

# I AM DYLANN ROOF

## Intro

Since I was 9 or 10 years old, I've been struck dumb with curiosity, awe, admiration, horror for the plight of Black Americans. As a white student, writer, citizen, I have been inexorably drawn, from the first books I read to the present day, toward race, the fundamental fault line in American culture, for better and for worse.

Over the years, I have read many wonderful disquisitions on race by Black writers, from W.E.B. DuBois to James Baldwin, to Toni Morrison, to Cornell West, to Eddie Glaude, been mesmerized by these writers' ability to describe the complexity of Blackness in America, and even more impressed by their ability to describe the complexity of whiteness. These Black writers, and others, have told us white Americans, as only the oppressed can define the oppressor, as only the victimized can understand the full measure of the assault, who we are.

Black willingness to examine the worst characteristics of white America has been nothing less than miraculous, the miracle being the perpetual opportunity for redemption white America has been offered. When they charge us with abuse, they are offering a chance for absolution; when they vent their rage, they are, again and again and again, offering us a chance to apologize, atone; and when they sink into despair beneath the weight of their merciless history, they are offering us a chance to be what we've always said we were, a fair and just and good people. The miracle is not that Black Americans have offered us these opportunities—no, as a long-time oppressed underclass they know our fates are inextricably linked, their generosity likely borne more of a practical urge toward survival than of a saintly concern for our blighted souls—the miracle is that they continue, after hundreds of years of failed dreams and broken promises, to offer us the chance to come clean.

We are in a fraught time in America, where the rabid political discourse, the sense that the world is closing down on us, with a dark environmental forecast, a growing population that threatens both food and water supplies, mutant germs developing faster than our scientists can respond, and most disturbingly, the triumph of materialism and consumption over conscience, a time with increasingly splintered moral leadership, where technology has outrun social controls, where the true leaders of our world are directed by passionate intensity and greed, the rabid impulse to consume, to self-aggrandize, coming untethered from the heart, from the soul.

We white Americans need to once and for all admit the truth of the white experience. We need to own it. All of us—as an *us*, a racial group, as white people.

## 1

The problem of race lies at the heart of the American soul as much today as it did one hundred fifty, two hundred fifty years ago. This is not to say the world is the same today as it was during slavery, but that race was then, and continues to be now, the totem of our

division, the manifestation of our essential American schism. The ego of America surges as the soul quakes.

Race in America, the republic founded on the principles of justice and freedom, represents the shadow of these ideals, the ineluctable price of such freedom, which is of course bondage, for the slaves as well as the masters. For as courageous and lofty as are our ideals, our practice and execution has been reactionary, defensive, self-righteous. And believing too strongly in ourselves, no matter how noble the principles we espouse, leads inevitably to blindness, an inability to see the shadow that lies on the ground, far beneath our exalted self image.

A people cannot sustain a belief in their own divine selection unless they demonstrate it, and create institutions that demonstrate it, on a daily basis. And though we mainstream whites have found other groups—the LGBTQ community, Latino immigrants, Muslims, Democrats and Republicans, and most notably, the ignominious poor—to serve as foils, cultural repositories for what we are not, African-Americans have played this role since our country's inception. Therefore, we have, at times consciously, at times unconsciously, created and enforced the conditions that perpetuate this perverse interdependence, between the saved and the fallen. For our American piety doesn't merely create but *requires* the shadow of impiety, of defiance and vulgarity, just as our high mindedness *requires* a reciprocal illiteracy and crudeness, and our sexual purity and moral conservatism *require* a shadow licentiousness.

Addressing race in a meaningful way will require a humility, an ability to admit being wrong, being flawed, a humility that in recent times appears to be diminishing. For just as conditions continue for so many Blacks to improve, for so many more they stay the same. The same can be said, of course, for white people.

As James Baldwin said fifty years ago, racial equality in America will require a frank self-awareness white Americans simply do not have.

One of my most poignant memories from early childhood, the only one in which I recall shedding actual tears, is from when I was ten years old and, finding the newly released issue of Life Magazine on our dining room table, opened it to the centerpiece spread on Martin Luther King who had only a week before been murdered in Tennessee.

