



AN INVITATION TO HEAL

An Introduction to America's Racial Karma **Larry Ward**

My growing years took place in Cleveland, Ohio, on the East Side of the city near Lake Erie. It was a predominantly African American neighborhood in the 1950s, with a few European immigrants from Polish and Italian roots. Interactions between children and adults of different races, other than on the job or through commercial transactions, were controlled and rare. To my young eyes, members of the community moved about their days going to work, to church, and to school in a kind of stunned silence about race, as if hoping that by never acknowledging it, the bitterness just under the surface would not leak out. Even then, I sensed we were all wrapped in a blanket of fear and yearning.

The nightly news of my teenage years expanded its coverage to voices echoing the pain of centuries, determined to be silent no more. Many of these voices and their stories became focal points in the story of race in the United States, including those of Rosa Parks; Angela Davis; Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.; Malcolm X; and Dennis Banks.

As a Black man writing about race in America, I do not forget the first peoples of this land, their genocide, and their continued presence. Many of us tend to think of African American bodies when we think about America and race, yet the story of racial hierarchy in this country began long before the arrival of African people on these shores. Now, we find ourselves living in a racialized world that existed before we were born, and our minds have been conditioned to see race as real.

This racialized awareness permeates us like a disease of the psyche, cementing our minds to a system of social worth and value by skin pigmentation. It animates our thinking, speech, and behavior individually and collectively. It influences our attitudes, emotional states, habitual dispositions, and social organization. How has this mindset become so powerful?

The cycle of America's racial karma has become very visible in my own lifetime—from my childhood in the fifties to the era of the war in Vietnam in the sixties, when Dr. King and Thich Nhat Hanh found in each other a source of spiritual friendship and political solidarity, and the many domestic and international conflicts in which race played a part. As I grew into adulthood, I was fortunate to have the chance to observe many peoples and places around the world, with jobs that took me around the globe to factories, educational institutions, consulting firms, churches, and community development efforts, in rural villages as well as urban centers. On most occasions, I've noticed the presence of racialized consciousness in the thinking, speech, and behaviors not only in myself but also in the people around me.

The first time I went to work in Asia many years ago, I was part of a faculty running trainings in new methodologies for schoolteachers in Hong Kong. My first day on the job, I had someone come up to me wanting to know if I was the luggage carrier for the team. I said, "No, I'm the dean." You could see their face working hard to try to fit that into their picture of the world.

That's when I knew this racial hierarchy system is global. I've been all over this planet a hundred times, and everywhere I've been, this is an issue. It's such an issue that as an African American going to Africa, people in Africa consider me "white" because I come from the United States. In the sixties and seventies, being regarded as "white" under the yoke of white supremacy gave Black Americans in the Back to Africa movement the shock of their lives. Everybody was clear that white people rule.

Millions of years of adaptation have formed our discriminative intelligence into a complex classification machine that constantly evaluates threats to our safety and integrity. But the kind of thinking that elevates some humans and devalues others based on skin color is not baked into our neurobiology. Some call it racism and colorism; some call it the colonial mind; others call it capitalism; whatever we may call it, those of us who feel the oppressive edge of bias tend to recognize its presence.

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It takes a certain conscious courage to read anything related to the word “race” in the title, because there are few other words in the English language that can activate our autonomic nervous systems so quickly.

It is no small task to attempt to describe America’s racial karma—what it is, and how to transform it—especially if, many days, it may feel as if there is little or no movement forward. Yet, I know once we recognize America’s racial karma as actions that continue to give birth to the notion of white racial superiority and its psychosocial consequences, we gain the necessary insight to change course. We will rage and grieve, but we will also begin to heal.

After living many years outside of the United States, in the year 2011, my wife, Peggy, who is white, and I relocated to progressive Asheville, North Carolina, to start a small business and develop a community of spiritual practice. After settling into our new home, we were invited by Gail Williams O’Brien to lead a meditation retreat in the college town of Chapel Hill on the other side of the state. This connection was made through our association with Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh and the Plum Village Community of Engaged Buddhism; Gail is a history professor emerita at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and the author of *The Color of the Law: Race, Violence, and Justice in the Post-World War II South*.

