

**Tim Wise**  
**Bermuda Lecture**  
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I have to tell you, I learned a very long time ago not to have any anticipation about the size of an audience—have no expectations whatsoever because if you have no real expectations you can never be disappointed. So if you go into an event and you think to yourself: “Well, we’ll be lucky to have a dozen people”—and we actually discussed that, the possibility that it could be a dozen people, could be five people or could be fifty . . . and I think actually we’ve exceeded that by some number now. So this is a good high class problem to have, you know, when you announce that you’re going to have a discussion about race—or a dialogue about race—and people actually come. And in a country with roughly 65,000 people, to have this group is especially impressive because—if I’m in a nation of 270 million—I have very difficult time, as do others who do this work, getting this kind of crowd on a regular basis. So this is very impressive and you should be very pleased and I’m certainly very pleased; I’m sure the organizers of the event are; and I’m glad to be here and to have a couple of days to spend with you addressing a number of different audiences and addressing the issue of race from slightly different perspectives each time—but all with a common theme.

What I’m going to do this evening is—this has been billed I know as a ‘white on white dialogue’—it’s a little dishonest in the sense that the first part is going to be very much a ‘white monologue’, in the sense that I’m going to talk and you’re going to presumably listen; and then when I’m done we’re going to have the dialogue piece which is where we will have some questions and some discussion back and forth—not only between you and myself but perhaps between folks who are in the audience and we’ll see how that goes.

I know it was somewhat controversial—there was some . . . not overly controversial discussion, but at least some, about the very nature of this ‘white on white dialogue.’ And I know this is very common (in the United States as well), that whenever we ask for a discussion to take place in which whites are particularly being asked to come out and to talk about the issue of race, there is often some consternation—there is often some agitation—on the part of those who insist that that is somehow separatist or segregationist or even racist itself; and of course the media sometimes stokes that perception, either deliberately or not so deliberately—and has done so, I know, in the case here. I want to suggest a few reasons why I think it is so important to have ‘white on white’ dialogue—that is to say, to discuss race as white folks amongst white folks. And it’s the same argument I would make, by the way, for why it is important for *black* folks to have conversations about race with other *black* folks; or in the States why I would say it’s important for Native American peoples to have the discussion amongst *themselves*; and for Asian Americans to have that discussion amongst *themselves*; and for *all groups* who are racially identified and treated as members of groups to get together on occasion—on regular occasion—and discuss ones issues. What I find interesting about the controversy surrounding this concept of a ‘white on white’ discussion or a ‘whites only’ if you will—

even though it wasn't formal and there's no law that can be used to actually keep people out—but this encouraged, if you will, 'white on white' dialogue, is that to have that be controversial is odd, given the fact that for most of us who are white—and this is true whether we're in the United States, whether we're in the UK, whether we're in Bermuda—most of us who are white spend a substantial amount of our waking hours anyway in the presence of other white people. This is the norm for us. The idea that somehow *this* is odd flies in the face of our experience—we go to church with other white folks, we go to school primarily with other white folks, we live in neighborhoods where most of our neighbors who surround us are white, our closest friendship networks and kinship networks are *white*—and that doesn't seem to bother white folks all that much. But suggest for one minute that those white folks who are already around each other ought to actually sit down and discuss what that means—that they're all white, or mostly white, in that particular space—and all of a sudden we push back and we say: "Oh no, no that's . . . that's 'separatism.'" Well, what was every other day of the year if it was not separatism? What were our mostly white neighborhoods and our mostly white churches and our mostly white organizations and institutions, and our mostly white workplaces and schools, if not a form of separatism? I guess my point is we might as well take advantage of the reality that already exists on the ground—if it is indeed a reality—and take that opportunity when we are in *white space* to talk about what 'white space' means; and to talk about what 'race' means. Because I assure you black folks do that. I assure you that folks of color the world over take advantage of their opportunity to be in 'black and brown space' to talk about race. It comes up regularly. It's only those of us who are white who sort of, I guess, take advantage of what 'whiteness' means (and I'll be discussing that length) to avoid the dialogue. But we really ought not find it at all disconcerting—we're already in those white spaces, we might as well do something constructive while we are in those spaces.

The interesting thing about the controversy, secondly, is that it implicitly assumes—whether it's stated or not—that race is not in the room until we *talk* about it. You know, the idea being that unless we *say* we're going to have a 'white on white' racial dialogue, that 'race' wasn't in the room of white people until we actually mentioned the word. But that of course assumes that race is not happening when we're in white spaces anyway, and I would suggest it is. I mean, I do this experiment sometimes when I do workshops at college campuses or when I do workshops with community groups or businesses, where I ask the white participants in the room to please tell me the first time in their life that they experienced race. And I don't tell them anything more than that, I leave it somewhat vague on purpose, because I want them to answer that question: "When was your first experience with race—whatever you take that to mean?" And, people will sit there for a second, they'll think and they'll ponder it and after a few minutes they will invariably raise their hand and they will offer an answer and their answer tends to be something along the lines of this: "Well, I was four years old and I was in the grocery store, and it was the first time that I ever noticed someone who was black. And I remember asking my mother or I remember asking my father: 'Wow! You know, what's with the person with the brown skin?'" Or something along those lines—it's always some story like that or somebody saying: "Well, my first experience with race was the first time that I *saw* a person *mistreated* on the basis of race and I heard a racist joke or a racist comment." And

all of those are fine answers, but there's something that's wrong with *all* of those answers, and it's the same thing that is wrong with getting upset at the notion of having this 'white on white' dialogue as if *that* and only *that* were instigating or instilling race into a conversation that otherwise would have been race-neutral. And that is that when you suggest that your first experience with race was the first time that you recognized the racial 'other'—that is to say the first time you actually were in the presence of somebody who was different—you are assuming, implicitly, that all of that time that you were *not* in the presence of the 'other' you were living an un-racialized experience. And I would suggest as I do in my book "White Like Me", that in fact we are experiencing race from the moment of our *birth* because we are born into a racialized society.

