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Updated 7:21 PM ET, Sun June 7, 2020 (CNN)

If you're a white person in America, social justice educator Robin DiAngelo has a message for you: You're a racist, pure and simple, and without a lifetime of conscious effort you always will be.

You just can't help it, you see, because you've been swaddled in the cocoon of white privilege since you came sputtering out of your mother's womb, protesting the indignity of it all.

You may be indignantly sputtering right now at this insult to your humanity -- for how can **you** be a racist? You have black colleagues you consider friends; you don't see skin color; you never owned slaves; you marched in the 60s; you even protest today against the uniformed "bad apples" that use the power of their authority to smother minority lives and minority rights.

"How dare you say I am anything like them?" you grumble, as you pull the cloak of your bruised and fragile feelings around you.

And there -- with that simple act -- you personify the theme of DiAngelo's best selling 2018 book, ["White Fragility: Why It's So Hard For White People To Talk About Racism."](#) What started as an essay written in 2011 on racial and social injustice has become an international sensation, flying off the internet shelves into the homes of those horrified by recent events.

CNN sat down with DiAngelo to ask her thoughts on the conversations around today's protests, how they fit into the history of the civil rights movement, and what white people need to do now. The conversation has been edited for flow and clarity.

**Q: Is this a "Me Too" moment for racial equality or is the conversation going to fizzle and fade as it's done in the past?**

**DiAngelo:** There are a few things that I think are different about this moment. First, it's being sustained. It's not one march, one protest. They are ongoing and spreading around the world.

There is discourse in the mainstream media that I didn't think I'd ever hear in my life. Those of us who have been beating this drum for years are finally hearing phrases like "systemic racism" used in the mainstream media.

The number one and two books being sold in the world right now are both on racism, one written by me, a white person, and one written by [Ibram X. Kendi](#), a black person. You can google "What can white people do right now?" and you wouldn't be able to keep up with all of the excellent lists of resources and guidance.

We're hearing a discussion of reparations for the descendants of enslaved Africans on the Democratic debate stage. For the first time ever in history, I think, a recent poll showed that more white Americans believe that there are advantages to being white than don't believe that.

These are huge breakthroughs. But it needs to be sustained, and I'm a little worried about what happens when the cameras go away. This is where I remember [Malcolm Gladwell's tipping point theory](#): You only need 30%. And when I feel discouraged, I remember that because I think "We got 30%. Let's keep it going."

I do want to put some thoughtfulness around saying that there is a difference to this moment. I'm devastated that this is the price that it took: Watching one more -- not just one -- but *one more* black man murdered in the most callous and public way. That's what it took.

I hope to God that isn't wasted in the sense of what it has ignited.

**Q: The theme of your book "White Fragility" is how white people are perpetuating racism by being too fragile to discuss the subject openly and honestly. How can white people be fragile if we have white privilege?**

**DiAngelo:** That's precisely why we're fragile. We live a very insular experience. We have rarely ever been challenged in our racial worldview. We move through a society in which racial inequality is the very bedrock in racial comfort as white people and we are rarely ever out of our racial comfort zones.

Most white people go cradle to grave in racial segregation. Most white people do not have authentic sustained relationships across race, particularly with black people. I'm not talking about acquaintances. Show me your wedding album. That is a truer measure of who is in your friendship circle and sitting at your table.

Most of us go through our lives in segregation without seeing anything of value lost. That is the most profound message of all -- that we could go cradle to grave and not see anything of value lost in not having authentic relationships with black people.

Instead, we use their absence as the value-measure of our space. What is a good neighborhood? What is a good school? We measure whether a school is good in large part by the absence of African Americans in that school.

Those are such deep messages. I would never say the n-word, but I've still internalized that message. And it manifests every day of my life in a range of ways.

As a white person, I take for granted that I get to be special and different and unique, and that you will respond to me that way. It would never occur to me that the police would be called because I was waiting in Starbucks for a friend before I got my coffee. Or that someone would call the police on me because I said, "Would you please leash your dog?" Or that I would be executed in the street for a petty crime that no one had proved I did yet, and that there would be no consequences for my murders. I can't even fathom that.

