

Past Due: Why Reparations to Black Americans and American Indians are Overdue is part of the title of our reparations handbook, which is like a hoagie sandwich of why, to whom, and how we might begin to redress the wrongs of America’s past and present. One of the layers in the middle is from whom, and one answer is White individuals—as in this White woman, me, thus the rest of the title is: Featuring One White Woman’s Debt. 2020 was a perfect year to begin writing this because I’ve been doing my self-examination with 20-20 hindsight. This past year was the catalyst.



2020 was a year we’re never going to forget. It changed our lives, possibly forever.



Topping the list of why it was such a substantial year, for many of us, is probably the coronavirus pandemic. Like the rest of the world, America was shut down, and our lives were turned upside down. Probably like everyone reading this, I was worried about the health and safety of my family and myself.



It didn’t take long to be jolted out of my self-focus. I started reading stories showing a bifurcated country. In my world, most had the luxury of sheltering in place, stockpiling food and protective gear, and safely working from home. Then, there was the other world—populated by those we came to call essential and frontline workers who had to be “out there,” who couldn’t work safely from home, and who enabled my life to be as uninterrupted as possible. A few months into the pandemic, it became clear that the effects of this pandemic varied greatly. White communities fared better, and communities of color and American Indian communities were hardest hit. The COVID pandemic and the associated economic devastation glaringly laid bare the persistent racial disparities in the U.S.



As the virus raged, another pandemic broke out across the country—social unrest and protests triggered by the murder of unarmed Black people in our streets – men, women, and children alike.



By the summer of 2020, these two pandemics collided in divisive presidential campaign rhetoric at the national conventions and carried through into the bitterly contested November election. These three markers of 2020—COVID, upheaval, and rhetoric—are related and have actually reinforced each other in devastating ways.

Personally, a silver lining of being cut off from many outside activities for a year was having extra time to read and think about all of this. I read a lot about race and caste, and I thought a lot about being White.



I had been reading about America's racist history for some time, but America's turmoil in 2020 made me delve much deeper.



Initially, I was angry. I was angry that "race," a social construct created by the dominant White caste, so deeply divided us. "Race" is not based on biology, and I was outraged at the inequities that resulted from the ridiculousness of the artificial "differentiations" around which we have constructed our society—melanin, hair, facial features, and body types. The irrefutable fact that "race" is the most reliable predictor of life outcomes in America is abhorrent to me.



I was especially incensed to learn that our government, courts, and religions endorsed and promoted racist policies and attitudes, both historically and to this day.



I was angry that the history I had been taught was sanitized, cleansed of the attempted genocide of American Indians and the confiscation of their lands, whitewashed of the horrors and legacy of slavery.



Worse still, I was astonished to learn how, in different forms, we are still stubbornly on this continuum of racism and attempted erasure of Black Americans and American Indians.



Even after that litany of terrible revelations, I was still pointing fingers at others who were responsible for racism, and I expected the reparations owed to come from them.



That was the case until I turned the spotlight on myself and began to inspect my own role. I now more clearly see how the Whiteness that placed me at a higher societal rank and accorded me privileges and benefits and opportunities has likewise kept so many Black Americans and American Indians at a lower society-assigned rank and deprived them of many of those same privileges and benefits and opportunities. I can't adequately express how disturbing it has been to realize how much I have benefitted from my arbitrarily assigned place in what America

considers the upper caste. It has been appalling to review how those opportunities have compounded and benefitted me, because our systems and structures have so clearly favored White people.



My White privilege has been with me from cradle to (eventual) grave. I hit the “lucky gene pool” as far as the American caste hierarchy is concerned, as I have light skin and eyes. Basically, I won the lottery right out of the box – through no merit of my own – merely by the circumstances of my birth and arbitrary DNA. I was already born on “first base,” as far as the American caste system goes, and I have benefited from White privilege ever since, in my White world, and in my White life. I put a lot of hard work and dedication into my decades-long career, nevertheless, I now discount what I personally achieved by a Whiteness factor, a factor I’m attempting to delineate and quantify.



I was elevated in so many ways, just for being seen as White. The same was true for my Italian-immigrant parents, after they were, also arbitrarily, reclassified as White. I have certainly benefited from the generational compounding of those privileges. No racial stereotypes of inferiority were imposed on my existence.



Attempting to see and understand the benefits of my own White privilege throughout my life is a very belated nod to Plato’s “The unexamined life is not worth living.” As I continue to read and learn, and to apply what insight I find to my own life, I see that the White privilege I’ve taken for granted is astounding. I need to give up “stuff.” I need to separate and re-distribute wealth, opportunities, power, and influence that I have accrued, in a substantial way because of my Whiteness, in systems that favored me. “Reparations” is now commonly used to describe making amends and setting things right, as far as wealth and opportunity that was redistributed AWAY from people it rightly belonged to in the first place. I don’t like the term because reparations somehow sounds like altruism or philanthropy. Instead, albeit clumsy, the term re-distribution more aptly describes how I view my own responsibility to make amends. I unfairly benefited from opportunities that came to me at the expense of others, and there’s a lot to undo. You’ll see that I switch back and forth because reparations is the common term, although my personal motivation for what I owe is captured in the notion of re-distribution



I wish this true history and state of conditions would be incorporated into all American school textbooks. I wish I had learned it from the start. However, it is due to my own neglect that this void in my education, awareness, and understanding remained unfilled until recently.

More importantly, I have deluded myself into thinking that I was doing my part to help level the playing field of opportunity. I've begun to see my inaction, procrastination, and dabbling as another form of White privilege. I read a sobering summation of what being White is: being able to walk away. In many ways, I was an active bystander. If I got uncomfortable or tired, I had escape hatches. At this point, I want to close those escape hatches. The vulnerability in sharing my own self-examination and action plan with family, friends, and other readers is the accountability that comes with doing that.



I always attempt to “stay in my lane” of what I can do as an individual to make reparations. And to be honest and upfront about the regrettable fact that it has taken me so long to begin examining my own White privilege. In addition to what has been happening in our country over the past couple of years, there's one final catalyst for my personal re-redistribution: turning 70—a big birthday that I still can't wrap my head around. My parents only lived into their early 70s, and the fact is I don't have the luxury of continuing to educate myself and indulge in emotional empathy without taking broad, serious action... or I will miss my chance to do my part. My personal reckoning is past due.



I don't try to persuade people who don't believe reparations are owed, but I welcome help and company from those who do. I am only at the beginning of this journey of learning and acting with good intentions.

