



“I am a Recovering Racist” (For Connor & Zoe & Luke)

Racism: *“a belief that race is the primary determinant of human traits and capacities and that racial differences produce an inherent superiority of a particular race.”*

By the time I was 3-4 years old I was a racist. I believed that African Americans were inferior to whites. Everything in my world told me that, and there was nothing to counter it. That was just the way it was.


Unfortunately, certain adult members of my family also felt that way about Catholics, Jews, “Polacks”, gays and lesbians, etc. Black racism wasn’t the only “ism” I absorbed – but it was the most virulent and the hardest to recover from.

I didn’t choose to be a racist. I was a child and there was nothing for me to decide. I didn’t analyze or compare or think critically. It was simply a fact of life that black people were “other” – and they were not as smart, not as moral, not as hard working and not as responsible as white people – and probably dangerous.

And they didn’t live among us. Where I lived outside Cleveland, most black people lived in what was called “the allotment”, which was full of ramshackle homes and dirt roads (at least that’s what I remember). They were literally “in their place” physically and it was inferior to “our place.” – naturally.

There was nothing in my small world as a 3-4-year-old that countered that racist world view. The unfortunate reality is that, if no one directly and powerfully counters racism – and in a sustained way – there is little hope of becoming anything other than a racist. My world was racist (and had been for centuries) and there was no one to counter that and provide an alternative.

No one in my family/extended family challenged racism. No one in my neighborhood challenged it. No one at my schools challenged it. No one in my church challenged it (that I remember). The media didn’t challenge it. And I didn’t know any African Americans to even cause me to question it. Literally everything in my world reinforced a racist world view. That community in which I grew up is still almost 98% White.



I was also taught to respect authority and the status quo. If I disagreed with those in official positions, I was told it was because I didn't know what they knew. "They knew better" and things were the way they were for a reason – even if I had no idea what the reason was. My parents believed that about themselves and taught my brother and I. If things were the way they were, it must be because that's the way they should be. My school and community operated on the same beliefs.

That was my world until I joined the army when I was 20. As I got older I should have started questioning that racist world view, but I didn't - even though I graduated from high school the year after the civil rights bills were passed in 1964.

Even going to college didn't change my world much in terms of my racism. Duke didn't enroll black students until 1962, when four African American students entered – and found segregated bathrooms and a "colored" section in the football stadium. I enrolled in 1965. My fraternity was all white and there was only one African American on the rugby team. There were no black professors or senior administrators that I was aware of.

When I joined the army after dropping out after my sophomore year, I started to wake up a bit as there were more black men in my world and we had a shared purpose and the military experience in common. I also had black drill sergeants and officers who clearly were not inferior. They were to be admired and respected because of who they were.

But even that didn't make much of a dent in my world view and any recovery from racism was minimal. But I at least had some experiences that started to cause some questioning.

Back at Duke in 1968, the civil rights movement had gathered strength and there was suddenly a significant counter voice to the racist worldview that had held such a monopoly in my world. Unfortunately, those voices ran into all of my internalized conditioning. I didn't disagree with them, but I didn't engage either. I stayed in my White comfort zone – which is always an option we have as White people.

NYC was the first diverse community I lived in. I was no longer living in a totally white world, and I had black colleagues in banking who clearly were not inferior. There were also just a lot of Black people around – they were no longer invisible and in new ways we inhabited the same world (and in many ways we didn't).

When I left Bankers Trust and was going to be a doctor I worked as a security guard, drove cabs, and worked in a small factory in the South Bronx - which made me "other" in terms of finances and professional esteem. I was no longer a banker with a title and money and a

safe career path. I was poor despite how hard I worked. That continued after I decided not to be a doctor and also decided not to go back into business. My “place” was no longer secure. I was no longer automatically “in” as I had been up to that point. But I was still White and had access to the privileges that are granted to White people.