On the six-hour drive from Asheville to Chapel Hill to meet Gail, I was at first startled by the presence of Confederate flags flying from many homes and businesses along the way. My sense of shock gave way to an increasing uneasiness within my body and mind, compounded each time I encountered a Confederate flag on the decals of a vehicle in front of me. Visible through my car windows were subtle and not-so-subtle reminders of Jim Crow attitudes and America's habits of racial dissociation and aversion. There seemed to be a rhythm of daytime integration and nighttime segregation. While some of the overt patterns of segregation had changed, it was clear to me that the psychological wounds of the past remained unhealed.

Stopping at gas stations, the politeness Peggy and I did experience seemed constrained, with furtive eye contact. The air was filled with discomfort, and I felt like an alien in my home country. My sympathetic nervous system went on high alert. My heart raced; I had knots in my stomach; and memories rose up within me of past trips South in the 1970s, in which my life had been threatened. My mind was filled with concerns for our safety. I had left the United States to work abroad for decades, but on returning, I was filled with the same fear from my childhood and teen years. Why did I, a grown man, not feel safe in 2011—three years into the Obama presidency—in my home country? On election night in 2008, the moment we saw the televised results I'd turned to Peggy and said, "Shit's going to hit the fan," because I knew that the election results would activate the hatred that had sent me outside of America for so many years.

The anger, sadness, and disgust I was carrying revealed themselves to me later during our community meditation. My body and mind began to calm down. I looked deeper into my experience and realized that I was witnessing the impact in myself of a society built on the sinking sands of the white supremacy complex. I began to see how all of us—regardless of how we or our ancestors came to be here—have been conditioned to live on this land as forever strangers. Later, after a meal, we discussed the importance of Gail’s book as well as our new life in Asheville, and we managed to return to some equanimity and enjoy our visit.

Nevertheless, I woke up the next morning with a question on my heart and mind. Why is the notion of racialized consciousness, with white skin on the throne of the human species, so intractable in the hearts and minds of many? Despite its trail of suffering around the world—for colorism is not unique to America—why does it persist? Movements, martyrs, and magistrates had not set us free from this great social-psychological construction.

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The idea of America's collective karma arose within me and inspired me to talk with people wherever I went about the subject of race and its effect on our consciousness. The themes of my new book, *America's Racial Karma*, were born from a decade of such talks.

Ten years prior to my and Peggy's trip to see Professor Gail, I had been introduced to Buddhist psychology while taking a retreat with my teacher Thich Nhat Hanh in Plum Village, France. His book on the subject, now known as *Understanding Our Mind*, had a different name back then: *Transformation at the Base*. This title gives us a good clue as to what is required for radical shifts in consciousness. Transformation at the base affects the roots of our consciousness. This is why we practice.

With this lens of Buddhist psychology, I began to see a fresh way to understand the lived experience of consciousness as a dynamic and multilayered reality. I began to see how deeply embedded the idea of race is as the psychological base of modern self and society. It's entwined with our notion of ourselves surviving within a world of fear, conflict, and competition, and painful though it may be to hold on to it, without awareness, we cannot let it go.

Not everything has an answer. Some things are not fixable. So, I'm not talking about fixing our racial karma. I'm talking about bending the trajectory and transforming the energy that sustains it. What we've seen in the last few years is the great feeding of animosity and the joy of bigotry. But nothing can live without food. If it's not fed, racism will not live.

I began to recognize a kind of catharsis, a sense of energy more like worship, a quality of transcendence that a religion would provide surrounding the notion of white supremacy. I then began to understand its seductive conditioning power and subsequent seeming intractability in history and in the present. I knew I had to dive deeper. We must go into our collective psyche and the social psychology that nurtures it, which in turn keeps feeding the institutions that damage us so intimately.