I remember my tears dropping onto the photographs and spreading into the thin paper. I'm not sure if it was the images, a particular image, or if it was something in the article that accompanied the photographs that triggered the emotion. But I was moved by the man's beauty and the tragedy of his being taken from us. For some reason, I felt a connection. Somehow I knew, and have known since, that he was speaking directly to me. And for me. I knew that he had taken on a challenge he could never vanquish, and I loved how he refused to back down.

Later, listening and re-listening to his voice rise and shudder in his recorded speeches, in the eerily prophetic words he uttered the night before he died, I would shudder myself.

I shudder still.

What moved me in King's speeches, and to a lesser degree nearly 50 years later in Barack Obama's, was that the speaker understood me. For white people to be recognized so totally, so nakedly, was stirring; yet, the recognition reflects one of the most vile aspects of American racism, namely, the fact that we whites need to be explained by Blacks, the very people we brutalize. Why else the rejection of the legitimacy of Black anger, and the continued insistence on an unearned absolution, on forgetting and forgiving, on moving on? To seek forgiveness, release, without ever offering meaningful contrition, without ever *earning* it, is at best fatuous, and at worst so psychologically unaware as to be dangerous, incendiary.

I was just a kid, and I identified with the pain of an entire people, because the spokesperson for those people had the magnanimity to concede that basic point, that we were all kids, and simply didn't know any better. He offered us another chance at innocence. He had the wisdom and courage and near saintly ability to suffer the abuse and offer forgiveness.

Who are the white leaders that have demonstrated a corollary understanding of the Black experience? Aside from Mark Twain and Abe Lincoln, two men who had at least moments of recognition and offered a degree of atonement and renewal, it's hard to name any. John and Robert Kennedy? LBJ? Bill Clinton? Bill Bradley? Jack Kemp? Joe Biden? The appeal of these politicians for Blacks is not that they devoted so much energy to Black concerns, but that they devoted any energy at all.

## 2

My interest in MLK may have led to my interest in the Black coming-of-age narrative that seemed to mirror my own coming of age—in one sense as a reciprocal, in another as an exact duplicate. In seventh and eighth grade, I read a bunch of autobiographies, most memorably, those by Gordon Parks, Claude Brown, and Richard Wright, all of which depicted Black boys struggling against a racist culture, living in households mired in poverty, outrage, and impotence. The stories vividly and dramatically told the tale of the underdog fighting against virulent forces, the hostility of their environments turning in on itself, the way degradation and abuse generally do.

As a child of deeply neglectful parents, one of whom spent the final year of her life in her bedroom dying of cancer, I myself suffered in childhood, and in the struggles of these men, these boys, I found the perfect representation of my own amorphous psychological unease. Of course I did not know this at the time, but I gravitated toward the narrative of the oppressed boy fighting against greater, mysterious forces. From as early as I can recall, I have felt a deep affinity with, and a deep admiration for, the underdog, especially the Black underdog.

But there was more to it. It wasn't merely the identification with fellow sufferers. There was a beauty, a grace that touched me. Similar to the lilting speeches of MLK, these books contained a music, a rhythm, and most of all, an unabated yearning, the valve somehow staying open in a world that seemed intent on shutting it down—the yearning, the hope, the desire. And though I realize I am treading dangerously close to a hurtful stereotype in saying this, I am talking about an innocence, a purity, that was and has been, somehow, preserved. I am talking about soul. Theirs and mine.

And that is the pitfall of talking about race in this land, especially being white and talking about it. As soon as you begin to describe the Black experience you are committing the age-old sin of the oppressor, cutting out people's tongues and speaking for them, inevitably objectifying, sentimentalizing them. To talk about Black people being innocent is to jump with both feet onto a slippery slope, where in the next breath, you will be talking about their purity and virtue, then their depravity, assigning all Blacks to one of two camps at either end of the moral spectrum. As John Cooley discussed in his literary study in the 1930s, *Savages and Naturals*, Blacks are often seen and portrayed in our white literature as pure or corrupt, saintly or evil, innocent or depraved. Never as simply human.

