think critically and develop an analysis and understanding of the community, country, and world. We are constructing organizations and communities with cultures which balance the needs of the individual with those of the community and which sustain life.

The thinking behind the development of a ladder to becoming a white anti-racist ally has been developed over several years with the contributions of many people, including Andrea Ayvazian (in her contributions to the PDF Dismantling Racism curriculum), Janet Helms (in "An update of Helms's White and people of color racial identity models" in **Handbook of multicultural counseling**, Sage, 1995), **dRworks** trainers (in their contributions to the **dRworks** Dismantling Racism curriculum – this includes Bree Carlson, Meredith Dean, M.E. Dueker, Alice Johnson, Michelle Johnson, Kenneth Jones, Jonn Lunsford, Suzanne Plihcik), Paul Kivel (in **Uprooting Racism: How White People Can Work for Racial Justice**, 1995), Joan Olsson (in **Detour spotting for white anti-racists**, Cultural Bridges, PA, 1997), Beverly Daniel Tatum (in **Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?**, HarperCollins, 1997), as well as the hundreds of participants in the caucuses of the Dismantling Racism workshops. The thinking behind the ladder is in constant development and will continue to improve in the coming years as we expose more people to it and continue to receive their ideas and input.

**dRworks** is a group of trainers, educators and organizers helping to build and connect thoughtful, creative, and sustainable grassroots organizations and communities grounded in an understanding of history, culture and a power analysis. **dRworks** can be reached at [www.dismantlingracism.org](http://www.dismantlingracism.org).