

**Discovering
the Real America**
Toward A More Perfect Union

Lewis W. Diuguid
Edited by Elsjie M. Smit

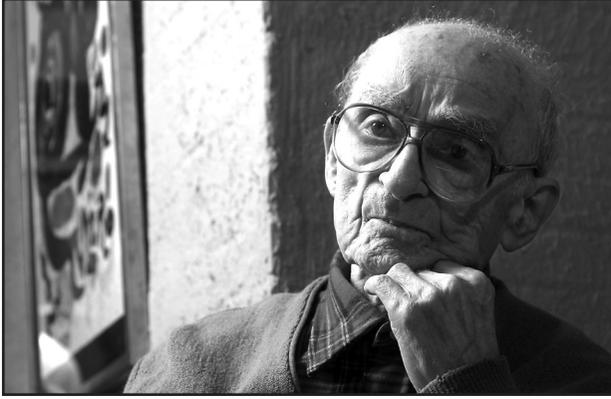
*Discovering the Real America
Toward A More Perfect Union*

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Photograph courtesy of *The Kansas City Star*

This book is dedicated to Dr. David Shapiro for the tireless energy he poured into eliminating bigotry and hate for more than 60 years before he died in 2005 at age 94.



*We shall not cease for exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And to know the place for the first time.
~T.S. Eliot*

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FOREWORD

*O*n a recent visit to my eye doctor, I was told that, even though I am far-sighted, I have near-perfect vision. In other words, I have very little trouble bringing objects, words or people that are at a considerable distance into focus. I was also informed that the prescription for my reading glasses had not changed significantly. With my glasses on, everything about 1 foot away comes into focus beautifully. In my middle distance, however, everything is blurry. If I want to see today's date on my calendar on the wall above my desk, I need to either step up very close—about 1 foot away—or step back about 5 feet. At any distance in between, all the numbers and words are illegible, blurred, uncomfortable.

This is the way most of us “see” people who are different from us. At a “safe” distance, they are in focus and “comfortable.” We have some clarity about them—or at least we think we do. When they enter that blurry middle distance, however, we start to feel “uncomfortable,” fearful, wary.

Legal gay marriage in Europe or Canada, for instance, does not in any way affect our heterosexual marriages in the U.S., but gay marriages “at home” are a potential threat (though I don't know why). Seeing Muslims in the Middle East on TV is easier, “safer,” than seeing them in the grocery store around the corner. Keeping prisoners locked out of sight in penitentiaries with high walls and small windows is more palatable than hearing their choir sing at the church down the street.

When those different from us are at a distance, our relationship is clear. But when they move closer, they become more threatening because our focus is blurred. We don't know them. And we're not “close” enough to “see” them properly, to get to know them, to understand who they are, or to “see” their value.

Our first reaction when that middle distance is breached by something or someone unknown is often “Not In My Back Yard.” We tend to move away because, after all, it's much safer than moving in for a closer look. A defensive mechanism kicks in, triggered by fear, and shutting down our natural curiosity. We quickly erect a barrier between us and them so that they won't get “too close for comfort.”

This book takes us to those uncomfortable, fearful places, but it also admonishes us to allow our curiosity to conquer our fear, to put on our “reading glasses” and move in close. We must bring those who are different—be they gay, Muslim, inmates, black, white, Hispanic, old, young, disabled,

homeless, or belonging to any other category we can dream up—into focus at a distance close enough to discover who they really are.

That takes courage and hard work. It takes stepping out of our comfort zones and talking to each other. It takes recognizing the value and richness of someone's differences.

I am a Third Culture Kid, or rather an Adult Third Culture Kid, or ATCK. That means I spent my formative years in parts of the world other than my home country. In my lifetime I have had to focus up close on different cultures, customs, norms and languages and try to make sense of them all. I've had to internalize, understand, or at least accept or cope with many, many "differences." That road to acknowledging and accepting diversity is not an easy one. Valuing the differences can be even more challenging.

In much of the United States, we don't need to venture far before we come face to face with diversity. And when we do, we should be prepared to overcome whatever fear we might have and value and learn from the experience.

This book can help us prepare.

The first 4 chapters point out the many kinds of bigotry that still exist in this country and what their effects are on all of us. They expose the pain felt by those who experience the needle of discrimination unexpectedly thrust deep into the soft flesh of their lives; the anger that grows when that needle pokes the same tender spot over and over again; the frustration at being told there is no needle, that the poking is "just your imagination." Those chapters can help us recognize and, if not understand, at least acknowledge the prejudice that we need to overcome in our diverse society.