But when I talk about their innocence, their beauty and grace (and when later on I will talk about their ugliness and violence), let me be clear: I am really talking about my own.

As I aged from ten to twenty to thirty to forty, I put so much energy into preserving and protecting my innocence it became hard to even recognize it. It was an unconscious effort, no doubt, but was a fundamental coping mechanism I had utilized from a very early age. When I began in third and fourth grade walking through the neighborhood with rocks and smashing the windows in the two abandoned warehouses, I was preserving my innocence. When in eighth and ninth grade I began cavorting with older friends who had access to liquor and pot, and began winning chugging contests—as a wee, ninety pound eighth grader I could down a quart of Boon's Farm Apple Wine in fourteen seconds—I was preserving my innocence.

I was driven by my family life, and no doubt by my nature, to extremes. When I broke rules, violated social tenets, robbing parked cars, shoplifting, smoking pot behind the school's storage shed at lunch time, I was putting myself, my functioning practical self on hold, on ice—I was preserving it. When I acted aggressively toward girls, attempting to cop a feel without permission, I wasn't becoming a beast, I was *acting* like one. I struggled with and doubted my ability to develop an actual, respectful relationship with the opposite sex, so I went to the extreme. Likewise, when I sought the thrill of finding cash in someone's car, I was not aware of any healthy alternatives for gaining gratification. I was also fighting a growing depression, which meant I searched out more extreme thrills to gain relief as the depression took hold.

Just as I was driven toward destruction, however, I was also driven toward creativity. I listened to music and wrote poetry, seeking moral and spiritual clarity. I became both sinner and saint, savage and natural, and developed a deep affinity with the simultaneous

possession of polarly opposite characteristics and the consequent emotional and cultural range of Black culture as intensified, boiled-down microcosm of the surrounding American culture.

Yes, we project into them what we cannot accept in ourselves, but also what we love most but cannot live up to.

An ugly truth, however, that perpetuates the blindness to this dichotomous reality is that most whites in this country are also forced to the extremes, denied the middle ground, their limbo sustained by the mythos they buy into that they, due to their whiteness, of equal opportunity, which creates a *need* for a debased underclass, especially one in which the inferiority is reified by skin color, an underclass which makes them (us) feel, by contrast, buoyed, aspirant, entitled.

How convenient the whole slave thing turned out to be, not merely for the country's bottom line, but for the steady reinforcement of a white self-righteousness grounded in fantasy.

### 3

When I was eight or nine, I first fell in love with professional sports, and with a couple of athletes in particular. Bob Hayes, wide receiver for the Dallas Cowboys, 1964 one-hundred-meter gold medalist, became my first hero, for one reason—he was fast, really fast. What he could do that few others could do was transform the game in a single play. He was magic. During baseball season my worship turned to Frank Robinson, mainly because my older brother was a Cincinnati Reds fan and Robinson was, in the late 60s, their gifted young right fielder. As a child, I was struck by his combination of speed and power, and also by his confidence and grace.

My first basketball hero was Connie Hawkins, another athlete I can only describe as transformative, magical. With his huge hands and sinewy body, the Hawk could twist and turn, leap and jackknife through the defense, often ending the sequence with an improbable dunk. He was the forerunner of such superstars as Julius Erving and Michael Jordan—transformative, captivating, transcendent.

I loved sports early on and was a talented athlete myself, making little league all star teams a full level ahead of my playing age, winning flag football (we didn't have tackle leagues for kids where I lived) championships as the quarterback, leading my basketball teams in scoring. I was fast, and as I grew older, I discovered one particular ability that separated me from my peers, even the most talented among them.

I first dunked a basketball the spring of my junior year, when I was sixteen. I was a late developer, not having my final growth spurt until fifteen, and the next year the moment arrived at the playground as a group of players stood around between games, two of the bigger guys, 6' 3" or so trying to dunk, but having trouble. Standing an even six feet, I

remember the ball bouncing off the rim over to me and, without thinking, dribbling to the hoop, jumping, and dunking with two hands.

