

# From: Uprooting Racism

by Paul Kivel (2002)

## "I'm Not White"

RECENTLY I WAS DOING A WORKSHOP ON RACISM. We wanted to divide the group into a caucus of people of color and a caucus of white people so that each group could have more in-depth discussion. Immediately some of the white people said, "But I'm not white."

I was somewhat taken aback because although these people looked white, they were clearly distressed about being labeled white. A white Christian woman stood up and said, "I'm not really white because I'm not part of the white male power structure that perpetuates racism." Next a white gay man stood up and said, "You have to be straight to have the privileges of being white." A white, straight, working-class man from a poor family then said, "I've got it just as hard as any person of color." Finally, a straight, white, middle-class man said, "I'm not white, I'm Italian."

My African-American co-worker turned to me and asked, "Where are all the white people who were here just a minute ago?" Of course I replied, "Don't ask me. I'm not white, I'm Jewish!"

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. There are others who proudly claim whiteness under any circumstances and simply deny or ignore the violence that white people have done to people of color.

Those of us who are middle class are more likely to assume we are white without having to emphasize the point, and to feel guilty when it is noticed or brought up. Those of us who are poor or working class are more likely to have had to assert our whiteness against the effects of economic discrimination and the presence of other racial groups. Although we share the benefits of being white, we don't share the economic privileges of being middle class and so we are more likely to feel angry and less likely to feel guilty than our middle-class counterparts.

Whatever our economic status, many of us become paralyzed with some measure of fear, guilt, anger, defensiveness, or confusion if we are named as white when racism is being addressed.

In this country it has always been dangerous even to talk about racism. "Nigger lover," "Indian lover," and "race traitor" are labels that have carried severe consequences. You probably know the names of white civil rights workers who were killed for their actions against racism, such as Goodman, Schwerner, and Lutzon. Many of us have been isolated from friends or family because of disagreements over racism. A lot of us have been called "racist."

Saying "I am white" may make us feel either guilty of being racist or traitorous toward other whites. We don't want to be labeled or stereotyped. Talking about racism has often

occurred in the context of angry words, hostility, accusations, and divisiveness. We also may have fears about people of color separating from us if we are clearly identified as white.

In any case, some of us are quick to disavow our whiteness or to claim some other identity that will give us legitimate victim status. We certainly don't want to be seen as somehow responsible for or complicit in racism.

I want to begin here — with this denial of our whiteness — because racism keeps people of color in the limelight and makes whiteness invisible. To change this we must take whiteness itself and hold it up to the light and see that it is a color too. Whiteness is a concept, an ideology, which holds tremendous power over our lives and, in turn, over the lives of people of color. Our challenge in this discussion will be to keep whiteness center stage. Every time our attention begins to wander off toward people of color or other issues, we will have to notice and refocus. We must notice when we try to slip into another identity and escape being white. We each have many other factors that influence our lives, such as our ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, class, personality, mental and physical abilities. Even when we're talking about these elements of our lives we must keep whiteness on stage with us because it influences each of the other factors.

What parts of your identity does it feel like you lose when you say aloud the phrase "I'm white"?

Part of our discomfort may come from our own family's ethnic and class background and its complex relationship to whiteness.

Was your ethnic or cultural group ever considered not white?

When they arrived in the United States or Canada, what did members of your family have to do to be accepted as white? What did they have to give up?

How has pride in being white sustained you or your family?

Has that identification or pride ever allowed you or your family to tolerate poverty, economic exploitation, or poor living conditions because you can say,

"At least we're not colored"?

If, when you move down the streets of major cities, other people assume, based on skin color, dress, physical appearance, or total impression, that you are white, then in American society that counts for being white. This is where we are going to start talking about what it means to say "I am white." I realize that there are differences between the streets of New York and Minneapolis, Vancouver and Winnipeg, and between different neighborhoods within each city. But in American society there is a broad and pervasive division between those of us who are treated as white people and those of us who are treated as people of color, and most of us know from a very early age which side we are on. If we are white we are told or learn in early childhood who to stay away from, who not to play with, who not to associate with, who isn't one of our kind. Several studies have shown that young children between the ages of two and four notice differences of skin