

# SACRED GROUND

## A FILM-BASED DIALOGUE SERIES ON RACE AND FAITH

SESSION TWO STUDY GUIDE



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### SESSION 2: THE ROOTS OF WHITENESS, AND DEEPER ROOTS

#### To watch beforehand or in the session

- Short video: *The Myth of Race Debunked in 3 Minutes* (3 min.)
- Short video: *Decoded: Are Cracker, White Trash, & Redneck Racist?* (5 min.)

#### To read beforehand

Note: There is more reading for this session because there is no full film to watch (just the two short videos above). These opening sessions are a time to lay some important foundations.

- Article: “Roots Deeper Than Whiteness” by David Dean
- Article: “A Geography Lesson for the Tea Party” by Colin Woodard in *Washington Monthly* magazine. The core of this article provides a digest of his book: *American Nations: A History of the Eleven Rival Regional Cultures of North America*. (You can just read from the paragraph that starts, “We’re accustomed to thinking of American regionalism...” and stop at paragraph that starts, “Which brings us to the Tea Party movement....”)
- Selections from book: *White Fragility: Why It’s So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism* by Robin DiAngelo (15 assorted pages from paperback edition)
- Blog posts: “On the Five Stages & White People Waking Up to Racism” and “On White Tears” by Tad Hargrave
- Core book: *Waking Up White, And Finding Myself in the Story of Race* by Debby Irving – Introduction and Chapters 2-3

#### Notes to facilitators

- This is a good time to invite those in the group who have European heritage, including mixed race members and Latino members, to share what they know about those European roots or what they can speculate in light of the readings.
- This may be a time for conversation about being a white group or an interracial group, depending on the composition you arrived at in the organizing stages. If the latter, it will be especially important to use Robin DiAngelo’s and Tad Hargrave’s writings to help you discuss how to make your circle a “safe enough” space (“safe” is arguably not possible) for people of color. Many dialogue facilitators use the term “brave space” instead of “safe space.”

- During this session, if not covered in Session 1, please discuss group agreements, norms, guidelines, or ground rules for how to be with each other in this series – how to hold respectful and transformative dialogue. You can decide, as facilitator, when it feels right to focus on this – during Session 1 or 2. There can be value in not doing it right away, as some time together can make it a richer and more ripe conversation. The idea is to take time with this, as it is so fundamental. Please share that creating and practicing respectful dialogue processes are ways to “practice the way of love” – the third quadrant in the **Becoming Beloved Community** labyrinth. You can use the “Suggested Dialogue Norms” provided on the “Curriculum” webpage, or you may use your own, or you may decide to create them together as a group. Please review the “Facilitator Preparation Guide” for further thoughts on this. During whatever session you decide (ahead of time) to hold this group agreements conversation, please assign Chapter 31 from *Waking Up White*.

### **Session themes and overview from the author**

This session and the assigned readings are designed to begin by establishing that the very notion of “race” is a human construction, not a biological reality. While humans clearly have different physical attributes, such as skin color, these differences are physiologically much less significant than other differences that cut across skin color groups, such as genetic propensity toward certain diseases. One quickly realizes that the differences that we choose to accentuate are arbitrary, and throughout human history, different groups’ definitions of who is “in” and who is “out” have been fluid and ever-changing. The construction of racial categories is better understood by asking what purpose they serve at any given point and place in human history. It seems safe to say that the purpose is usually to define the other as inferior to oneself to justify various exploitative behaviors, such as conquering, taking lands and resources, killing, enslaving, and engaging in other forms of economic exploitation.

With this awareness, we can explore the history of how and why the concept of the “white” or “Caucasian” race got invented, along with the destructive notion of a hierarchy of “races.” The Vox short video powerfully summarizes this history.

This then begs the question: Who were white people before they became white? What European history is important to know? What European conflicts and inter-group dynamics were brought to these shores? What harms were perpetrated and suffered in Europe that then led to tragic “reproductions” of harm in early America and the United States?