And because I'm so rarely ever uncomfortable, I'm so rarely ever not seen as a unique and special individual, I am so rarely ever not granted objectivity, I come to feel entitled to those things.

And when they're challenged and called out as privileges, I am thrown off. I take great umbrage. We're not used to being seen as white and in some ways we feel exposed -- our unracialized consciousness sets us up to be fragile around these conversations.

The term "fragility" speaks to how little it takes to throw us out of our racial comfort zones, but our reaction is not fragile at all in its impact. We lash back in ways that actually end up being punitive to whoever challenged us, but highly effective to repel the challenge.

The impact is a weaponized defensiveness, hurt feelings and umbrage because it marshals behind it the weight of history and institutional power. We have some work to do in building our stamina. But we won't build it as long as we believe that only mean people who intentionally want to hurt others based on race could ever do so.

**Q: If someone was to say to you, "I don't understand how I have been shaped by my whiteness," what would you tell them?**

**DiAngelo:** I would say that when your mother was pregnant with you, what choice did she have in where she lived? What was the water, soil and air quality in that environment?

The number one indicator of where a toxic waste dump will be placed is the racial makeup of the community. With water, think Flint, Michigan.

What nutrition was available to her? What kind of transportation? What kind of health care? How was your mother's labor managed?

Racism in healthcare is well documented -- a [recent survey showed](#) that over 50% of medical residents believe black people feel less pain. And that belief surely impacts how a black mother's labor is managed. Who owned the hospital you were born in? Who took out the trash and washed the sheets?

As a white person, you were born into a racialized hierarchy, the forces of which had been operating in your life before you even took that first breath and every breath since.

We have to start there -- and not so we can see how bad we are -- but because we bring all of that to the table with us.

**Q: You write about the "pillars" which support white fragility. What are they?**

**DiAngelo:** People will ask me often what causes white fragility and it's not one single thing. We've got individualism, which we think can exempt us. Apparently a lot of white people don't understand socialization -- how our environment shaped who we are. We literally think we look at the world through objective eyes and therefore we are exempt from racism.

We have universalism, which is this sense that we are people who can speak for all people. We don't have a point of view, we aren't speaking from any particular position. Take film, for example. Spike Lee is always a black film director who makes films about black issues and we always mention Spike Lee's race. Mike Leigh is a white film director but he's just a great film director who makes films about the human condition. We never mention Mike Leigh's race and we continually grant to Mike Leigh the ability to speak for all humanity, from some disembodied neutral position.

We don't understand that objectivity and individuality are privileges. These are not granted to everybody.

Internalized superiority is another pillar. That's a hard one to admit to, but the research is very clear that by age three to four, all children know it's better to be white. And many parents ask me about how to teach their children not be racist but they need to start with themselves. They themselves are not educated. They haven't done the work. It's not some talk you have, it's like put your oxygen mask on first and then if you are truly integrating this into your life it will come through in everything you do.

One of the most important white pillars is what I call the good/bad binary -- you're either racist or you're not. If you're racist, you're bad. You're intentionally and consciously mean to people based on race. And if you're not racist, you're good, you're nice and you're open minded. What that sets up is that being a good person and being complicit with racism become mutually exclusive.

And I think that is the root of almost all white defensiveness -- that simple definition that racism has to be conscious and intentional in order to count.

Think about how people defend themselves when somebody says what they just did was racist: They're going to say "I didn't mean to, I'm not racist." They're going to get their friends to say "No, he is a really nice person so he can't be racist."

Every act of racism that you can think of was probably committed by somebody who said I'm not racist. Amy Cooper said she's not racist.

**Q: You say in your book that white progressives can be more difficult than outright racists when it comes to conversations about race. I believe you say many black people see it as racism "by a thousand cuts."**

DiAngelo: I've had so many black people say: "Give me the old school, in your face, straight up racist. Give me Richard Spencer. I know how to protect myself. I know where Richard Spencer's coming from."

I don't want to minimize the dangerousness of the growth of the alt-right movement, but on a daily basis, most black people are not interacting with Richard Spencer. It's the well-meaning white people at the overwhelmingly white workplace that send black people home exhausted and wondering if it's worth it to try to discuss racism. That's what I mean by daily harm.

