

Racism by Proxy

Are you biased?

Am I?

The short answer is yes. We *all* are.

Having bias isn't a choice. We can't avoid it. We prefer members of our religion, our country, our political party, and speakers of our native language. We're taught bias unintentionally by people who aren't conscious of their biases, and we in turn unintentionally pass them on to others.

So it's not a "sin" to be biased. It's inevitable.

What matters is not allowing our unchosen biases to exert absolute control over our decisions and behavior.

To do that, however, we must recognize and accept them as real.

In *Racism by Proxy*, essayist Johnny Townsend pushes past shame, guilt, insults, and other useless approaches to show how all of us, even white people of varying privilege, benefit from increasing equity and social justice throughout our communities.

Praise for Johnny Townsend

In *Zombies for Jesus*, “Townsend isn’t writing satire, but deeply emotional and revealing portraits of people who are, with a few exceptions, quite lovable.”

Kel Munger, *Sacramento News and Review*

In *Sex among the Saints*, “Townsend writes with a deadpan wit and a supple, realistic prose that’s full of psychological empathy... he takes his protagonists’ moral struggles seriously and invests them with real emotional resonance.”

Kirkus Reviews

Let the Faggots Burn: The Upstairs Lounge Fire is “a gripping account of all the horrors that transpired that night, as well as a respectful remembrance of the victims.”

Terry Firma, Patheos

“Johnny Townsend’s ‘Partying with St. Roch’ [in the anthology *Latter-Gay Saints*] tells a beautiful, haunting tale.”

Kent Brintnall, *Out in Print: Queer Book Reviews*

Selling the City of Enoch is “sharply intelligent... pleasingly complex... The stories are full of... doubters, but there’s no vindictiveness in these pages; the characters continuously poke holes in Mormonism’s more extravagant absurdities, but they take very little pleasure in doing so... Many of Townsend’s stories... have a provocative edge to them, but this [book] displays a great deal of insight as well... a playful, biting and surprisingly warm collection.”

Kirkus Reviews

Gayrabian Nights is “an allegorical tour de force... a hard-core emotional punch.”

Gay. Guy. Reading and Friends

The Washing of Brains has “A lovely writing style, and each story [is] full of unique, engaging characters... immensely entertaining.”

Rainbow Awards

In *Dead Mankind Walking*, “Townsend writes in an energetic prose that balances crankiness and humor... A rambunctious volume of short, well-crafted essays...”

Kirkus Reviews

Johnny Townsend

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Johnny Townsend



Saint Petersburg, Florida

Introduction: Another Book on Race by an Old, White Man

Why should you read a book about bias from an old, white man?

Unless you're white, you probably shouldn't. And even if you are, you should first be reading work by Ta-Nehisi Coates, Trevor Noah, Ibram Kendi, Bryan Stevenson, Sherman Alexie, Sandra Cisneros, and many other writers from marginalized groups.

But since it isn't their responsibility to teach white people about our biases, we need to take on some of the work, too. Writers like Robin Di Angelo and Howard Zinn are great resources, as well as books like *Everyday White People Confront Racial and Social Injustice*.

So what can *I* offer that's worth your time?

Let me take a moment to share my cultural resumé:

Born and raised in New Orleans

Spent summers and holidays with extended family in rural Mississippi

Graduated from a Baptist high school

Volunteered two years as a Mormon missionary in Europe

That should be enough to reveal my white, religiously and politically conservative background, but there's a bit more:

Taught ten years at a historically Black university in the Deep South

Excommunicated from the LDS Church for being gay

Wrote the first book on the Upstairs Lounge fire, an arson at a French Quarter gay bar that killed 32 people

Wrote 50 books about gay, feminist, and other "outsider" Mormons

As a former Mormon who used to do "proxy" work for the dead in various LDS temples, I understand how easy it is to convince ourselves to engage in busywork to avoid the more difficult tasks necessary to make meaningful change in the lives of the living.

I know from experience how easy it is to shrug off our role in combatting racism and other forms of bias. "*I didn't own slaves! I didn't oppress anyone!*"

Because I'm like you, I've had all the same resistant reactions you have. As a result, I can show you how "white dominant culture" doesn't mean "every white person."

"Mormon culture" doesn't mean "every Mormon."

"Evangelical Christian culture" doesn't mean "every evangelical Christian."

I can show you that accepting the reality of bias doesn't mean we chose to be biased or that we're "bad" people. I can show you that empathy doesn't mean giving up our personal values.

And finally, I can assure you there's no virtue signaling here. I'm not going to call anyone out for not being world-class anti-racists. You're probably already far better at it than I'll ever be. And you don't need to agree with everything I suggest. We're all learning and growing here. None of us are going to be in the same space a year from now.

I'm simply offering my own painfully slow realizations about bias. You can either take sixty years to learn on your own... or you can skip a couple of decades by reading a few of these essays and investing just a bit of effort reflecting on them now.

There's great value when someone can consolidate their journey into a single coherent narrative. Isabel Wilkerson does a great job of this in *Caste*. But I learned the lessons in *Racism by Proxy* piecemeal and there's also value to reading the insights of others in manageable portions. Most of my essays are short enough to read as daily reflections—morning, afternoon, evening, whatever works for you—or once a week as a couple or family.

Yes, my gay ex-Mormon husband and I still practice our own version of Family Home Evening each week. There's good in every culture, after all, even various iterations of white dominant culture.