The next section gives an explanation—admittedly incomplete—of where some of that discrimination comes from and how it has been bolstered. The section highlights bits of history that have conveniently been ignored in the process of "whitewashing" American society. It illustrates how the media have been a major force in downplaying the importance of—or even going so far as to ridicule or vilify—those who are not white or "mainstream." The last chapter in that section, "Hate: The Worm in the Apple Pie of America," illustrates the lengths to which people will go as they dig in for their long, lonely, fear-fueled and hate-filled battle against this country's diversity.

The hope expressed in this book is that they will stop fighting and emerge from their trenches—and that appeal is what the last and

longest section of this book is about. Every day people are overcoming the discrimination, the fear, the hurt, the hate, and the divisions of this country. They are living its diversity by “putting on their reading glasses” and taking a closer look at those who are different from them. They are celebrating others’ talents, talking with people for understanding and cooperation, and working for change. And they are doing all these things everywhere, in groups, alone, behind bars, on the street, in churches, in homes, through their art—in ways and places too numerous to list. The third section of this book is a celebration of those solutions, packed with information that gives us tools to act.

And act we must. No one has a monopoly on prejudice and no one is immune to it. We are all guilty of jabbing the needle—and bruised from being jabbed. Therefore we must find ways to use the information in these many pages and join the cause for diversity.

The many stories in this book must be used as fuel to light innumerable campfires of conversation everywhere. *Educators* at all levels can use the stories in their classrooms to generate discussions or projects that will help students understand and appreciate the richness of their diverse histories and lives. *Community, civic and faith-based groups* can broaden their diversity outreach using the stories and solutions as a foundation. *Government and businesses*—anyone in the work of diversity—can use the book to help their employees understand, accept, indeed *appreciate* the stories of those who are different. And *the media*, of course, must finally discover the importance of reflecting in their print, electronic, and other forms what the Real America is *really* like.

This book includes hundreds of voices—in columns, poetry, quotes from outside sources, personal stories, and readers’ messages. As the book’s editor, I suggested that we separate all the columns from the main text by indenting them slightly and using a smaller size of the main font. The title under which each column appeared in *The Kansas City Star* headlines the text. A complete list by chapter of the columns used can be found in Appendix A.

Readers’ feedback contained in e-mails, voice mails, and letters is scattered throughout the book and uses a different font altogether to offset the messages from the rest of the material. Quotations from outside sources are formatted and referenced according to MLA style. A Works Cited page can be found at the end of the book. Two other appendices are also included: Appendix B, which contains a 62-point list of privileges whites enjoy, as identified by

Dr. Peggy McIntosh; and Appendix C, which contains very brief biographical portraits of the authors whose quotes grace the opening page of each chapter.

Some of the material in this book is painful and hard to stomach. In preparing the manuscript, as Lewis Diuguid and I struggled with how best to present the difficult material, poems started showing up in my e-mail box. After reading the first—very powerful—ones that Lewis wrote, I suggested he tax his own creativity ever further and write a poem for each chapter. Without realizing it, I had given Lewis the go-ahead to open the floodgates, and more and more poems popped up in my inbox. We sifted through the many pages of often-heartbreaking emotion and chose what we considered his best and most appropriate poems, which now jumpstart each chapter.

All of these bits and pieces combine into many voices that are meant to allow readers to learn and grow from the experiences described. It is important to take note of the value that each voice brings, in what it teaches as well as in the questions it allows others to ask and answer. As an Adult Third Culture Kid, I know firsthand how difficult such an exercise is, but I also have benefited from its many rewards. In “putting on our reading glasses” and becoming involved in diversity, we gain the ability to understand, to tolerate, to think on our feet, to empathize, to belong. We find out that we have missed so much and that there is much still to be found out. It is my sincere hope that this book will provide all who read it a way to discover for themselves those many undiscovered riches.

~Elsje M. Smit
Editor

INTRODUCTION

What's diversity got to do with it?

