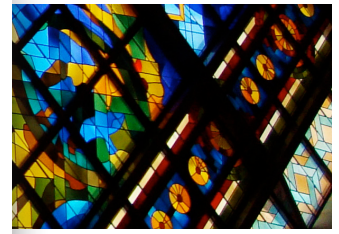




40 DAYS OF ENGAGEMENT on *Anti-Racism*



DAY 19

Implicit Bias and Racism

Bill Millar



Learning

Racism exists here, as in most human societies. It exists, but doesn't have to. While it may grow out of patterns in the human mind that are universal, racism can be, and needs to be, disarmed and dissolved. To effectively *uproot* racism (in ourselves and in society) we'll need to first find its *roots*—to understand where it comes from.

It's tempting to want to fix blame somewhere, but that won't work. Its origins lie in the way our minds work, the fundamental architecture of the brain. As Christians, we have theological language for this: a cluster of words translated *sin* in the New Testament, words about missing the target, wandering off the trail, tripping. Neuroscience offers us other ways to explain this. Different parts of our brain do very different things. The part that does what we call *thinking* is the prefrontal cortex (PFC). It's vital to our experience of being human, but rather small in size, with very limited computing power compared to more robust areas.

Researchers estimate we are exposed at any one time to some 11 million pieces of information. Our conscious/thinking minds can deal with 40. Our brains instantly sort and categorize the millions of bits, reduces them to 40 or so, and that is what we perceive as *real*. Reliance on automatic responses was key to our evolutionary survival. Our brains had to categorize to survive. Even today they must categorize. In doing so socially, they create categories of *us/them*, and *like-us/different*. Such social categories may be either accurate or inaccurate, but in themselves are not racist—they move toward racism when they involve a negative evaluation of the other group.

This act of mental simplification creates implicit or unconscious bias. A cluster of biases connect directly to racism: in-group bias, affinity bias, outgroup-homogeneity bias, and others. As humans, our brains categorize others as *us* or *them*, and they also attribute *safe* or *risky*. One of the easiest ways to categorize this is to base it on what we see (physical charac-

Stereotypes develop into prejudice when layered with the belief that *they* are somehow inferior to *us*.

teristics, such as skin colour, and other visuals like clothing) or hear (language).

Stereotypes are one form of categorization/bias. Most are unconscious—height bias for example. About 15% of American males are over 6 foot, yet 60% of male CEOs are at least that tall, showing unconscious preference for tall males in leadership positions. It would be absurd to choose a CEO because of height—about as absurd as giving overweight employees poorer performance reviews, teachers calling on boys more often than girls, or assuming all Black youth are good at sports.

Biases, including stereotypes, are surprisingly malleable. Once aware of height bias, we're less likely to be affected by it. Racism is far less malleable. Though it may be rooted in brain architecture, it

has morphed into something toxic. Racism develops when inner processes of categorization fuse with power, privilege, and entitlement. Where bias is universal, privilege is, by definition, not. You can only have privilege where someone else doesn't. Entitlement is the inner appropriation of privilege—as we come to consciously believe we are somehow entitled to that privilege.

Efforts to uproot racism will falter if we only work at a conscious level. Logic and reason seem far less effective in fighting racism than we might expect. We need to work at the root level—and that involves, for many, facing our own entitlement and privilege. We needn't look far. We can see both at church, at home, and in our relationships. However, reflecting on our privilege and entitlement can be tricky. Our minds try to keep this below consciousness, at the level of implicit assumptions. Once conscious, they can lose efficiency, and there's always the possibility we might abandon them altogether. A mix of self-kindness and unwavering resoluteness works best.