So let's celebrate the good in our lives and start reducing the bad. If you're like most people, it's what we genuinely want to do anyway. Let's stop feeling guilty, embrace positive motivations instead, and finally do what we know has to be done.

I Threw My Confederate Cap Away

I just took an internalized bias test through my workplace for the third year in a row. The results? I show a “strong preference” for white people over black, just as I have on each previous exam. I threw my Confederate cap away decades ago, but it’s not as easy to get rid of the bias.

As a child, visiting my grandparents in Mississippi provided some of my best memories. Making homemade ice cream on the back steps, picking blackberries, walking the cows in for milking, swimming in the creek, shelling pecans. But life on the dairy farm wasn’t all fun and games. Sometimes, the news reported sightings of bears in the area or we’d be warned to keep an eye out for black panthers. No one in the family had ever seen one, but they were the mascot for the single high school in town, so we knew they were real.

Walking with my sister through a pasture the day we heard the latest alert, I saw her stop in fear and point. “I see something black!” she said breathlessly, fixated on something moving beyond the trees along the gravel road. “It has a yellow shirt on!”

It wasn’t a panther.

So we relaxed and played among the flowers, a field of Black Eyed Susans, a name I didn’t learn until I was

almost an adult. We'd been taught to use a racial slur to describe them. "N-word navels."

We made occasional day trips to Vicksburg, the site of some of the heaviest fighting during the Civil War. Dad bought miniature Confederate flags for my sister and me, bought us Confederate caps. Neither of my grandfathers had fought in WWII, and none of the great-grandfathers had fought in WWI, but our family had an illustrious Confederate heritage, so we ran up and down the steep hills celebrating past glory.

Back in Metairie, the middle-class suburb of New Orleans where we lived, my mother forbade me to watch the show *Julia* starring Diahann Carroll. I was also denied access later to the show *Room 222*. "It has a black person in it," my mother explained.

At one point, my mom wanted to move back to the country and placed an ad to sell our home, describing it as "Tara-style." It was a square brick box with brick columns, built in 1964.

One year, our family attended weekly meetings for several months to prepare for the Elks parade on Mardi Gras, the most prestigious day of the entire carnival season. We'd follow Rex down St. Charles Avenue and Canal Street. I was going to throw out beads and doubloons! The kids at school would be so jealous!

At the last minute, though, the group voted against participating. It was just too dangerous to be downtown with all those black people. They sometimes threw bottles at white people on the floats.

During my early years, Mom sometimes brought my sister and me to the French Quarter to tour the wax museum or the natural history museum. We ate beignets at the Café du Monde. We watched movies at the Robert E. Lee Theater on Robert E. Lee Boulevard, ate Italian sweets on Jefferson Davis Parkway. We passed a statue of General Beauregard on our visits to Storyland in City Park. Sometimes, we shopped along Canal Street. Those adventures all ended once there were “too many black people.” My parents did permit me to go down to Lee Circle on Mardi Gras with my best friend and his mom, as long as I promised to be careful. Black people sometimes put razor blades on the tips of their shoes and kicked white people. Best if I wore boots for extra protection.

My suburban public school wasn't integrated until I reached fifth grade. By the time I reached ninth grade, my parents put my sister and me in a private Baptist school that banned blacks. “We're not prejudiced,” the headmistress explained. “We just don't approve of interracial dating.”

One of my classmates was a David Duke fan. The head of the KKK lived only a mile from the school. Several of my other classmates encouraged the rest of us not to elect the lone Hispanic girl in our class as one of the cheerleaders.

But at home I defiantly watched shows like *Good Times* and *The Jeffersons*. I wasn't prejudiced. Racism was stupid.

Though my parents had both grown up Baptist, we'd all converted to Mormonism in 1971, and in June of 1978, the Prophet announced a new revelation. Black men were now "allowed" to hold the priesthood. The only local news affiliate to cover the story was WDSU. "They're owned by blacks," my mom explained in a what-can-you-expect tone.

My mom sounds like a horrible person, and her racism was clearly destructive. But growing up with her was a mostly wonderful experience. That's a large part of why "good" people harboring terrible prejudices don't see themselves as "bad." It's almost as if racists like my mother have Multiple Personality Disorder. 97 of their personalities are good, upstanding people. It's the remaining 3 who are criminally insane. But it's too uncomfortable to rehabilitate those three, so the other 97 simply go into denial.

It's not unlike what a friend of mine coping with schizophrenia has had to endure throughout her life, mean voices in her head telling her things that aren't true, making her and everyone around her miserable until she was finally able to start treating her disease.

When I turned nineteen, it was time for me to "serve" as a volunteer missionary for two years. Mormons have no say over where they're sent, so waiting for "the call" to arrive in the mail was excruciating. What if I were sent someplace boring? Or scary? One of my aunt's boyfriends had gone to Japan. The man she eventually married had served in Finland. When my letter arrived from Salt Lake, I ran upstairs and opened it.

When I came back down, my mother's brows furrowed. "Where are you going?" She pressed her lips together to prepare herself for the bad news.

"It's someplace that has food you really like."

My mother's shoulders slumped. "Mexico," she said, shaking her head slowly. "You're going to Mexico."

"It's someplace *else* that has food you like."

My mother's eyes lit up. Then she started jumping up and down, clapping. "You're going to Italy! You're going to Italy!"

Everyone at church was excited, too. "Oh, you'll get to learn Spanish," they said.