So indeed *my* first experience with race is *not* being enrolled in preschool at the age of two and a half at a historically black college where all of my classmates were black—that is *not* my first experience with race, though indeed that happened. My *first* experience with race is being conceived to and born to a white family, in a nation where whiteness *means* something and *meant* something and continues to mean something. It was going to affect the health care quality that I would receive; it was going to affect where my family would and would not live; it was going to affect the kinds of educations and opportunities that my family would have had *even before my birth*—and so indeed I was living a racialized life from 'day one', but maybe perhaps not thinking about it until several years later. But that's the problem. Race is happening, whether we're talking about it or not. We're living a racialized experience whether we talk about it or not. By the same token, we live a gendered experience whether we talk about it or not. So indeed, my first experience with the issue of gender or sex or sexism is not the first time that I actually saw a woman mistreated on the basis of gender or sex. It is indeed being born a man in a society where being a man means something; and has always meant something in terms of access and opportunity.

So what I want us to think about—whether we're in white on white space, whether we are in inter-racial space—is the way in which our experiences are racialized anyway. The only question is whether we're going to talk about it or not. And I think it is important to have these moments where we can come together and discuss these issues, just like it's important for black folks to do the same. Because too often times our racialized experience is one that has intimidated us and kept us from having the kind of open and honest dialogue that we have when we are among "family." And I realize in a broader sense we're all part of one human family, but the reality is that living in a racialized environment with a history of discrimination, a history of inequality, a history of oppression on the one hand and privilege on the other hand—makes it very difficult for the oppressed and the privileged, the marginalized and the included, if you will—the excluded and the included—to be able to come together and sometimes have the level of honesty that they would otherwise have in private. In the South of the United States, we have a saying that 'nobody likes to put their stuff in the street'; and actually 'stuff' is not the word that we used—that is the PG-rated version. There is another word that also begins with 'S' and it is the stuff that you don't really want to put in the street in front of other people—the idea being that airing your dirty laundry, particularly in front of those who are different than you in some way, is very frightening to people. And I think too

oftentimes, white folks are unwilling to open up about race—our own biases, our own preconceived notions, our own stereotypes that we have of others—if those others are in the room, because we have a fear that somehow they’re going to attack us!—that somehow they’re going to think ill of us and think badly of us. There’s a wonderful film that has been used to do anti-racism training for years within the U.S. (and it’s been used outside the U.S.) called “The Color of Fear”, and in this particular film—what’s fascinating . . . it’s a dialogue group with about eight men—two black, two white, two Latino, two Asian—and a Chinese American film maker, and they came together over the course of a weekend in Northern California back in 1994 to have a discussion about race and what it meant to them as men from these different racial groups. And it’s used and it’s shown all around the country, and what’s interesting . . . there was a scene in it (and I’m sure most of you have not seen it) but there is a scene in which one of the white men (and actually it’s throughout the film) one of the white men is having a really difficult time discussing this issue and he keeps saying things to the people of color in the room along the lines of: “Well, you know, anybody can make it if they just work hard enough” and “This is an equal-opportunity society and there really isn’t any problem with racism”—and he’s saying this in spite of the fact that these men of color have for thirty minutes on film and for a day and a half in real time, been sharing with this man their actual experiences with racism; and yet he’s saying: “No . . . it’s not really a problem, I think you’re exaggerating . . . I think you’re seeing things . . . I think you’re hyper-sensitive” etc., and at one point (as disrespectful as this dialogue is) the black men, the Latino men and the Asian men have been very patient, they’ve been very calm, but one of them—Victor Lewis who is a good, dear friend of mine, a black man who does this work around the world—has just had it (he’s one of the cast members in this film) and he just can’t hold it in any longer, and he explodes and he gets up and he really, literally lays into this other white man, David, and just spins off on him for a good minute, minute and a half—it’s a wonderful 90 seconds or so of film, it’s actually quite brilliant—but what’s interesting about it is that when you watch the film in the presence of white folks you can *see* the white bodies tense up as Victor stands to confront this white man. And this is not a black man who is actually in the room with these white people, but it’s just that fact that he’s on celluloid, you know, on the film yelling at the white man and all of a sudden you see the bodies tense as if they think Victor is going to come out of the screen and attack them! Or that maybe he’s hiding back stage or in another room and he’s going to come out and attack them! And so you can see them sort of whip around like: “Oh dear God!” This the kind of thing that I think whites perceive is going to happen to them—if in fact they engage in an honest discussion and say their honest feelings, as biased and as inaccurate as they may be. And Victor, like I said, held it in for a very long time, as I think folks of color generally have done—they’ve held it in for a very long time, and they too need the opportunity to come together and blow off steam, as does any group. And I think this is true of race, I think it’s true of gender—I think it’s valuable for men to get together and talk about the issue of sexism . . . and our role in either perpetuating it or responding to it. I think it’s valuable for members of a religious majority to get together and to think about what *that* means and their role in perpetuating religious bigotry. I think it’s important for folks who are heterosexual to do the same thing with regard to sexual orientation—people who are able-bodied to think about what it means to be able-bodied and to talk about our role in creating equity for those with disabilities. So in any

combination of identities, I think this is valuable. And the reason it's valuable is it actually allows us to come together after that and have a better *inter*-racial dialogue. So having the *intra*-racial discussion and getting some of our stuff 'out there', if you will and dealing with it openly and honestly, then allows us to come back into an inter-racial or mixed setting and have a much more productive dialogue.

