

Debbly Irving: I'm a good person, right? Because the only alternative is I'm bad. So the idea that I could be both a good person and be deeply racist, my whiteness training set my mind up to make that an impossibility.

Sam Fuqua: That's Debbly Irving, and this is Well, That Went Sideways! A podcast that serves as a resource to help people have healthy, respectful communication. We present a diversity of ideas, tools, and techniques to help you transform conflict in relationships of all kinds. In this episode, we talk with Debbly Irving about white privilege. She's a racial justice educator and author of the book, *Waking Up White and Finding Myself in the Story of Race*. We spoke with Debbly Irving at the 2023 White Privilege Conference in Mesa, Arizona.

I'm Sam Fuqua, co-host of the program with Alexis Miles. Hi, Alexis.

Alexis Miles: Hi, Sam.

Sam Fuqua: And we're so pleased to have Debbly Irving with us for this conversation. Hello.

Debbly Irving: Hello. Thanks for having me here.

Sam Fuqua: Let me start by asking you about your own awakening. Sometimes we wake up slowly, sometimes we wake up with a jolt. What was that like for you?

Debbly Irving: Well, my awakening probably happened in several stages. The first stage was a 25-year period where, um, I had grown up in a white bubble suburb outside of Boston, went to a white bubble college in the Midwest, came back from college, and started working at the intersection of arts and education in the Boston area. And immediately found that I was able to raise money quickly, this is in the nonprofit sector, for, if you could see my fingers, (air quote) inner city, underprivileged, under-resourced neighborhoods and youth. And so, uh, for the first time in my life, I encountered neighborhoods, um, and people that did not look like mine. I did not yet know that these were red line neighborhoods. I certainly could see with my eyes that these were black, um, and some brown, but mostly black families. This is in Boston. And I jumped into a help-and-fix mode. Something must be wrong. Something must be terribly wrong. I never thought, I didn't know about systems or structures. Um, so I went, uh, through that sort of white savior process that white people go through. I stayed, stalled there for 25 years though, and it wasn't until the age of 48 when I ended up in a graduate school course that asked me to turn the mirror on myself, that I ended up doing the deeper work of understanding myself as a racialized being.

Until that course, I really thought race was something that belonged to black and brown people, and I was just sort of this neutral, "all-American person." And, uh, so, whoa, that rocked my world. I learned a lot of history. I started my, my own sense of identity started to crumble. And, when I was done with that six-month course, I felt like I'd been shot out of a rocket and landed all by myself in the middle of, you know, nowhere. And, the reason I wrote the book *Waking Up White* was because I needed to process and I need to keep learning. And I also kept saying, how did I get to the age of 48 and not know basic US history, uh, like red lining, like, uh, Black Wall Street, both its building and its, and its destruction, um, like Indian boarding schools. And wow, how this changes my sense of myself, my family's history. And I had been a K-1-2 teacher at that point, and I thought I should not be let loose in this world, let alone in a kindergarten, you know, as an elementary school teacher. And so, the waking up, that second chapter, uh, of it was so

startling and so identity crumbling that I actually, I walked around with a bottle of ginger ale for two months because I felt sick to my stomach every single day. Uh, that's how much of an impact it had on me. And, and by the way, I'm not woke. It hasn't stopped. I'm still waking up. You know, the learning curve steepens and flattens and steepens and flattens.

Sam Fuqua: I want to ask you about a couple of things, uh, that you said in that answer. White savior-ness. Why do white people fall into that mentality?

Debbly Irving: Uh, well, I think it's rooted in our sense of superiority. So, I was taught, uh, that, you know, the playing field is level. Everybody in the US, it's a land of opportunity, a land of the free. We're all rugged individuals, making it or not. And so, if someone isn't "making it," if they're living in the kind of neighborhood I was seeing, which was, uh, the buildings were in disrepair, the schools were in disrepair, uh, my sense was that it must be the people. The people weren't working hard enough and especially when I was working around while creating programs for young people, my thought was their parents don't, don't know how to raise them the way my parents raised me. But I can step in because I know better. And I can help them be more like me, which I now understand is so deeply twisted and arrogant and entitled. Um, it's, it's this combination of ignorance and arrogance, I think, that makes white saviorism so dangerous.