"Uh, no, I think they speak Italian in Italy."

"Be careful with the water. You don't want to get sick."

Italy was wonderful and miserable and incredible and depressing, the negatives largely a result of the oppressive missionary lifestyle. Every moment of our lives was regimented, our actions constantly monitored.

In my first area, a young local member, a carabinieri, was so excited to learn I was from New Orleans that he struggled valiantly to blurt out, "South rise again!" in English far better than my Italian. Perhaps I should have found it strange, but one of the songs we had learned in Culture Capsule back in the Missionary Training Center was "Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah" in Italian, so perhaps not. My first four assignments were as companion to various

district leaders, the position jokingly referred to as “District N-word.”

Told every day our lack of faith and success was a disappointment to God, I became suicidal for the first time in my life and wanted desperately to go home. Of course, doing so would have labeled me a failure among other Mormons for the remainder of my life. My mother, eager to help, wrote back after my latest unhappy letter. “If you want to come home,” she said, “I’ll hide you in the attic.”

I plodded on, and my time in Italy became a transformative experience. I saw abject poverty for the first time. I witnessed a kidnapping near the train station in Rome. I was caught in a Camorra gang war in Naples. Teens threw heavy rocks at us because they hated Americans. I was spit on and kicked, chased with garden shears, had guns pulled on me. I was approached by dozens and dozens of “gypsies.” A woman asked me to marry her daughter and bring her to the U.S.

I met folks from Ghana and Nigeria and Somalia. An African woman the sister missionaries were teaching was abducted. We never saw her again.

And then I returned to Metairie, struggling with culture shock in my conservative, white neighborhood as I began my sophomore year at the University of New Orleans.

When I saw a young man on campus I’d known growing up, I was surprised to realize for the first time that he was black. I’d always been confused at how different he looked from everyone else in the family, but it had never

occurred to me he wasn't white until I saw him in a different setting.

I returned to Italy a year later, becoming engaged to a former Italian sister missionary I'd worked with who was a Communist. We agreed I should complete my degree in America before we married, and then I'd move back to Italy and teach English.

I absolutely loved literature. Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, Thomas Hardy, Edgar Allan Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and more. I even liked Shakespearean sonnets and Middle English lit.

My Chaucer professor chastised the class one day for laughing at a story from the *Canterbury Tales* in which townspeople blamed the bubonic plague on Jews. "Medieval people were so stupid," a student said.

"You don't think people today bear illogical prejudices against certain groups?" the professor asked pointedly.

Years later, I wasn't surprised to run into my professor in a gay bookstore with his black partner.

At church, the first black man in our congregation was ordained a high priest, the most prestigious position at the local level. My father still used the N-word every time he spoke of the man, and he laughed every time I corrected him. I asked another high priest if he felt any of the others in the group were prejudiced. "No," he said. "We believe in equality."

“So you wouldn’t mind if your son married Brother Alfonse’s daughter?”

“Well, we don’t approve of interracial marriage, of course, but that doesn’t mean we’re bigoted.”

How blind, I wondered, could these people be? Thank God *I* wasn’t biased.

As I approached graduation, I realized I still hadn’t managed to change my sexual orientation, despite my continued virginal status. The first mission clearly hadn’t been enough of a sacrifice for Heavenly Father to heal me. So I talked to my bishop and stake president about serving a second two-year mission. I talked to my fiancée about it.

She wasn’t happy. But if I needed to marry a woman, I had to become straight first, not “hope” it would happen miraculously sometime after.

And if worse came to worst, at least missionary life was the closest I could get to marriage with another man.

I finally broke up with my fiancée after I realized I was always going to be gay. I came out while in grad school, was called to a Court of Love, and was excommunicated, my stake president and other members of the High Council telling me I’d denied the Holy Ghost and betrayed God.

It wasn’t until that evening, when I heard one of the high councilmen refer to me as “articulate” that I understood my own problematic use of the word when talking about “educated” blacks. The slur in my case meant, “when they are learned they think they are wise.”

It meant something different for black people but was equally insulting, perhaps more infuriating because the white people like me using it thought we were saying something “nice.”

My excommunication was announced during church services. Friends I’d known for years refused to talk to me.

But I felt genuinely free and soon met my first lover. We lived in a mobile home in St. Rose on the edge of the swamp past the airport. Everyone in the neighborhood lived in trailers and mobile homes.

Everyone was white.

Well, almost everyone. One day, two white neighbors stopped by our place. “We just told that guy down the street he’d better have that black guy staying with him move out or we’d burn them out.” The men laughed. “What do you think about *that*?”

I could hardly say what I was really thinking: “Sure, the two faggots out here in the boondocks are thrilled to hear your violent, bigoted threats.”

We decided to move to the Marigny, just outside the French Quarter. There I noticed the neighborhood public schools always kept their classroom windows open in the sweltering heat and humidity. My elementary school in Jefferson Parish had air conditioning twenty-five years earlier, but schools in Orleans Parish still didn’t. And I’d never known that until I was almost thirty.

Nearly every public school in New Orleans had a mostly black student body, almost half the schools named

after a “generous” slave owner. Virtually every white public school student attended a magnet school for the “gifted.” Nearly all the remaining white kids attended a variety of private Catholic schools or a single private school serving mostly Jewish students.