I think it is really the reason that I wrote the book that I wrote. The reason that I wrote "White Like Me" was because growing up—and I think this is true generally around the world when the issue of race is discussed—those of us who are white, if we are encouraged to think about race (and a lot of times we're not) but even when we are, I fear—and in my experience I know I have experienced it—that whites are encouraged on those occasions when we've . . . broached the subject at all—we're only encouraged to think of it from the perspective of the racial other. Now that's a good thing to do, we certainly ought to try and generate empathic understanding and we ought to listen to what people of color say about their lives and we ought to listen without challenging the way that David in "The Color of Fear" did with Victor . . . but one of the things we're rarely encouraged to do is think about the 'white experience.' So growing up in high school you know there was this book in the United States and of course it's been all around the world—it was written in 1960—it's called "Black Like Me"—it was written by John Howard Griffin who was a white journalist who took medication for the course of several months in order to turn his skin dark enough to go through the South under segregation and experience life as a black man. It was a brilliant book that actually was quite influential and was quite persuasive in making the case that to be black in America in 1959 and 1960 carried with it, as we know historically, the baggage of oppression. Of course the irony of this was that real black people had been saying that for hundreds of years and white America didn't seem to care. You know, when actual black people said what it was like to be black, white folks said: "Yeah, whatever." White man takes drugs for three months and becomes black for the summer, writes the same book and all of sudden whites around the globe are amazed, and: "Oh my goodness, we should make a movie out of this!"—and indeed they did. So it was very persuasive when the white man told the black truth.

But what was more interesting to me about having to read that book growing up and millions of people around the world have now read that book or similar books was that again the implicit argument made by the teachers who were assigning it to us was: "If you want to understand race you should try and understand the black experience." But the implicit argument then is that I was not having a white experience that would also or could inform my understanding of race. So I found it to be much more helpful, and I think it would be more helpful for those of us who are white, to ask not what does it mean to be black—which we can never actually understand, other than second-hand, third-hand, vicariously by reading the words and listening to the words of people who are black—but instead asking what does it mean to be white in a society that continues to be economically dominated in *all* aspects and really all around the globe by those who are white or those who are of European descent, whichever term we prefer to use. What does it mean to be white? What does it mean to be a member of globally the dominant group, if you will, in terms of economics, in terms of commerce, in terms of power? What does

it mean to be white in the U.S? What does it mean to be white in Europe? What does it mean to be white in Bermuda? They will have different meaning, but there will also be some similarities. And so what I wanted to talk about in the book was what *that* meant, because it's my opinion that if we understood—had a full understanding of what it means to be white—we would gain a much better understanding of what it means to be anything else without having to constantly *ask*. Which is sort of what nice white liberal people do, you know, we *ask* people of color: “Well, tell me about your life.” And perhaps we're truly genuinely interested. Perhaps we're actually sincere, but of course it becomes quite a burden to the person who is black, to the person who is a person of color, to constantly have to educate us about the issue of race when in fact if we would spend just a few hours out of our week, just a few days out of our month contemplating our own racialized experience, we would have a lot deeper understanding than anybody else could possibly give us.

So, given all of that my goals for this evening are for us to explore and to discuss—and I will share with you *my* take on it and then I'd like to get yours—a few particular questions, a few particular issues. Number one is to ask that question that I just put to you which is: “What does it mean to be white?”—both in general in a world in which whiteness continues to have immense meaning in terms of economic power and influence—“What does it mean for you in Bermuda to be white?”—how might that be different or similar to what it means for me to be white in the United States.

Then the second question, after we ask what does it mean to be white, is: “How does the answer to that question, or the answers to that question—how do those answers inform our discussion of race and racism and what do those answers say about what we need to be doing and what we need to be discussing in terms of policy, in terms of practice, in terms of institutional procedure that would generate greater levels of racial equity?”

And then the third question is: “What does it mean to be an *ally* to persons of color?” What does it mean to stand with and next to and beside people of color and challenge problems of racism, to challenge discrimination? What does ally-ship actually look like, or what *should* it look like and how do we know when we're doing it? And by the same token, how do we know when we're *not* doing it?

So, what does it mean to be white? How does that answer inform our discussions of race and racism, and what we have to do to eliminate those problems? And then, what does it mean to be an ally? I want to suggest that for me these questions are fairly easily answered—and you may have slightly different answers and, if so, I want to hear them—and if you have similar answers I want to hear those, as well. To me (and I talk about this at length in the book) to be white means a lot of things, but the first and foremost thing that it means to me at this time in 2005 no matter where I go on the planet—whether it is to Alabama, whether it is to New York, whether it is to Bermuda, whether it is to Europe, whether it is to the continent of Africa, wherever it is—to be white is to have certain presumptions of competence, certain presumptions of legitimacy, certain presumptions of belonging that I fear, and I know from what I have learned listening to people of color, that they cannot take as easily for granted. Certain presumptions of ability, certain