Sam Fuqua: And you also said you didn't think of yourself as, correct me if I'm wrong, but part of a race, or sort of, you thought of yourself as raceless. Is that accurate? And where does that come from?

Debbly Irving: It's both accurate and inaccurate. The conscious part of my mind would have, would say, says that. But there had to be a part of me that understood I had a race. This is, I think, the insidiousness of whiteness, of racism, is that it can feel invisible. It can feel like my family's accomplishments are just because we must have worked harder or maybe we're genetically superior. I mean, this, I don't know, I didn't know as a child that I was gathering these ideas deeply, uh, in, in my subconscious, in my belief system, uh, nor did I understand how the extent to which they were driving my behaviors. But I can see now that I, that I did. So, I mean, I knew to check white if I, if you gave me a census form, right? But if you said, tell me about your white racial identity, tell me about how being white shaped your worldview. Tell me about how your white household, how did that shape your cultural beliefs and behaviors? I would have been stumped.

Alexis Miles: My first thought is that the system is designed that way, that it be invisible. It's structural, largely, I believe. I was listening to you take this personal responsibility and accountability, and I think that's important. But I think it's a system designed to operate that way. And in your case, it worked.

Debbly Irving: Mm hmm. It worked, probably in part because of the thorough isolation. So two things, two things help it work. One is the thorough isolation. I'm in a suburb where there are, there are policies, practices, and laws keeping black and brown people out of that suburb. When I say that, I'm referring to the lending and housing policies of the 1930s that create racial segregation. I don't know that. My home looks like a Norman Rockwell painting, maybe my hometown. And I just assume that's, that's normal. The other thing that's going on that I think is crucial is it's not like there's no explanation given for the way we organize ourselves as a society. I'm given an explanation. It's that the playing field is level. So, I already have an answer. I, I look to a different neighborhood, I see that it's drastically different. The people in it look drastically different from me, both in, in terms of like, the way we're engaging with each other, the way, uh,

our homes look, the way we dress, et cetera. But my explanation for that has already been given to me. It's a level playing field and everybody has an equal shot and you know, golly gee, if they didn't make it, it's their own darn fault. But I'm a good white person. So I'm, that's where the save-ness brings us back to face. You know, I have a choice now. I can be resentful, or I can, I can be a good person. And I hope everyone can hear my sarcasm when I say that. So that was, it, it was so effective for both of those reasons and more.

Alexis Miles: I think of meritocracy. You have merit. You did all of the right things. Those people don't have merit. They didn't do the right things, which is the other side of, um, of level playing field.

Debbly Irving: Right. It's all part of the explanation that I and so many other people buy into without knowing we're buying into it. That's what I think is, that's so dangerous. We don't know. We're, we're born open to everything. Our little minds are, and in our earliest years, we absorb so much. One of the things I think about, um, is every day, uh, I saw currency, I saw dollar bills, I saw coins, and who was on all of those? Every time I look at an organization, there's a certain kind of a person in charge. I can now say that's a white, landowning cis, able, male, presenting as Christian, presenting as, you know, heterosexual, like all the things that have been elevated as best. Um, but I don't know that's, I'm just taking in the information without understanding the construction.

Sam Fuqua: And we were talking before we started recording about the role our parents can play in that. Can you explain your perception, growing up, the role your parents played in reinforcing some of those ideas you've just been discussing, or not?

Debbly Irving: My parents really reinforced it in the most seemingly benign ways. Uh, we were taught that, uh, we don't see color. So, I'm born in 1960 and this is the era, this is where laws are becoming colorblind, thanks to the civil rights movement, but that ideology leaks out as some kind of positive way to move forward. So, we're not supposed to see color, which if you're not supposed to see it, you're sure not going to talk about it. So, there's zero talk about it. My parents, I don't believe, you know, they were, they had passed before I started waking up, uh, before that graduate school course. So, I was never able to say, "Dad, did you know when you took advantage of the GI bill that there were two million plus black and brown GIs who weren't able to access? Did you know that or, or not?" Because all you have to do to perpetuate racism is say, oh, I want to take advantage of that lending rate. I want to move to that neighborhood. You don't need to know all the people who are barred from it, who are having a different experience. So, certainly they were perpetuating it that way. So, we weren't talking about it.

