

# Conquering Our Own Racial Biases

By: Helen Tai

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It's easy to denounce the racism of President Trump and white nationalists, but are we willing to face our own racial biases? In *White Fragility: Why it's so Hard for White People to Talk About Racism*, author Robin DiAngelo discusses the built-in dominance of white culture in America – almost everyone who is in a position of power is white – the teacher, the doctor, the one who decides which movies and TV shows are made, who decides what news is printed or aired, who owns businesses, and who runs our country. It shouldn't surprise us that the result is an implicit belief in white superiority. DiAngelo also states that because of the belief that only “bad people” are racist, all of us are unable to accept that we may have racial tendencies within ourselves. This makes it impossible to have constructive dialog about race, with the unintended outcome that we all contribute to the status quo of racial inequality.

Racism has extremely serious consequences – people of color are quite literally being shot in their churches and hunted down on the street. Our government is separating Central American children from their parents and forcing them to sleep in cages. The Supreme Court of the United States has upheld our President's order that bars Muslims from entering our country.

We must protest these inhumane actions. We should condemn Trump's racist rhetoric and incitement of violence. We should attend rallies, meet with our elected officials, demand meaningful gun violence prevention laws and the humane treatment of immigrants. We must do these things; yet “just” changing policies is insufficient because our culture and deep-seated beliefs will remain unchanged.

Our racial beliefs are so deeply embedded and the consequences so heinous that we may feel helpless and unable to act. But I firmly believe that most people would be appalled to realize that they are inadvertently helping to maintain racial inequality and would want to learn what they can do. An important start is to understand how deep-rooted racism is and the emotional damage it causes. This is why I want to share my experiences.

From the outside, I appear to be a confident and successful Asian American woman who hasn't been held back by racism. In fact, until a few days ago, I too held the false belief that I have not suffered negative consequences because of my race. Sure, I've experienced racism, but nothing in my life changed as a result of it. I was never barred from an establishment because of my race, I was never discriminated against in housing, I held good jobs at excellent companies, and I have a successful consulting business. Last year, I even won a special election for Pennsylvania State Representative in a district that is overwhelmingly white.

But recently, I've come to appreciate that racism has had and continues to have a profound and insidious impact on my psyche. Memories from my childhood that I thought were long gone have made an unwelcome return. Being asked, “Where are you from?” And then, “No. Where are you really from?” when my response of “Michigan” did not satisfy them. Or, the “compliment” “of, “Wow, your English is so good.” Although these questions and comments come from the ridiculous presumption that an Asian person can't possibly be from the United States, they were less painful than being mocked for my slanted eyes or yellow skin. They were less painful than listening to racist imitations of Chinese people and being asked to demonstrate Kung Fu. They were less painful than being called “Hop Sing” or “Ching Chong” or having to listen to racist rhymes about Chinese and Japanese people.

I learned slowly throughout my childhood, through my ears, through my eyes and through my pores that being different was bad. Being different meant that I could be attacked and mocked and excluded. It meant I didn't fit in. Sometimes I felt utterly alone and afraid. Other times, another student, almost always a little girl, would stand up for me. At those times, I felt a visceral sense of gratitude that a white person had come to my rescue.

Thankfully I haven't experienced much outright racism as an adult, but a few incidents illustrate how firmly race is entrenched into our culture. Early in my career,

I attended a diversity training program at Johnson & Johnson along with several white people and several black people. At one point, the trainer asked us to split into two groups: a Caucasian group and a non-Caucasian group. I can't remember the exact nature of the exercise, but it was clear that it was not intended to sow division but rather to help each side gain understanding of the other. I got up and sat with the non-Caucasian group. One of my white co-workers said to me, “I don't think she meant you. You should be in our group.” Although she meant well, wanting to include me in her group, the unspoken presumption was that her group was better and that I would prefer to be with them.

A few years ago, I was reading through the police blotter section of our local weekly newspaper. I only remember seeing the race of the perpetrator mentioned once – and he was black. I wrote to the paper and asked them why they normally did not indicate the perpetrator's race, but chose to this one time.

Another time, one of my friends told a story about an Indian person. Because my friend is progressive and educated, I assumed that his mentioning that the person is Indian had some relevance to the story. After he finished, I asked him, “What does him being Indian have to do with the story?” He didn't understand why I asked the question, and after some back and forth, he admitted that the person's race had no significance. So why bring it up?

Immediately after the 2016 election, a local school board director made a hateful post on Facebook. The gist of the message was that “if you stand up for those who are more vulnerable, I hope you get beat up.” Claiming it was satire, he made a half-hearted apology for the “misunderstanding.” I am grateful that many people in the community, including several courageous students, spoke up, but I was deeply discouraged that not a single member of the school board would censure him. Worse than that, some supporters of the school board director attacked me for speaking up. The message to our community and to our students was that it's okay to threaten

others who aren't like you.

Race also came into play during my run for state representative last year. The district is more than 90% white, and my opponent sent out a mailer with pictures of three different white women who stated that they were supporting her because (unlike Helen Tai), “she's just like you and me.” Other mailers included doctored photos of me with my skin darkened. They spread rumors that I hated white people, despite the fact that my husband and almost all my friends and supporters are white. It might've been enough to push her to victory.

All of these experiences as well as the open racism spreading across our country today impacted me in a way that caught me off guard. When my husband and I looked at a rental property, what went through my mind as I shook hands with the owner was, “I hope she doesn't reject me because I'm Asian.” What a jolt – I had no idea this fear was inside me. Even though I had not suffered any material consequences from racism, I had this buried fear. It made me see with immense clarity that deep inside, I still believe that being different makes me inferior. Most of the time I don't feel this way, but sometimes, especially when I'm feeling vulnerable, the thought flares up, and when it does, it brings with it shame and fear. Shame of being inferior. Fear of harm.

My experiences are insignificant compared to those of brown or black people, but they have given me the tiniest glimpse of what their lives are like. Wounds from racism run deep, and I had erroneously believed mine had healed. But I've come to realize that they won't ever heal because the system that created them still exists and will continue to cause re-injury. Racial bias is so ubiquitous, I don't think we can stop it from permeating into our consciousness. But knowing this, we must acknowledge the racial bias we each carry and then consciously fight it, not just in others, but also within ourselves, until we achieve our American ideal that all people are created equal.

(本报将于10月4日刊登中文翻译版本，敬请关注。)



2018年6月5日，戴怡平由弟弟戴怡康（Michael Tai）为她手持美国宪法宣誓，成为宾州首位华裔州众议员。  
On June 5, 2018, Dai Yiping was sworn by her younger brother, Michael Tai, to become the first Chinese state congressman in Pennsylvania.