When I later went to work for the Fortune Society, not only was I in the minority as a white man, I was also an “the outside” for the first time in my life because I had never done prison time like 27 of the 30 staff. I was the “other” and I was on the outside with no chance of being “in” – not because of my character or performance, but simply because I was a “square” – someone who had never done time in prison. **I was “inferior” simply because I was different than the “in” group.**

That dawning of awareness continued as I worked with a diverse staff in a big youth center with kids with drug problems. That continued to enlarge my world and bring it into more focus. And a year in a Gestalt therapy training group began to significantly increase my awareness – of myself and my relationships (to others and to my world).

And yet, I still was privileged as a White man, with advantages and options available to me solely because I was white and male. I had other career paths even if I hadn’t fully discovered them. And at some level of consciousness, I knew that and had a level of confidence that rested on being a white male in a society where that gave me a natural advantage.

What I had no awareness of, was that people who were not white were very aware of their lack of advantage and the vulnerability that came with that. I felt confident playing the game but didn’t realize how much the game was rigged in my favor.

At this point I was still in the phase of not seeing myself as a racist. My – mostly unconscious – belief was that I was no longer the child or young adult that thoughtlessly carried the racist worldview. I had evolved and wasn’t that person. My other incorrect assumption was that even though I wasn’t a part of the solution, I was no longer part of the problem.

What I didn’t yet realize was that I was never going to be a “not racist.” The racism I absorbed in my earliest years was always going to be my “operating system.” At best, I was going to be a recovering racist, but I didn’t understand that yet. Nor did I understand that, until I was actively confronting racism, I was still going to be part of the problem.

Rochester and Cincinnati – deeper understanding and engagement, but disturbing realizations. Rochester NY (and D.C. before that) had vibrant gay and lesbian communities, so that aspect of diversity became very real to me and enriched my world. But it wasn't until my mid-30s, when I got into the organizational development world that my experience and self – awareness started to seriously evolve and change my view of the world as it related to racism and my role in it.

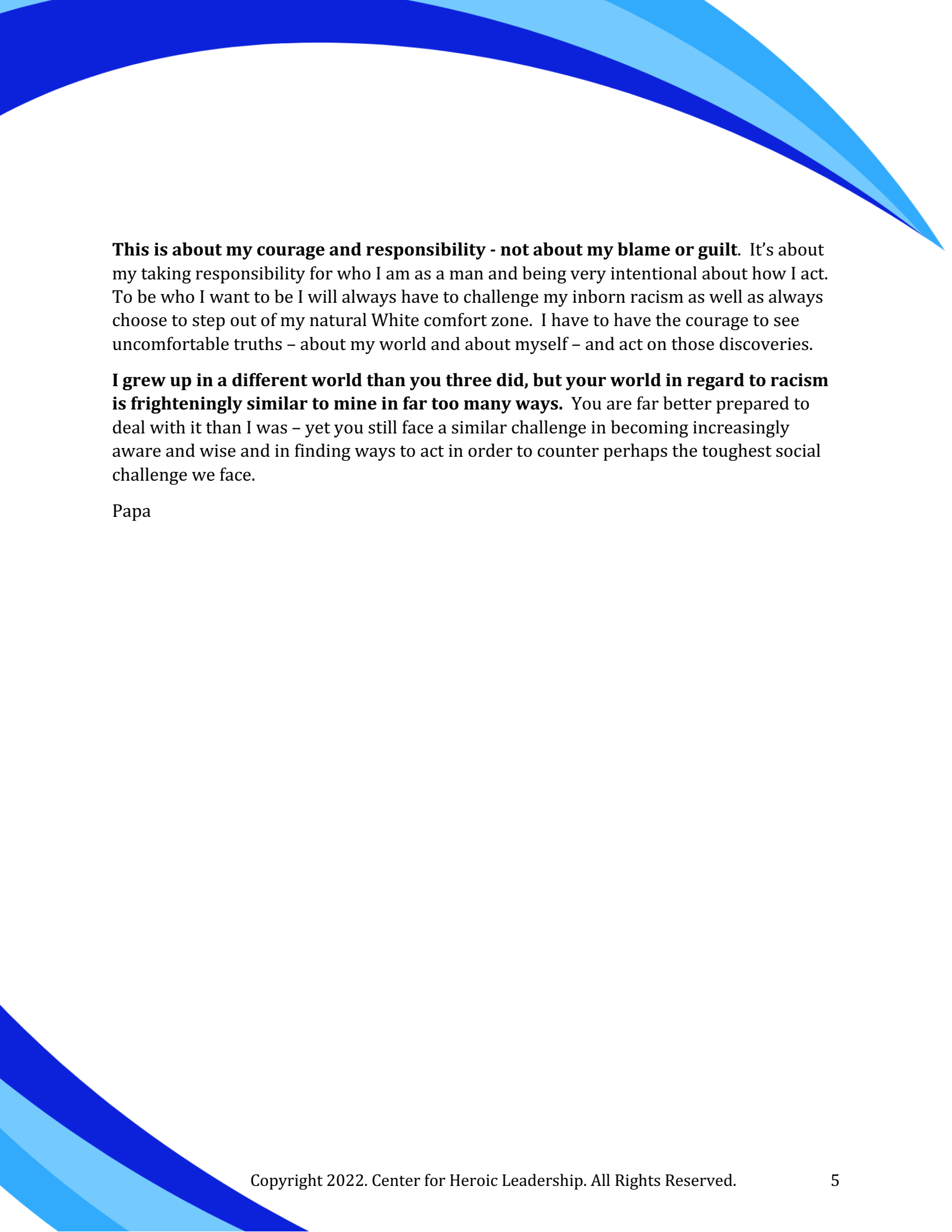
In the 80's the organizational development world placed a very high value on self-awareness and authenticity. A major focus of that was on diversity, from racial and gender, to management style and personal preference. "Diversity" became much better defined and much more central.