And, there are two moments in my life. I remember two, exactly two, in my entire relationship with my, with my parents, with my father, he said, he was a musician and an athlete and a jazz musician, and he loved listening to jazz, and I, I remember, uh, him holding, uh, it was probably Louis, Louis Armstrong, but he was holding an album cover with a black man with a, you know, I think it was a sax, his eyes were closed, and he was kind of rocking, and he was tapping his foot, and he said, "Listen to the rhythm of this black man." And I thought, wow, yeah. So, that's this stereotype, that black people are somehow more musical. It's, wasn't a negative, but it's still a stereotype. It still paints all black people with a broad brush. Another time he's watching basketball, he says, "Whew, look at those black people jump." He probably said colored. He wouldn't have said black. But, but that again, the idea. So now we've got the musical trope and the athletic trope in my belief system. And speaking about a "race" as having some attribute that permeates the entire race and, and that like there aren't white people who are basketball players or have rhythm or, or

black folks that don't. I mean, it just doesn't complicate the story at all in the way I would need to have it complicated to really, um, understand the world I'm living in.

Sam Fuqua: And one more I remember from an interview I heard with you, the very young you asks your mom, "Where are the Indians, mom?"

Debbly Irving: Yeah, whatever happened to all the Indians? Yep, and uh, I was obsessed with "Indians." I would now say indigenous people. I mean really obsessed, like every book on the, we went to the library, we weren't book buyers, we were book borrowers, I, I took out every book I could, every Halloween costume I was, without knowing I was appropriating, I was wearing, you know, some kind of Indian garb. And, uh, so one, one day it occurs to me to say whatever happened to all the Indians? And we were in the car, and she said they drank themselves to death. When I share this story in rooms full of people, three quarters of the people gasp in horror. These are obviously rough numbers. And 25 percent of the people shake their head yes, because they were told the same thing. So, I pursued it and I said, "Went extinct?" Like, what? And she said they, they, how? And she said they drank themselves to death. Of course, I now understand that alcohol was used by colonizers to inebriate and then coerce and take lands and get things, you know, land signed over. Property signed over. Rights signed over. So it's used as a tool of oppression. And I, and I remember thinking as a little girl, you know, my family drinks quite a bit. Like cocktail hour was a big deal in my, in my circles. And so, I think that again, this is this development of our belief system, which is happening below our radar all the time. If the "Indians," they drink and they die, and my family drinks and we live, we must be genetically different. And not just different, but superior. So here are some of the ways that I'm starting to flesh out my, my understanding of racial hierarchy.

Sam Fuqua: Well, once your awakening began, the story you told earlier, how did you shift or make the decision to be proactive and make it sort of your life's work?

Debbly Irving: Oh, I, I mean, I mentioned the ginger ale. I, I literally felt sick to my stomach. I was so embarrassed, angry, disturbed that I, it had taken to the age of 48, that my children were now 12 and 15 or something like that, that I had mis-raised my children. I had lost that window, that I was a teacher. The more I understood, the more I understood the ways I had treated students differently based on race. And, I was the nicest teacher in the world so that's not what I'm talking about. I'm talking about expectations. Who I held to what standard, and I always held white children to a higher standard. I would have denied it at the time. I can see it now. And the more, every day that I understood more, the more I felt culpable. And the more I wished, I kept saying, how did it take to the age of 40? I was a history major. How did I not know this? And, who let me loose in a classroom? So I, I went, oh, and also, and I was so distraught and my family and friends kept saying, what, like, what, what did you learn that was so upsetting?

And because I had been taught not to talk about race, I had a really hard time even, um, articulating what it was that I had learned in that course. I couldn't talk about it at all the way I can talk about it now. I would stumble over my words. I couldn't find my words. My heart would start racing like I was breaking some kind of a law. And so it took me a long time and in those, that first year where I was trying to find my words, I went looking for, you know, when you come out of a, graduate school course like this, if you could see me holding my hands, I'm making like a foot high, foot high, high mark because back in those years, everything was printed out. There were books. There were DVDs. There were videotapes, whatever they were. There was so much material. And what do I do, say to my, my friends and family, "Here, read this and then let's talk." So, I felt like there has to be a resource and I went looking for books. The closest thing I could find

was *Race: The Power of an Illusion*, which is an incredible three part documentary. Anybody listening hasn't watched it, it's a must watch. Um, it's available on Vimeo. It's about 25 years old, still completely relevant, sadly.