Now let me explain a couple of things about dunking a basketball. In today's YouTube world, a six-footer dunking the ball is not unusual, at least not in any town with a sizable Black population.

Next, there is no single athletic act for any boy as transcendent as dunking a basketball. Every athletically minded boy wants to jump high, spends hours in his home trying to touch first the door frame, then the ceiling, and on the court, first the net, then the backboard, then the rim, at some point, if he is lucky, growing tall and limber enough to attempt to dunk a basketball (most of us begin with volleyballs we can more easily grip with one hand).

To dunk a basketball is a moment of magic, an experience in which you overcome what seemed an insurmountable limitation. That basket looks so high for so long. To actually rise up, raising the ball above the rim, and throw it down is an exhilaration like few others. Hitting a homerun, returning a kickoff for a touchdown, scoring a breakaway goal, all are thrilling. But dunking a basketball is a moment of actual transcendence.

Black players made up about half of my high school team, and about ten percent of the school population, ninety or so Black students out of nine hundred. Most of the Black players on my high school team were good jumpers, though we didn't have any true leapers like other towns nearby. In fact, I was the best leaper that had come along in quite a while, at that point, maybe ever. And I was white, which anyone who follows sports knows is an anomaly.

But before I get into the whole white boys can't jump issue, back to Bob Hayes, Frank Robinson, and Connie Hawkins, and what it was about these athletes, and others, that drew my admiration. Somehow, it was their Blackness. And though I began to follow these stars before King's assassination, my admiration for them may well have grown afterwards, once I realized the struggle associated with their skin color, with their underdog status, which added a simmering power to their expressions, and grace to their style. Or maybe the struggle was sensed intuitively. Or maybe it wasn't sensed at all. Perhaps I simply enjoyed their athleticism.

Later, I would root for James Harris, one of the first Black quarterbacks in the NFL, and for the other rare Black quarterbacks, Doug Williams, Rodney Peete. It was magic I was rooting for, transcendence. Theirs, and mine too. All of ours. I loved the deftness with which they knifed through defenses and also through our culture.

Again, I realize I am stepping onto dangerous terrain in saying this, but the Black athlete, in this country and in others, possesses qualities white athletes do not. Oh I get that I'm treading on a minefield. I understand why the discussion of the Black athlete's superior physical ability has become taboo. For too long, identifying Blacks as physically superior has been the first step in stripping them of their rights and sending them out to the fields,

and the first step in the absurd logic that superior physical ability indicates inferior mental ability.

I remember distinctly how the election of Barack Obama triggered white fear that he would lead a retaliatory anti-white movement. Which is how many whites see affirmative action—through a lens of fear, levying the absurd charge of reverse racism, which can only be trumpeted by people unaware of their own historical advantage.

And so politics, race, and religion all swirl together in this peculiarly free and small-minded land, with the result being the election of a Black president who simultaneously liberated us and scared us back into our holes.

#### 4

After the Trayvon Martin murder in Florida, there was an outpouring of white sympathy, some of which took the form of protests joined and t-shirts that declared, “We are all Trayvon Martin.” Aside from the fact that this type of sympathy has recently been rejected by the Black community, decried as sentimental and patronizing and, well, so untrue as to be laughable, such statements, no matter how well intended, do nothing to broach the divide within the white community.

When two years later Dylann Roof murdered six parishioners in the Charleston church, a similar outpouring of sympathy ensued. Many white people were filled with shock, horror, and even shame. Not personal shame—no, their outrage inoculated them against such a feeling—but shame for their monstrous countrymen.

What is needed is not horror, not outrage, not even shame. What is needed is ownership.

I am convinced the only way white people can move the needle, the needle that has been stuck since the 1960s, is to own racism. Not easy to do, I get that, when it is built into the system, only visible in the extreme examples broadcast in the media, which are so easily discounted as exceptions to the rule, rather than seen as the visible edge of the rule itself.