presumptions of competence . . . And when indeed I fail at something which I do from time to time (and all of us do from time to time) I can also take it for granted that my failure at whatever it may be—it may be a professional endeavor, it may be an academic endeavor, it may be a personal goal of some sort that I failed to attain—I can rest assured that when I fail (as I will from time to time) that there are things that I will never have to concern myself with my failure being ascribed to some type of racial trait, to some type of racial incompetence. I will have the luxury of owning my own screw-up, if you will. Whereas to be a person of color is to know that one's failures may not only be viewed through the lens of individual incompetence, but through the lens of group incompetence because we have these stereotypes that are literally global. They may have been generated or created by one or two or three cultures but they are now transmitted via the media and all other types of cultural institutions throughout the entire world and those stereotypes tend to stigmatize people of color—particularly but not exclusively black folks—and they tend to elevate the legitimacy and credibility of whites. So that if I succeed, I get to succeed as an individual; if I fail, I get to fail as an individual. On the other hand, if I'm black and I fail, my failure may well be viewed through the lens of group failure . . . and if I succeed, I have to concern myself with the individual who will look at me and will say to me as that successful black man: "Oh, you're such a credit to your race!" Which is something that none of us who are white, of course, have ever been told because our race gets credit—you know, it's sort of an unlimited supply of the thing so you don't have to be a credit to your race when your race is simply presumed to be more competent. So that's what, at least in part, what whiteness means. It also means that I'm presumed to belong to the orbit of European civilization and all that that implies. And so in a world where European civilization is seen as the pinnacle of human achievement and it is the norm against which all other civilizations are compared and usually found to be lacking by Europeans—found to be lacking and found to be wanting—is to know that one comes from this paradigm, comes from this world, in which one's superiority is taken for granted by one's self and by others. And I would suggest this is a problem, not only in the white mind—its not just that whites have internalized notions of European civilizational superiority—it is that those notions are also internalized by *non*-Europeans in a way that can be quite debilitating to the advancement and to the equal opportunity and success of non-European peoples, non-white peoples, peoples of color. And so the issue of internalized racial oppression is one that black folks in the United States—and I would suggest black folks in Bermuda and black folks in continental Africa who may indeed be the heads of government, and may indeed be in positions of authority—nonetheless grapple with. And to have that burden, to carry that particular burden of feeling as though one has to constantly prove above and against a culture that is forever and always positioned as superior to one's own historical culture is a significant burden. And to not have to do that—to not have to worry about that, to indeed be able to take for granted one's own place within the culture presumed superior, is a huge privilege.

It is also true that to be white, at least in my experience—and again I'll only speak for myself though I think that many of these things are applicable—is to be presumed honest, it is to be presumed law-abiding until I prove otherwise. And if I do indeed prove otherwise by doing something dishonest, by doing something criminal, I can also take it for granted—as with the issue of success and failure—that my criminality, my deviance,

my dysfunctional behavior, is not going to be written off to group pathology. And so in the United States if my name is Jason Blair and I'm a black journalist for the New York Times and I plagiarize a dozen stories and I fabricate the names and the places, and I make up all of these stories and I get caught, I can take it for granted that as a black man who was caught plagiarizing the entire dialogue in my country will be: "Well, that's what happens you know when you lower standards to get more diversity in the news room. You have to hire these black people that really aren't as good and they're really not as honest, and they're really not as competent." But now if my name is Jack Kelly and I'm a *white* journalist at U.S.A. Today, you know the 'Mick' paper of American journalism but one that is very well read and in some circles well respected—I'm a white journalist and I fabricate and I plagiarize twenty stories, I know that I too will get fired when my dishonesty is caught, but I also know that no one is going to think to say something about *white* journalists, that no one is going to suggest that standards have been lowered to make way for dishonest white people. I will get to just be Jack Kelly, the incompetent and plagiarizing and dishonest journalist, whereas Jason Blair will become 'Exhibit A' in somebody's racist fantasy of the dishonesty of black people more generally. Or if I'm in the streets of New Orleans at the time that a hurricane comes through and the city is flooded because the 17<sup>th</sup> street canal and levy breeches, and the media decides that the story is not the devastation of New Orleans, but the looting done by a handful of individuals in New Orleans, I will then get to bear the stigma of an entire group and the dialogue will be: "What's wrong with *these* people?" And *these* people, of course, always in that racial context takes on some group meaning. But if I'm white, and I loot a corporation called Enron and I take the money from those who would have gotten retirement benefits, and I take their benefits and I invest them in some other scheme, and I rip them off or I rip off the savings and loan industry as a lot of very wealthy white men did in the late 1980s and early 90s in my country, I'm not going to worry a) that that's going to be covered on the news with white men being taken away to jail with handcuffs and ties on and suits, and I'm not going to worry that white people are going to be viewed as a group as predatory—whereas black folks in the streets of New Orleans have now for the last five weeks born the brunt of a media critique and the critique of an awful lot of white Americans, which suggested that there was something deviant about them. You probably didn't know it, but in the last ten years there have been roughly forty riots on American college campuses and every last one of them, engaged in by white students—and it wasn't because they were angry about some real horrible injustice in the world (not that that would necessarily justify rioting, but at least you would understand it), no indeed these riots were sparked because authorities in the towns where these colleges existed had decided to crack down on under-age drinking; or it was because the football team had won; or the basketball team had lost; or the hockey team had lost, or won (you see, sometimes white college students will riot whether their team wins, or whether their team loses)—and yet at no point did the American media or anyone seeing that news respond by saying: "What is it with white students in college? There's something wrong with them as a group—they're violent, they're dangerous, they're deviant, they're dysfunctional." But I don't have to tell you that when black folks engage in a riot in Los Angeles in 1992, or if Latinos engage in a riot in L.A. in '92 or Miami in 1980, St. Petersburg in 1996, you know exactly what the dialogue is—and it is a racialized discussion—and people of color get viewed as the least desirable member of their