But I started thinking, okay, I really love books personally, and I love memoirs. Like who has written a memoir? And I found two, but they were really outdated. One was by Lillian Smith, *Killers of the Dream*. She was from the South and I want to say 1930s. And then Louis Daly wrote *Education of a Wasp*. She was from the Midwest during the 1960s. And so I felt like there needed, I felt if someone had written like *Eat, Pray, Love*, but about racism. *Eat, Pray, Love* was a recently, uh, released a very popular book at the time. I would have read that book and I would have learned. And I thought, okay, it doesn't exist. I'm going to write it. So, of course, the more I started to write, the more I realized I need to learn. And so that I thought it would take a year, it took four years. And by the end of that four years, I just got deeper and deeper into both my understanding, because there is no end of understanding to this. So I kept learning more, and I kept meeting more people. And I got deeper and deeper into the anti-racism and racial justice community. And once I started building relationships and finding my people and finding my voice, I couldn't not be in that group because it was so, it is still painful for me to spend time, uh, with family and friends who aren't willing to, uh, speak openly about race, racism, and specifically the white piece of it.

Alexis Miles: You talked about relationships, developing relationships. What role did relationships and that kind of proximity have in your awakening?

Debbi Irving: It had so much to do with it. I'll give you an example. So, it took four years to write *Waking Up White*. At about the two-year mark, an article came out. It was, uh, by Ewuare Osayande. It was called *A Word to the Wise*, and he's a, this is a black man who is really slamming Tim Wise for being a white person in the work. And, white people shouldn't be in the work, white people shouldn't be making money. And really, you know, there are a lot of people who are doing it. Tim Wise got the brunt. He was in the headline. And it so freaked me out. I, it had never occurred to me that it would be inappropriate for a white person, uh, that anyone would think it was inappropriate. Of course, there's a lot of mixed feelings about this. But once I heard that, it was, this was a whole new thing for me to digest and metabolize. And I thought, I can't put this book out in the world. I, you know, it's inappropriate for me. I can't take up space. I can't have a book.

And so, I, I wanted to put an end to it. And I started to talk to some of the people who I had been learning from, and several of them were people of color, and some of them old friends who had never gone deep with me because they could tell I couldn't, um, but now we were going deep. And one of them said, "You do not have the right to stop writing this book. I have shared my deepest pains with you with the full expectation that you're going to follow through on your project." And that was my first sense of what accountability looks like. And, also, my, my feelings of like, oh my God, Debbi, like, okay, you've got one black man you don't know saying white people can't be in this work. And now you have, this was a black man who said it to me, another black man who has loved you enough, trusted you enough to share his personal stories and his pain, who I, I love. I couldn't let him down. So, and of course he wasn't my one black friend at that point, I was developing lots of friendships. But that, that's an example of how that, if not for relationships, the book would have stopped. I would never have got, gotten it out.

Alexis Miles: It's an example of diversity, diversity of opinion. Some people, you know, had one feeling about it, others had a different one. It sounds like you, the depth of your relationship or relationships help you make a clear decision.

Debbi Irving: Yes. And speaking of diversity, I didn't just take Ewuare Osayande's and these friends of mine, I, I use that to say, I've got to talk to a lot of people. This is a piece I did not understand. And so, I started looking, I did as much research, I'm a serious research wonk, and I will just call up anybody and, um, who I know and say, are you willing to have this conversation? And, and so I just had that conversation with so many people. But yes, if not for him saying, "You owe this to me," basically, "I count," "I'm counting on you." Yeah, that's huge.

Alexis Miles: So, another question I have for you is, a lot of people, once they start feeling guilt or shame, stop because they can't push through that. What allowed you to do that? And how can people who are willing to cultivate whatever it was that allowed you to push through those feelings and move toward deeper understanding?