From Ruination

*Does the sun set and never rise
 Across these beautiful American skies?
 It did more than 500 years ago
 When great ships landed "discovering" these inhabited shores
 Unloading whites calling themselves "explorers"
 But actually they were "the exploiters" who came
 Murdering, raping, stealing and enslaving in European kings' and God's
 name
 Did the rains thereafter ever fall
 Blessing some with life but never all
 Potential withered in generations-long droughts
 And darkness keeping minorities out
 It's the color line these centuries kept in good repair
 To showcase whites and keep others in despair
 Never accepting the goodness that minorities bring
 Pooh-poohing their stories with disgust and disdain
 Yet the oppressed
 Struggle nevertheless
 Fueled by multicolors of hope they continue to profess
 The truth so all one day will be forced to attest
 And celebrate the irrepressible joys bubbling in their people's breasts.
 It's America's real promise
 Finally emerging like ghostly ships frozen in racism's pumice
 Sailing one day soon from the long dark terrible nights
 Into a dreamlike light
 With luscious, life-giving rain that will kiss all
 As it falls
 In this undiscovered country
 Calling us to a journey we must take
 For the Real America's sake.*

You know, Lewis, I had an excellent teacher at Paseo High School back in the '50s who told us we should be very grateful, proud and protective of our culture. Be particularly proud that we are Midwesterners, Protestants, white, and a load of other things that meant our Northern European cultural background. She told us to be proud of it and protective of it because there would be forces to try to dilute it and try to wipe it out in the future. You know, I have every right to protect the culture that I grew up with, which started this country basically, the Northern Europeans. It's well and good to talk about diversity and try to understand all of this. But I'm sorry. We're going to continue to protect what we have in our background.

We have every right and responsibility to do it.

~Voice Mail, 2003

Bigotry and prejudice these days work their way to the surface in the most unusual manner. A Saturday, June 14, 1997, Father's Day column I wrote for *The Kansas City Star* was meant to be just a feel-good, multigenerational, extended-family piece featuring a man spending time with his children and grandchildren. It was a personal story about my dad, then 80 years old, who drove solo from St. Louis as he annually has to play golf with me and visit my sister, Renee, and our families.

Among the voice mail messages waiting for me the following Monday was one from a woman who left no return phone number. But I'll never forget what she said. The woman remarked in the kindest voice that she thought I was a good writer. She said the Father's Day piece was nice and well timed. Then she added, "Why did you have to ruin it by putting black people in it?"

I was dumbfounded. The line the woman objected to was this:

From "As always, gifts flow both ways"

We met a friend the next morning for 18 sunny holes at Minor Park Golf Center. Another guy, whom we'd played with before, joined us in a foursome of African-American men.

That "nice" column was written to do a lot of heavy lifting. Like many columns that I write featuring my family, that piece had to counter the many, monstrous stereotypes about African Americans. It had to show that black men do care about families and travel miles to show it; black men are hard-working, taxpaying citizens; black men value education and want the best for their children; and black men aren't ashamed to be black and play golf at the same time. In fact, we value golf just as much as basketball, baseball and football.

But the caller, like many people who telephone and write to express their prejudices in an unabashed way, wasn't buying any of it. The things I described fit neatly in the perfect all-American world she envisioned for white people. For her, turning it into something that blacks also value was unimaginable. It so strongly offended her sensibility and sense of what was right, and she felt obligated to call to tell me.

The book will show hundreds of examples of such feedback. They are among thousands of responses I get every year, and they always make me wonder where that bigotry comes from. People like that just can't see the commonality that all of us share in this country. It is true that we are different in many ways, and it's empowering to learn from that diversity. But we all have deep feelings for our families, for motherhood, fatherhood and for our children. There is a reverence for older people, the history they have lived and the continuity and value those individuals add to all community relationships.

As people in America, we embrace the same ideals of hard work, discipline, patriotism, love, trust, honor, duty, friendship, ethics and morality. But a nuclear detonation occurred centuries ago on this North American continent, and continues to destroy identities and melt them all down into one that's white, Christian, heterosexual and middle or upper class. That fission obliterates and separates us. It guarantees a destructive future for us all. Its fallout assigns the best values to people who are white. Darker, baser qualities are seared into minorities.

Those qualities include the inclination to live a life of crime, poverty, sloth, always looking for a handout; incurable government dependence; welfare cheating; and an insatiable, maniacal appetite for sex. Individuals with these traits are viewed as the dregs of America. Sweet, white cream always floats to the top; bitter, dark coffee grounds always sink to the bottom. To link such people with the "sweet, white" characteristics as I had in that 1997 column was unconscionable.

But in the 21st century we now must ask: How did our country become so disunited? What will it take to erase 400 years of racism, bigotry, prejudices and discrimination? Will it require another 400 years to eradicate this multifaceted generational problem? Or is there a way to appeal to people's enlightened sense of self-interest to get them to embrace the racial, ethnic and other diversity that has always been part of the fabric of these United States?