This is not to attempt to shame whites. Shaming, blaming, takes us nowhere, but in an ever continuing circle of sin, confession, sin, confession... This is simply about recognizing the racism in each of us, starting with the common feelings so many of us have but scarcely recognize. And though it's true that many in today's younger generations (millennials and Gen Xers), having grown up in more diverse settings and having a less stilted view of race, the fact is that they are breathing the same air, and the ones able to bypass the trap of racism are largely whites of privilege, which suggests, of course, they aren't avoiding racism so much as avoiding the pressures that reveal it.

It's time to be blunt. Time to stop the scholarly analysis and simply admit the truth. Racism doesn't exist out there, but in here. *Here*. It has been so difficult to exorcise, not because it exists in particular pockets of society, but because it is systemic, constitutive, in the very air we breathe. Which means it is in all of us. *All of us*. Sure, some may be

better equipped to process it, place it in historical perspective, better able to keep our heads above the fray, but no one can breathe in a toxin and not be affected. In fact, the most insidious symptom of systemic racism may well be how inured we've become to it, on both sides of the political spectrum.

Okay then, let's do this.

When I watch professional sports on TV, I often root for the white guys. The underdog issue I discuss elsewhere notwithstanding; the point here is I generally assess athletes (at least in the mixed-race sports I watch the most, football and basketball) through the prism of race. Barack Obama's bobbing walk made me uncomfortable because it was too Black. I wondered if he was laying it on, strutting a little extra as if to say, "In your face white boy." I sensed in him an affinity with other Blacks that made me feel excluded, insecure.

Sure, as an educated progressive, I *know* better. The problem is, if I am honest, I don't always *feel* better.

The differences in Black language and style stem from a difference in values, which at times seem diametrically opposed to my own. Whereas the dominant values I learned growing up were restraint, self-control, discipline, much of Black culture seems outwardly defiant, immodest, directly flouting these sacrosanct white values.

Look no further than the world of sports. When a Black player engages in what to me seems an excessive celebration after making a good play, it strikes me as individualistic, attention-grabbing, things that are antithetical to the values of humility and teamwork I was taught. When, after scoring a basket, a Black player pauses to clench his fists at his hips and scream up to the sky, it strikes me as a primitive display of emotion, an abnegation of self-control—in other words, an outright rejection of the values I was taught and have since taught others. And though it's true that many white athletes have begun to adopt these new forms of expression, the fact is that these forms come directly from Blacks.

But it's not just the lack of self-control. There's something else, a laying it on, an exaggeration, as if they are gleefully becoming the very caricatures we whites have for so long painted them as. As if they aren't merely celebrating the play they made, but the caricature, the stereotype itself. Just as they commandeered the n-word, Black semiotics includes a self-conscious inversion of stereotypes, using the stereotype to mock the stereotyper, the resultant white squeamishness only adding fuel to the expression.

Rappers using profanity, slacking their pants, grabbing their crotches. The thumping bass emerging from a tricked-out car with a Black driver pulling up beside me at a traffic light. . . Black people, with explicit expressions of anger, hostility, crass sexuality and ostentatious demonstrations of wealth, make me uncomfortable. Yes, Black people. If a white person does any of these things, it's different. It annoys me, but it does not unsettle me, does not feel threatening.



As an educated progressive, I have been an outspoken supporter of affirmative action; yet, at the same time, I have been deeply suspicious—despite the fact I have known better, have understood the wide-ranging political and social forces that have held Black people down and locked them out. I simply haven't been able to help it. Even today, after years of self-assessment and growth, when a Black person gets promoted, or lands a job in a predominantly white environment, I immediately notice their skin color and, on a level I am barely aware of, begin to ask questions. I am often able to stop the interrogation, either acknowledging my own bias or that of our culture, but the point is that in this country, the lens through which I look breaks it all, everything, into Black and white.

I am white, and the markers of whiteness, the core identity of whites, is at odds with Blackness. Sure, there are many Blacks that break out of this limiting identity, and some whites as well, at least that seem to, but these are merely the exceptions that prove the rule. Such contrary cultural markers breed distrust, antagonism, and violence. I am different from the likes of George Zimmerman, Dylann Roof, and Derek Chauvin in degree, not in kind.