Debbi Irving: Well, you know, one of the things I had on my side, we are all such multi-dimensional beings and one of the handiest things I had in my personal tool kit is that I had struggled terribly with anxiety in my life. And I had spent a lot of time learning how to manage anxiety and how to recognize feelings in myself and to self-regulate. And so, you know, guilt and shame, if they're mild, are one thing, but I think they can produce something really close to a panic attack or, you know, shut down. So, I had learned to manage uncomfortable feelings. So, I had all kinds of tools to say, this is a feeling that's, you know, feelings are like storms. They come and go. What can you learn from this feeling? Uh, difficult feelings will help you grow. So, I had a really solid set of tools around what I, the terminology I use is growing my emotional capacity.

That said, if the 28 years, because I probably started to know, the 20 years from where I very first saw, uh, somebody who specialized in anxiety as a therapist, I had 20 years of training. That probably grew my emotional capacity 10 percent. Once I stepped into the anti-racist world, I had to like put that on steroids because it was so uncomfortable, and managing our emotions, it's just a skill. Guilt and shame, those are stuck energies. They will stop us. And I think for me, I was pretty able to transform the energy of guilt and shame into rage. Oh, I was so angry. I was so angry that I had been set up to perpetuate an injustice that I never would have signed up for if you had asked me at the age of five. Okay, so you're a white person, here's how it works in this country. Would you like to check that box, "Yes I want to be that." I would never have signed up for this. And yet, I was totally conditioned to do just that. And that infuriated me. Yeah, I didn't spend much time in guilt or shame.

Alexis Miles: Malcolm X used for it, bamboozled. That we've all been bamboozled. We have all been bamboozled.

Sam Fuqua: So, you wrote the book, and you combined that with your experience as a teacher to move to workshops with white people. Can you tell us, for those of us who have never attended one of your workshops, what happens? What goes on? And then, I also wanted you to talk a little bit about resilience training, which I think gets to what you were just talking about.

Debbly Irving: Everything I do, whether it's a keynote or a workshop to, I have a workshop called *Transformational Conversation*. I have a workshop called, um, *How to Explain White Privilege to a Skeptic*, called *Leveling the Playing Field, Disrupting Patterns of Power and Privilege*. Every tool, everything I do, I create first for myself. It's because I need this tool to understand and navigate this work. And, so I'm always sharing my tools with people. Um, I talk a lot about how our, I have, in a keynote that's called, *I'm a good person. Isn't that enough?* I talk about a lot of what we've talked about here today. I talk about how our belief systems get constructed, and how we then go on to use them because the purpose of a belief system, that's how we interpret the world around us. So I, so I encourage people to think about what were you exposed to when you were young? And I also model what it looks like. Very few white people understand that it's okay to admit this level of what I'm admitting here today because they think you're supposed to say you don't have a racist bone in your body. And in fact, that's such a barrier to progress. And so I, one of the things I'm always doing is modeling what it looks like to say, this happened to me. I was bamboozled, and here's how I'm de-bamboozling myself. There's a new word for us.

And I talk a lot about what I call dominant white culture. There are a number of scholars who've looked deeply at what's called white, white culture, dominant white culture, white supremacist culture. Tema Okun was one of the first people I saw describe it in a way that I was like oh my God, that's the house I grew up in. That's the school I went to. That's the world I live in. One of the things that I have done is, uh, I've identified 40 ways whiteness lives in me. And for each one of, so be busy. I was taught to be busy. That's part of being productive, being efficient. And that's what we're here to do. We're here to be busy. And so, if I want to find a different way of being, not that I'm not going to be busy some of the time, and it's good to know how to be busy when we need to be. But I need to learn a different skill set, and so I, for every one of those 40, uh, cultural white norms, I have an antidote, or an intervention, or an alternative way of being. So, be present. Go fast is a, is something that I was taught. You know, be fast, be quick, be efficient.

