

## Barbara Shew UU Talk: Growing Up in White America

John Gaines convinced me I should give a talk today, saying, “Why are you so interested in antiracism work? You have something to say after all these years!” I don’t really know why, so my talk is a chance to share my experiences and growth in understanding, which is still changing after all these years!

I grew up in rural New York, in farming communities and small towns, Ithaca being the largest. This ranged from Medina, Wolcott, and tiny Red Creek. Then three years in Dryden High School and one year at Ithaca, graduating from IHS in 1947.

My first puzzling about race relations was in Wolcott, when I went to a minstrel show my grandfather participated in. I couldn’t understand at age 8 why he had blackened his face, and I don’t remember asking him why.

One contact with the outside world was through radio programs, books, and movies. Popular in the 30’s was a Little Golden Book, “Little Black Sambo,” my stereotyped introduction to “the other.” Langston Hughes criticized the book as the typical “black boy” storybook that wounded many children of color. It gradually led to the book’s disappearance from lists of recommended children’s stories. It was one of my earliest books. Another one was “The Uncle Remus Tales,” written by a white man, Joel Chandler Harris, who took Black storytellers’ material to create this character. These books are still on Amazon. This was my first contact with Black people in any of the small towns where I lived.

A very popular radio series in the 30’s and 40’s was “Amos and Andy,” played by two white actors, which I hadn’t known until I googled it. The show was modeled in minstrel show racial stereotypes; Amos was an earnest and hard-working Black man; Andy was his shiftless friend. Both spoke in Black dialect.

Shirley Temple movies were all the rage in my childhood years. I distinctly remember her scenes with Bojangles, a Black vaudeville actor. This was an unusual combination for the ’30’s. Black women were stereotyped in “Gone with the Wind,” and the famous Aunt Jemima ads for pancakes and syrup.

These influences jaded my understanding of Black America. I don’t remember my parents ever talking about their feelings about race relations or learning about slavery or lynching in grade school American history classes.

In 1945, my mother was a single parent; my parents were divorced when I was 10. She moved my brother and me to Dryden, where she was a junior high teacher. Again, no exposure to African Americans.

I spent my senior year at IHS and had classes with Black students. One of them was James Gibbs, Jr. who was president of our class of 1947. I was impressed that a Black student had this honor, thinking he was an exception, not reflective of my perception of most Black Americans. The road near the Youth Bureau is named for his father, who was instrumental in creating the Southside Community Center.

It was in college at the University of Michigan from 1947-51, that I started to understand a little about Black history and suffering. I had to do a paper on Black living conditions in nearby Detroit. I remember being shocked with what I learned. I had a test of my new knowledge in my sophomore year. My new roommate and I were going to dinner in our college dorm. As we approached a table where a Black student was seated alone, my roommate Helen, from Oklahoma, said she couldn’t sit there. I said, “Helen, we don’t do that here in the North.” We sat there. Later in the year, her father visited, wearing his cowboy hat, and he and Helen took a

tour of Detroit. While there, they took a bus. Her father made a big fuss about a Black person sitting in front of him. Helen cautioned her father and said, "We don't do that here." I was proud of her!

In the 50's, marriage and four children were my life. I was aware of the confusion and turmoil that the 1954 Supreme Court case of *Brown v. Board of Election* caused in the country's schools and neighborhoods. It wasn't until recently that I learned that Black schools were better for their students, even though their facilities and funding were inadequate. I knew that the racial prejudice rampant in our society was wrong, but I had no idea how to help. I guess I've always been sympathetic with underdogs and found myself wanting Blacks to always win sports and other competitions.

I started reading books like *Black Boy* by Richard Wright and especially *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison, which started the rich history of modern Black literature for me.

In the 60's and during the Civil Rights era, national media revealed the brutal actions against Blacks in the South. The film and book *To Kill a Mockingbird* became a bestseller and raised consciousness. The movie "Look Who's Coming to Dinner" comes to mind. Finally, America's ideas of racism were being addressed.

The book *The Fire Next Time* by James Baldwin was a seminal awakening for me to the reasons for the severity of our racial divides, which still resonates today. A quote from Baldwin, "Color is not a human or a personal reality, it is a political reality. But this is a distinction so extremely hard to make that the West has not been able to make it yet. The West, and the United States in particular, has historically had difficulty separating color from character instead of acknowledging it for what it is: an excuse for one group to assert political and social power over another." This book frightened me, at the time, about the future of race relations. However, I still had not thought about accepting personhood and character of Black people because of not having close contact and friendship with persons of color. I felt I wasn't prejudiced and was ready to defend them.

Here's an example of how not to handle a family incident in the mid 60's in Florida. We took our family to Florida during spring break to visit my husband's parents who spent their winters there. My father-in-law had a Black gardener, and during a party with neighbors, he made a racist remark. I was incensed, grew angry, and left the house, got in the car and drove to a small beach area to calm down. To this day, I don't know why I overreacted, which is not like me. All of a sudden, a car drove up and my father-in-law apologized to me.