This book will show the United States for what it is—a nation struggling to find its moral compass, questioning its will to explore and grappling for the courage to do so. *Discovering the Real America* will examine the history of racial, ethnic and other divisions in this country. It will show that we all lose from such separatism. It also will look at the history and media of America, show their faults and point to how the walls that divide us can be brought down. The book will point out that the bridge over the seemingly impassable chasm can and must be built by people sharing their stories with others of different races, faiths, ethnicities, sexual orientations, disabilities, ages, socio-economic backgrounds and neighborhoods. From such brave efforts it is possible to finally discover the Real America—that unexplored place which includes the long-overlooked contributions of the above groups and celebrates them.

But right now we don't really know each other. Following tradition, the schools help construct the walls that keep us apart, giving students inaccurate accounts of the triumphs and tragedies that people of all colors have been through in this country. The masons of the media follow. They have us think we know each other because of what they build for us to see and hear. However, television, radio, newspapers, movies, magazines, videos, DVDs and other media mostly reinforce existing stereotypes.

Truly knowing others takes more than relying on media images. Schools must offer multicultural curricula, textbooks and teaching. The media, at the same time, must change to reveal the truth about diversity in news reports, programs and advertising.

Newspapers like *The Kansas City Star* have ongoing diversity efforts to try to change the culture in the media to be more inclusive and more accurate, fair and balanced in its coverage. *The Star* now is viewed as one of the newspaper industry's leaders in diversity. But we had a rough go of it at first. My colleagues said, "We just want to do journalism. What does this diversity stuff have to do with it?" Well, the simple answer is *everything*.

One morning in December 1993 my youngest daughter, Leslie, was running outside to play when she stopped at the kitchen table where I was reading the newspaper. She pointed to a big picture on the cover of the features section of a little black girl with her hair in braids. Leslie said, and I'll never forget it, "That little girl looks like me."

Leslie was 6 years old then. The power of that statement is that I couldn't have said anything like that when I was 6 growing up in St. Louis, Mo. The *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* wouldn't have featured a little black boy like me—anywhere. *The Star* and *The Times* in Kansas City wouldn't have carried a photograph of a black child in 1961. Other blacks growing up elsewhere in the U.S. couldn't have said that looking through their local newspapers. But the devastating thing was that not even my oldest daughter, Adrienne, could have said that in 1989—almost 30 years later—when she was 6 years old growing up in Kansas City.

Very few people of color have had the benefit of seeing themselves in positive ways in the media. The book will examine that issue, too, and why the situation has been allowed to persist. We must keep insisting that people who are different show up in the media because they need to see themselves and people who look like them. But others who don't look like them need to see them as well. Diversity has *everything* to do with journalism. But the battle for inclusion is hard fought and painful.

Right now in much of the media, anything that doesn't fit in the well-maintained, traditional boxes of bigotry is to be doubted, cursed or dismissed as an exception to the rules. This book offers no easy answer, no magic potion or diversity flea dip for everyone suffering racism's effects. There is only hard work ahead. Dodging the task only prolongs the suffering of the victims and perpetrators. Racism in this country is an American problem, and it will require everyone's efforts to find solutions, so we can discover the Real America.

I found that out rather abruptly myself, and wrote about my own epiphany-of-sorts in this Nov. 18, 1993, column in *The Kansas City Star*.

From "Slaying the beasts in us all"

A gold-colored box of "silver bullets" sits on a file cabinet in my office.

New friends from newspapers nationwide fashioned the shells out of aluminum foil – partly for laughs and partly to send me home with what I had sought. Their gift represented the ammunition I wanted to combat stereotypes, biases and prejudices.

The firepower from the six-day Newspaper Association of America Diversity Facilitator Training Certification Pilot Program in Dallas was for the monsters that stalk our workplaces, terrorize our communities and show up in our schools and media. But I didn't realize before making the trip last month with two other editors at *The Kansas City Star* that I would use the first silver bullet on myself.

A call from a friend in Louisville, Ky., helped me see that I had been shot. She said it angered her when firms send African Americans to diversity training programs. Black people live the multicultural experience in America, she said, and understand too well why it's important.

The Dallas training was the sixth one I had been through both in writing articles on such sessions and in learning from them as co-chair of *The Star's* 11-month-old newsroom Diversity Committee. But more than the others, the Texas experience heightened my awareness.

You see, I flew to Dallas wearing what I thought was a pretty neat white baseball cap. It said "Atlanta Braves, National League Champions, 1991-1992."