My first teaching job was at SUNO—Southern University at New Orleans. It was a public university, historically black like its sister campus in Baton Rouge. This was the 1990s, and the mostly black SUNO and mostly white UNO sat hardly a mile apart, two public universities still quite separate and not equal.

For the next ten years, I taught evening classes at SUNO, all the while thinking I wasn’t prejudiced, every semester learning I still was. Some of that realization, unfortunately, didn’t take place until years after I left campus. Looking back, I squirm at some of the things I did and said. I made a particularly awkward comment once in response to a general rebellion over the amount of homework I assigned. “We work during the day, Mr. Townsend. We don’t have time to read all this stuff.”

“You people,” I said. I’d meant it as “you students,” but boy, I sure learned something that evening.

Almost every semester, an angry student would meet with me after class. “You can’t give me a D on this paper! I’m a high school English teacher!”

I was told by the assistant dean, “You’re penalizing the students for being black. You need to understand the background of your students and take that into account when you grade.” While three major grammar errors

would fail a paper at the University of New Orleans, where I also taught, students could have fifteen at SUNO, and I was still expected to award a passing grade. But after I complied, the assistant dean called me back to her office. “You’re trying to keep the students ignorant and keep them in their place!”

In class, we sometimes discussed current topics related to race, and when the Rodney King riots erupted in Los Angeles, one student defended an attack on a white woman, married to a black man, dragged out of her car. My student felt that every white person got what they deserved. When a young white woman, an American college student, was killed by a mob in a South African township where she’d been registering people to vote, one of my students said, “White people always think we need their help. They were right to kill her.”

On my way to work one evening, I heard about the Oklahoma City bombing on the radio and upon arrival asked the assistant dean if she’d heard the news. She ignored me, so I thought I hadn’t spoken loudly enough and repeated the question.

“Maybe the FBI did it!” she finally spat at me. I walked to my class stunned. I hadn’t yet heard of the MOVE firebombing several years earlier.

I received perhaps a dozen pieces of hate mail in my office mailbox one semester. One note simply declared, “The White Man is the Devil,” but most of the letters were long rants. I tried comparing the handwriting on the notes with that of the essays by my students, but I could never

find a match. I even compared the handwriting with that of the assistant dean, who'd told me flat out, "I think you're a racist, and I'm going to do everything I can to get rid of you." It wasn't her handwriting, either.

The moment the dean retired, the assistant dean got her wish, and I was no longer an instructor in the Evening and Weekend College. The truth is... the assistant dean was right about me. I have no doubt I said and did racist things I don't even remember now because I was unaware of their significance and impact. It never occurred to me to study racism because I was convinced I wasn't racist and therefore had no personal behavior or mindset to change. Even in an atmosphere that offered ample evidence to the contrary, I'd chosen to remain ignorant that such a thing as structural racism even existed, much less that I had an obligation to help dismantle it. At the time, I was relieved not to be rehired after the new dean took over. I'd no longer have to face feeling so uncomfortable every day.

Only I did.

The staff in a store on the "black" side of St. Claude refused to wait on me. Once, when I honked impatiently at a car taking too long to turn on Elysian Fields, the black driver made a U-turn and chased me for blocks. I gave up driving, recognizing my growing irritation with traffic wasn't going to improve. I soon found myself almost always the lone white passenger on public transportation. My family was aghast that I'd deliberately *chosen* to do something so reckless and dangerous. I only saw a single white driver in all the years I rode the bus around New Orleans.

A priest walking his dog one night two blocks from my Marigny apartment was shot and killed by a black man during a mugging. A woman jogging a block past that was shot by a black man during her morning jog. A tourist at a bed and breakfast two blocks in another direction was shot and killed by a black man. A friend of mine was murdered in his Marigny apartment by a black man. Another man was found tied to a chair in his apartment after a black man broke in. A man was seriously injured and his wife killed by a black man during a home invasion six doors down from me. Two of my friends were beaten in the French Quarter by black men. Another had his ribs fractured in a mugging Uptown. A white woman I knew was attacked stepping out of her car.

I understood by this point that white people had ensured a black underclass trapped in poverty with limited access to good education and decent jobs. But that didn't keep me from crossing the street when I saw a black man walking down the sidewalk.

Another friend was murdered by a white man during a gay bashing. But in my mind, the killer wasn't "white." He was a "religious homophobe."

One of my white coworkers looked hauntingly like Jeffrey Dahmer. I gasped when I saw him out on Mardi Gras day, leading his black lover around on a chain through the French Quarter.

Another coworker told me he was hoping to get into med school based on his minority status. "What minority are you?" I asked.

“I’m black.”

One of my fuck buddies complained once about the extra layer of discrimination he faced as part of two oppressed groups. “What’s the other group?” I asked.

“I’m black.”

I’m not colorblind. I’m simply inattentive. I didn’t even notice my husband had blue eyes until we’d been together two years. And in New Orleans, “black” covered a wide variety of skin tones.

Do I have any bias, any internalized white superiority?

Of course I do! How could I not? I recognize I must constantly and actively combat it every single day.

I learned in a History of the English Language course that the names of some towns in England are of Celtic origin, going back as far as 800 BCE. Some names still exist from inhabitants living on the British Isles even before the Celts. The residents since then have resisted any alteration in the names despite influxes of Angles, Saxons, Jutes, and Normans. “Place names are very resistant to change,” my professor explained.