community. The same is true with terrorism. So if Arabs decide that they're going to engage in an act of terrorism in the United States, all Arabs will now be seen as suspect. If Timothy McVeigh blows up the federal building in Oklahoma City and has the help of another white man Terry Nichols, he is not going to be a stand in for white people and we as white men are not going to be singled out, we're not going to be racially profiled, we're not going to be looked at funny the next time we try to rent a truck, as Tim McVeigh did. I actually write about this in the book, you know, that a year after the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995, I had to go rent a truck to move a bunch of my stuff from New Orleans where I'd been living for ten years, back to Nashville where I was born and raised and where I live again now. And as I walked into the Ryder Truck Facility, the name of the company—the very same company that Tim McVeigh and Terry Nichols used to rent that truck with which they blew up the Murrah Building and killed 173 people—I knew that I was not going to be viewed as the latest, greatest American terrorist Tim McVeigh. In fact I walked in, I'm white and I'm male and I have short hair and my name is Timothy, for God's sake—and at no point did the officials at that company view me as somehow similar to that other Timothy. But of course, if I were to try to get on a plane in this country—the United States or anywhere in the world right now, anywhere in the world right now—with the name Mohamed, or if it was known that I happened to follow a prophet by the name Mohamed, I would be immediately suspect in a way that Tim McVeigh never would have been and was not. *That* is what it means, at least in part, to be white. It means that I don't have to think about race if I don't *want* to think about race—even if I'm living in a mostly black community. And this is important for white Bermudians to think about because I've lived in majority black places, numerically speaking. I've lived in New Orleans for ten years—two-thirds African American prior Hurricane Katrina (I feel it will be far less so afterward because the rebuild . . . the repair work does not include many of the persons displaced, and they're going to do their best to keep them out, I'm afraid). But at the time that I was there, roughly 65-70% black—and yet the reality was if I wanted to (and I didn't), but had I wanted to carve out white space for myself, had I wanted to only really associate with white New Orleanians, I would have had no problem doing that. Just as white Bermudians can, if you really choose to—you wouldn't be able to completely avoid the presence of black people but you can sure do a very good job of constructing kinship and friendship networks, if that's your desire, that would be *almost* exclusively white if not exclusively white. And that's not to suggest you want to do that, but the mere fact that you could, the mere fact that whites have that capacity even in a mostly black place, to carve out racially exclusive space for themselves and that black folks can't truly do that—I mean they could. Black folks in New Orleans, yeah they could avoid white people, but if they want any actual job opportunities, if they want to be able to move up within the Academy, within the college and university system, if they want to be able to have access to government contracts and decent jobs and decent incomes, the odds are that segregating themselves away from white folks is not going to serve their interests. Why?—because there is a power differential that exists between whites and blacks, so that black folks really have to deal with us, whether they wish to do so or not. We have that luxury of not dealing with people of color. That is a privilege. I would say it's also actually very culturally detrimental, and I don't think it's a positive thing—but it is a

privilege and a luxury to be able to avoid the dialogue all together, if we so choose. That is one less thing to think about, you know, one less thing to sweat.

It also means—and this is very important right now here in this country—it means that if I had a negative interaction with somebody, and I'm white and they're white, one thing I know for sure is that that negative interaction or the criticism that that person levels against me—I know it is not a racialized criticism. I can take for granted that if that person criticizes me for something that they feel I have done or failed to do in business or in government that that is an individual criticism. But now if I am black, and I'm the head of government and I'm criticized by someone who is white—whether or not the criticism is fair . . . Let me be very clear about what I'm discussing, if you don't already know. If I am a black man and the head of the government and a white person criticizes me for presumed incompetence or something that I've done wrong, there is that part of me as a black man that has to wonder—whether this is true or not true—that has to wonder: “Is this criticism coming from a place of racial animus or prejudice?” And then when I respond in a way that may seem and be intemperate, and when I respond in a way that may seem and be inappropriate and ill-placed, *I'm* the one who then bears the brunt of all the criticism, when in fact, I would suggest, that a white person in that position would be able to take it for granted that whatever criticism was leveled was purely individual. And I bring this up because . . . in light of—and I'll just, you know, stop being oblique—I mean in light of what's happened in the last little bit of time here and in light of the Premier's comments which I know have received a lot of press coverage, I think a lot of it unfair, a lot of it inaccurate, but some of it perhaps fair. I think it's important to know two things—Number 1: That analyzing the issue of race always has to go beyond the surface, it always has to go beyond, “Was this comment appropriate? Was this comment prejudicial?” I think that the Premier would acknowledge the comment that he is now on record as having made was inappropriate and ill-placed and ill-timed. But I do want us to ask that question: “What does it mean to be a black man—even in a majority black society—and the head of government, and have a white person step to that Premier and criticize (that being a term we use in the U.S., “step to” meaning you know, sort of challenge and confront very viscerally . . .)?” “What does it mean to have the ability as a white person, as a citizen, as a civilian to write an e-mail (I mean, this is amazing to me) to write an e-mail to the head of government, challenging their very competence in such a direct and personal way?” There are many things that George W. Bush does that I, needless to say, do not like and yet I have never found myself feeling as though it would be appropriate for me to get on his personal e-mail and write him a letter and say: “Damn it, George! What is wrong with you that you are so?—the economy is tanking and it's your fault!” Right, and I might feel that way, but I'm not probably going to feel the level of entitlement to challenge that person. What I'm asking you to consider is not the appropriateness or the inappropriateness of the remarks that were made, either by the Premier or the person who initially challenged the Premier. I'm wanting us to be deeper than that and ask the question: “Do we understand the context within which white on black conflict arises? Do we understand the history? Do we understand that for a black man to be criticized in this fashion by a white man conjures up more than just that incident?” It conjures up an entire history of blacks being viewed as less competent, as less capable. And I have very little doubt, based on the conversations that I've had with

black Bermudians in the small amount of time that I've been here, that there is still a real sense among the black community here in Bermuda that they are viewed and that this government is viewed as incompetent, and there is at least part of that view in the minds of blacks that they do perceive to be racialized.

Now whether that's accurate or not, it's an interesting question and we can discuss it. But, it seems to me we have to at least understand that context. It's the same way that Oprah Winfrey, who is without question the most powerful black woman on the planet, nonetheless when she was in Paris this last summer (and you may or may not have heard the story—it was big news in the United States, may be not so much elsewhere), when she was in Paris over the summer and she attempted to enter a boutique store, Hermes, after hours—and she arrived about ten, twelve minutes late—(she had called ahead to tell them that she was coming), but when she got there they turned her away. Now, was this about race or was it not? Well, we probably will never know in any real, true sense. She perceived it to be a racial slight. She perceived it to be an example of her being plucked out because she was black in spite of all her money. And she may well be wrong. Hermes, of course, says it had nothing to do with race. But how do you decide the truth of that? How do you decide whether it did or did not? What does it say, that even Oprah Winfrey—someone who could buy and sell every one of us in this room, I'm sure, several times over—what does it suggest that even *she* is in a situation in this world—outside of her own country, in a different country where the racial dynamic is still somewhat different—what does it say that even she has to wonder? Even she has to second-guess her experience and wonder whether that comment, whether that look, whether that slight was merely personal or whether it was actually racial. And I would suggest that those of us who are white should not take lightly the privilege of not having to worry about that, the privilege of not having to consider whether the rude service at the store was about our race, or whether the short and curt comment by our colleague was somehow based on a premise of racial incompetence. It does not suggest that the Premier's statement is either appropriate or inappropriate; it is simply to suggest that there is a burden that comes with being a person of color that whites do not share, and that the experience therefore has to be viewed through that history and through that lens of history.