The emblem included a baseball, an infield diamond and a tomahawk. I got it free with other giveaways at the National Association of Black Journalists July convention in Houston.

That conference hyped the Unity '94 convention, which will take place in Atlanta next summer. It will be the first joint ethnic membership gathering of the National Association of Black Journalists, the Asian American Journalists Association, the National Association of Hispanic Journalists and the Native American Journalists Association.

But I didn't see until after the Dallas training that the Braves cap was a racial insult to Native Americans – just as much as the Kansas City Chiefs name is and the chop and chants that fans do at every home game.

That white cap started to look pretty disgusting; especially as a gift given at a meeting of an association that prides itself on promoting diversity. The first silver bullet had found its mark, taken out a monster in me and created a new awareness.

Valuing diversity enhances our ability to respect differences in people, enables us to reach our productivity potential and boosts our communication skills. It doesn't diminish us or lower workplace, academic or community standards.

Diversity troops are pushing into communities nationwide like the forces of the Civil Rights Movement did years ago. But instead of an enlightened few training folks on the streets to break forced segregation, the new effort is in boardrooms, workplaces, schools and communities, where harmony will be vital for everyone's future.

But getting people to believe in diversity won't be easy. In Greater Kansas City, the areawide movement struggles against old ways.

It also battles the Ku Klux Klan passing out despicable recruitment fliers, saying two white homicide victims were killed this year because of their race. The slayings were horrid but not race-related.

The twisted army of prejudices that would make up such lies, however, will require a lot of silver bullets to knock down. But it's also important to save some shells for the subtle beasts in us all.

People often rile against diversity and affirmative action, thinking those two things are synonymous. They aren't. Alisa Lange, when she oversaw the University of Kansas Medical Center's diversity program in the 1990s, described the difference this way: Affirmative action is like having a car delivered to your driveway except nothing is assembled. In the driveway is just a pile of different parts and cans of the necessary fluids. Diversity is having that car delivered, but all of the parts are assembled in the proper working order. The fluids are all in the right place, and the vehicle runs like a top. Affirmative action then is having all of the right parts and fluids. Diversity is the proper engineering, collection, assembly and management of those unique parts and fluids so that the vehicle actually runs. That is what companies and other entities want to get out of affirmative action and diversity. Uniquely different people are needed in the workplace, schools, churches and throughout the community. Diversity is simply the management of that different talent so that the highest possible function is achieved. As merely a pile of parts, and containers of fluids, nothing works or goes forward.

This book will look at the real diversity in America and the challenges people face. It will examine how difficult their struggles to overcome the status quo remain for minorities and the majority. It will delve into the power of and investment made in maintaining the way things are. The book will go into the denial people of color face as well as the anguish and mental health issues of their being told that the racism they feel in this country is just their imagination.

Discovering the Real America is a coalescence of myriad puzzle pieces. They consist of textbook material clearly conveying the Real America—that which is disturbing and frightening, and that which offers hope to those who believe that this country and our world can be better. The book's puzzle pieces

also include hundreds of columns spread over nearly 20 years that examine the problems of this country's many -isms and efforts toward solutions. The puzzle pieces include hundreds of e-mails, voice mail messages, letters and faxes filled with condemnation of efforts to expose the truth about diversity.

In this book, diversity includes myriad differences, not just race. In any large American city, the diversity of the population cannot be avoided or ignored. This book mirrors that reality. The text does not segregate different groups but is structured as we experience diversity in life. The only exceptions are the chapters on prisons and on homelessness. In *Discovering the Real America*, those conditions are mostly isolated because they are also kept out of our lives in this country.

So what is the goal of *Discovering the Real America*? People should be able to recognize themselves in the pages that follow. For some, what's reflected back will not be pretty. But this could be an opportunity for change. People will also see others in what follows. With new ideas they will be able to ask those different individuals informed questions and get to know them better. And the book should start people on their own journey toward valuing diversity and discovering the Real America.

The book mostly focuses on how Kansas City, the Heartland of America, has struggled to make this community more inclusive. Kansas City's work mirrors efforts going on all over the country to make the United States finally be that "more perfect Union" that the Preamble to the Constitution promises. Showcasing the work in the Heartland will help others in the struggle to save the spirit of America.

Lastly the book includes pieces of the puzzle that map out solutions. They show America as it needs to be and, like a treasure map, guide today's explorers along the way to discovering the Real America.