But a simple stroll through the French Quarter of New Orleans showed me that change was possible. Ursulines Avenue used to be named Calle del Arsenal. Governor Nicholls bore the prior name of Calle del Hospital. Decatur Street had previously been named Camino Real y Muelle at one point and Rue de la Levee at another. And Jackson Square had first been Plaza d’Armas.

Working on my genealogy as a teen, I learned the 1850 census was the gold standard for information. I was confused at first to discover that the area my ancestors had lived in almost since their arrival in Mississippi had originally been named Lawrence County. I'd only known it as Lincoln County. Obviously, though, it would not have been named that before the Civil War. Yet despite my family's continued racism, no one seemed to suffer unduly because of the renaming.

Mormons do genealogy so we can perform "proxy work" in temples and baptize our ancestors posthumously. In a university library, I discovered a letter from one of my great-great-grandfathers who fought at the battle of Vicksburg, in which he petitioned his commanding officer to transfer him away from the fighting because he had hemorrhoids. We were all so happy to know he was now Mormon in heaven.

Andrew Jackson was the president who'd signed the Indian Removal Act of 1830, opening the land now known as Mississippi to my ancestors, who all arrived within the following decade. The capital of Mississippi is, unsurprisingly, named after him.

Many among my family and friends talked of Confederate symbols as part of their "heritage." But since the Confederacy only existed for five years, what they're really celebrating is the white supremacy that both pre- and post-dated the Civil War.

Almost all of my white friends and family, like me, never felt they were prejudiced. Some still adamantly deny

it. But if we can't make the most minor effort to change the names of a few streets and university buildings, relocate a few statues to museums, and agree that naming military bases after traitors was a mistake that must be both repudiated and rectified, then our "lack" of prejudice doesn't mean very much.

The problem, of course, is that most white conservatives *don't* think the Confederates were traitors. I'm well aware of how these folks *do* treat traitors.

And I can guarantee they're not waxing nostalgic over me.

After Hurricane Katrina, I relocated to the Pacific Northwest, but on a return visit to New Orleans, I heard the daughter of one of my friends talk about her work with the National Guard immediately after the storm. She was assigned to make sure everyone evacuated. "This one old black man wouldn't leave," she said. "He wanted to stay in his house." She shook her head. "He told me, 'You can't make me leave,' so I told him, 'I can shoot you if you don't.'"

She thought this was a funny anecdote.

After several weeks of Black Lives Matter protests, after taking several more online courses on bias and diversity through my employer in addition to the in-person workshops I participated in over the two preceding years, I was unhappy to discover that my latest internalized bias test still shows I have a "strong preference" for white people over black. If I keep taking this test every year for the rest of my life, I'm not sure the results will ever change

much. Maybe, if I continue to work at it, my score may eventually evolve to, “slight preference.”

The least we can do as “good” white people, and I mean absolutely the very least, is remove monuments to racism from public spaces and rename the streets, university buildings, and military bases honoring those who caused so much suffering and death to our fellow citizens.

If farmers in Mississippi, middle-class churchgoers in Metairie, and so many other white people can still feel the sting of losses incurred over a five-year period more than 150 years ago, can we not manage to feel the slightest empathy for folks who have suffered continually for more than 400 years?

We must make this small token of repentance immediately so we can move on to dismantling more serious aspects of structural and institutional racism.

But that’s the reason for so much resistance to taking *any* step, isn’t it? We want to think we’ve already arrived at our destination, and we dread acknowledging we haven’t, because the rest of that road looks steeper than a hill in Vicksburg, and we know there is no place to rest along the way.

Our journey doesn’t have to be a Trail of Tears, though, or a Middle Passage. It can be a Path to Reconciliation, a double-laned highway to both secular and religious morality.

Because while the road to Hell may be paved with good intentions, the signs pointing the way are posted by resentment and a refusal to accept the truth.

So let's choose to march—humbly, haltingly, boldly, however we can—toward equity.

Throwing away our bias may be harder even than losing the weight we gained eating Grandma's homemade pecan pie.

But justice is a choice. And we can make it.

White Racist for Black Lives Matter

When I relocated to Seattle after Hurricane Katrina, I encountered what at first seemed a less racist culture than I'd experienced in New Orleans. Then I noticed that my coworkers limited their racist comments until our black manager left the room. One even said he wished the military would dump airplane fuel on black protesters.

But *I* wasn't like that. I watched movies like *The Hate U Give* and *Get Out*. I donated to the United Negro College Fund. I read James Baldwin. *I* wasn't racist.

At another job, employees were asked to take an assessment test that determined levels of unconscious bias. My results showed I had a "strong preference" for white people over black. And I took the assessment *right after* participating in two Black Lives Matter protests.

It felt like taking a DNA test and discovering I was adopted. I'm not who I thought I was.

But my bias doesn't prevent me from recognizing the urgent need to dismantle institutional racism and to support the efforts of those more knowledgeable than I am to do so.

For years, I've known about the "black national anthem." When I heard it a few Saturdays ago during a rally at Othello Playground, I didn't even recognize the

melody. I'm 60 years old and never bothered to look it up. I've learned over the past several weeks that it's not possible to be non-racist in a society that shapes us to be racist every day of our lives. I'm now finally trying to be anti-racist.

At the rally, I held up my handmade sign, the words, "Black Trans Lives Matter" on one side and "LGBTQ for BLM" on the other. It was Pride month, after all.

Other signs insisted we "End Qualified Immunity" and "Say her name!" A white man's hat bore the words "Veterans for Peace" while a white woman held a sign asking us to "Amplify Black Voices."

