

White People Will Always Let You Down



[Ijeoma Oluo](#)

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But I care too much to stop demanding more.

I thought I was going to lose my mind. I'm not saying this flippantly. I remember thinking that I was actually going to lose my sanity, that I was going to...break...somewhere in my mind. I remember thinking that might have already happened. Trayvon Martin had been killed—murdered—and nobody was saying anything. This baby had been shot in cold blood for simply existing in his beautiful brown skin and I couldn't sleep at night thinking about it. And my friends, people I had known the majority of my life, had nothing to say.

There had been other letdowns in the past, other hurts. But this time, I really *needed* my community in white liberal Seattle—my friends and neighbors—to get past their shit and show up. I needed this to matter to them, at least a little. Because Trayvon could have been my son or my brother, because he was a baby—*our* baby. But everyone kept talking about the film they saw the previous weekend, or the new shit they bought online. I started begging people to say something, anything.

When people responded at all it was to say something like, “I don’t think it’s my place,” or “I’m not really comfortable.” I was falling apart and my community was afraid of being uncomfortable. Two friends of mine, Lyndsey and Melody, checked in, got me out of the house, let me know that they cared. I will love them until the end of time for that. But time and time again I ran into the wall of apathy that said, “this is where we stop. This is the limit of how much we can invest in your humanity.”

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As time passed, and Black Lives Matter made it into the everyday dialogue of society, those who were previously silent suddenly had everything to say—about themselves. It was all about their feelings, their pain. “It hurts me so much to think that this country is doing so much horrible shit to people like you,” they’d say, “I don’t know how to deal with this pain. Can you help?” White people would reach out to me in tears, “I don’t even know how to get out of bed in the mornings, thinking about how horrible racism is. How do I go on?”

I spend a lot of my day navigating the white people in my life that I love. I try to figure out when to offer comfort, encouragement, hard truths, or humor. I agonize over when to take time just for me, when to give up, when to take the risk and challenge someone I love who is hurting me.

People fuck up; it's natural. And when we deal with topics as fraught as race, people fuck up a lot. But when you are a person of color in a white majority country, the fuck-ups that cut into you are relentless and unavoidable. People talk about building bridges, about finding common ground, and so you find that, and you walk together. And then when it is most important you find yourself standing alone over the water where the bridge has been unfinished and you look over at your friend and they say to you, "Oh no, I won't go there." And then you look down, and like in the cartoons, you fall.

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Last year I was giving a talk at a local university. A woman raised her hand to ask a question. She said, "My niece is experiencing a lot of pain as a mixed race black woman because she is realizing how little of her black identity the white members of her family are willing to see. They are refusing to discuss the things that matter to her most. Do you have any words for her?"

I could tell that her niece was the young woman sitting next to her. I could see it in her eyes. I looked at the niece directly and I said, "It shouldn't be this way. You deserve to be seen by those you love and those who love you, just like your white friends and family members are. You deserve to be believed by your community. You should hear them say, 'this matters to me because you matter to me. What hurts you hurts me, and I'm here for you.' And that hasn't happened for you, just as it hasn't happened for so many people of color in this country. And it's not okay. And if you are feeling hurt by that, it is a valid way to feel. Because it should be different, and you have the right to expect more." Tears streamed down her face as I said this.

She nodded at me silently. I had little more advice to give her than that, because I knew that this was a pain that would visit her time and time again throughout her life. The letdown was just beginning. She

would experience this in the majority of her friendships with white people, in every office she worked in, with every politician who courted her vote, with every institution she interacted with. She would always be the one expected to reach out, and she would be left hanging time and time again.

White People: I Want You To Understand Yourselves Better

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On social media I'm often confronted with white friends posting about how afraid they are to fuck up, how unforgiving their friends of color are when they do. How "call-out culture" is ruining their relationships and destroying discourse. How they were labeled "racist" for asking a simple question or saying the wrong thing. And then I see my friends of color, heartbroken when once again a trusted friend reveals deep-seated racism. I see them trying so desperately to get the people they love to see.

"You are hurting me," they say in so many ways, and the response is always, "No, you're hurting ME." I see them lamenting not only the loss of a relationship they valued, but the loss of yet another person who they had once thought saw their humanity. I see them calculating each time something hurtful is said or done: "Do I say something now? Do I risk it? Or do I swallow this again? Do I refuse to look down and risk seeing that the bridge is no longer there?"

A few weeks ago my intern, a young black woman, reached out to me for advice on an issue she was having with one of her best friends, who was refusing to see how she had been harmed by an act of racism. She asked, "When do I give up? When do I keep fighting? When am I just hurting myself?" And I responded in the only way I could, because I knew that it was all just starting for her, that she would be asking these questions for the rest of her life.

“You will have to decide each time what is best for you,” I said. “You will have to decide who is worth the risk. Because it will hurt you almost every time. It will almost never have a happy ending. So if you say something, say it because you love that person enough to risk that particular pain—the pain of realizing that they do not see you and will not risk the discomfort of seeing you. Do it for people who are worth the one in 10 chance that they will respond with the love you need.

Do it because even if they cut you out of their life, you love them enough to try. Do it when the thought of swallowing any more of it makes you want to gag. Do it when you need the words said out loud so you know you haven’t lost your grip on reality. Do it for love. Speak out for love of yourself or love of the person you are speaking to. But conserve what else you can. Because it is a long life and you can’t hurt yourself for everyone.”

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And that is what we do. With every confrontation, every call-out. We are saying, “I know that this is likely to hurt me, I know that I will likely be the one hanging. But I have to look down to see if the bridge is still below me, even though I know that if I don’t see it, I will fall. Because I love you and I need you and I need to know if we are standing on anything real at all.”

And for that act of love we are called bitter and angry. We are told that we are the real problem. We are cut out and away. But we keep trying, because we love. And when everything else has been taken from you, love is all you’ve got.

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