White people who see themselves as liberal can be the hardest, the most defensive, the most resistant, the most arrogant in their certitude that it is not them. Their energy will go to making sure you see that it is not them, in all the ways that will have you rolling your eyes.

There's a question I've asked people of color for 20 years: How often have you attempted to give a white person -- who thinks they're open minded and sensitive to

racism -- feedback on their inevitable and often unintentional, but hurtful, racist assumptions and behaviors -- and had that go well for you? The number one answer to that question? Never.

**Q: I'm sure many liberal white people reading this will be mortified to think that they are the problem. How do they stop it?**

**DiAngelo:** I'm not sure we can fully stop it, but we can seek to do less harm through education and practice and mistake-making. The key is that you learn and grow from your mistakes. You don't use it as an excuse to shut down.

You've probably seen this reaction from white people: "Well, then forget it. I'm not saying anything." And then they disengage and withdraw. Some defensiveness is natural, but not defensiveness that excuses you to dig in your heels and refuse any further growth.

If you think I'm effective at what I can articulate, it's from thousands of mistakes over the years, and trying to learn and grow from those mistakes. And it's also why the people of color in my life trust me is because they've seen me through that. They're not going to give up on me because my conditioning resurfaced.

I don't think in my lifetime I will be free of my racist conditioning. And I don't actually call myself an anti-racist -- that's for people of color to decide if at any given moment I'm actually behaving in anti-racist ways.

I often say try for less harm. Be thoughtful, but don't be so careful that you don't take any risks because that's just protecting you.

**Q: Why is a book on racism written by a white woman flying off the shelves and resonating with people at this time?**

**DiAngelo:** As an insider, there's a way that I can speak to racism, explain it and expose it that is much harder to deny. You can't dismiss me as biased or too sensitive or playing the race card. It's a sort of wink between white people: "You know and I know, come on, we know." And I think that is a key piece of it.

Now I want to stress that we can never understand what we need to know about racism if we only listened to white people. But for too long, we've turned to people of color as if we are outside of race and they're the holders of racial knowledge. And even then, if we don't agree with what they tell us, in our arrogance, we dismiss it.

Always looking to people of color is to put that incredible burden on them. And that's another reason why I think people are starting to realize that we've got to start looking at ourselves. It's a relationship, right?

**Q: There's much to be done. What are the key things white people can do -- right now -  
- to begin to make a more permanent change?**

**DiAngelo:** So many white people are asking right now is what can I do? And so I'm going to give you five tasks.

The first one is to remove this claim from your vocabulary: "I'm not racist." If you are wondering why on earth, I would ask you to remove that claim then you have some education to do.

The second thing is work on answering this question: What does it mean to be white? Describe how your race shaped every aspect of your life from the moment that you took your first breath. Ask yourself how being white shaped how you see yourself as unique or special or different.

The third is take out a piece of paper and start to make a list in answer to this question: How have I managed to be a full functioning professional adult and not know what to do about racism?

Your list might look something like this: I wasn't educated on racism. I don't talk about racism with the people in my life. I don't talk about racism with people of color. I don't really know any people of color. I haven't really cared to find out. I don't want to feel guilty. Whatever is on that list is your map and everything on that list can be addressed, not quickly, not easily, but all of it can be addressed.

Next, take Dr. Eddie Moore, Jr.'s "[21-Day Racial Equity Habit Building Challenge](#)." It is active and participatory, and it will set you up on an active path that you can continue for the rest of your life.

And number five, you can never understand what you need to understand about racism if you only listen to white people. Read everything you can by people of color, listen to people of color, watch their videos, get [Layla Saad's "Me and White Supremacy"](#) workbook and do the work. Turn your attention to hearing what people of color and black people have been telling us for centuries.

It's liberating to start from the premise that there's no way you could have avoided internalizing a racist worldview. It's liberating to understand why you need to stop saying that you're not racist. It opens up everything on this journey.

You will stop defending, deflecting, denying and putting your head in the sand. Yes, it is painful at times, but there's nothing more growth enhancing and challenging on every possible level than this journey. You will have relationships you never had before and you will be able to align what you profess you believe with the actual practice of your life.