Probably 400 people were at the rally, far fewer than the thousands at other local protests over the past few weeks. I saw a white friend at the park, an older woman with bursitis. A longtime activist, she told me, "I can't run anymore, and when you know the police might attack you for no reason, you want to be able to run." Another white friend was there, too, walking unsteadily with a cane.

A white counter-protester started shouting from the street using a megaphone. The speaker on the stand carried on while about thirty folks in the crowd blocked the man from approaching, drowning out his intrusion with chants of "Black Lives Matter!"

I tensed when I heard sirens in the distance, growing louder until... they passed by on nearby MLK. Several protesters sighed in relief. I expect most of the white folks at the rally were used to *seeing* police violence, not worrying about becoming the recipients of it. These past

few weeks, some of us were likely feeling this particular fear for the first time.

I remembered a photo I'd seen online, a black man with a sign explaining, "We aren't trying to start a race war. We're trying to end one."

A young woman on the stand read some poetry. Other young women performed a dance. Several speakers gave short talks, the emphasis at today's rally the lives of black women. A Somali talked of the retaliation she'd faced at work for speaking out about unsafe conditions during the pandemic.

Then all the non-black folks—about 300 of us—were ordered to the street, the black protesters asked to remain near the stand. On Othello, a group of bicycle riders raced up and down the block, guiding the white, Asian, Indian, and Latinx protesters to line up along both curbs. We were to lock arms and act as a shield against any counter-protesters who might try to break through and interfere with the black marchers. "Alternate which direction you're facing," one of the riders instructed us, "so you can be on the alert to danger approaching from any direction."

Another bicycle rider zipped by. "Remember why you're here," he said.

A white woman on the other side of the street stepped onto her porch with a lighted candle and held it out toward us for moral support.

After fifteen or twenty minutes, the black protesters walked over from the main part of the rally. They headed

west toward MLK, and the non-black allies kept on both sides and behind as they marched toward the police station a few blocks away to make their demands known... again.

When I returned home, I checked my social media and saw several new racist posts from my family. It was disappointing, but I also felt hope.

Because while I'm white, and still strongly biased, I'm one of many who know that Black Lives Matter.

Successful Citizens Are the Key to a Successful Nation

Many Americans worry that the U.S. is losing ground to China, Russia, or other rising global powers. We think drilling for more oil or banning immigrants or enacting harsher prison sentences will get us back on top or, at the very least, keep us from slipping further off the winner's podium.

However, those aren't the most effective strategies for making America #1. We can't succeed without making the success of everyday Americans not only "possible" but routine. Here are seven difficult ways for the U.S. to win, and one easy way to lose:

First, we must **reduce income inequality**. A living wage is not a giveaway. By definition, folks are working for it. We must raise the minimum wage so that no one working 40 hours a week lives below the poverty level. We also need a comparable minimum Social Security payment. And there's a great deal of evidence that Universal Basic Income is effective.

Affordable housing must actually be affordable if we are to decrease our growing homeless population.

Many of our most successful corporations are already headquartered elsewhere or have sent a majority of their

jobs overseas. When we can only ensure success for the top 1% of our population, we have no leverage to keep corporations or their jobs—and the funds to pay them—here.

We need **universal healthcare**. Every other industrialized nation in the world, and even a few developing countries, guarantee healthcare to all their citizens. If we want to attract and keep the best minds and talents, healthcare must be part of the incentive package. Dental, vision, and mental healthcare must be included as well. We can't keep a competitive economy when over half a million Americans are forced to declare bankruptcy every year over medical debt.

When the number of Americans affected by crushing medical debt is added to the number of full-time workers living below the poverty level on subsistence wages, we already have a population so heavily burdened we can only continue to slip further away from a leading position in the global economy.

The U.S. must ensure **tuition-free college and vocational training**. Like universal healthcare, free or nearly free postsecondary education is guaranteed by many other countries. Some of the best international students will go elsewhere for their education and then work in those other countries as well. We're creating our own competitors. And we can't even concentrate on developing our homegrown students because millions here simply can't afford our skyrocketing tuition.

Even those who take out student loans are then burdened for twenty or thirty years with debt that prevents them from buying a home, making other consumer purchases, having more children, or making financial investments in their own future. And their future is America's future.

Just as a sports team can't be successful unless its players are given the training and other resources they need, a country that refuses to ensure that its citizens are skilled and educated cannot hope to remain a world leader.

Universal pre-k and subsidized childcare are non-negotiable if we want successful adults. Workers don't mysteriously materialize out of nowhere at the age of eighteen, prepared to make America's economy competitive. We must begin by valuing childcare and childhood education. And in a digital economy, for kids to succeed in school, they need free access to high-speed internet.

Is such access a "right"? It doesn't really matter. Full access to high-speed internet is *necessary* if we hope to have a skilled population that can compete on the world stage.

Strong, capable adults come from nurtured, educated children.

Fare-free public transportation allows even the poorest folks to get to work and back. It's also essential if we want to address the climate crisis. Those with no transportation or access to childcare may be good stay-at-home parents, but they're certainly not contributing to a

successful global economy. They often, however, are forced to depend on public assistance. It doesn't matter if poverty and dependence are technically our goals if they're still the consistent outcome. If we want workers to get to work, we must make achieving that something less than a daily Herculean effort.