Faith Reflection

While out walking, I came upon the cutest older bungalow. Perfect paint, perfect yard, perfect garden. Beside it ran the back alley of a commercial street. I saw, across the lane, in a nook behind a store, evidence that a person who is homeless was living there. Garbage. Bits of clothing. The windows of the house looked right out on this. I wondered how I'd feel if I owned that house. The answer came way too quickly: resentful. I wouldn't want to feel it, but I would. Not my property, yet I'd feel somehow entitled to *not* seeing this. Can you relate to this? How might you feel? How do you feel when pain, sadness or unpleasantness intrudes on your personal/private life?

Paul wrote, "I've learned, in whatever state I am, to be satisfied. I know what it is to be made low and to be lifted up; the secret to experiencing fullness and want, excess and deficiency. I can do all this, I've learned, through the One who strengthens me" (Philippians

4:11-13). Buddhism's teachings include practicing detachment, ensuring that things, including our own expectations, don't own us.

I invite you to bring your home and your possessions to mind, and, then, if you are willing, release them. Simply let go, perhaps using the words: "*Into your hands, O God, into your hands.*" Many of us who participate in churches feel we're entitled to having a style of worship that suits us. But worship isn't about meeting your needs or my needs, it's the expression of a whole community's love and gratitude to God. So I invite you to bring your church experience to mind, and once again, intentionally release it, perhaps with the same words. Continue doing this with everything that is a part of your lives. Your work. Your loving relationships. Your health. If we do this regularly, then, incrementally, we teach our minds to stop trying to control what they ultimately cannot.



Children's Activity

There are many activities you can do with children or youth to explore how implicit bias works. One is called the Circle of Trust. Invite them to make a list of 6 or 7 people they trust, who are not part of their family. After they've made their list, tell them you are going to read a list of words associated with diversi-

ty, and ask them to place a check mark beside any names on their list who fit the term (e.g., gender, race, religion, orientation, income/class). Then look at the list together. Usually the list of trusted people shows a group of people who are quite similar to us. Ask why this might be.





Group Commitment

The primary arena for doing racial justice work isn't internal, it's "out there." But to do it well we also need to create some inner spaciousness, a place free of guilt and anxiety, free of the compulsion to act, where a new story/understanding can grow. Racism and social biases are so pervasive in our culture that we've been deeply conditioned in that kind of reductionist thinking, trained to see it as normal. To counter this, we need to transform our way of thinking, a de-conditioning that is deep and sufficient to free ourselves from that kind of training. And the keys to that, I believe, lie in mindfulness and compassion.

This activity must accompany our inner work, but not precede it. Many of us too easily hide in the flurry of activity, avoiding the difficult inner work necessary to become reliable allies. So I want to invite you to commit to radical internal action, a deep dive into the ways we have been affected and infected by systems of thinking and patterns of relationship that foster racism.

Here are a few suggestions to help guide you.

- Slow down. Breathe. Pause before you react today. Biases activate when we act quickly. By slowing our thinking/responding, our prefrontal cortex can catch up. Ask questions like, "Who do I want to be in this mo-

ment? How can I bring my best self forward?"

- Bring assumptions to the surface. As you feel yourself reacting to someone/something today, simply ask, "What am I assuming here?" Simply bringing them out of the unconscious, and rationally examining them, can dissolve many assumptions.
- Practice compassion. With kindness, recognize our brains do this work mostly without our being aware. Many of us have been immersed in racist thinking. Feel appropriate remorse for words or actions that have hurt, but don't wallow. Self-shaming or scolding seldom helps.



Advocacy

We shouldn't avoid all outward actions. No doubt other writings in this series will have helpful, constructive activities to suggest. I'll limit myself

to suggesting that you plan one micro-action, one small act that only *you* might notice, something that grows out of your new awareness and understanding, something

different than you might have done before. Or perhaps a slightly different way of doing an activity. Once you've achieved that, plan another.



Bill Millar is host of the podcast series "Open Out" about the nitty-gritty of intercultural ministry. The series grew out of research funded by the McGeachy Scholarship and his years of ministry at Knox United Church in Winnipeg. Bill is also part of the Forum for Intercultural Leadership and Learning and the Western Intercultural Ministry Network.