My intervention is pace to the project. If we're having a really hard conversation, all of my go fast, be productive, be efficient training is not going to help me because I need to slow down. I need to be present. I need to be embodied. All the things I was taught not to be. Need to be able to hold complicated feelings. Not spew my feelings all over the person I'm talking to. And so, I'm always helping people, um, be able to identify the whiteness in themselves. You don't have to be white to absorb the norms of whiteness because we're all so exposed. We have to perform them in our institutions. So a lot of my work is rooted in, let's just be honest about what whiteness is and, uh, identify it in ourselves and our institutions and see if there might be some alternative ways that are more rooted in humanity. Humanizing spaces, humanizing ourselves. It's okay to be imperfect. It's okay to let projects unfold instead of having crystal clear timelines and strategic plans, et cetera. So, I do a lot personally exploring my own limitations that whiteness left me with and then I share, basically I'm learning in public all the time. That's the short way to say it.

Sam Fuqua: Can you say a couple more of the 40?

Debbly Irving: Yeah. I mean, either/or thinking, which is black-and-white thinking. So, I'm a good person, right? Because the only alternative is I'm bad. So, the idea that I could be both a good person and be deeply racist, my whiteness training set my mind up to make that an impossibility. So, you think about all the binaries we have in dominant white cultures. By the way, whiteness includes patriarchy, you know, sexism, ableism, homophobia, religious intolerance. Okay, so Christianity is in there 'cause that's the privileged identity. Um, specifically Protestantism. And, you know, now we're talking heaven-hell. So, we're talking

about a binary that impacts your entire existence. I was taught things were appropriate or inappropriate, right or wrong, boy, girl. Gay, straight. There was no fluidity. There was no complexity. It was a very simple world that I, that, um, I was taught. It was the way I was taught to approach problems and taught to approach people, which is why stereotypes stick so well.

Because we're so, those of us trained in this whiteness binary thinking, we are, we are so primed to be given a label and just stick it on a box and keep it there. So, if I really want to engage in a world that is much more complex, where people are more than just their race, are multi-racial, multi-ethnic, gender fluid, sexually fluid, class fluid, we go up and down that, we can go up and down that class spectrum. We can change our religions. We evolve our whole lives long. Liberating myself from this stuck sort of status quo, like change, like getting to a place where change not only is not scary, but it is exciting. That's another example of, I was stuck, binary had something to do with it, and liberating myself feels like, uh, whoa, it is, world gets really exciting when we complicate it in a good way.

Alexis Miles: So, if you had to describe for a person the movement from what's been called fragility to resilience, what would you say to a person? Well, here's a step you can take if you want to take that, that march, that journey.

Debbi Irving: Uh, I think the first thing you can do is learn to pause. You feel that clench in your gut. Someone has just said, you know what you just said is racist. Or you get a vibe that you've said something and people start kind of, mo, turning away. We all know body language is so much of our communication. And you wanna defend yourself. Fragility, uh, often results in, you're either defending yourself, you're lashing out at someone, or you're lashing in on yourself. My fragility was lashing in on myself. A lot of shaming and blaming myself. And so, step one is to put a pause in there and say, I'm feeling some kind of a way right now and I am not going to act on it until I have a chance for A) my body to metabolize really, you know, it takes at least 20 minutes, for me it takes 24 hours, to get to a point where all those feelings have settled. And then I really get to reflect, what happened? What was I really afraid of? And often for me, the answer is I didn't want to look bad. You know, I thought if, it was going to be the end of, the end of the relationship, so I had to look good. So I think, I think the pause is and this comes back to time and urgency. And it takes a lot to hold a really difficult emotion, especially where, um, self image is involved. So, that would be step one.

Oh, and you know what I think is important to mention is I've been, there's, there's, this is, this is very new, uh, cutting edge information. I think out in the world, certainly for me, that the idea of resilience, which we've all been talking about is such an important skill, uh, means being able to bounce back from something that rattles you. That, for people of color, has a really different meaning than for a white person. It's important that I, as a white person, have resilience, so that I can bounce back and not just fall back and cling to the comfort of, of my white spaces and my white ways of being and just say, that's too hard, I don't want to do it. Asking a person of color to be resilient is a really different ask, because people of color have been nothing but resilient through history. And so, um, is there a different word there, you know? Rest. Rest and resistance is really, you know, possibly more for, for people of, of, of color. When, when something rattles a person of color, that's like tapping into hundreds of years of trauma. So, asking resilience in that moment is not really what we want if we're looking for healing.