The next thing that I think is important here beyond what it means to be white, is what that all says about what we ought to be doing, and what the answer to 'what whiteness means' says about how we address issues of race in our society. It seems to me that most obviously, if whiteness has meaning—if it's not just blackness that has meaning, if it's not just people of color who experience race, but if whiteness also carries with it certain implications—then we must apply that understanding to our workforce, we must apply that understanding to our schools, we must apply that understanding to all of our institutional settings. Because what all the research suggests—going back some thirty or forty years—is that racism, let's say, in the workplace or racism in the school system, or racism in the criminal justice system or racism in government contracting, and all different realms of life in societies across the globe, tends to play out somewhat differently than people assume. We tend to assume that racism is mostly predicated on the negative mistreatment of those who are considered members of some out group, other

than our own. But in fact, racism is just as often perpetuated, and racial inequality is just as often perpetuated, not by the negative treatment of racial others so much as by the *overly positive* treatment of ones own. In other words, I might be engaging in a form of racism that is not overtly bigoted against, let's say in this case, black folks, but if I overly prefer and preference and give extra credibility and credence and legitimacy and privilege to those who are white like me, I may perpetuate inequality. How does this play out? Well, think about it in the context of the employment scenario. If you're an employer and you're engaged in evaluating applicants for a job or you're involved in evaluating those who are already working in your company, or you're involved in trying to determine who will and will not get a promotion for a particular position. What the research suggests is that even people who are not overtly bigoted at all, people who in fact are quite open-minded, quite tolerant, quite committed to issues of equal opportunity nonetheless will oftentimes more favorably evaluate those who are similar to them in terms of race and gender, and that this is particularly a problem for those who are white—and white men in particular—because, once again, the stereotypes that exist and that we're all familiar with, tend to inferiorize people of color, and on a gender level, tend to inferiorize women. And tend to superiorize, if you will, white folks and particularly white men. And so when white men—who oftentimes *are* the ones making the bulk of those hiring decisions, promotion decisions, doing the bulk of the personal directing, etc.—when they are in a situation of evaluating a job applicant, or when a white teacher is in the process of evaluating a white student versus a black student versus a Latino student, an Asian student, etc., it is often the case (according to all the studies, again going back three or four decades) that too oftentimes, even when the objective qualifications are essentially identical between those folks or when, in fact, the person of color is more objectively qualified, or the woman of whatever color is more objectively qualified, that oftentimes subtle biases, subtle stereotypes will come into play. So that if you're in that interview situation, for example, and you're a white person interviewing a black person, and then your next interview is with another white person, what the studies suggest is if that black person does anything in the interview at all that conjures up or pushes a button of a stereotype . . . it could be anything that in some way suggested that they were less than perfectly competent, less than perfectly brilliant (it might be mispronouncing a word which we all do from time to time; it might be ending a sentence with a preposition, which we all do from time to time) . . . and in a sense, if a black person does that in the presence of a white evaluator, that is the thing that gets remembered, according to the available research. On the other hand, in the white on white interview setting, if I'm evaluating another white person, all those little mess-ups, all the mistakes, all the mispronounced words—I forget about those, or at least I don't hold them against that person, instead I remember all the positive things. So in other words, we tend to accentuate the positive for those who remind us of ourselves; we tend to accentuate the negative for those who do *not* remind us of ourselves. And so this means that even (and it's all very subconscious), even non-bigoted persons can in the process of an evaluation make bigoted decisions or decisions that have the effect of perpetuating inequality. And you can think with a ready example of the United States and our head of government. And I don't want to just beat up on Bush because it's easy and . . . for some of us its fun, but I want to suggest something. Regardless of how one feels about the President of the United States, I think one would have to agree, irrespective of one's particular politics,

that this is somebody who is not particularly adept at the English language. This is someone who mangles the language—and even his fans will say this—but now here’s the interesting point. Here’s someone who regularly mispronounces words. Here’s someone who makes up words that do not exist. And yet the reality is that if that President were black, and made all the same grammatical errors; made all the same mistakes of syntax; made all the same malapropisms that this individual happens to make; I have very little doubt that an awful lot of people would begin to ask that question—whether they did it under their breath or whether they did it outwardly, which is: “You see, these people just aren’t as bright.” In other words, it would trigger a racial stereotype. But with George W. Bush, there is no racial stereotype of white people as being, you know, incompetent and unintelligent, so when he does it that’s just Texas, right, or that’s just . . . or that’s just cute! I mean people actually make excuses: “Oh my goodness isn’t that cute? Isn’t that endearing! He’s just a regular guy!” Well, there are a lot of regular black folks that mispronounce words too, but when they do that they don’t get to be viewed as ‘regular guys.’ And that’s what happens, you know, in the context of an interview setting or an educational setting. So what it means is we have to recognize that racism is not just about negative discriminatory treatment toward the marginalized groups; it’s also about preferring, giving extra credibility, cutting extra additional slack, if you will to those who are members of the dominant group. If we understand that, then we are in a position to guard against that. So if we’re in a position to do hiring, if we’re in a position as teachers evaluating students—as long as we’re aware of the way that the biases operate. As long as we’re aware of the way that we’ve been conditioned to respond in that way, sometimes subconsciously—if we’re aware of it we can push it to the forefront of our consciousness and we can attempt to address it. If we do not want to admit it or acknowledge it then we obviously can’t solve that problem.