So, speaking to all participants with European heritage: This session is an invitation to explore your family history and, specifically, to ascertain whatever you can about ancestral losses related to your European roots, to class issues, and to “whiteness” going back through the centuries, even if just with conjecture. Please share stories from family history that were passed down (the emphasis is on losses, but prides and joys are welcome too!). This also is a chance to identify gaps in your knowledge and further research you may want to do, such as the history of a region in Europe just prior to an ancestor’s departure. It’s important to name that this can be deeply painful terrain for people of African descent who are cut off from their family history and ancestral lineages due to the violent rupture of slavery.

Practicing self-compassion toward one's own family lines can be an essential part of the healing process and hopefully creates more space for a bigger heart to extend toward others. You may not know much about your ancestors' experiences in Europe in various centuries, such as whether they were driven off "common lands" during land enclosures by elites and forced to survive in urban slums; whether they experienced religious persecution as Catholics, Protestants, or Jews; whether they suffered during wars of conquest by vying kingdoms and nations on the British Isles or in Southern, Central, or Eastern Europe; or whether famine, or lack of jobs, drove them to seek a better life in the Americas. Much of this history is not passed down in families, particularly as people immigrated to the colonies or the U.S. to put that all behind them. But perhaps you can permit yourself some imagination, from the bits and fragments that you may have. Who were your ancestors when they were "indigenous" and rooted to their ancestral lands? Or when they were migrants? What unhealed wounds may have been passed down through the generations? Is there grieving that is needed in your family, such as for loss of language, tradition, or culture? Or celebration, for what persists and nourishes? David Dean's essay on "Roots Deeper Than Whiteness" will help spur these reflections.

Please be aware that some of what **does** get passed down in families is lore that, upon further scrutiny, can be seen to operate more in the realm of self-serving myth than reality. A prime example I am well aware of is white Northern amnesia about our role in slavery.

The reading from Colin Woodard, and the *Decoded* video, will also shed light on how class, cultural, and religious conflicts in Europe were brought to colonial North America and, later, the United States. The resulting cultural "personalities" of different regions of our country, and the conflict among them, provide much to consider.

European colonists, settlers, and immigrants have obviously come from many countries and in many waves, and their reasons for coming were not all grim, but these two quotes are meant to be food for thought. While the timeframe referenced in the first quote is specific, the concept of uprootedness, as Weil expresses it in the second quote, could be considered applicable to our broader history.

"According to historian Gabriel Kolko...50 million of our [European] ancestors migrated to Canada, the U.S., and Australia after being uprooted from Europe between 1821 and 1932, a period ending less than 100 years ago. 50 million in 111 years makes our ancestors the largest concentration of 'displaced persons' in history." – Derek Rasmussen

French philosopher Simone Weil wrote, "He who is uprooted uproots others." Or as the popular expression goes, "Hurt people hurt people."

This session is also a chance to fast-forward to the present day and focus, with help from Robin DiAngelo, on some of the core "defensive moves" white people are at risk of making in order to avoid having to face our relationship to racism. Her concept of "white fragility" is important to ponder early in this dialogue series, and her analysis hopefully will inspire in

white participants a higher degree of openness and resilience. If your circle is interracial, then it would be powerful for white folks to hear from people of color about their experience of these dynamics. It will be essential to be versed in this material in order to have a successful interracial circle with emotional equity built in.

I think of Tad Hargrave's blog posts as expanding on DiAngelo's work. He has applied Elizabeth Kubler-Ross's concept of the five stages of grief to white men coming to terms with racism and sexism. If you are a white man – or woman: Do you recognize yourself in one or more of those stages (now or at earlier times in your life)? Hargrave also has a related blog entry, "On White Tears." White tears, and especially white women's tears, have been the source of explicit controversy in recent years. In another (not assigned) chapter of DiAngelo's book, she and the people of color she quotes provide a powerful breakdown of how white women's tears can hijack conversations on race and racism. I agree that when white people are overcome with strong emotions, we have a responsibility to have enough emotional control to keep our needs from dominating in interracial spaces. That being said, I agree with Hargrave that white people do need an outlet for our emotions. Whether you have constituted as a white dialogue circle or an interracial one, please think intentionally about how you might hold space for grief work for everyone in ways that feel respectful and life-giving for all. What spiritual resources might be of service?