In 1963, I went to library school at Syracuse University and took courses on and off, and got my Masters in Library Science in 1968. During this time I got a job at IHS as reference librarian and then head librarian. In the late 60's, IHS had a racial incident. The climate in Ithaca after the takeover of Willard Strait Hall by Black students filtered down to our Black students. They had a sit-in in our lecture hall and started to march through the halls. The vice principal called me and said, "You'd better lock the library, they are headed your way." As our library clerk was starting to lock the door, they pushed her aside, walked to the library stacks and started pushing the books to the floor.

Luckily, the vice principal came and directed them out. The library was full of white students and there were several moments of silence. I got the sense that the students understood the Black rage. I knew I had to say something: "Well, I guess we have some work to do." Every student got up quietly and started to put the books back on the shelves. Later that day, our principal called a faculty meeting in the library to assess the day's events. During the discussion, one teacher made a racist observation, which really troubled me, but I didn't say anything.

I started reading Toni Morrison's book *Beloved* in the late 80's. It was published in 1987 and was a truly emotional experience for me. It made me feel the horror of being a slave in white America, and the choices

they had to make to survive. These moments of awakening seem profound to me and few works of fiction I've read are its equal.

Two other writers before the 21st century I found instructive were Maya Angelou and Zora Neale Hurston. I was in an Ithaca bookstore and saw the title *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, which I glanced at, not a title I would usually pick up, but I bought it. It's written in Black dialect and tells the love story of a woman determined to be free to be herself in a racist southern culture. It is now a classic and read in schools and colleges. I became a fan and have collected her books. She was not only a fiction writer but became an anthropologist who collected Black folklore. Her autobiography *Dust Tracks on a Road* is highly praised. A truly independent woman who was a part of the Harlem Renaissance.

In the mid 60's, I had the extreme good fortune to attend a Cornell lecture by Martin Luther King, Jr., and James Baldwin. I was overwhelmed with awe for these two men, so much so, that when Dr. King was assassinated, it seemed personal to me.

After retiring in 1986, my husband Randy and I spent many pleasant years being snowbirds and purchased a home near DeLand, FL. I became aware that, even though Ithaca has segregated neighborhoods, the lines in Florida are more strictly drawn. I rarely saw Black or Brown people in commercial downtowns. I was disturbed when my own sister-in-law, from Greene, NY, insisted her husband not drive through Black neighborhoods in Florida. I didn't understand her fear, but said nothing.

One of my grandsons married a Nigerian American from Lawrence, KS, who came to the United States as a child. They met online. Her mother was quite upset that she was marrying a white American, but changed her mind after getting to know him. His wife loved being in our large family, and her presence helped me to see her as a person, not a representative of her culture. My grandson tells me she seems to only have white friends, being uncomfortable with American Blacks. She and I became close friends and she still calls me "Grandma," and emails often, even after they divorced after 13 years of marriage. I'm embarrassed to repeat that one time I took her to a restaurant and felt proud I was there with a Black person for customers to see. I see now, after our "Pledge to End Racism" training, that this was a real personal microaggression.

My son is a professional musician and plays with Samite, a well-known Ugandan musician. My son told me Samite's mother, Nnakku, needed someone to help with her English. I met her and we became close friends, a relationship of over 10 years, until she passed last year. I enjoyed her firm but warm personality.

However, these personal relationships were not with African Americans and I hope to have much closer contact with our own POC. It's time to talk about labels, such as BIPOC and POC. I hope it is a transitional attempt to step away from Black, white, Asian, and indigenous ways of describing people. I yearn for the day we don't have to use the word RACE, a false concept, even though I have used it throughout this talk. I have hope that day will come!

The time is coming, and I sense evidence of it in the proliferation of books, films, and TV ads, where POC issues and history are in the popular culture.

One book I learned from is Ta-Nehisi Coates' *Between the World and Me*, published in 2015, which opened my eyes to the concerns most Black parents have for their children's safety in white America. I discussed this book with a Florida UU friend, who wasn't impressed, saying, "He complains too much!" She had missed the whole impact of the Black experience in America. I tried to explain to her my interpretation, being empathetic but calm. (I've learned since my Florida eruption in the '60's!)

I became more active in FUSIT in 2016. Beth Howard started a discussion group on racism and we read, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* by Michelle Alexander. It's an important book to understand the many faults of our judicial system that disproportionately incarcerates Black people. The group met over several years and I learned about "red-lining" which I had never heard of. *Just Mercy* by Bryan Stevenson was suggested reading about life and death sentences enforced, often without evidence, for Black prisoners. Isabel Wilkerson's *The Warmth of Other Suns* describes the Great Migration of Black southerners to major northern cities. The Great Migration was a term I had never learned in history classes. Most recently, I'm reading *The 1619 Project*, a series of essays by Black historians and authors about the way slavery has influenced American history to this day. Those are the books that some states are banning to try to keep our children from learning about American history.

I have to end my experience in white American by promoting FUSIT's Pledge to End Racism cause and our antiracism ministry team. The Pledge Program introduced me to what a microaggression is and ways to improve one's reactions and responses. I had not realized I needed to work on my hidden biases. Both groups insist we find personal activities that will help our society to be more inclusive, including systemic change.

Many people will say that books and other media are not enough to make the systemic changes we so desperately need to improve race relations in our country. But, I've heard it said, "You can legislate change, but you can't change hearts and minds." I disagree because if we don't change hearts and minds, the real systemic changes won't happen! We've come a long way since "Little Black Sambo," but we have more work to do.