We must **decriminalize addiction, provide subsidized rehab, and eliminate private prisons**. The war on drugs has led the U.S. to inflict enormous casualties on its own citizens. Legalizing some recreational drugs and decriminalizing others will save our country hundreds of millions of dollars a year, plus create taxable income. It also allows us to stop deliberately destroying the lives of millions of our citizens, a plus even if it didn't save money, which it does. Our current system of creating millions of unemployable workers each year with felony convictions ensures increasing poverty—or criminal enterprise as the only viable way to earn money. Destroying our own populace isn't an effective way to compete globally.

The last and arguably most important way to maintain or raise our position is to **tackle the climate crisis head-on**. We must become a global leader in products and services for greener forms of energy. We need to find the most effective, least destructive ways to incorporate wind, solar, thermal, or other methods of extracting and storing energy.

Burying our head in the tar sands won't change reality. *Whichever* country develops the best technology and infrastructure to move us away from fossil fuels, to remove carbon from the atmosphere, and to deal with the no longer

preventable changes that are now too late to avoid, *will* be the leader of the world. If that's not us, it will be China or Russia or India or someone else. It won't be—*can't* be—the U.S.

We'll *have* to do it eventually, of course, whether we want to or not, whether we come in last or not, so we may as well make a goal to be the best at it.

There are all sorts of other things we could implement—require all high school graduates to master two foreign languages, require a semester abroad for every college degree, or a year of teaching ESL to immigrants. We could require community service instead of military service and retrofit buildings with energy-efficient windows or solar panels or whatever, teaching marketable skills in the process. There are many other things we could do to improve our country, but we only NEED these seven.

And we'll pay for these things one way or another. Prisons aren't cheap. Neither are riots in response to racism and other forms of oppression. Cleaning up oil spills or water polluted by fracking isn't free. Neither is the destruction caused by longer wildfire and stronger hurricane seasons. Droughts and floods aren't cheap. Neither is relocating coastal communities.

We can divert hundreds of billions from our military budget and still fund at a level four times that of either China or Russia. We can tax corporations and the wealthy at the same levels we did in the 1950s and have more than enough funds to implement these changes.

So what's the **one easy, sure way for America to fail?** Choosing austerity programs. This, of course, can be broken down into smaller pieces—pitting workers against each other, taxing everyone except the rich, cutting back on every form of assistance, trickle-down economics—but it's all basically the same thing. When we structure every benefit to favor the top 1% of citizens and weigh down the other 99%, we ensure with absolute certainty that 99% of our population will not be able to compete effectively with the Chinese or Russians.

Just as it's easier to deface property than to construct it, just as it's easier to burn a book than to write one, it's easier to choose austerity over the difficult programs we'll need to lift our country.

It boils down to this: do we *want* healthy, educated, well-balanced adults? Then we'd better not start two decades after their most formative years. Do we want a skilled, educated, debt-free population capable of competing globally in every major industry? Then we'd better stop throwing up as many barriers as possible. We must accept responsibility for the workforce we do—or don't—create.

None of these winning strategies is easy. But then, no one wins a gold medal by putting off strenuous workouts. No one is named valedictorian for shrugging off chemistry and literature classes. No one wins a Nobel Peace Prize for justifying mass incarceration and extrajudicial killings.

There's only one way to be competitive on the world stage, and that's by making our citizens successful. We

don't *have* to do it, of course. We *can* let the inertia of our current poor policies keep dragging us down.

That's certainly the easier path.

But if we want to succeed, we'll need to stop deifying oppression in all its forms. We must change our downward course by telling officials already in office exactly what we demand, and only support those candidates in future elections who are willing to take immediate action.

Sound hard?

Well, you didn't think it would be easy, did you?

So let's get to work.

What Readers Have Said

Townsend's stories are "a gay *Portnoy's Complaint* of Mormonism. Salacious, sweet, sad, insightful, insulting, religiously ethnic, quirky-faithful, and funny."

D. Michael Quinn, author of *The Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power*

"Told from a believably conversational first-person perspective, [*The Abominable Gayman's*] novelistic focus on Anderson's journey to thoughtful self-acceptance allows for greater character development than often seen in short stories, which makes this well-paced work rich and satisfying, and one of Townsend's strongest. An extremely important contribution to the field of Mormon fiction." Named to Kirkus Reviews' Best of 2011.

Kirkus Reviews

"The thirteen stories in *Mormon Underwear* capture this struggle [between Mormonism and homosexuality] with humor, sadness, insight, and sometimes shocking details... *Mormon Underwear* provides compelling stories, literally from the inside-out."

Niki D'Andrea, *Phoenix New Times*

“Townsend’s lively writing style and engaging characters [in *Zombies for Jesus*] make for stories which force us to wake up, smell the (prohibited) coffee, and review our attitudes with regard to reading dogma so doggedly. These are tales which revel in the individual tics and quirks which make us human, Mormon or not, gay or not...”

A.J. Kirby, *The Short Review*

“The Rift,” from *The Abominable Gayman*, is a “fascinating tale of an untenable situation... a *tour de force*.”

David Lenson, editor, *The Massachusetts Review*

“Pronouncing the Apostrophe,” from *The Golem of Rabbi Loew*, is “quiet and revealing, an intriguing tale...”