Sam Fuqua: That's so interesting because, you know, when I think of the, the resilience as sort of buzzword of late, we talk in the education system about raising resilient kids or where Alexis and I live, it's often used

in terms of some strength or recovery from natural disaster, be it flood or wildfire in our neck of the woods. But, you're giving a much more nuanced interpretation, and maybe we do need new words.

Debbly Irving: And I'm learning it from other people. You know, and if I had to name where we are right now in the movement, this hundreds year old movement, I think the rate of nuance, uh, is just extraordinary. That speaks to the fluidity of the younger people who are a little less steeped in binary, who are catching a lot of this and saying, you know, one size does not fit all. Uh, resilience isn't the right word for everybody.

Alexis Miles: When you said that, when you made that juxtaposition between resilience and rest, I actually felt quite emotional in that moment because I thought, oh my goodness, I have tons of resilience developed over my entire lifetime. I don't have rest. I don't have rest. And many, many people of color I know say the same thing. We never get a chance to rest. So thank you for recognizing that and highlighting that, that one size does not fit all.

Debbly Irving: And let's just think now we're at the relationship. Now, if I'm more resilient, does that allow you more space to rest? To have a redistribution of the burden, the trauma? You know, the one thing we haven't gotten to, I have come to understand how my conversational skills that I was taught reproduce whiteness. So I think it's really important, especially on a podcast where you're talking about, you know, conversation, understanding what conversational norms steeped in whiteness look like, and how conversational norms steeped in what I would call transformation look like. So, maybe that's another conversation.

Sam Fuqua: So, give us an example of, of how to have a transformational conversation versus how we might have a, a whiter version of that conversation.

Debbly Irving: Well, and there are all kinds of, you know, Ken, this is contextual. But if your purpose is to dominate or win, you want the tools of whiteness. That's where I'm gonna look good. I'm gonna look smart. I'm gonna do a lot of talking. I'm gonna give you a lot of facts and data. I'm gonna tell you how it is. I don't care about your opinion. You need to think though you, I need you to make me more comfortable by thinking and believing my way. I want to look good. I want to look smart. I'm gonna go fast. I'm going to speak like an expert. Either I'm going to show no humility, no vulnerability, and at the end of it, I'm going to come out on top. You're going to be sorry you started a conversation with me.

Sam Fuqua: And I'm going to gender that and call that mansplaining.

Debbly Irving: Okay. Think about how, uh, for me, uh, I raised, I was asked to raise my hand with, hoping it was the right answer. I got graded for the right answer. And, the people who got heard the most in my social circles were people who spoke the way I just imitated. This came to my attention in my marriage. I've been married, um, for 33 years to a wonderful man, and we have had our share and of, of issues. And, one of the things that happened when I started understanding dominant white culture is I thought I am bringing, we are both bringing whiteness into our marriage conversations. No wonder we keep going around and around and around and having the same fights. And so I started thinking, again, this is the way I, I approach, if I find something that's not working, and it might be a habit, in this case, the conversational habits. If I want to move away from that, if I want to break that habit, I have to name what I'm reaching for.

I've quit drinking, so I can't just say, quit drinking. I have to have an alternative. For me, that's like pineapple juice and soda water at five o'clock. That's a good alternative. I have all kinds of alternatives.

If I want to not concentrate on winning or losing, but I want to prioritize relationships, then I need the skills of relationship. And that's where I say, no matter how long it takes, I'm going to hear what you have to say. I'm going to trust that there's time, there's going to be time from, from my perspective, but I really want to hear yours. I want to understand where you're coming from. So I'm decentering myself. That's totally not whiteness. I'm not eliminating myself. I'm going to come in there too. I'm going to, I'm going to slow it down. I'm going to, uh, take risks. Um, show humility. I will be vulnerable. Oh, I am so scared. My heart is beating right now. And I really want to stay here. Or, my heart is beating, would it be alright with you if I just went out and took like five minutes breath of fresh air? Oh, this is such a hard conversation but, and I really want to get through it. I can complicate it. I can say, so it's not all or nothing. A part of me is really angry at you right now, and a part of me completely understands why you did that. And another part of me knows we're going to be laughing about this for years to come. So, the idea that we all have multiple parts of us and multiple feelings going on simultaneously, finding common ground would be a part of, so I have eight, in my workshops, I present people, there are more than eight, but I, I introduce eight dominant white, uh, conversational norms and eight counterparts that I've, it's my, all my language. I always encourage people, if you like my tools, take them, but make them your own, and make them your own because this is, there is no one right way. We're going to, we, we need to find tools that work for us and our particular limitations.