Dr. W.E.B. Du Bois, a founder of the Niagara Movement and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, wrote in his ground-breaking book *Souls of Black Folks* more than 100 years ago that the greatest challenge the United States faced in the 20th century was the barrier that the color line presented. That crippling wall has stayed intact in the America of the 21st century, and the garbage that has piled up on both sides continues to spread its rotting stench to all of us.

It won't go away unless people of all colors resolve to get to know each other, accept the humanity in us all and live and work in harmony. There is no hiding from it; there can be no slackers. People are starting to realize that our planet is too small and we need each other too much for there to be a divisive, unchallenged color line. We must all wield sledgehammers and together tear down the barrier. It is the only solution.

Section One
SECTION I



The Cutting Winds of Discrimination:
The Situation Now

Chapter One

CHAPTER 1

Whiteness in Charge

21st Century Slave

*They don't beat us no more
With the sting of the whip.
They don't chase us no more,
Shooting at us from the hip.
They don't sick the dogs on us
With sharp flesh cutting teeth.
They don't burn down our houses
Leaving us no place to eat or sleep.
They don't hunt us down like dogs
Or string us up like gutted hogs.
No. Things have radically changed.
But the bigotry – 21st century style – is all the same
Just more bloodless and now more corporate humane
The slurs are coded and so are the violence and the hunt
The prey's the same and so is imprisoning people for a blunt
The hunters' hearts are cold, beautifully cold
Righteously bold
Just like times long past
Enabling racism to forever last
Leaving us wondering as we're in flight
Why do whites think they're always right?*

The greatest obstacle to discovery . . . is the illusion of knowledge.

~Daniel J. Boorstin

People think they know race. Nothing could be further from the truth, said John A. Powell.

From "Privilege feeds a system of racial division"

"Race is constructed by our social norms and practices, not by our biological makeup," said Powell, the Gregory Williams Chair on Civil Rights and Civil Liberties at the Ohio State University Law School.

Race is only 400 to 500 years old. It is not a black, Latino, Asian or American Indian thing. Powell said it's largely an Anglo-American phenomenon constructed "to keep poor blacks and poor whites apart."

"They wanted to create a divide, and out of that divide was created a concept of whiteness," said Powell, who is also executive director of the Kirin Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity in the Americas. "Everybody understood who was categorized as white.

"It had substantial consequences. It meant you could be a 'member of the community.'"

White people could own property, vote, hold public office and enjoy all constitutional liberties. Whiteness allowed those immigrants who qualified to become naturalized citizens. Laws and the courts blocked others.

"In all of these cases race measures something," Powell said. "It measures a set of privileges, benefits, status and assumptions that attach themselves to those categories or disabilities if you're not white.

"Privilege to white males causes missed opportunities for others in society," Powell added.

Such privilege causes minorities to subsidize the majority. How many Einsteins are in poor inner-city schools? Such students could develop the cure for AIDS, but that potential is smothered under a blanket of racism.

"Because we treat them a certain way, what we know about them becomes real," Powell said. "After the Civil War blacks couldn't join a union.

"If they couldn't join a union they couldn't work. Because they couldn't get work they were labeled lazy.

"So it's circular."

Since slavery, thousands of minorities with white skin and features have "passed" as whites to gain privilege. "Passing is normally in one direction," Powell said.

"People are passing from a lower status to a higher status," he said. "There are very few white people who will walk into work today and say, 'I look white, but I'm actually black.'"

Passing validates the system of inequality and lets it continue unchallenged. "It's strategic to just get along in life to avoid stereotypes and to avoid liabilities," Powell said.

“Code switching” is another practice that enables minorities to fit in and function in mainstream America. They switch how they talk and act to gain acceptance, depending on whether they are among whites or minorities.

“The question is: Why is there a need for this to go on?” Powell asked. “Privilege has to be called into question.

“You can’t address the racial hierarchy by passing into the higher race or ignoring the hierarchy itself.”

Powell said the good news is how we define race constantly changes. We see it in the census. “There has been no 10-year period where our racial categories have remained stable,” Powell said. An example is how the census has changed its definition of Hispanics and multiracial people.

“It’s funny because we organize our whole life around race, but it’s just a mess,” Powell said. “It seems there is a common sense to race, but there is not.

“Each generation sort of reconstructs race. The good news is we can influence that.”

And perhaps in applying that influence, the people of the Real America can collectively end racism.