Working for **Alignment Strategies** on diversity contracts for Fortune 500 companies put me in a position where I had to deal with myself and white clients as well as be part of an African American owned and staffed company. I repeatedly saw highly qualified expert Black colleagues treated as inferior by white clients, by white staff at facilities we used and by white men and women on the street. I also got to be around Black people that were extraordinarily talented, tough, and committed

In Cincinnati when I served as the only white person on the on the design team for the Urban League's African American Leadership Development Program (AALDP) I got a better look at the gulf between Whites and Blacks even when the mission was shared – and the inherent difficulty of white-black collaboration. In the first meeting the question was raised, "Why do we need a white man on the team?" That question came up every time a new member joined (the first three meetings). **The question wasn't about my capabilities, it was about my race.**

From my perspective, although I felt relatively comfortable in my role and relationships, I never lost an underlying feeling of discomfort around being different, not fitting in, and not being completely accepted and trusted. Over time I was basically trusted and accepted, but that always came with ambivalence and questioning. I am convinced that that will always be the case, although it will vary from situation to situation and can be diminished some with shared experience.

I will always be a recovering racist. The racism I was infected with by the time I was 3-4 is almost part of my DNA, so it will always be there. My job is to continue to be aware of that and consciously battle it. My job is to also continue to find ways to act against racism, not just understand it (although understanding is critical to effective action).



This is about my courage and responsibility - not about my blame or guilt. It's about my taking responsibility for who I am as a man and being very intentional about how I act. To be who I want to be I will always have to challenge my inborn racism as well as always choose to step out of my natural White comfort zone. I have to have the courage to see uncomfortable truths – about my world and about myself – and act on those discoveries.

I grew up in a different world than you three did, but your world in regard to racism is frighteningly similar to mine in far too many ways. You are far better prepared to deal with it than I was – yet you still face a similar challenge in becoming increasingly aware and wise and in finding ways to act in order to counter perhaps the toughest social challenge we face.

Papa