Although whiteness has been a difficult feature to define, it has bestowed upon me certain privileges, among them, a confidence in my country's legal and economic system, and an unselfconsciousness with how I am perceived in public, or at least how my *group* is perceived (for we all have personal insecurities), believing in essence that I am trusted and respected until I prove otherwise. In other words, whatever flaws I may exhibit are individual ones, rather than inalterable, *a priori* qualities of the group to which I belong.

Whiteness means restraint, a belief in delayed gratification that comes from the confidence that the system will deliver the goods, that you will in fact be rewarded for your restraint. And even if certain white individuals do not possess these qualities, as genuine self-possession results as much from socio-economic status as from race, as a white person I take comfort in the invisible realm, the *system* in which I live, the fact that what I cannot see is on my side.

Seen through the filter of white privilege, Blackness is the shadow, the inversion of whiteness, signifying anger, bitterness, fear, shame, defiance. It signifies roughness, simplicity, loudness, lack of restraint, impulsivity, recklessness, all of which are direct by-products of belonging to a system in which you may not expect any long-term payoff. To me, Blackness means not just having personal insecurities, but a whole layer of insecurity due to the group you belong to, a group that has been humiliated, debased, disenfranchised, *openly hated* by its own government, for centuries. Hated, that is, not for what you do but for who you are.

Yet, somewhat miraculously, Blackness has also come to signify grace, soulfulness, open-heartedness. As an inversion of white wickedness, Blackness also signifies goodness.

The curse of white America is that it creates in perpetuity the very qualities it dispossesses, both those it wishes to rid itself of and those it forsakes unwittingly, the bad and the good. We destroy a people's self-esteem and then bemoan their lack of self-restraint. We deny them access to education and call them stupid. We emasculate the men and then complain when they grab their dicks. We take away their fathers, degrade their mothers, and then ask why the children don't grow up to be better parents. We openly debase them, write that debasement into our founding documents, and then swoon when they turn the other cheek.

I am aware of these hateful practices, have seen them at work all my life. Yet it is only the luck of the draw that separates me from Dylann Roof, Derek Chauvin—a couple of lessons from compassionate adults, a confidence in the future that comes with advanced education and upper middle class status, a brain not hard wired to harbor an anger that festers into uncontrollable rage.

Without knowing a thing about either Dylann Roof's or Derek Chauvin's family lives, I would wager that such confidence was in short supply in the homes in which they grew up.

Isn't it cruelly ironic that they chose as targets the very people most likely to understand their alienation, their helplessness? What a horribly beautiful and tragic fact that it was their victims that took one of them into church as a total stranger, and that offered the other a chance at personal redemption. All Derek Chauvin had to do was remove his knee from George Floyd's neck to accept the opportunity, which white America has been given again and again and again, to repent. By simply heeding George Floyd's plea for air—not for liberty, not for respect, for *air*—Chauvin was given the chance to save the very life he was taking.

It is nothing more than happenstance that allows me to sit here pecking away at my keyboard—reflecting, wondering, introspecting—while Dylann Roof and Derek Chauvin sit in prison, and a million other white men and women sit stewing in their anger, feeling put upon, aggrieved, sensing their whiteness is losing its power.

To suggest that a group of people might relinquish power without rebellion, without outrage, is utterly fantastical. No, the more insidious problem is not the legion white folks clinging to their misbegotten privilege but the people who claim to be above such lowly behavior, who in their scorn and mystification over the behavior of the unenlightened, express the exact emotions, the same ignorance, they decry. *How can they be so dumb?*

Dylann Roof and Derek Chauvin committed two of the most horrific acts of my lifetime. But in these murderers, the hate, denial, ignorance in all of us white people was unleashed. Sure, some of us hate more, some less, but there is a collective hate we are all party to. It is an invisible and constitutive component of American whiteness. It is molecular, built into the system. It is in the air we breathe.

Roof and Chauvin may have made the choice, but they did not create the option they chose. These men were filled with hatred, but they did not create the hatred. White people did. *We* did.

*I am Derek Chauvin. I am Dylan Roof.*