I tell the story in the book (and I know some of you have read it; most of you have not) I tell the story in the book of a few years ago getting on an airplane in Nashville to go to a conference in Iowa—I had to fly from Nashville to St. Louis first—and, you know, I’ve been doing this work for fifteen years, I’ve been on the road for eleven years lecturing; I live and breathe anti-racism from every pore—other than my wife and children, this is what gets me out of bed in the morning . . . And yet in 200 . . . I guess it would have been 2002, as I was getting on this particular plane to go to an anti-racism conference mind you, having done this work for all of these years . . . I got on the plane and for the first time in probably a thousand or more flights, I had two black pilots at the controls of my plane. This had never happened before and it hasn’t happened since because less than three percent of the pilots in the U.S. happen to be black, so it’s very rare. And so there I was, and there they were.

And I ask my audiences and I will ask you though it’s obviously a rhetorical question, the answer of which should be fairly obvious to you: “What do you think my initial, purely instantaneous and purely emotional reaction to seeing two black pilots was on that day?” I’ll give it to you multiple-choice because if you’re like the U.S., everything is multiple-choice from the time that you’re a kid. So the first choice is:

a): “Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty we are free at last! I’m so glad that we have attained aviation equality so that I’ve got two black pilots! My goodness, I’m so happy—let me get on my cell phone and call all my friends and family and tell them the good news.” That’s choice a) and don’t let the sarcasm throw you.

And then choice b) is: “Oh dear God, can these men fly this plane?”

Now, keeping in mind what I do for a living. Keeping in mind that I understand intellectually, philosophically, spiritually, theologically, scientifically why racism is flawed and why it’s based on faulty and erroneous thinking, nonetheless I’ll tell you—if you didn’t already know—that the response was indeed b). Now I was able to cancel that immediately, I was able to catch it, I was able to stifle it, because I’m working on my stuff, so good for me—but that’s not the point, right! The point is that the reaction was there and where did that come from? It did not come from my upbringing, ‘cause I was raised to feel quite the opposite. It did not come from my own intellect, because I know that to be ridiculous, I know intellectually that those two men were probably the best pilots in the fleet or else they wouldn’t have been there—they probably had to work twice as hard to get half as far—four times as hard to get *as far* . . . so I know all of that. And as I’m sitting there in my seat and I’m ordering my drink and putting my bags away, I have time to think about it, and I have time to realize how preposterous and how fundamentally racist my reaction was. But the point is that’s only something I was able to catch because I was open to the possibility that I was no better than anybody else in this regard. That I was no more hip, that I was no more together, that I was no more unbiased than anybody else and that in fact I had been conditioned just like everyone else to have that response. The good news is we’re able to fight that if we are also being counter-conditioned, but that doesn’t mean it’s not there. And for me to have gone through life thinking that I was free of racial bias would have been highly dysfunctional—it would have been a lie, first of all, and it wouldn’t have allowed me to see myself in this problem. It would have allowed me, it would have encouraged me to say: “Well, racism is what those *other white people* do, you know, it’s what those *bad* people do—and I’m a *good* person who doesn’t have those views.” But in fact I did have that same internalized stereotype, even though I knew better. I mean in the two months prior to this particular flight (you may or may not have heard this) but there were half a dozen white pilots in the U.S. who in the two or three months previous had been hauled off of their airplanes because they were too drunk to fly. So in theory, I should have been happy to have anybody *but* a white man flying my plane. I should have seen a black man and said: “Well, at least he’s not drunk!” And two weeks before this particular flight there were two white men on South West Airlines that decided that not only would they drink, but they would take off their clothes in the cockpit and invite the flight attendants in as a practical joke. And I should have been happy to see a black man thinking: “Well, at least I know he’s not going to get naked in the cockpit as a practical joke!” ‘Cause surely, no black pilot would have thought: “Yes, I think I’ll just take off my clothes and invite these white women in here with me and I’m sure no one will think anything of it.” They would have known better, but indeed I didn’t think that, right, my initial reaction was what it was. And I’ll tell you the sad fact—I’ve told that story to black audiences and I’ve had black audiences respond that they had had similar reactions upon seeing African

American pilots, that they had had similar reactions upon having black doctors or black accountants, or black bankers. I have a good friend who's a Chicano-Latino-Mexican-American activist in Washington state and he does this work for a living as an educator, and when his own mother went in for open heart surgery in a hospital in Seattle and her doctor was Chicano, her doctor was Mexican-American—he had that initial reaction that said: “Oh no, no, no, I don't want the Chicano doctor . . . I need a nice old white guy with grey hair.” And then he caught himself and he realized: “What is that?! What is that about?” But the fact is it's there. And if we acknowledge it, we can use it. If we acknowledge it, we can address it—we can catch ourselves in the act of engaging in those kinds of thoughts, but if we don't acknowledge it we can't.

The final thing I want to do before we do questions is to ask: “What it means then to be an ally?” Other than catching ones own biases, other than interrogating those biases, other than thinking about what it means to be white—all of which are helpful and I think all of those are sort of first steps, you know, to be a decent ally to folks of color who are fighting the struggle. But I think there are a few things beyond that.