Alexis Miles: If a person wanted to experience a workshop with you, what would they do? How would they go about doing that?

Debbly Irving: I'm part of a wonderful speakers bureau. It's called Comadre Speakers Collaborative. I have a website, debblyirving.com. Debbly is with a Y, uh, Irving's with an I. People can contact me through that, but they can also go directly to a Comadre Speakers Collaborative and that would be a way to bring me to your community virtually or personally. And then I also, this transformational conversation one is in such demand right now that I'm offering it online. So, if people follow me on social media or go to my website and sign up for my newsletter, they'll, they'll hear about it.

Sam Fuqua: And finally, coming back to where we started, and you said you're still waking up, and we're at the White Privilege Conference, any waking or sometimes we say 'aha' moments that have come to you over these few days?

Debbly Irving: God, yes. Every day I learn something new. Here's what I learned today. I was talking to, um, a wonderful man who's from NCORE, the National Conference on Race and Ethnicity. He's sitting at that exhibit booth and, uh, Comadre Speakers Collaborative is right across from it. So I go over to say hi, we start talking, and he tells me about how NCORE has hired a disability consultant to think with them through every part of their process, everything they do. And one of the things he says to me is, you know, there's some people for whom a small group, for people who are neurodivergent, a small, small group is, is, uh, just untenable, they can't do it. And we want to start naming which workshops have small groups and which are more lecture style because based on your learning style, we want to be able to differentiate and name our workshops. That's interesting, right? So that's a learning. The biggest learning for me is I ask people to turn and talk and get in small groups all the time. And it's never occurred to me that there may

be people in my spaces who are having to button up really intense feelings of not wanting to do that, just to follow my orders.

Like, I'm dominating the space, I'm controlling the space, facilitators have a lot of power. And I've never once thought to say, um, if, if a small group or a turn and talk is, um, something that doesn't feel right to you, I encourage you, you know, just to reflect on the prompt individually, which I will be doing forever, henceforth, um, except for that time I mess up and I forget. 'Cause I want, you know, this is the thing, like when we try to change, it can take a couple tries. That's my aspiration is to never, ever ask someone to turn and talk or be in a small group with the assumption that that works for them. And the way, I love small groups, this is where it's coming from. I love turn and talks. So I'm imposing my preferences, um, on, on people who participate in my workshops. And so, yeah, there's a little learning for the day.

Sam Fuqua: Any next book for Debby Irving?

Debby Irving: Absolutely. It's at least halfway written. I'm in love with it. Uh, working title is, *Whiteness Doesn't Love You*. And, it picks up where *Waking Up White* left off. It's about what happened in my life the day *Waking Up White* went out into the world and I was suddenly on the main stage talking, you know, and, and facilitating groups of people and really underqualified at that, in the early days especially, and that learning curve. Uh, so it's about all these things that we've been talking about. How, I mean, there's nothing like, uh, being in the public eye. Uh, about one of the most charged topics during one of its most charged errors to force an overdue learning curve. And so my learning curve hasn't slowed for one day. And the way, and *Whiteness Doesn't Love You*, uh, is all about the ways I discovered whiteness living in me and undermining me again and again and again despite my best intentions. And how, as I've explained to both of you today, how I'm, I'm, I'm trying to train myself in alternative ways of being that align me more closely with co-creating the world I want to live in, which is a more humane world and a world that more closely resembles that life, liberty, justice for all line that I was raised on and, and still believe in.

Sam Fuqua: Debby Irving, it's been great to talk with you. Thank you.

Alexis Miles: It's been fantastic. Thank you.

Debby Irving: Yeah, thank you both.

Sam Fuqua: Debby Irving is a racial justice educator and writer. Her book is called *Waking Up White and Finding Myself in the Story of Race*. Her website is debbyirving.com.

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