What exactly is *white privilege*? Peggy McIntosh is associate director of the Wellesley College Center for Research on Women and has done groundbreaking work on white privilege. She calls it the “unearned assets” that whites possess but about which they are “meant to remain oblivious,” the “invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions” that gives whites an edge over people of color from conception to grave (10). (See Appendix B.) Thandeka, who teaches at Meadville/Lombard Theological School in Chicago, offers another perspective in her book *Learning to Be White: Money, Race and God in America*. She describes the unearned advantage as a “wage of whiteness,” which functions “as a kind of workers’ compensation, . . . a ‘consolation prize’ to persons who, although not wealthy, would not be counted as losers because they were, at least, white” (78). In her piece in *Multicultural Perspectives*, “My Class Didn’t Trump My Race: Using Oppression to Face Privilege,” Robin J. DiAngelo acknowledges the validity of that description:

As I reflect back on the early messages I received about being poor and being White, I now realize that my grandmother and I *needed* people of color to cleanse and realign us with the dominant White culture that our poverty had separated us from. . . . Regardless of one’s other locations [in social groups], White people know on some

level that being White in this society is “better” than being a person of color, and this, along with the very real doors Whiteness opens, serves to mediate the oppression experienced in those other social locations. (52-53)

Thandeka adds that white people’s “race’ was used to distract them from their shrinking value as wage earners. Diminished as workers, they felt shame. . . . Inflated as whites, they felt white supremacist pride” (78).

White privilege also blinds whites to the talent in others. It serves as a massive obstacle to all people discovering the history, the tragedies and triumphs of everyone except white people. There is no talk about others’ contributions to America, leaving people to believe none occurred. Without talk creating a buzz that could lead to new discoveries there can be no change.

The effects of white privilege are most visible to members of multiracial families. The blending of the races is happening more now than in the past. It creates new realities in offspring, as well as new opportunities for people to better understand others and for whites to see their own position of privilege. The effects can be jarring and confusing, as some multiracial families explain:

From “True colors of white privilege”

Cindy Taylor and Sarah Starnes gave me insight into a galaxy of white privilege that I’d otherwise never see.

Taylor and Starnes possess the extrasensory perception of white women who are married to black men and are mothers of biracial children.

“It’s more than just a feeling,” Cindy Taylor said. “When I’m alone, I’m not subjected to the same things.”

When Taylor is by herself, she isn’t followed in stores, refused service or hassled. She’s welcomed by white people.

“The most amazing thing is even people of good will don’t even appreciate how much they take that for granted,” said Anthony Taylor, Cindy’s husband.

It’s their exclusive *American express* to preferential treatment.

Alisa Lange, a black woman, says some of that invisible privilege washes onto her when she’s with her white husband. It’s an ease and comfort in conversations and kindness that she’s not afforded when she’s alone or when she was married to her first husband, who was black.

White privilege is the mother of all affirmative action. That preference supersedes today’s endangered programs, which try to level the playing field for minorities.

Taylor feels white privilege when she uses her checkbook or her husband’s on purchases. “Nobody blinks,” she said.

“When he writes a check they ask for two IDs,” Taylor said. “It would be unthinkable for him to use my checkbook.

“He has to jump through hoops again and again.”

At a Johnson County, Kansas, fitness center, Taylor has felt welcomed in a whirlpool with other white people. But she has noticed after she has left and her husband enters that the other white people suddenly get out of the hot water. “It’s the same old thing, and it’s endless,” she said.

“You kind of develop a sixth sense, and so you avoid people and situations that are kind of uncomfortable or kind of unsatisfying,” said Starnes, who prefers inclusive settings. “I value things about African-American culture. I feel like I’ve gained more than I’m sacrificing.”

Yet, she’s found some white people will assume when she’s with her daughter, Amani, that they’re not together or that Starnes adopted her. People of color, however, clearly see their likeness and their love.

“The assumption is that a respectable white woman would not have a biracial child,” Starnes said. There also are the stares and rude questions that Amani in her emerging awareness of race finds unavoidable.

Sometimes the Taylors turn others’ ignorance against them in sort of a mental martial arts exercise.

Cindy Taylor engages them and exposes the underworld of white privilege.

I wish more people did that. Then maybe America’s invisible, white affirmative action would end and true equality could begin.

Whites are not often aware of their own privilege. Rather, they are practicing what Indigenous Peoples scholar Cornel Pewewardy recognizes as “dysconscious racism,” whereby they “unconsciously [accept] dominant white norms and privileges” (“La Belle Sauvage”). As DiAngelo puts it, “White social power is so normalized that it is outside our conscious awareness” (55). One reason for this lack of awareness—isolation of the races—is pointed out by Jim Myers, author of *Afraid of the Dark: What Whites and Blacks Need to Know About Each Other*. Myers notes that isolation is more a problem for white people than black people.