The first and most important thing perhaps is that we need to come to a place where we're able to listen to what people of color say and not just listen but actually believe them when they talk about racism. This may seem obvious, it may even seem trite but in fact it's not because if indeed whites were as willing to believe what black and brown peoples the world over say about racism as we claim we are willing to do, then I think we'd have a lot less dissension and we'd have a lot less argumentation, we'd have a lot more understanding. The problem is in any society in which whites and blacks and really for that matter in which race is an issue at all, whether its white/black or some other dynamic, those that are in the dominant group—and that doesn't necessarily mean numbers, it doesn't necessarily mean governmental power; it may mean economic power, it may mean in terms of elite status higher incomes, etc.—those who are the members of the dominant group almost invariably perceive the problem to be far less significant than those who are in the non-dominant or subordinated group. That's not surprising. But what it suggests is that those members in the dominant group have an unwillingness to listen and to believe what persons of color are saying. In the U.S. it's amazing to ask white Americans: “Do you believe racial discrimination is still a significant national problem?” I would be fascinated to hear the same question put to white Bermudians and I'm sure that although the numbers would be different they would also be similar in that whites would be half as likely, a third as likely, a fourth as likely to say that it was still a significant problem as blacks would be. And in the U.S. that's certainly the case. In fact, only 6% of white Americans when they were asked this question a few years back said that we believed racial discrimination was still a significant national problem. *Six* out of one hundred as opposed to, you know, sixty out of a hundred African-Americans and then twenty more said it was *a* problem even if not all that significant. Now what does it mean that only 6% of white Americans believe that even though black folks are constantly saying: “This is real.” And yet essentially 94 out of 100 whites are saying: “Mmm . . . no it's not.” And I would have you compare that just to give you an indication of how pathetic it is, and then you can do your own comparisons and your own polls, and I'd recommend it highly. Two years prior to that survey white Americans were asked if

we thought Elvis Presley might still be alive. And, when we were asked *that* question, 12% of us said yes, which is to say that white Americans are twice as likely to believe—and I'm sure fervently hope—that Elvis Presley is still alive somewhere, than we are to believe what black Americans tell us they experience on a regular basis. And what's sad about this if you go back and you look at surveys taken 40 years ago, if you go back and you look at surveys taken of white Americans in the '60s and in the '50s . . . In 1962 a great example—white Americans were asked the question in 1962: “Do you believe that blacks are treated equally in your community?” And now, if I were to ask you that, if I were to ask white Americans that now with 43 years in retrospect of course they would say: “Well, good Lord no. Of course not, that was before the major Civil Rights Legislation. It was a terrible system of apartheid. Of course things were not equal.” But when whites were asked that question in 1962, what do you think they said then? Not what they would say now, when it is safe to admit how bad things were. But what they said at the time, contemporaneous to the events—between 70 and 80% of white Americans *in that year* said that things were essentially, perfectly equal.

And my guess is that the same would be true in Bermuda. That if you were to go back at the height of the struggles in this country and the height of the boycotts of the theatres and the movement as it existed in Bermuda, you would find that most whites at that time would have said: “What's the problem?” And that there isn't really a problem; and they would have down-played it relative to blacks. And they would have been wrong. And the point that I guess I want to leave you with is that to be an ally is to let go of ones sense of surety and sense of confidence that you actually know the reality of other people and instead recognize that black folks actually do know their lives better than white folks do. And that folks who are Asian know their lives better than we do and that in fact part of being an ally—may be the biggest part of being an ally—is coming to the point where you're willing to listen and you're willing to believe and you're willing to start off with the assumption that people are competent enough to know what it is they're experiencing. It doesn't mean that every time a black person says they've been the victim of discrimination that they were—individuals can misperceive an event; individuals can misperceive a comment; individuals can misperceive an encounter. But ultimately what we as whites are saying when we deny this as a social problem is not just that individual black people might have misperceived something. We're ultimately saying that black folks as a group are not smart enough, not rational enough, not objective enough to know what their lives are like. And I think there's really nothing more arrogant than that, and in racial sense, nothing more racist than that. So to be an ally means we must let go of that sense of certitude and we must actually focus in and believe what people say, and then we must follow their lead. I think it's very important for whites to be involved in the struggle, but I think it's critical for people of color to *lead* the struggle. And I think that's true with any country—it is one thing for whites to be allies to blacks in South Africa for example; it's one thing for whites to be allies to the civil rights struggle in the South in the United States; it is one thing for whites to be allies in Bermuda for black and brown folk who were trying to create a more equitable Island, but it is quite another for whites to take the lead. And I think although one may be promoted to positions of leadership—because that's what happens when you're a white man in particular . . . your voice carries and you always have a microphone it seems, and you always get attention—I'm a good

example of that, but I try to follow the lead of black and brown people who have set the agenda. It is not *me* setting the agenda; it's not other whites in the anti-racism and civil rights community who seek to set the agenda, I hope. It is indeed black and brown peoples who are setting the agenda, because ultimately they have the most to lose. And so if we try to run the show—which, sometimes you know, we do that, you know—if we try to run the show, whether as whites or as men (because men do this too with regard to gender) the reality is if we screw up (as we will from time to time) we're not the ones who pay the price for that. It's people of color who really pay the price for that. And as just as I want men to be allies to women, in the struggle against sexism, I don't think I would trust men to actually lead that struggle. I want women to lead that struggle. The women are the ones with the most to lose and the most to gain, and men have too much staked in both sides of the game—men have too much stake in the situation . . . are easy to co-opt. Men who say they're against sexism—there are all kinds of perks that come with, you know, keeping that system in place. The same thing is true with race. It's too easy for whites to be co-opted back into a system of privilege and not challenge it. So I want us to be allies, but ally-ship means following, ally-ship means believing what people say, and ally-ship means being accountable to the greatest extent possible to those who are really under the gun, literally or figuratively speaking.

So this is essentially my part of the presentation. I hope that it's been helpful or informative in some sense and I want now for us to engage in this dialogue portion, which is to say you get to say what's on your mind. You can do that either in the form of a question or comment. You can relate those comments or questions to me, or you can bring up things that you would like others in the audience to address. I thank you so much for your rapt attention and for this wonderful turnout. This is fantastic and it's wonderful to be here. Thank you very much. (Applause)