Sima Rabinowitz, *Literary Magazine Review*, NewPages.com

The Circumcision of God is “a collection of short stories that consider the imperfect, silenced majority of Mormons, who may in fact be [the Church’s] best hope... [The book leaves] readers regretting the church’s willingness to marginalize those who best exemplify its ideals: those who love fiercely despite all obstacles, who brave challenges at great personal risk and who always choose the hard, higher road.”

Kirkus Reviews

In *Mormon Fairy Tales*, Johnny Townsend displays “both a wicked sense of irony and a deep well of compassion.”

Kel Munger, *Sacramento News and Review*

Zombies for Jesus is “eerie, erotic, and magical.”

Publishers Weekly

“While [Townsend’s] many touching vignettes draw deeply from Mormon mythology, history, spirituality and culture, [*Mormon Fairy Tales*] is neither a gaudy act of proselytism nor angry protest literature from an ex-believer. Like all good fiction, his stories are simply about the joys, the hopes and the sorrows of people.”

Kirkus Reviews

“In *Let the Faggots Burn* author Johnny Townsend restores this tragic event [the UpStairs Lounge fire] to its proper place in LGBT history and reminds us that the victims of the blaze were not just ‘statistics,’ but real people with real lives, families, and friends.”

Jesse Monteagudo, *The Bilerico Project*

In *Let the Faggots Burn*, “Townsend’s heart-rending descriptions of the victims... seem to [make them] come alive once more.”

Kit Van Cleave, *OutSmart Magazine*

Johnny Townsend

Marginal Mormons is “an irreverent, honest look at life outside the mainstream Mormon Church... Throughout his musings on sin and forgiveness, Townsend beautifully demonstrates his characters’ internal, perhaps irreconcilable struggles... Rather than anger and disdain, he offers an honest portrayal of people searching for meaning and community in their lives, regardless of their life choices or secrets.” Named to Kirkus Reviews’ Best of 2012.

Kirkus Reviews

The stories in *The Mormon Victorian Society* “register the new openness and confidence of gay life in the age of same-sex marriage... What hasn’t changed is Townsend’s wry, conversational prose, his subtle evocations of character and social dynamics, and his deadpan humor. His warm empathy still glows in this intimate yet clear-eyed engagement with Mormon theology and folkways. Funny, shrewd and finely wrought dissections of the awkward contradictions—and surprising harmonies—between conscience and desire.” Named to Kirkus Reviews’ Best of 2013.

Kirkus Reviews

“This collection of short stories [*The Mormon Victorian Society*] featuring gay Mormon characters slammed [me] in the face from the first page, wrestled my heart and mind to the floor, and left me panting and wanting more by the end. Johnny Townsend has created so many memorable characters in such few pages. I went weeks thinking about this book. It truly touched me.”

Tom Webb, A Bear on Books

Dragons of the Book of Mormon is an “entertaining collection... Townsend’s prose is sharp, clear, and easy to read, and his characters are well rendered...”

Publishers Weekly

“The pre-eminent documenter of alternative Mormon lifestyles... Townsend has a deep understanding of his characters, and his limpid prose, dry humor and well-grounded (occasionally magical) realism make their spiritual conundrums both compelling and entertaining. [*Dragons of the Book of Mormon* is] [a]nother of Townsend’s critical but affectionate and absorbing tours of Mormon discontent.” Named to Kirkus Reviews’ Best of 2014.

Kirkus Reviews

In *Gayrabian Nights*, “Townsend’s prose is always limpid and evocative, and... he finds real drama and emotional depth in the most ordinary of lives.”

Kirkus Reviews

Gayrabian Nights is a “complex revelation of how seriously soul damaging the denial of the true self can be.”

Ryan Rhodes, author of *Free Electricity*

Gayrabian Nights “was easily the most original book I’ve read all year. Funny, touching, topical, and thoroughly enjoyable.”

Rainbow Awards

Lying for the Lord is “one of the most gripping books that I've picked up for quite a while. I love the author's writing style, alternately cynical, humorous, biting, scathing, poignant, and touching.... This is the third book of his that I've read, and all are equally engaging. These are stories that need to be told, and the author does it in just the right way.”

Heidi Alsop, Ex-Mormon Foundation Board Member

In *Lying for the Lord*, Townsend “gets under the skin of his characters to reveal their complexity and conflicts... shrewd, evocative [and] wryly humorous.”

Kirkus Reviews

In *Missionaries Make the Best Companions*, “the author treats the clash between religious dogma and liberal humanism with vivid realism, sly humor, and subtle feeling as his characters try to figure out their true missions in life. Another of Townsend's rich dissections of Mormon failures and uncertainties...” Named to Kirkus Reviews' Best of 2015.

Kirkus Reviews

In *Invasion of the Spirit Snatchers*, “Townsend, a confident and practiced storyteller, skewers the hypocrisies and eccentricities of his characters with precision and affection. The outlandish framing narrative is the most consistent source of shock and humor, but the stories do much to ground the reader in the world—or former world—of the characters... A

funny, charming tale about a group of Mormons facing the end of the world.”

Kirkus Reviews

“Townsend’s collection [*The Washing of Brains*] once again displays his limpid, naturalistic prose, skillful narrative chops, and his subtle insights into psychology... Well-crafted dispatches on the clash between religion and self-fulfillment...”

Kirkus Reviews

“While the author is generally at his best when working as a satirist, there are some fine, understated touches in these tales [*The Last Days Linger*] that will likely affect readers in subtle ways... readers should come away impressed by the deep empathy he shows for all his characters—even the homophobic ones.”

Kirkus Reviews