America's Racial Karma explores the psychological factors that continue to create our racialized consciousness and the waves of suffering in its wake. Our racialized consciousness is the greatest achievement of white supremacy and an example of how human consciousness can be nurtured to perfection in unwholesome ways. It is a fundamental obstacle to the achievement of collective wellness and justice in US society.

The stories we tell ourselves and one another about race are full of political emotional manipulation, the social theater of status and, most of all, unprocessed trauma. While such stories must be reported for as long as they continue to occur, the unwitting ingestion of them as forms of cultural reenactment actually prevents many of us from the personal and collective work of grieving our racial karma, restoring our racial sanity, and reimagining our lives together. By telling and retelling such stories of suffering, without mindfulness or insight, we reinforce our fears and biases through the triggering and retriggering of our autonomic stress responses.

Storytelling is an ancient means of creating individual and collective identity, but stories are not innocent; they provide language and leave footprints in the cave of the heart that reveal how to be human. Our racialized stories tend to be in-group affirming and out-group shaming—self-affirming and other-demeaning. Stories of our racialized consciousness are passed from generation to generation and from land to land. We can track the progress of these stories over five hundred years of colonial history as they provided legal, religious, social, and psychological support and justification for ignorance, injustice, and indifference in America.

To assume that our current racial dysfunction is disconnected from America's continental and Eurocentric past is a delusion of the highest order. Our racial past echoes through the air we breathe and permeates the ground on which we walk.

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This fragmented consciousness predates our birth but still flows through our neural networks, the veins of our being. When it comes to matters of race in America, we are caught in a cycle of reactivity. Our autonomic nervous systems are on high alert, flooding our bodies with the energies of fight, flight, or freeze. If we can learn to stop and look deeply into these energies, we can discover the courage, connection, and imagination to embody a new world.

We must better understand the mind's grasping, clinging, and attachment to the fiction of race. Our minds seem to enjoy projecting qualities onto others with the aim of elevating ourselves. The result is nothing short of tragic: in a fictional universe, we may make ourselves feel safer, but we lose touch with reality.

We can learn to recognize, name, and rest these mental gymnastics, and begin to heal our shared racial trauma with awareness, whether we are victims, perpetrators, or witnesses.

I see us in America today walking uneasy and contorted from the continuous cycle of actions that create, sustain, and perpetuate our racialized consciousness. This cycle is America's racial karma. For those of us in a deep state of paralysis due to our past pain, shame, grief, and trauma, it's all we can do to exist, get up, and walk.

For many of us, the question becomes: Am I worthy of being healed? Feelings of guilt, shame, and grief may seem as solid as blocks of ice within us. Or, the anxiety of our imperfections becoming more exposed paralyzes us from acting and taking the risk to heal. These anxieties are part of the healing process, not obstacles to be feared. To move into healing requires us to be vulnerable. One way I understand this sense of vulnerability is the presence of openness and grace in my body and mind's readiness for change.

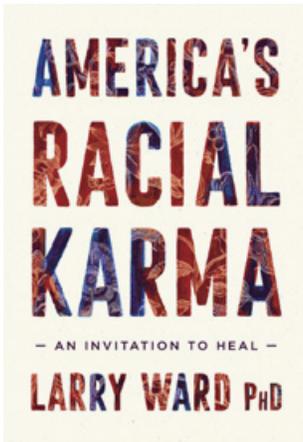
Anything could happen, and it could even be good. 📖

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was the catalyst that sparked the young Larry Ward's journey into a life of planetary peacemaking. Dr. Ward's introduction to Buddhist practice began in Calcutta in 1977, but it was when he met Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh in 1991 that the practice became truly central to his life. He is ordained as a Dharma teacher in Thich Nhat Hanh's Plum Village tradition and has accompanied Thich Nhat Hanh on peace-building missions internationally, as well as throughout the United States. Dr. Ward brings 25 years of experience in organizational change and local community renewal in 20 countries to his work as director of the Lotus Institute and as an advisor to the Executive Mind Leadership Institute at the Drucker School of Management, in Claremont, California. Dr. Ward holds a PhD in Religious Studies with an emphasis on Buddhism and research on the neuroscience of meditation.

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