From “Obstacles abound in starting honest talks”

“Most white Americans rarely encounter situations in which they are surrounded by black people,” Myers wrote. “For the most part, whites avoid such situations. Black people have no such choice.”

African-Americans represent about 13 percent of the population. They have to interact with white people. But it sometimes isn’t good.

Myers described it as people who prefer chocolate living in a larger vanilla world:

“On occasion blacks might sense themselves as outsiders in a vanilla world, where the wishes and wants of a vanilla-loving majority consistently prevail.... [Blacks] are described as different and out of step, almost as if there is something wrong with them. Everyone, from entertainers to politicians, seems to talk exclusively about the love of vanilla. It’s always vanilla, vanilla, vanilla.

“So it passes that majority tastes or concerns seem normal, sane and sensible, while minority tastes can seem abnormal, irrational or oddball.”

The “mathematics of race” also is a problem, he notes.

“Across much of white America, there is a shortage of black people with whom whites might have the discussions,” Myers said. “And in many black neighborhoods, there are too few whites to hold much of a discussion.”

Peggy McIntosh, however, asserts that it’s far more than a black/white thing. McIntosh leads discussions on white privilege across the country. In March of 2003 she visited the Kansas City area, where she and I cofacilitated sessions with people at the Minority Museum, where diversity regularly is discussed, and at Johnson County Community College.

From “Diluting the power of privilege”

She first asked people to get a partner, and for one minute, each was to tell the other the “hard or scary things about talking about privilege.” She also asked each person to list the “good things about talking about privilege.”

Later she had each person spend a minute telling personal stories of unearned disadvantage followed by a minute of recollections of unearned advantage. People also had to tell what it was like to hear the other person say such things.

“A minute can seem very long or very short,” said McIntosh, a national expert on privilege.

African-Americans at the college said it was easier to speak of the disadvantage they’ve faced. Some whites said it was easier for them to identify their advantages but difficult to speak of their disadvantages to minorities.

“Any disadvantage I have is nothing compared to what he is feeling,” one person said.

McIntosh said the exercise showed that everyone has unearned advantage and disadvantage.

“None of us is only a victim; none is only a villain,” McIntosh said. “Our lives are nuanced.

“But I do see a hierarchy of oppression.”

Women find the media, school curricula and history often exclude their challenges, triumphs, discoveries and contributions.

The same is true for African-Americans, Hispanics, Asian-Americans, American Indians, Muslims, people with disabilities, gays and lesbians. Instead they struggle against stereotypes, discrimination and exclusion.

People are left to believe that “men are knowers, and knowledge is male,” said McIntosh, co-founder and co-director of the National Seeking Educational Equity and Diversity Project on Inclusive Curriculum. “Other people’s knowledge is defective knowledge.”

McIntosh said at least half of the people on the planet are women so half of the history, experiences and intellect of the world belongs to women. But that’s not how it’s recorded. “Men fill our half with their stuff,” McIntosh said.

People who are right-handed discount their unearned advantage, too, she said. But left-handed people easily note their unearned disadvantages in a world dominated by right-handers.

McIntosh recalled black women arriving first at a restaurant, but a group of white women she was with was served ahead of them. She said the table of black women was served “too slow for justice.” Conversely the table of white women was served “too fast for justice.”

“It’s the upside of discrimination,” McIntosh said. “Racism as I experience it comes in the shape of white privilege, which confers dominance to my group from birth. I got it without approving of it.”

That unearned privilege aids one group of people at others’ expense. “Those benefiting from the privilege system are kept blinded to it to keep alive the myth of meritocracy,” McIntosh said.

Those race blinders are not easily shed and awareness of white privilege does not come about without a struggle, even when meaningful discussions do take place. The inability to hear, see and comprehend what people of color are trying to convey adds to the invisibility that Ralph Ellison wrote about nearly 60 years ago in his groundbreaking novel, *Invisible Man*. Whites in the U.S. can choose *when* and *when not* “to legitimize people of color’s assertions of racism” because of their “social, economic, and political power within a White supremacist culture” (DiAngelo 55). The blinders stay on because recognizing differences in experience for different races is unnecessary for fitting into the dominant culture.

From “Blind to ‘white privilege’”

Diane Kappen sent me a consoling e-mail after I had spent about